



St George's College

PERTH · WESTERN AUSTRALIA

LEONARD COURTNEY LAVER

17 FEBRUARY 1917 TO 8 JANUARY 1943



Len Laver was the youngest of six children of Dr Charles William Laver, the famous Eastern Goldfields medical practitioner after whom Laverton was named, and his wife Edith.

He attended Eastern Goldfields High School (1930-1934), where he had a busy life that included School Captain and captain of the school cricket team. He was perhaps less diligent in his academic studies – “Laver is a student of excellent character and average ability” said a 1933 school reference – and his Leaving Examination did not yield the results needed for matriculation. He subsequently corrected this by passing units of English at The University of WA between 1935 and 1937.

Len decided that he wanted to be an architect, and in 1935 he entered St George's, though he was not enrolled as a full-time student at the university which at that time it did not offer a course in architecture. However, UWA was happy to utilise his sporting skills, and he played in

both the UWA and College cricket teams, from which he is remembered as a fine batsman and bowler. He left College in the first term of 1937.

On 19 March 1935 he signed Articles of Pupilage with the well-established Perth architect Alfred R.L. Wright, who had offices in the old T&G Building in St George's Terrace. He (or more probably, his father) paid 25 pounds for tutelage, and he successfully completed his articles on 28 March 1938. Along the way he qualified by examination to become a student member of the prestigious Royal Institute of British Architects, was on the editorial staff of the Architectural Association of Western Australia's *Tee Square Journal* (to which he submitted, chillingly, a design for a mausoleum), and seems to have made a great impression on his mentor.

Alfred Wright, who was feted at a dinner at the Adelphi Hotel in 1937 for his 76th birthday, was suffering from cataracts and probably relied on Len's young eyes for much of the practice's architectural work. When Len decided to move to Melbourne at the end of 1938, Wright wrote in his reference:

I shall very much regret the termination of our association as Mr. Laver intends to proceed to Melbourne to join his family, and later on to England to extend his studies. He is probably the best liked young architect in Perth.

Len's family was already in Melbourne. His father had died in May 1937, and in November his mother moved to Melbourne to be closer to some of her children. Len joined the firm of D.F. Cowell in Bourke Street, Melbourne, and was employed on the design and construction of various buildings including hotels, residences and the Springvale Crematorium. "Mr Laver left me of his own free will," wrote Cowell in November 1940, "to join the fighting services of this country."

Len had joined the RAAF on 21 July 1940, and was soon in training at Bradfield Park in Sydney, and then Narrowmine. As part of the second group of recruits to train under the Empire Air Training Scheme, he left

for Canada in November 1940. He won his wings in Canada at the Calgary training camp and then sailed for England at the same time as the Royal Navy was pursuing the *Bismarck*.

After further training in England he joined Bomber Command and flew a number of missions over Europe, having been posted to the RAAF's 458 Squadron. This unit was equipped with Wellington Mk IV aircraft and began operations in Britain in October 1941. It distinguished itself by achieving the highest serviceability of any bomber group in the U.K., but in January 1942 it was withdrawn from all Bomber Command duties to prepare for transfer to the Middle East. Len was one of the pilots involved in ferrying 36 Wellingtons safely to Egypt, to support the army's advances in the desert campaign.

In September 1942 the squadron was transferred from Bomber Command to Coastal Command, detailed and trained to attack ships and submarines in the Mediterranean with both bombs and torpedoes. Its primary role was to seek out and attack enemy shipping, with its aircraft operating from fields in Egypt, Malta, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. From northern Africa Len was sent to Malta and on 6 January 1943 was attached to 69 Squadron RAF, which was preparing for the landings in southern Europe.

For much of this time Len had been ranked as a Flight Sergeant, though he was the captain and principal pilot of bombers whose crews contained commissioned officers, and there was some suspicion among Australians that E.A.T.S.-trained pilots were being overlooked for promotion. Though he was ranked in Malta as a Flight Sergeant, his commission as a Warrant Officer had already been decided and was in the pipeline.

Two days later he took off from Malta in Wellington bomber NX471 for a bombing mission. He was the principal pilot. The crew manifest also lists Sergeant B.W. Shearer (2nd pilot), Pilot Officer A.T. Gell (observer), Flight Sergeant E.F. Saggars (wireless air gunner), and Flight Sergeant D.A. Smith (wireless air gunner). They were all members of the RAAF, attached to 69 Squadron. The sixth member of the crew was Flight Lieutenant J. Francombe of the RAF (RDF/observer). The Wellington took off from Luqa at 6.20pm on Friday 8 January for an operational mission, but never returned. The crew was posted as missing.

Len's mother, Edith, and the rest of his family waited and hoped for more than two years that by some miracle, Len would be found alive. Edith wrote to the Warden, Josh Reynolds, on 17 February 1945:

We had hopes that they may have been picked up by a ship and perhaps landed, as one crew some months later were landed in Italy & nothing was heard of them, until the allies advanced past Rome. Quite recently a lad we know, who had been missing since July 1943, has been reported P.O.W. in Verona through Switzerland notifying London, the lad had been shot down over Sicily.

But her hopes were in vain. Len's last mission was a shipping strike on the strategic Trapani harbour in Sicily, and he had brought his Wellington bomber down to just 50 feet above the water, probably to drop a torpedo. Flak caught the bomber and it crashed, killing the entire crew. The people of Trapani were able to recover and bury their bodies, but confirmation of their deaths did not reach the Australian authorities until after the war had ended.

Len and his crew were later moved to the War Graves Cemetery in Catania (Coll. grave 11.G 7-10).

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“He had early made up his mind as to those ideals which he was to pursue, and he always maintained them, though without the least ostentation. He tried to live up to the highest as he saw it, and instinctively saw the best in others.

“He had a quiet smile, a very happy personality and an easy approach to men which made him a natural leader.....His was a....character which did the job which lay to hand be it flying, cricket or architecture with the same good cheer and purpose.”

The Dragon, 1946 (attributed to Josh Reynolds)