

GORDON WISE — TRIBUTE

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [5.11 pm]: I want to present for the acknowledgement of the Parliament of Western Australia the story of a remarkable man whose distinctive contribution to our history was marked on Remembrance Day last year with the awarding of France's highest distinction, the Légion d'honneur.

Gordon Wise was born in Queensland in 1923 and spent his childhood in Broome and Carnarvon, before arriving in Perth in 1933, where he spent four years as a scholarship student at Perth Modern School. Gordon is the son of Frank Wise, a former Labor Premier of WA and Administrator of the Northern Territory, who has the distinction of being the only person to have led a major party in both houses of the Western Australian Parliament.

On 1 January 1942, aged nearly 19 years, Gordon joined the Royal Australian Air Force as trainee air crew, hoping to be a pilot. He says in his autobiography that he liked those uniforms and thought being a pilot was the most glamorous job going. Apparently, flying did not come entirely naturally to him. Circuits and bumps, he observed, were supposed to be a deliberate part of one's training and were not to happen by accident. Gordon's instructor, Officer Walker, perhaps deserves an honour of his own! Gordon, having tested Officer Walker by regularly stalling the plane while upside down in a loop, also managed on one occasion to lose the airfield, at which point Officer Walker, according to Gordon's account of the incident, grabbed the controls, pointed the nose straight down beneath them and yelled, "There it is!" Gordon noted wryly that they both survived each other.

Having been transferred to an air base in the United Kingdom and completed his training, Gordon chose to join the Sunderland flying boat RAAF No 461 Squadron. His choice was based on what he calls a lingering idealism that led to his firm belief that although he was a pilot, he wanted to save lives by serving as a convoy escort, rather than take them by bombing cities. In due course, Gordon received his flying officer commission and served as a flying boat first pilot. According to Gordon, the Sunderland seemed enormous after the training planes he had flown, with a crew of 12, three gun turrets, eight depth charges and 12 machine guns. The standard patrol on an anti-U-boat search and convey escort was 13.5 hours. He explained that the schedule as pilots was an hour at the controls, an hour on the right seat as second pilot, half an hour on radar and half an hour off in the wardroom. He added that because of the Allies' air superiority by the time D-day came, the 550 hours he spent on Sunderlands was, for the most part, boring routine. He marvelled at how the navigator would get them back to base after 14 hours out in total darkness, with only his calculations to guide him. Nowadays, a transatlantic navigator sets the course on a computer before take-off and the plane itself takes over the flying after take-off. In fact, Gordon described his life at that time as a mixture of nicotine, challenge, risk, fear, boredom, camaraderie and, above all, devotion to duty.

Gordon's story is a powerful reminder of the unglamorous nature of war. It is also a testament to the fact that devotion to duty, to your comrades, your country and your cause, can sustain the human spirit through fear, grief and deprivation. Gordon "dreaded" operation flying. Several of his close friends were killed in action. His mother died unexpectedly while he was overseas, yet he learned that vulnerability can lead to true wisdom. The solemnity of this insight informs Gordon's delightfully dry sense of humour. During a very bleak period stationed in the Shetland Islands, he used his spare time to learn the Gettysburg Address by heart, noting that this was a better way of stopping himself going mad than talking to the sheep, if only because, as he says, "eventually, the sheep would talk back to you".

Let me tell the story of Gordon's war in Gordon's words, not from his autobiography but from an article he wrote about the award of the Légion d'honneur last year. Gordon writes that, as an Australian, he served as a Sunderland flying boat pilot with No 461 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force in Coastal Command. In preparation for D-day, the Commander-in-Chief of Coastal Command, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas, gathered three squadrons in a hangar at Pembroke Dock where they were stationed. He warned them that probably 50 per cent of them would not survive the coming operations. I will add a little additional colour and movement here: Gordon elaborates a bit further in his book on this "pep talk", recalling that after warning that they might lose up to 50 per cent of their crews, Air Vice-Marshal Douglas said that they should not worry, as the aircrew strength had been doubled. With his inimitable dryness, Gordon notes that Douglas was more philosophical about this than they were.

Gordon continues: on their first night in action they saw a U-boat on their radar and so prepared for attack. Captain Neil McKeogh called for the flares to light up their target but the flares failed, despite previous testing, and the U-boat submerged. They lost three of their planes during that first week due to enemy action. They were lucky to survive. Flying at a height of 50 feet along the coast to avoid enemy radar, they felt extremely exposed and could not turn the plane for fear of dipping the floats in the sea. They had a fire on board after take-off when

he was accompanying the squadron leader. They landed on the water of Milford Haven with 2 000 gallons of petrol on board and bounced home across the bay. The fire went out but the plane was not used again for operations. Their patrols—halfway across the Atlantic Ocean, south to the coast of Spain, north to Sullom Voe and the Norwegian coast, always 13 to 14 hours of night flying at 1 000 feet in all weather—continued throughout the last year of the war. Historians will note that not one of their allied ships was lost due to enemy action during the first week after D-day. He was one of the lucky ones.

Gordon's award was presented to him in London by the Ambassador of France to the United Kingdom, Sylvie Bermann, at a ceremony that was attended also by French Secretary of State Axelle Lemaire. Her Excellency was representing President Francois Hollande who, to mark the seventieth anniversary of D-day a few years ago, pledged to honour all those veterans who had served to help his country and liberate France during the Second World War. The award of the Légion d'honneur medals was, the ambassador noted, France's way of thanking veterans for their tremendous service.

Speaking at the award ceremony Ambassador Bermann said, and I quote —

“I feel privileged and incredibly moved to award these veterans with France's highest distinction, which is our way of thanking them for their tremendous service to our country in the second world war.

“Just as today we remember the fallen of the first world war, so we shall never forget the courage of those who fought for France's liberation over 70 years ago. To them, France owes its freedom.”

Gordon Wise and his wife, Marjory Wise, now live in Ticehurst, East Sussex, very close to the place where I was brought up after my parents fled the smogs of London in the mid-1950s. He is a close friend of my esteemed predecessor, Labor MLC for South West Region, Hon John Cowdell, and I thank John for bringing Gordon's story, particularly the recent awarding of Gordon's Légion d'honneur, to my attention. I have told only a small portion of Gordon's story tonight. He has lived a rich life and influenced an enormous number of people by providing a living example of his deep spiritual convictions and never resiling from his profound commitment to a fine and inspiring set of values.

On behalf of every honourable member of this chamber, I offer Gordon our hearty congratulations and warmest best wishes.