

## LT FERGUS LEE DEMPSTER OBE DSC (29-34)

The following is taken from an obituary published in the Spring 1997 OF Magazine, which was largely taken with permission from the obituary that appeared in the *Telegraph* :-

### Obituaries

## Finally, at the Annual Dinner and aged 80, Fergie Dempster confessed: 'I was a spy'

Until he died, aged 81, in October last year the full details of the adventurous life of FERGUS DEMPSTER DSC OBE (29-34), as revealed in a long *Daily Telegraph* obituary, were known to few of his Framlingham contemporaries.

Dr Alan Dods (27-32), who shot with him at Bisley, remembered one claim to fame: Dempster was crewing for Headmaster Whitworth when their yacht was run down by a French trawler off Ramsgate. They were rescued but the boat went down, and with it the Headmaster's artificial leg. Of Dempster he said: 'He was truly ebullient, life moved up a gear in his presence'.

Cdr. Peter Lloyd Bostock (28-31) - who attended the funeral - came upon Dempster again in Saigon on his way home from the Korean War. 'Fergie' was then officially First Secretary at the Embassy there. As he had to go up country on some hush-hush mission he loaned Bostock his air-conditioned home while he was away.

Even when prized out of retirement to join the O.F. party which visited Amiens on the 50th anniversary of Percy Pickard's famous raid, Dempster let slip few details of the life he had led. Then, Alan Dods recalls, 'during a conversation at the 1995 AGM and dinner about his wartime exploits he leaned across to me and whispered: 'I WAS A SPY'. And indeed he was, as the *Telegraph* obituary reproduced here with permission explains:

Fergie Dempster, who has died aged 81, was a senior officer in the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). He began his intelligence career as a Lieutenant RNVR in a clandestine Wartime organisation known as the African Coastal Flotilla. The name was deliberately chosen, as being anodyne and almost meaningless, to give no hint of the Flotilla's operations, which never appeared in any news bulletins or official reports:

Formed in 1942 under the Deputy Director of the Operations Division (Irregular) in London, and based first in Gibraltar and then in Algiers, the Flotilla used fishing vessels, feluccas and any other craft they could commandeer, to ferry personnel and arms secretly to North Africa and the French Riviera.

When Dempster joined, late in December 1943, the Flotilla was operating from Bastia in north-east Corsica.

It used fast Italian Motoscafi Antisommergibili (MAS) boats (available since the Italian surrender in September) and US Navy PT motorboats to carry out missions for M16, SOE, the American OSS and the French Deuxieme Bureau. These involved taking passengers, nick-named "Joeys", to rendezvous, known as "pinpoints", along the coast of Italy and France.

As well as landing (rowing them ashore in dinghies) and retrieving the Joeys who were agents, saboteurs, propaganda specialists and escape organisers, the Flotilla ferried stores, arms,



*Fergie Dempster in earlier days*

ammunition, explosives, food and money for the Resistance.

It also picked up fugitives who were trying to evade the Gestapo, escaped PoWs, crashed Allied air crew, politicians, and Resistance workers.

The boats had their own captains and crew, but the Flotilla officers, who called themselves "Shoeflies", were responsible for the conduct of the mission, ensuring that the Joeys were delivered to the right pinpoints.

It was dangerous work. Some pinpoints were compromised and ambushed. There was always the risk of running into enemy destroyers, E-boats, flagships and coastal convoys. Any boat still at sea after daybreak was attacked by the Luftwaffe. The allegiance of some MAS boat crew could not be relied on. There was at least one mutiny, resulting in the death of the Shoeflies officer.

Operating only in the 10-day dark period of the moon each month, the Shoeflies carried out more than 100 missions between January 1944 and the Allied invasion of the south of France in August. Dempster was awarded the DSC.

When Dempster came home he was offered the command of a Shoefly junk in south-east Asia. "I said I'd had enough of putting sardine oil over myself," he said, "pretending to be an Italian fisherman, and I didn't think I'd contribute further to the war effort by wearing pigtails."

Instead, he joined a Special Counter Intelligence unit to detect German "stay behind" agents in the Antwerp region, under the cover of the Port Security Control. Years later, the Belgians made him a Knight of the Order of the Crown.

Fergus Lee Dempster was born on August 18 1915 in Tangiers, where his father was policy adviser on Moroccan affairs to the US Government. His parents wanted him to "learn to be an Englishman" and sent him home to Framlingham College in Suffolk, but were disappointed to hear that his best friend at school was a Chinese boy.

When war broke out in 1939 Dempster was an administrative trainee with Shell Oil in

Venezuela. He was trilingual in English, French and Spanish and also fluent in Italian and Arabic. Eager to serve in Special Forces he came home in an Atlantic convoy to join the Navy, who received him without emotion, classifying him "HDO" - Harbour Defence Only.

However, as an ordinary seaman Dempster did take part in two secret missions in an MTB from Felixstowe to IJmuiden in Holland, before going to *HMS King Alfred* in Hove, to be commissioned as a sub-lieutenant RNVR. He then joined the armed Special Service trawler *Prodigal* and went out to the Mediterranean to operate with Yugoslav partisans in the Adriatic.

Wartime service gave Dempster useful contacts in the SIS. After the war he was interviewed by Kim Philby and offered a post in Barcelona, where he had "three delicious years", assessing the possibility of the Catalans joining the opposition to Franco in an SIS plan to overthrow the Caudillo. Dempster estimated that this would never happen and enjoyed himself making Catalan friends and learning the language.

Back in London for the next four years, Dempster was responsible for investigating European communist parties, particularly the French, who were regarded by SIS as a subversive organisation ready-made to aid any Russian move against the West.

Dempster then accepted the No. 2 post in the Security Intelligence Far East in succession to Maurice Oldfield. He monitored communist parties at the time of the communist insurgency in Malaya and the French struggle against the Vietminh in Indo-China.

Dempster had by now become an authority on intelligence in south-east Asia, and he and Oldfield were both summoned to Washington (flying in separate aircraft lest something befell one of them) to confer with the CIA.

### **Only an O.B.E.**

Dempster himself regarded the resulting intelligence framework they established as "a very clear triumph", and felt a little let down to be appointed only an OBE in 1957.

Dempster had three years as Head of Station in London, involved in the counter-attack on Soviet intelligence, and then went to Australia to set up the Australian SIS. Asked what next, he said he would go to Madrid "and see bullfights", which he did for four "felicitous years".

His final SIS appointment was in Mexico, responsible for safeguarding the security of Belize from Guatemalan encroachment.

In retirement, Dempster started a consultancy in Mexico, which folded after the death of his ex-CIA American partner. He also had business interests, including supplying sharks' fins to Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong, all of which failed.

Fergie Dempster was one of nature's extroverts. He once took part in a sailors' "Sod's Opera" in Bastia, when he was one half of a memorable duo, impersonating the wartime music hall and radio artists, the Western Brothers.

In Western Brothers' drawl, they sang a song which exactly caught the Shoefly self-deprecating sense of humour, and Fergie's own philosophy of life.

*Our lives are fraught with danger, our deeds are frightfully hush,  
We're awfully Lone Star Ranger, and all that sort of gush,  
We seldom see a harbour; for us no gilt and plush.  
We're Special Service Shoeflies, Special Service Slush!  
We can spin a spiffing story (and spin it frightfully well)  
Of how we rolled to glory on a rough and ready swell,  
But there's precious few among us who won't roll down to Hell,  
We're Special Service Sinners. Special Service? Well.*

Fergie was excellent company and occasionally achieved diplomatic success at the dinner table as in Mexico, when he was the guest of the Guatemalan Foreign Secretary. At his host's request, he sang a Flamenco song with appropriate gestures after which his host "gave me a hug and said 'For that, I will give you Belize!'" Latterly, Fergie suffered from Kidney failure, and had to undergo dialysis three times a week. Eventually, he decided, "That's it, I've had a good life, that's enough", discontinued the dialysis, and summoned family and friends to a farewell of guitar music, songs and jokes.

He married in 1939 in Caracas, Diny (Diana) Taylor, who died in June last year. They had a son and a daughter.