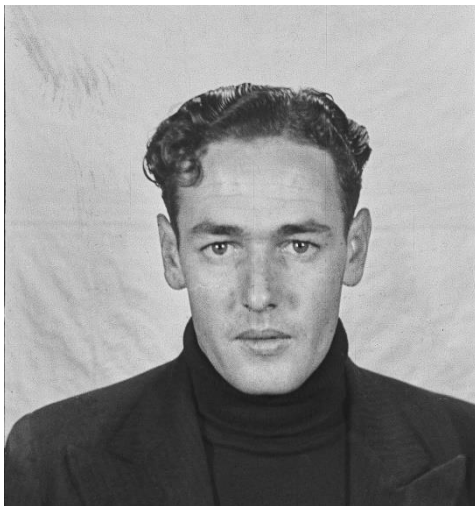




Leonard Charles Paproth

Eight streets in Altona North had been named after local servicemen who had lost their lives during the Second World War. About twelve months later, a further opportunity arose to acknowledge another local serviceman, Leonard Charles Paproth. In September 1967, Altona Shire's council felt that there was a need to rename Merton Grove, Altona North, as some people felt that it created confusion with Merton Street, Altona Meadows. Merton Grove ran between Ross Road and McIntosh Road. The new name the council chose was Paproth Grove, after the late Corporal Leonard Charles Paproth who had served with the Royal Australian Air Force. But who was Corporal Leonard Charles Paproth and what was his connection with Altona?



Leonard Charles Paproth on joining the RAAF (1943)

Leonard Charles Paproth was born 3 May 1922 in the Collingwood/Abbottsford area, an inner-city area of Melbourne. His parents were Herman John (Jack) Paproth and Annie Elizabeth Paproth (nee McCann) who were married on 14 January 1917 at St Michael's church in North Melbourne. Leonard Paproth was the third son born to the couple and one of seven children born to Herman and Annie, between 1918 and 1932.

The family moved to Altona around 1925, following the birth of their daughter, Ada Florence. They moved to Altona from Abbottsford, where Herman had been working as a butcher. In a short period of time, Herman had involved himself in the Altona community. With a group of fellow First World War veterans, he had set about establishing the Altona sub-branch of the Returned Services League of Australia (RSL)¹. Herman Paproth had served with the 8th

Light Horse Regiment at Gallipoli Peninsula as a private during WW1.

In fact, he was the first secretary of the Altona branch of the RSL and served in this role until his retirement in 1964, except for four years in which he served as president. In all, he served with the Returned Services League for almost forty-five years. In 1965, Herman Paproth was awarded the Returned Services League's highest honour – the League's Gold Life Membership. By this stage, Herman and Annie's two eldest children, John and Raymond, would have been attending the local primary school. Initially, Herman was employed as a butcher, but shortly after his move to Altona, he worked as a wool presser and eventually went to work for the Young Husbands Company, for approximately eighteen years, where he became a leading hand. His eldest children also worked at the same company.

In 1932, the last of German and Annie's children, Frederick Alan, was born. Coincidentally, he was the first baby to be born at the new Altona Community Hospital which had just been established on the eastern side of Pier Street, just north of the railway station. When the new, purpose-built hospital had been completed in 1938, on the corner of Sargood and Queen Streets, Alan was there as part of the party of the official opening. He had presented a bouquet of flowers to the ladies within the official

¹ In 1916 it was referred to as Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia. In 1940 this changed to Returned Sailors', Soldiers' and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia. Then in 1965 it changed to the Returned Services League of Australia.



party. Life must have seemed somewhat settled at this stage for the Paproth family who had settled into Altona and had been very much welcomed by the community. But things were about to change for the whole of Australia as well as for the Paproth family.

Having survived the depression years of the 1930s, the Paproth family now faced the hostilities and uncertainty of the Second World War. Herman's sense of duty saw him attempt to enlist but given his age of forty-four, his application was rejected. The mantle of serving their country now fell to the Paproth's three eldest sons, John, Raymond and Leonard. John Edward Paproth enlisted into the Citizen Militia Force in 1936, joining the Signals 4th Division and serving for three and a half years. When the war was declared, John transferred across to the Royal Australian Air Force on 31 July 1940, serving at the 1st Engineering School in Laverton and then in Ascot Vale, Victoria, as a mechanic. His service ended abruptly in February 1941 when he requested to leave the service on compassionate grounds due to the sudden death of his mother, Annie Elizabeth Paproth. She had passed on 27 January 1941 in Altona, aged 42. The popularity of the Paproth family was demonstrated by the large attendance of community members at her funeral at Williamstown cemetery.

The death of Annie now left Herman with four young children, three girls and a son, all under the age of seventeen. Of the three eldest sons, John was already with the Royal Australian Air Force; Leonard Charles had spent a short period training with the Royal Australian Navy but had not completed his training; and second eldest son, Raymond Herman Paproth, must have been contemplating his enlistment. Hence, John Paproth's request that he be able to return home and assist his father with the wellbeing of the family was granted.

Raymond Paproth was the next son to enlist, on 5 August 1941, into the army, and was assigned to the Signals 3rd Division based in Seymour, Victoria. However, due to an injury on 6 June 1942, he was declared medically unfit for further service and was discharged. He didn't return to his family but instead to his new wife, Mavis Elizabeth Purton, and their home in Mount Street, Altona.

In 1943, Herman John Paproth remarried to Anne Gaynor Walker, nee Duke, who had four children from her first marriage. 1943 was also the year when Leonard Charles Paproth enlisted into the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), aged 21, on 15 April. Very quickly, Corporal Leonard Paproth found himself appointed as a Drill Instructor at the RAAF 1 Recruit Depot in Shepparton, Victoria, where he was responsible for the training of new recruits. The camp was situated on the outskirts of Shepparton, close to the banks of the Goulburn River and in the vicinity of the Mooroopna township.

Corporal Paproth settled into RAAF life in the rural setting of Shepparton, organising drill sessions and exercises, with his fellow non-commissioned officers², for the new RAAF recruits. All was going well for Leonard until one fatal night in late September when a chain of totally unforeseen events ended in tragedy. The following is an account of what transpired on that evening, taken from the accounts of eleven RAAF service personnel who took part in this exercise and were near the location of the incident that took the life of Corporal Leonard Paproth.

On the 22 of September 1943, "C" squadron was stationed at the RAAF River Camp in Shepparton, and a night exercise had been arranged between two smaller squads, with a third squad designated to undertake normal camp duties including guard duty. The overall aim of the exercise was for one squad

² Non-commissioned officers typically function at the rank of sergeant but can also serve as corporals and petty officers (in the navy) and generally have received advanced military training. Tactical Non-commissioned officers have a responsibility for the training of recruits.



to defend the base whilst the other attempted to enter and take over the base. The exercise was scheduled to commence at 8.00pm, so would have commenced after nightfall.

Prior to the commencement of the exercise, the recruits taking part in the exercise were issued with blank ammunition. Blank ammunition is done up in paper packets containing ten rounds. Sergeant Denis Comerford took the blank ammunition from the ammunition box, wrapped in its individual packets, and handed the packets to Corporal Paproth and Drill Instructor Michael O'Keefe. Corporal Paproth and Drill Instructor O'Keefe broke open the packets and emptied the rounds into a dish. These were then issued to the recruits, each person taking ten rounds. All live ammunition had been removed from all weapons and stored. Once this was completed, each instructor, who had charge of a squad, positioned their recruits strategically around the camp.

For their role within the exercise, Sergeant Denis Comerford, Corporal Leonard Paproth, Aircraftman Landen Cowan and Drill Instructor Michael O'Keefe had rounds of tracer ammunition³. These were to be used to alert the recruits of the commencement of the exercise and to add a level of realism to the drill. The four leaders then set out in an easterly direction, past the point on the main road, known as the "Main Gate". They walked past the sentry on the "Main Gate" who did not challenge them and who was then questioned as to why he didn't and was also asked whether he was aware of the night exercise in progress. He responded in the negative and was then questioned to ensure he did not have any live rounds in his weapon or on his person.

The four leaders proceeded a few yards up the road and fired some tracer rounds in the air over the rifle range area. The four continued following the road, firing irregularly in the air as they went, until they reached a fork in the road. By this time, they had travelled about 280 to 300 metres from the main gate area. All four stopped and Sergeant Comerford checked that they had all fired all their tracer ammunition, which was confirmed that they had. It was now nearing 9.00pm or just after. They all then loaded the blank ammunition which they had also brought with them.

Before they reached the bridge, Corporal Paproth and his three companions reloaded blank ammunition into their rifles, because they had planned to move back up the road firing blank ammunition as they went to see if any of the defending forces would stay in their posts or come out to challenge them. After a short time, the four instructors had come to a fork in the road at which stage the men spread out with Drill Instructor O'Keefe out front on the left-hand side of the road, and Corporal Paproth with Aircraftman Cowan a few metres behind Drill Instructor O'Keefe. Sergeant Comerford was not immediately with the others but was in the general vicinity of the others.

The aim of the four to draw men away from their posts appeared to work as several of the defenders left their positions to challenge the four instructors. At this point there was considerable shouting and firing of weapons from both sides of the road. In the commotion that was now developing, Aircraftman Cowan fell backwards into a muddy pool and as he was getting himself out, he heard a shot from a rifle close by, that appeared loud and certainly did not sound like a blank being fired. There were several men nearby but due to the darkness he could not make out who these men were.

At this stage, Aircraftman Cowan straightened himself up and heard groaning coming from his left. Looking to the direction of the sound, he saw about four men approximately a metre or so away. His first impression was that this was a ruse to draw more defenders away from their posts to take them prisoners. Aircraftman Cowan went over to the group and at this point saw that a person was lying

³ Tracer bullets have a column of pyrotechnic composition in the base that is ignited by the flame of the propellant; this provides a visible pyrotechnic display during the bullet's flight.



A few minutes afterwards, Flight Lieutenant Pitcher and NCOs arrived on the scene. Shortly after the ambulance arrived and Corporal Paproth was transported to the medical centre on the base. From there, his body was eventually transferred to the mortuary in the township of Mooroopna. The following day, 23 September, Detective David George McMillan arrived at the camp to investigate the circumstances of Corporal Paproth's death and to speak directly with a large number of the men involved in the exercise from the previous evening who were in the vicinity of where the tragedy took place. Attention was given to how the ammunition was checked and issued across all the participants. Particular attention was given to one serviceman who believed that he may have noticed that one of his shots appeared to 'feel' different to the others. Whilst he certainly could identify the difference in the firing or live ammunition to blank ammunition, he could not tell the difference between the two by sight. Detective McMillan gathered his reports and evidence before reporting his initial findings to the Deputy Coroner George Vaughan Furphy⁴ JP.

On 11 October 1943, in Shepparton, Deputy Coroner George Furphy opened the inquest into the death of Corporal Leonard Paproth. Testimony was heard from eleven of the RAAF personnel involved in the night exercise on 22 September, as well as the coroner, Duncan Gordon McKeeler, and from Detective McMillan. The finding of the inquest was – "that Leonard Charles Paproth died from a gunshot wound accidentally inflicted whilst the deceased was engaged with other troops in an Air Force exercise at night. There is not sufficient evidence to show by whom the shot was fired".

Corporal Leonard Charles Paproth was interred in the Military section of the Shepparton cemetery on 25 September 1943. He is remembered at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, the Altona War Memorial and in the naming of Paproth Grove, Altona North.

Leonard's father, Herman (known as Jack) John Paproth continued residing in Altona until his death on 20 March 1970. Jack Paproth had remained an active member of the Altona RSL and always took a keen interest in the progress of the Altona community. He is interred within the Altona Memorial Park with his second wife, Anne Gaynor Paproth, who passed away on 31 October 1977. Leonard's youngest brother Frederick (known as Alan) Alan Paproth also lived in Altona his entire life until his death in 2007.



Leonard Charles Paproth, Headstone at Shepparton Public cemetery

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⁴ George Vaughan Furphy was the son of John Furphy who had founded the famous J Furphy & Sons and Furphy Foundry in Shepparton, and George was also a director of the company.



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