

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THREE AUSTRALIAN JEWISH PILOTS: 1936-1954

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In general, Jews are not readily associated as soldiers, and even less so as pilots. Yet, during both World War I and II, Australian Jews made important contributions to the fighting forces, with the role played by Sir John Monash being the most important. This article deals with the story of three Jewish pilots, Oscar Nathan Diamond, Lionel van Praag and Frederic Bedrich Adler, each of whom made interesting contributions, either during or after World War II. Only one of these three stories, that of van Praag, is discussed by Gerald Pynt.¹ There are, of course, many other Jewish pilots of renown, notably Peter Isaacson of Melbourne.

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT OSCAR NATHAN DIAMOND, DFC²

Oscar ('Ossie') Diamond was born in Brisbane in 1917. He was the son of Rosetta and Joseph Diamond. Joseph was born in Russia and fled from the anti-Jewish pogroms in 1905. Arriving in the United States, he changed his name from Dashevski to Diamond, choosing this name because the Diamond Match Company was near his first job in New York. He met Rosetta when he was in Brisbane on business and they were married in the Brisbane Synagogue in 1916. After their marriage, Joseph opened the long-running Diamond's Dry Cleaning business. Oscar was their only child. He celebrated his bar mitzvah at the Brisbane Synagogue in Margaret Street. In 1939 he gained a pilot's licence and enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) before the outbreak of war.

By 1941 he was a flight lieutenant, based in Northern Malaya. On 7 December 1941 at 12.30am, a Japanese convoy was observed approaching the coast near Kota Bharu. Flight Lt Diamond captained a Hudson Bomber and attacked at mast height dropping four 240-pound bombs on the *Awasaki Maru*, a 10,000-ton Japanese transport that exploded and sank. This was the first Japanese vessel to be lost in the Pacific War. As this action took place at 3.32am



Flight Lieutenant Oscar Nathan Diamond, DFC, in uniform

and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour commenced at 4.52am, both Malay time, it can be seen that Flight Lt Diamond and his crew struck the Japanese an hour and 20 minutes before the attack on Pearl Harbour, making this an historic event for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. One of his engines was shot out in that action and he managed to limp back to base on the other.

The following day, 8 December 1941, Australia declared war on Japan. The reason why the RAAF attacked that convoy was that Japan had struck first. A few days before 7 December 1941, the

Japanese had invaded Malaya, near Kota Bharu and a delay in response would have been foolhardy. On another occasion, Diamond strafed a Japanese landing force and damaged a railway line. Finally he was shot down over Sumatra and after an adventurous attempt at escaping, he was captured and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of war (POW). Much of that time was spent working in a Manchurian coal mine.

At the end of the Pacific War, Diamond commandeered a Douglas DC3 and flew a number of his fellow POWs to India where he was hospitalised after suffering from amoebic dysentery. Later, he reached Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) where he booked himself into a luxury hotel, charging his bill to the RAAF. From there, he 'jumped' a DC4 and flew to Perth, reaching there in September 1945. He then returned to Brisbane and took over the management of his father's business until his retirement in the early 1980s.

Flight Lt Diamond passed away in August 2003. In October 2003, members of his family joined the Squadron No 1 at Amberley Airbase for a ceremony of remembrance. A framed picture of 'Ossie', together with an account of his achievements was unveiled at the Squadron No 1 Headquarters. The description of his contribution to the war effort is headed: 'The RAAF Pilot who struck the first blow in the Pacific War'.³

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT LIONEL MAURICE VAN PRAAG, GEORGE MEDAL

In his book, *Australian Jews of Today and the part they have played*, Rabbi Rudolph Brasch introduces Lionel Maurice van Praag as follows: 'From a sheltered Jewish home he became a (cycle) racing champion, an expert speedboat driver, a war hero and one of Australia's leading early (aerial) survey operators'. Rabbi Brasch refers to his father, Louis, as 'a Sydney Jewish tailor' and mentions that his mother, Mozelle was dedicated to helping the Temple Emanuel, Sydney, where she would pray for the safety of her daredevil son.

Lionel Maurice van Praag was born in Sydney in 1908. It is interesting to note that while his name shares a similarity with well-known Australian Jewish dancer, Dame Peggy van Praagh, OBE, they were not related.⁴ His early training and experience was in mechanical matters and he took naturally to the newly introduced sport of motorcycle racing, known also as 'dirt track racing', 'speedway cycling' or 'cinders racing'. He joined the English circuit in 1931, became captain of the Wembley Team, and won a world championship in 1936. In the following years he won many cham-

pionships and awards and raced in many parts of the world. In the United States he took up flying and during the Second World War he joined the RAAF. On his first mission he was piloting an unarmed plane when it was shot down by Japanese fighters and crashed into the Timor Sea. Van Praag and his crew of three were injured and bleeding and had only life jackets to keep them afloat. After 30 hours in shark-infested waters they drifted close to land and swam ashore. It was considered that without van Praag's strong leadership and initiative, together with Officer Webster, none of the crew would have survived.⁵ He was awarded the George Medal⁶ for his leadership role in this incident and spent the remainder of the war on aerial transport duties.

After the war, van Praag returned to speedway racing as a promoter. He then became a commercial pilot, carrying goods and passengers and crop-dusting.⁷ A serious accident put him out of action for a year. On recovering, he became a senior pilot in Pakistan where he contracted a serious tropical illness from which he eventually recovered and joined Adastra, an aerial survey operation.⁸ For many years he was engaged in the aerial survey of the Australian continent and he became Adastra's senior pilot.

Van Praag was described as an intense man who drove himself as hard as he drove his planes and motorcycles. He was very dedicated to the dangerous and exacting task of aerial surveying. He explained why he carried a lightweight motorcycle on his plane so that he should not waste time travelling on land.⁹

In 1964, van Praag decided that it was time to slow down and he bought a beautiful little island near Mackay, on the central Queensland coast, where he built an airstrip and tropical style home. He settled down to what would appear to be an idyllic retirement, but life was too quiet there and after twelve years he returned to live in Sydney. There he resumed his lifelong hobby of tinkering with things mechanical in his workshop. He passed away in 1987 and in 2000 the ACT government honoured him by naming a street after him as 'van Praag Place' in Canberra.



*Lionel van Praag, GM,
in 1960*

PILOT OFFICER FREDERIC BEDRICH ADLER — 0311305, RAAF

Frederic Bedrich Adler (Efraim ben Avraham) was born in England on 28 March 1923. After service with the Royal Air Force (RAF), he fought in the War of Independence in Israel, where he was later joined by his mother. The Israeli Air Force arranged for him to return to England to obtain further skills as an Aeronautics Engineer. He became highly proficient with Canberra bombers and, before he returned to Israel, it was decided to send him to Australia where he was to receive further instruction. He was also delegated to assist in engineering research on Canberra bombers as Australia was building up its own air force.

While engaged in the latter capacity, he lost his life in a shocking accident at the Amberley Air Force base, near Ipswich, Queensland.¹⁰ Extracts from the Unit History Sheets recorded the details of the accident as follows:

Pilot F.B. Adler (0311305), an Engineer employed by the Aeronautical Research Laboratories, Melbourne and as a member of the RAAF Reserve, was carrying out some technical research for Air Force Headquarters connected with Avon engine flame stability and re-lighting problems.

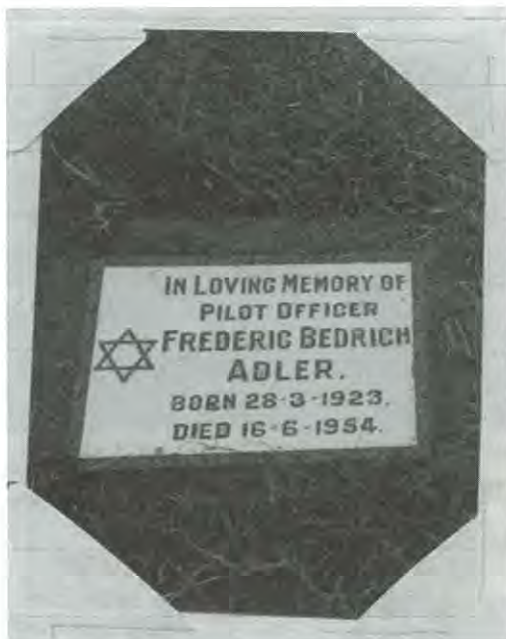
16 June 1954: whilst carrying out a period of continuation training at RAAF Amberley, Canberra Bomber A84-202, with Flight Lieutenant F.N. David as Captain, Flight Lieutenant D.C. Nicholls as pupil and Pilot Officer F.B. Adler (ACTIVE RESERVIST) of RAAFHQ as Observer, crashed and all crew members were killed. This was the first Canberra accident to occur in the R.A.A.F.¹¹

...The plane, while taking off, failed to maintain altitude. It tilted; a wing touched the airstrip and the plane cart-wheeled along the ground for a great distance. It disintegrated and its entire load of kerosene jet-fuel ignited. Air Force personnel gathered the remains of the personnel. Their bodies had been mutilated and badly burnt in the accident.¹²

The late Rabbi A. Fabian, then minister of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation and chaplain of the Forces, Northern Command, went to Amberley to supervise the preparation of Pilot Officer Adler's remains for burial. The funerals of the three pilots killed in the crash took place on 18 June 1954 and were described as follows:

A combined service was held in the chapel at R.A.A.F. Amberley after which the remains were ceremonially escorted

to the main entrance of R.A.A.F. Amberley. The remains of Flight Lieutenant Davis and Flight Lieutenant Nicholls were then escorted to the Brisbane Crematorium where last rites were carried out. Those of Pilot Officer Adler were escorted to the Lutwyche Military Cemetery where last rites were administered according to the Jewish Faith.¹³



*The plaque over the grave
of P/O Adler*

The RAAF provided a full military escort at the Lutwyche Military Cemetery. The Brisbane Chevra Kadisha and a large number of congregants assembled at the graveside. Soldiers carrying British, Australian and Israeli flags, followed by high-ranking RAAF officers, led the cortege. The coffin, draped in flags, was borne on a gun carriage. Then followed the Air Force band and a large party of servicemen carrying guns reversed. On reaching the graveside, the deceased was honoured by a salute of guns. The O/C RAAF, Northern Command, and Rabbi Fabian gave addresses. The latter then proceeded with the Jewish ritual.

Subsequently, Rabbi Fabian corresponded with Adler's mother who was in Israel. She was very pleased to learn that the Queensland Ex-Servicemen's and Women's Association (QAJEX) conducts an annual memorial service at her son's grave on the Sunday closest to Armistice Day (now called Remembrance Day). Though she passed away some years ago, this is still done. After that service, similar



*Members of QAJEX at an annual Remembrance Day service
at Adler's graveside, Lutwyche Military Cemetery*

respect is shown to Raphael Grose, AIF, who is buried in the same cemetery. The group then moves to the Toowong Cemetery where a service is held for departed Jewish Servicemen interred there. The same procedure has been inaugurated at the newer Jewish cemetery at Mt Gravatt. Adler's name is also included in all Yiskor (Memorial) services in the Brisbane Synagogue.

Rabbi Fabian is to be commended for his compassionate services in all the above matters, as are the QAJEX members who carry out the annual memorial services. The QAJEX president, Sid List, continued to organise and conduct these services after Rabbi Fabian left Brisbane in 1962.

NOTES

1. Gerald Pynt, (ed) in cooperation with Jack Epstein, *Australian Jewry's Book of Honour World War II*, Australian Federation of Jewish Ex-servicemen & Women, 1973. Lionel van Praag is discussed on pp47-48. There is also a chapter on the 'War in the Air', pp.104-108. The three pilots discussed in this article all have a link with Queensland.
2. This section was written with the assistance of Wing

Commander, No 1 Squadron, the State Library of Queensland and the *Courier Mail*.

3. Rudolph Brasch *Australian Jews of Today and the part they have played*, Sydney: Cassell, 1977.
4. These surnames represent a wave of Jewish migrants who left Prague in Czechoslovakia and settled in Flanders, at the time in Holland (two thirds of that area are now the provinces East and West Flanders in Northern Belgium, extending slightly into the Netherlands). At the time many European Jewish families did not have surnames and they were allocated the names 'van Praag' 'from Prague' or van Praagh' 'of Prague'. See M.Ochert, 'The Brief, but Eventful Life of Lewis Flegeltaub, AJHSJ, Vol XV, Part 2, June 2000. It was purely coincidental that families with these names later settled in Sydney. See also AJHS Newsletter, No 64, May 2004, p.7.
5. Pynt, op. cit., pp47-48.
6. The George Medal was instituted by King George VI in 1940 to acknowledge acts of great bravery.
7. This involves spraying fertiliser, pesticide, insecticides or top dressing onto farmlands and has to be done from a very low level to ensure that the material lands on its target area. It requires considerable skill and many planes have met with disaster by impacting power lines, fences, trees or low hills.
8. The term *Adastra* is made up of the Latin words *Ad Astra* — 'to the stars'. This is part of the motto of the RAAF — '*Per ardua ad astra*', that is 'by hard work, to the stars'.
9. Comments from a friend of the author's who has a large hotel in Cairns where van Praag stayed whenever he was flying in North Queensland.
10. It is regretted that very few details could be obtained from the RAF Management Centre in England and the Ministry of Defence Air Staff, Israel. It has not been possible to contact P/O Adler's widow, Violet Elizabeth, who lived at that time in Warrandyte, Melbourne. A VAJEX officer believes she returned to Israel and remarried. Appreciation is expressed to Stephen Locke of the RAAF's Historical Section and D. Pullen of the RAAF's Discharged Personnel Records, Department of Defence, for some of the data produced in this section on Adler.
11. Unit History Sheets, No 82 (Bomber) Wing Headquarters.
12. Ibid.
13. Further extract of RAAF's Historical Records, 18 June 1954.