

OBITUARY

STANLEY FOWLER

Stanley Fowler, a noted pioneer in fisheries exploration and in aerial observations in marine ornithology, died in Melbourne on January 23, 1961. He was born at Williamstown, Victoria on November 23, 1895. Though he was not a member of the Western Australian Naturalists' Club he knew many members and was closely associated with their activities in the years he was working in this State, between 1942 and 1946. Some of our members who were war-time airmen also met Fowler as a fisheries observer with the R.A.A.F., where he was familiarly known as "The Admiral" and "Peg Leg."



Stanley Fowler, 1944.

The latter name was in allusion to a severe leg injury he received in World War I. He was at the Gallipoli landing and in France, and was severely wounded at Pozieres. Wounded in the leg he lay on the battlefield apparently dead and had just lifted his head when an enemy sniper shot him between the eyes. Almost miraculously he survived. However, by an amazing coincidence his brother John was killed by a similar shot in the same battle.

These wounds caused him great physical discomfort in later life and eventually led to his being invalided out of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in July 1948, when he held the rank of Principal Research Officer in the Fisheries Division.

Though not a professionally trained biologist Fowler was the real founder, and in its earlier years the main driving force, of the Fisheries Division. He joined the Commonwealth Public Service

in March 1920 and held responsible posts in the Bureau of Commerce and Industry, Board of Trade, Department of Markets and Migration, and the Development and Migration Commission. Whilst with the Commission he was organizing secretary of the Australian Fisheries Conference of 1927-29 and prepared a very valuable fisheries map of Australia, for long a basic work of reference. A programme of fisheries research and the planning of a research vessel was projected but the economic depression delayed progress. Funds only became available in 1934 after he had personally addressed Federal Cabinet on the subject. The fisheries investigations with Fowler as Commonwealth Fisheries Officer, were first attached to the Development Branch of the Prime Minister's Department and in July 1935 these were transferred to the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.

As soon as he was able Fowler enthusiastically made personal surveys of pelagic fish occurrences (mainly of the tuna species) in the Tasmanian region in whatever craft were available for occasional engagement. In December 1937 he surveyed south-east Tasmania in the police patrol boat *Allara*; in January 1938 he was in the Flinders I. region in the police boat *Falcon*, and in February-March the same year he cruised in Bass Strait and northern and eastern Tasmania south to Pedra Branca in the auxiliary ketch *Peter R.* In May of that year, 1938, the *M.V. Warreen*, research vessel of the Fisheries Division, came into service and Fowler was a member of both parts of its first cruise (May 11 to June 9 from Melbourne to Tasmania; July 22 to August 19 Melbourne to the Furneaux Group and north to Cronulla, N.S.W.). He made several cruises in the vessel subsequently before it was taken over by the Navy in 1942 for use in World War II.

However, it was in connection with his aerial reconnaissances of Australian coastal waters that Fowler was best known. He became impressed with the possibilities of aerial observations after discussions with Squadron-Leader Hemphill of the R.A.A.F., who described to him the large schools of fish he saw off the north-west coast in W.A. Fowler wrote to Sir David Rivett in January 1936 suggesting the utility of aerial surveys and the Air Board agreed to the use of air force planes for fisheries reconnaissances.

The first series of flights were made in a Seagull Amphibian between October 21 and December 1, 1936 from south of Sydney to southern Tasmania. The second series were made in the same region in February-March 1937; the third in July-August between Cairns and southern Tasmania; the fourth in August in Port Phillip and Westernport whilst he was an observer accompanying a training flight. Most of these flights depended on aircraft being available and where there were some aeronautical facilities, such as landing grounds. The next flights were made in November-December 1938, in co-operation with surveys by the *Warreen*, and similar plane-ship co-ordinated surveys were carried out in South Australia in February-March 1939. Extension of the aerial surveys into Western Australian waters was planned for October 1939, but the outbreak of World War II led to their abandonment.

The War, however, did not extinguish the aerial work, but, in fact, led to Fowler making some of his most fruitful flights. After the War began an application was made at his instigation to the R.A.A.F. for permission for an observer of the C.S.I.R. to accompany some of the coastal patrols in order to capitalise, in a fisheries sense, on some of the extensive patrols being conducted at the time. This request was not met until late in 1942 when permission was granted to Fowler to accompany operational flights in Australia, except broadly, the north of Australia. He decided to use the operational flights offering in Western Australia since that State had not been surveyed in any way by C.S.I.R. Flights began in December 1942 and continued at intervals until 1946.

Much useful information was accumulated, not only of pelagic fish occurrences but of the movements of whales. He even arranged for the dropping of drift bottles out at sea for ocean current studies. In these war-time flights many hazards had to be contended with and the "Admiral" gained the esteem of many young officers for his intrepidity in seeking flights in dangerous situations. These were not without their moments of drama. On one occasion in an American aircraft, the pilot confused the identity of the Cape Leeuwin and Cape Naturaliste lights, and kept going on into the Southern Ocean. Fowler prevented a certain disaster by persuading the pilot of the accuracy of his own observations on their probable position.

In August 1944 the R.A.A.F. reverted to the pre-war arrangement by which an aircraft was made available especially for the fishery work and this was continued until the final aerial survey in 1946 (in which the writer of this article was able to participate) when the post-war dissolution of R.A.A.F. facilities made further flights of this nature impracticable. These planned flights added notably to the documentation of biological phenomena along the W.A. coast. In May and June 1945 Fowler discovered remarkable concentrations of pilchard (*Sardinops neopilchardus*) shoals in the western Bight, between the Recherche Archipelago and Point Culver. Gilbert Whitley, the Australian Museum ichthyologist who accompanied him on a second flight to the area, estimated there were 60,000 shoals visible along one strip of 50 miles (*Proc. Roy. Zool. Soc. N.S.W. for 1947-48: 17-27*). Later in the same year the flights were conducted in association with a boat survey along the coast from Fremantle to King Sound in the chartered lugger *Isobel*, skippered by the late Erik Akerstrom and in which Whitley was the scientific observer. These Western Australian flights ended in August 1946. However, Fowler continued his activities in the State by assisting to organise the re-commissioning of F.R.V. *Warreen*, which was now released by the Navy. It began its operations in Western Australian waters in 1947.

Fowler was very disappointed at this time at not receiving the leadership of a new section in the Fisheries Division (the Section of Fisheries Exploration) which he had been led to believe would be his. This was the crowning frustration in a fisheries career which was more than ordinarily turbulent. He was described by

one of his colleagues as a "erusing type", and, as such men often are, not always easy to get on with. He firmly believed in the richness of Australia's fisheries potential, criticised the current belief in the necessarily low productivity of tropical seas, stressed the patchiness of plankton occurrences (based on his aerial observations of krill swarms), and developed a firm faith in the utility of aerial observation of pelagic fish occurrences. And he had the energy and persistence to advance these views uncompromisingly in defiance of the prevailing scientific thought of the time. The years have shown that he was right in many of the views he held. In respect to the value of aircraft he was vindicated whilst he was still in the C.S.I.R.O. service and in January 1946 he had the satisfaction of receiving the following tribute from Sir David Rivett: "Obviously there no longer remains any shadow of doubt about the practical value of aerial spotting; and in view of past history which will still be within your recollection, it all represents quite a triumph for you and your steadfast faith."

His war-caused physical disabilities became an increasing burden to him, and the loss of the control of the Fisheries Exploration Section was a blow which seems to have undermined his will to carry on with fisheries work. In July 1948 he retired from the service as medically unfit. The Exploration Section, without him, proved short-lived and the officer (from overseas) who was appointed as its head soon left the Organisation. The C.S.I.R.O. Executive honoured Fowler after his retirement by naming one of its research vessels after him, the F.R.V. *Stanley Fowler*.

Whilst he was engaged in fisheries surveys Fowler made detailed observations on sea-bird occurrences. In Western Australia he made low level flights over almost every island, of potential sea-bird interest, from Wyndham to the Archipelago of the Recherche, noted major sea-bird occurrences and documented much of his observation by a superb series of photographs. His knowledge of shorthand enabled him to write ample "on the spot" field notes of what he saw. He was also a talented sketcher. He did similar work in south-eastern Australia, where his most notable effort was on the five gannets of *Sula serrator* which he photographed over successive seasons. All of these records were freely made available to other students, but unhappily he did not, as he had hoped, prepare any extensive publications on his work.

His bird papers are enumerated in Whittell's *The Literature of Australian Birds*. A very useful geographical account of the western coastline appeared in the report of the second annual conference of inspectors of the W.A. Fisheries Department, 1944.

Fowler was a robust virile man, brown-eyed and with a ruddy complexion, and who did not look his age; to the end he showed no grey in his dark hair. He had a zest for life, was something of a bon vivant, and, though his zeal for fisheries exploration and development gradually took over almost all his private life, he retained a wide interest in public affairs, literature and art.

—D. L. S.