

# OBITUARY

## Michael Alexander of Skelbo

NO ONE could swash a buckler with greater verve or panache than veteran Colditz prisoner and writer-adventurer Michael Alexander, one-time trustee owner of Skelbo House, overlooking Loch Fleet. He died in London on 19th December, aged 84.

National newspaper obituaries have concentrated on his dashing Second World War exploits as a commando and a member of the Special Boat Section in North Africa, but here he will be remembered as an entertaining host and for organising a series of annual speedboat races around the North of Scotland some 15 years ago.

With fellow adventure writer Richard Frere, based at Drumnadrochit, Alexander piloted a fast rigid inflatable craft into the mouth of Loch Fleet in June 1989 while on a 500-mile reconnaissance from North Kessock, via the Caledonian Canal and Pentland Firth back to Inverness. The tide was against his anchoring off Skelbo, to walk up to his Highland home, so he opted for a ham and free-range egg breakfast with friends of both Frere and himself at Littleferry Pier, while awaiting high water.

Having proved a major international event could be based on their trip, Michael Alexander set about organising the "Round the Top" RIB Race, which attracted entrants in different classes of inflatables from all around the world. The remote



overnight anchorages on the west and north coasts proved too ill-equipped to cater for the demands of highly-sophisticated seafaring jolly jacks, however, so the race was relocated to the Mediterranean within a couple of summers.

The excitement and unexpected adventure this kind of event invariably produced were the ingredients that had driven Alexander's life from his early years. The son of Rear-Admiral Charles Otway Alexander and his Dutch wife Antonia Geemans, Michael Charles Grant Alexander was foiled from joining the Royal Navy from Stowe College because of a bout of pleurisy. Instead, from Sandhurst he was commissioned in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry.

His exciting war came to an end when he was captured and expected to be shot for his behind-the-lines escapades. He fooled the Germans into believing he was a nephew of General Sir Harold Alexander of Tunis, the British GOC Middle

East, and therefore valuable ransom. He was a prisoner in Colditz Castle from 1942-44, along with another officer of later Sutherland connection, Major Alan McCall, Culmailly Farm.

He married Sarah Wignall, whose parents owned Cambusmore Estate, in 1963. They adopted a daughter, but the marriage was later dissolved. His wife, also a writer under the name of Sarah Ferguson, based one of her novels around Skelbo and Loch Fleet, *To the Place of Shells*, and another, *A Guard Within*, gave a harrowing account of mental illness, from which she suffered.

His books covered hovercraft expeditions in the Himalayas and through the Yucatan Straits, his life in Colditz and his travels all over the world. A Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, he was a director of Acorn Film Productions and Wildlife Publications Ltd.

His later life was just as torrid, if more domestic. He strongly resisted Sutherland planning officers' attempts to persuade him to finance the restoration of ancient Skelbo Manor House within the ruined walls of Skelbo Castle, which were declared unsafe. His answer was to sell the Barony of Skelbo in 1996 to a mysterious and as yet untraceable Russian businessman Mikhail Trebouair, who has allowed the buildings to degenerate into even more dangerous condition.

Around this time a third "Michael" entered the scene

— Alexander sold Skelbo House and policies on behalf of his daughter's trust to Dr Michi Meftah, a New York based neurosurgeon, who is a far more regular visitor and benefactor to Sutherland than his predecessor.

In the 1980s Michael Alexander branched into a new, unlikely career — he founded the Chelsea Wharf Restaurant at Lots Road, but became bored with the drudgery of making it a business success. More colourful was his garishly-headlined romance, at age 74, with a 21-year-old Cheltenham College and Cambridge student Emily Bearn, who accompanied him on his final visits to Skelbo as hostess at cocktail parties for his local associates.

The Daily Express took delight in quoting Alexander in 1995: "She's not a Lolita. And I'm not a cradle-snatcher. This all grew gracefully out of circumstances. There is nothing wrong with our relationship. As long as one is not totally decrepit I think it is fine. There's a bit of mileage left in me yet."

Then, almost 10 years on, the old soldier just faded away. As his death announcement put it: "Died peacefully in his sleep on Sunday, 19th December 2004, Colditz veteran and war hero, writer, poet, explorer, connoisseur and life-enhancer extraordinaire." And so say all of us.

James Henderson

