

DOUBLE LIFE

Roy Farran was a local hero—and a man with a hidden past.

By MAURICE YACOWAR



PHOTO: CHRIS WARE

US Major General Clayton Bissell congratulates Captain Roy Farran after presenting him with the Legion of Merit.

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APPARENTLY I HAVE IDOLIZED A SADISTIC WAR criminal. How do I deal with that?

Roy Alexander Farran abducted and tortured a 16-year-old Jewish boy in Palestine in 1947, and when the interrogation failed, Farran smashed the boy's head in with a stone. Alexander Rubowitz's body was never found. Farran, a highly decorated commando in the British air force, was incriminated when a felt hat bearing his name was found at the abduction scene.

That's the story David Cesarani tells in *Major Farran's Hat: Murder, Scandal and Britain's War against Jewish Terrorism 1945–48* (Heinemann, 2009). On CBC radio's *The Current*, the same charges were made in Jerusalem by Stephen Rambam, a Brooklyn detective recently hired to investigate Rubowitz's disappearance, and by University of New Brunswick professor David Charters, who has also written on the case. They claim Farran's acquittal in a British trial was a cover-up that ignored his written confession.

Born in India in 1921, Farran was a British war hero before he turned 23. He returned to Palestine late in the British mandate and tried to infiltrate the Jewish terrorist Stern Gang. When he heard he was being blamed for Rubowitz's murder, he fled to Syria. He returned to stand trial after a book bomb mailed to R. Farran killed his youngest brother, Rex, instead. He produced

a solid alibi and claimed he'd been framed with his hat. Witnesses failed to select Farran from a lineup.

After leaving the army, Farran drifted, then moved to Calgary, where he farmed, wrote memoirs and novels and worked in journalism. In 1954 he founded the weekly *North Hill News*. He became a Calgary alderman, then joined provincial politics in Peter Lougheed's sweep to power in 1971. He was the PC member for Calgary-North Hill, and Minister of Telephones & Utilities in his first term and Solicitor General in his second. He retired to chair Alberta's horseracing commission. In 1994 the French government added the Légion d'honneur to his 1946 Croix de guerre. He died in June 2006 and received a hero's burial.

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THAT'S THE BIO. HERE'S MY ROY FARRAN.

When I turned 16, I applied to all three Calgary papers for a job. One responded. Roy Farran hired me for the summer, full time, to write for and edit the *North Hill News* and the *Rocky View News*, its weekly farm contract. In 1958, I made \$19.76 a week; in 1959, \$24.15. Ben Wicks made the same money as apprentice in the printing shop, before advancing to cartoonist and wit. I did better during the school term, when

my reports on North Hill events and school sports earned 25 cents a column inch. For my third summer, I pleaded university costs and got \$45.

I didn't know about Roy's past. Then came the rumbles. Did I know Israel had a warrant for his arrest?

My parents aside, Roy Farran was the most influential figure in my life. The first two summers we shared an office and wrote the paper between us. By the third, Graham Smith came in as editor to free up Roy for politics. Their lessons on direct writing made my English Ph.D. studies in Birmingham, UK, a breeze.

Roy taught me investigative journalism; he was determined to keep the powerful honest. A few lines about a civic official paving his driveway with city cement led to Mayor Don Mackay's resignation, with an echoing scandal for Mayor Hawrelak in Edmonton. Roy championed the little guy against the system. His passionate campaigns for the ward system, against fluoridation, and for principle in politics set my more modest path of maverick in academe.

Roy opened out my life. When Reginald Maudling, a candidate for the British Tory leadership, met with the local British community, Roy got me a private interview. That was for my education, not for the paper. He let me write a Stampeders column and sometimes cover City Council. For business

An Obituary for Roy Farran

Major Roy Alexander Farran, passed away at the age of 85 years. One of the most highly decorated soldiers of World War II, Roy was the recipient of the Distinguished Service Order, Military Cross (two bars), Africa Campaign Star, France/Germany Campaign Star, Italy Campaign Star, General Campaign Medal, Queen's Gold Jubilee Medal, Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal, Canada 125 Medal, Officer and Chevalier of the Order of the Legion of Honour—France, French Croix de Guerre with Palm, Officer of the Order of the United States Legion of Merit, the Italian Gold Medal, Italian Partisan Star of the Garibaldi, and the Greek War Medal. A true child of the Commonwealth, Roy spent his youth in India until he returned to England and attended the Royal Sandhurst Military College. His colourful military career saw action in the Western Desert, Crete, Italy, France, Norway and in post-war Palestine. As an early member of the Special Air Services (SAS), Roy pioneered behind-the-enemy-lines operations. In August 1941, Roy escaped from a German PoW camp in Greece to return to fight in the Battle of El Alamein in North Africa. His biographical chronicle, *Winged Dagger*, was a post-war bestseller and is today considered a military classic. In



1949, Roy worked in southern Rhodesia, where he met his Canadian-born wife, Ruth Harvie Ardern. He left his Herefordshire farm in England to emigrate to Canada in 1950, where he started a dairy farm in Springbank. Roy was an accomplished journalist, spent many years with the *Calgary Herald* and established the *North Hill News* in 1951. He was the publisher of many Alberta weeklies under his motto "without fear or favour." He was an alderman for Calgary-North Hill 1961–1969. He was an

MLA 1971–1979, holding the cabinet portfolios of Telephones & Utilities and Solicitor General. Roy was well known for his columns in the *Edmonton Journal* and *Calgary Herald* and his lively talk show on CFAC radio. Roy was active in the community and held directorships with the Calgary Stampede, Calgary Hospital Board, Fanning Centre, Calgary Zoo, Calgary Winter Club and many others. He was the energy behind the creation of Fish Creek Park and Nose Hill Park. An accomplished author, he wrote nine books. A linguist, he spoke seven languages and was a long-time supporter of the Alliance Française. He was chairman of the Alberta Racing Commission for 14 years and was a passionate horseman and outdoorsman.

(From the Calgary Sun, 2006)



The Farran family at the funeral of Rex, the son killed by a letter bomb meant for Roy Farran (second from left).

director Bill MacCallum—then launching Calgary’s Winter Club—I churned out copy for the real estate supplements. Heady stuff for a boy of 17. I took up the pipe and smoked Roy’s Amphora brown.

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I DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT ROY’S PALESTINE PAST. Then came the rumbles. Why would I work for a notorious anti-Semite? Did I know Israel had a warrant for his arrest? Would I help set him up?

I’d repeat: Mr. Farran was fair to me and was teaching me a lot. I was proud to work for him, flattered to know him. Represented in the Leon Uris/Paul Newman *Exodus*, he was the only fictional figure I knew in real life. As for those Palestine charges, he was too fine a man and too devout a Catholic. I believed what he wrote in his memoir *Winged Dagger*.

As a boy of 16 my résumé wasn’t much, so I piled in everything, including my being Jewish. At my interview Roy complimented me on its fullness. Maybe he did hire me as a gesture, to make peace with the Calgary Jewish community, but the job worked out. I was Alexander Rubowitz’s age.

We talked about a lot but nothing personal. When he was debating whether to put his children into the Catholic system

he asked about my experience in the Jewish school.

Once I started to rip open a book in the mail. “Wait,” he said, “You could blow your head off that way.” Then he showed this Jewish boy how to open a package warily, to ensure it wasn’t a bomb. You keep the pressure on. That’s as close as we came to his Palestine story and his brother’s death.

When I moved back to Calgary 13 years ago I was keen to reconnect. All grown up, my parents gone, I guess I craved Roy’s approval. But he didn’t return my calls. He didn’t remember me, but at the Highlander Ball and at his wife Ruth’s funeral he gallantly pretended to. Cancer had taken his larynx so he spoke through a slit in his throat. I never told him how much he’d meant to me.

Now comes this guilt. How do I reconcile my Roy with that evil? I knew him as a man of character and courage, committed to public service. The people he helped as a journalist elected him alderman. His constituents gave him two terms as MLA. If the terrible conditions of terrorist war drove him to that vile action, he is still the man of that solid service.

Alexander Rubowitz deserves to have his story told full and true. He deserves to be found and buried properly. He deserves to have his killer named and judged. Whatever happened is a double tragedy. Young Alexander did not get another chance. Roy Alexander Farran remade himself a fine life, but could never escape the shadow of that one day in Palestine in 1947. ■

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