

## Obituary

**Victor Aloysius Jean-Baptiste Marchesi** was born in London on 25 January 1914 and was educated at St. Joseph's in Norwood before joining the Merchant Navy. He later served fifteen months as fourth mate on RRS *Discovery* in 1936–7. He returned to a country preparing for the possibility of war, and joined the Royal Navy as a Sub-Lieutenant specialising in hydrographic survey. While serving as First Lieutenant on HMS *Franklin* surveying waters off southeast England in 1943, he received a signal requesting him to report to Lieutenant Commander Jimmy Marr at the Admiralty.

Marr announced that a ship, later described by Marchesi as 'a funny little schooner rigged wooden ship, with a very small engine' had been acquired to take men to the Antarctic. This was, of course, the first stage of Operation Tabarin. Doubting the suitability of the vessel, Marchesi was told that if she proved to be unsatisfactory, a minesweeper would take her place. Renamed HMS *Bransfield*, she was abandoned before leaving British shores but, by this time, the demands of war meant that no replacement was available. Marchesi sailed on *Highland Monarch* bound for the Falkland Islands along with his two deck officers and the expedition staff (Fig. 1). There they picked up HMS *William Scoresby*, now converted to a minesweeper flying the white ensign, fitted with a 12-pounder gun on her foredeck and armed with depth charges. The Operation Tabarin shore party, designated Naval party 475, boarded the Falkland Islands mail ship *Fitzroy*, carrying the stores of the expedition. Appointed as second-in-command of Operation Tabarin, Marchesi remained in charge of the sea-going Naval Party 476 until the end of the war.

No member of the operation knew its true purpose, except to be told it was 'Most Secret.' The expedition's covert nature was 'blown' in a broadcast by the BBC World Service on 24 April 1944, leaving them all dumbfounded, but none the wiser. On their return to England in 1946, there was no welcoming party waiting to greet them, so the group quietly split up and went home to their families. It was to be many years before sufficient information became available to indicate that whatever the reasoning behind its inception, the purpose of the expedition when it left England was as a disinformation exercise, aimed at reinforcing the belief by the German Navy that their 'Enigma' codes were still uncompromised.

After seeing bases established at Deception Island and Port Lockroy, in April 1944 Marchesi took *William Scoresby* to Montevideo for a refit. He had persuaded the Admiralty that her single 12-pounder gun and depth charges would be ineffective against any foreign warships



Fig. 1. The full Operation Tabarin team on board *Highland Monarch*, heading south for the Falkland Islands, having spent Christmas Day in Gibraltar. Taken in January 1944. Marr is in the middle of the middle row. Marchesi is to his right.

should he ever encounter one, which he never did. While being off-loaded onto a lighter, one depth charge slipped from its slings. Despite the detonators having earlier been removed, it required three days of negotiation, a large payment from the British Embassy and two bottles of brandy to persuade a local diver to descend to the seabed and re-attach lifting slings. Returning to the Falkland Islands, *William Scoresby* acted as an additional supply ship, ferrying goods to and from the outlying stations.

Next austral summer Marchesi accompanied *Eagle* to Hope Bay to establish the third British Base, and *William Scoresby* then took a third building to Sandefjord Bay on Coronation Island, in the South Orkneys. Marchesi described this operation as being 'For sovereignty purposes only, as nobody was going to live in it.' In late 1945, the administration of the bases was taken over by the newly-formed Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey as Marchesi headed south to relieve the Operation Tabarin team from their three bases.

Victor Marchesi remained in the Royal Navy and joined the Joint Intelligence Service for eighteen months as a hydrographic surveyor before taking part in Operation Hornet to carry out chemical warfare experiments. From there he became Admiralty Lecturer to Schools, before serving on an aircraft carrier during the Korean War. He later joined HMS *Unicorn* for two and a half years in the far east, before returning to England. He then served on the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean as Atomic, Bacterial and Chemical Defence Officer. When passed over for promotion to Lieutenant Commander, he became a Staff Officer to the Ulster division of the RNVR until retiring from the Royal Navy at 45. He then joined

the brewers Bass and thereafter worked as a port relief officer for Cunard, and eventually as captain of *Cutty Sark* at Greenwich.

Victor Marchesi died on 27 December 2006, aged 92. His wife Nancy, whom he met when refitting *William Scoresby* in Montevideo predeceased him. He is survived by two sons and a daughter. A long-standing member of

the Antarctic Club, he also attended many FIDS reunions. His attitude to life in his later years can be summed up when asked, just before his last birthday whether he ascribed his longevity to genetics, or perhaps careful living? His memorable response was, 'Gin and fags, dear boy, gin and fags!'

*Alan Carroll*