

Robert Webster Ford (1923-2013) – known to Tibetans as “Phodo Kusho” – Ford Esq.

Roger Croston

Career diplomat and one-time resident radio officer in Tibet and the last of the few Europeans who travelled to Lhasa, before the Chinese annexation of 1950. He was captured by the Red Army and imprisoned in China for almost five years, surviving severe brainwashing.

Robert Webster Ford, who has died aged 90, was a career diplomat who, as a young RAF radio officer was posted to Tibet and was later recruited by the Tibetan Government. Captured on the Tibet-China border in 1950 by the invading Chinese People’s Liberation Army, he was imprisoned for nearly five years undergoing “re-education” and “thought reform.” He was one of only 78 westerners to reach Lhasa between the British Foreign Office invasion of 1904 and 1950 when China annexed Tibet. After retirement from the Foreign Office he again took up the cause of the Tibetan people by whom he was revered as “Phodo Kusho” – “Ford Esquire.” He became a close friend of the Dalai Lama from whom, for his support of the Tibetans, he received the “Light of Truth Award” in April 2013.

Robert Ford, an only child, was brought up in Rolleston-on-Dove, Derbyshire, England. His father was an engine mechanic at the Ind Coope brewery at nearby Burton-on-Trent. From the village school he won a scholarship and attended Alleyne’s Grammar School, Uttoxeter. In 1939, aged 16, he took an RAF entrance exam to become a radio technician. “Radio was unusual; I wanted to explore a growing science about which I knew nothing. I enlisted because I wanted to see the world and foresaw the coming war.” His three-year course at Cranwell, beginning in September 1939, was shortened to 18 months because of war. His first commission was with the ‘No.1 Polish Flying Training School’ at RAF Hucknall, near Nottingham. “They were all officers and NCOs who had escaped and I had to do the work – not many privates had escaped. They were anti-Russian, who had taken over half of Poland; in my naïvety I said, “they are our allies” and we had long political discussions. This was very formative and changed my outlook on the world.”

In 1943, Ford was posted to India, sailing in convoy from Liverpool to

Durban, South Africa. *"We spent three weeks in Durban. The South Africans gave us fantastic hospitality; we couldn't move without being invited out. A lady met every troopship, singing a welcome through a loudspeaker which we quite appreciated."*

With two officers plus three other rankers, he established the 'No.1 Indian Air Force Signals School' based at Drigh Road, *"a huge remote aerodrome near Lahore originally built strategically against Russian invasion. Even though there were no aircraft, we set up the radio school from scratch. There was no equipment. Instruction was in English for volunteers of all castes from all India. It exposed me to a different culture."* The unit relocated to an airbase at Secunderabad where Ford was promoted to Sergeant.

Finding instructing repetitively dull, Ford wanted more action. When the opportunity arose just after VE Day in June 1945 to go to Lhasa, Tibet, and, although still in the RAF, become "Mr Ford", he grasped it. For three months, he relieved the resident radio operator at the British Mission, Mr Reginald Fox. Ford's Commanding Officer gave him a ticket to travel to The Bengal Club, Calcutta, with instructions to report to Mr Arthur Hopkinson, the incoming Political Officer Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet. *"His first question was, 'what clothes have you got? You are going to a cold country.' He gave me money with which I bought two sets of unmarked RAF battle dress."* It was the warmest clothing available in Calcutta and served him well. On arrival at the British Residency, Gangtok, Sikkim, he was informed by Mohammed Khan, major-domo to Sir Basil Gould, the retiring Political Officer, that *"dinner is served at 7.30. We dress for dinner."* The battle dress was all he had as formal wear, even in Lhasa when he called officially with the British Mission on the then child Dalai Lama, *"the others were in political dress uniform and the doctor in his military uniform, all the Tibetans were in magnificent coloured silks. Gould was very knowledgeable about Tibet to where he was devoted. His parting words were, 'do your job and be helpful to the Tibetans.' This epitomised his attitude and was my first introduction to diplomacy."*

Ford later recalled his first impressions of Tibet, *"travelling by pony up a hot and sticky valley to above the leech line at Karponang with thinning vegetation. The undulating, craggy path was a botanist's dream. Crossing the Natu La pass from Sikkim at 14,300 feet, I got a view into Tibet. At the top the sky cleared and I saw the incredibly beautiful peak of Chomolhari towering to 24,000 feet and the plateau of Tibet above the village of Phari; after five minutes the view was gone."* He could only agree with the locals as, when they reached such a high

pass, they invariably cried, *“The Gods are with us”* as they threw stones onto the pass’s cairn. Dropping down to Yatung in the Chumbi valley, Ford’s pony tripped and threw him over its neck. The party climbed up to the Tibetan plateau and traversed through Phari township, *“described by all visitors as dirt, dirt, dirt and dirt; but I have heard other terms used!”*

“As a young man there was so much to see and absorb, it was very exciting; there were monasteries, flora and fauna - we reached the turquoise lake of Yamdrok Tso, full of fish, so tame you could pick them up in your hands. Approaching Lhasa, the valley had spines of mountains reaching to the river and after the last one, I saw the Potala Palace- a remarkable sight, white and red, still half a day’s journey away. I thought, ‘now I’ve arrived’, but did not realise then that it was the start of a lifelong attachment to Tibet.”

Two miles outside the city, the party was officially greeted by representatives of the Tibetan government. *“We ritually exchanged white ‘khata’ scarves; I was unused to formality, tradition and service - it was very moving. We had another welcome by the staff at the British Mission’s Residency, the Dekyi Lingka, the aptly named ‘Garden of Happiness’. It had a stream and was filled with flowers; Reginald Fox had his radio station in a little house to the side. Everyone proudly wore national dress and never aped Westerners apart from Homburg hats. I never wore Tibetan clothing other than a thick chuba coat when it was very cold.”*

Fox left within 48 hours and Ford had only a brief introduction as to how everything worked. Coded diplomatic reports were transmitted twice daily to the External Affairs Department, India. Until then there were only two transmitting radios in the entire country, the other being at the Chinese Mission which the British wanted to counterbalance. Immediately the world war ended, amateur ‘Ham’ radio was again permitted and a radio contact with Tibet was the most sought after in the world. *“We were our own licensing authority and I gave myself the call sign AC4RF.”* [AC4 the radio country code for Tibet; RF for Robert Ford].

During his sojourn in the capital city, Ford attended many social functions thrown by the Tibetans who were intensely fond of picnics, partying, drinking, singing and dancing; a keen dancer himself, Ford introduced the ‘samba’ to Lhasa.

After three months, Fox came back and Ford returned to the Political Mission, Sikkim, where he discovered that fellow radio operator Henry Baker, Royal Signals, was due to be demobbed and was leaving. The

Political Officer offered Ford the post and he spent 1945 to 1947 in Sikkim on loan from the RAF. He would later recall two notable events whilst there. Firstly, in 1946, he accompanied an official Tibetan Goodwill Mission to Delhi, sent to congratulate the Allies on victory. Secondly, he uniquely recorded that one day an unknown European was seen sitting on a roadside in Sikkim and he was sent to investigate. He found Dmitri Nedbailof, a White Russian, who, incredibly, had fled across Siberia to China and thence walked to India where he was interned during the war. He had escaped to Tibet but was turned back to Sikkim. Later, under the patronage of a Tibetan noble, he was employed in Lhasa for his electrical skills where Ford would meet him again.

Upon Indian independence the Political Office reverted to India and Ford, harbouring thoughts of returning to Tibet, was offered employment by the Tibetan government to install the country's first ever broadcasting station "Radio Lhasa" and develop a radio network throughout Tibet and to train operators for it. Ford recalled, "*worldly wise Tibetans such as the Foreign Minister who were clever and astute were behind it*". Ford accepted, the job provided he had a written contract, was paid in local currency, provided with housing and had the ability to import items such as sugar, cigarettes and Indian tea.

From 1947 to 1950, Ford was Radio Officer to the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Tibetan Government. He was the first of five foreigners to be formally employed by the Tibetans (the others were Fox, Harrer, Aufschnaiter and Nedbailoff). He was given the official fifth rank of Letsampa. After a year in Lhasa, having on one occasion been blessed by the 14 year-old Dalai Lama who laid both hands on his head – an honour normally reserved for the highest ranking officials – he was requested to go to Chamdo, 100 miles from the Chinese border, to improve internal political and trade communications which otherwise took weeks along a narrow track. Taking four Indo-Tibetan radio trainees, he travelled in a large caravan of 100 animals, 40 porters and 12 soldiers along a route previously only traversed by two westerners. [Huc and Gabet in 1846/7]. "*What worried me most was the Tibetan's habit of stacking cans containing a total of 400 gallons of petrol for the radio generators, as wind breaks next to their camp fires.*"

By the time he arrived in Chamdo, at 10,500 feet above sea level, Ford was sporting a red beard which he shaved off with the consequence that next day rumour had it that two Englishmen had arrived and people were

looking for the other one. "*The whole town had turned out to look at my blue eyes and long nose.*" He lived on the upper floor of the former Summer Palace of the Governor General of the province, Lhalu Shapé, for several months. One day while searching amateur radio wavebands he made a 'contact' with a Mr Jeffries who by chance lived in his home town of Burton-on-Trent; and soon, to their mutual joy, he was in weekly conversation with his parents by radio-telephone.

The idyll of life in Chamdo, filled with lavish summer parties, was soon disrupted by threats of Chinese invasion, broadcast by Radio Peking in January 1950. Instead of fleeing, Ford promised to stay provided the Tibetans did not capitulate, as he felt committed to the country and greatly enjoyed living there. One day a high ranking official of the Chinese communist government arrived en-route to Lhasa to negotiate Tibet's incorporation into China, he was Geda Rinpoche, a Khamba from Sikang and an eminent, highly respected Buddhist incarnate lama. He was accompanied by three pretty servant Khamba girls who were reported to go to his room every evening to sing for him; although Ford never heard any singing, he refrained from making bawdy remarks. After several days in Chamdo, during which Geda once visited Ford to listen to Radio Peking, he fell ill and died. He was thought to have been murdered, a fact which later had very serious consequences for Ford.

By mid October 1950, the Red Army was on the doorstep of Chamdo and panic ensued. Ford was on the radio to Lhasa all hours, but to his amazement no announcement was made to the world about the ensuing invasion. The new provincial Governor, Ngapoi Ngawang Jigme, fled westwards towards Lhasa. Ford having removed the crystals from his radios to make them useless, planned to escape south to India but all mountain tracks had been obliterated by a catastrophic earthquake, so he followed in the Governor's wake. However, the route had been cut by advancing Chinese and Ngapoi and Ford were captured at a monastery near Lamda.

Ford was ordered to sit on the ground as he heard the click of a rifle bolt at his back. Taken back to Chamdo he was interrogated and accused of being a British spy, spreading anti-communist propaganda and causing the death of Geda by poisoning. Further interrogations became increasingly aggressive, more cunning and malicious; he was urged to confess to many more charges. Things progressively worsened as he was not allowed to

wash for five months and was confined to solitary confinement in rat infested cells, at times being forced to sit rigidly still for 16 hours a day. He was not starved and, *"I was never struck a single blow, but mentally it was no holds barred. I thought I would go mad."* At times, he was threatened with a loaded gun, on others *"left to rot"*. After three years of intense interrogation; "re-education" and "thought reform" brainwashing; learning to read and write Mandarin and *"to translate ordinary words into communist jargon"*, the only way out, he realised, although fearing conversion, was self-degrading lies. Eventually he signed a false confession – the charge of killing Geda having been withdrawn – in which he had not only to admit his guilt, but deeply, sincerely, believe and prove he had done wrong and see his crimes from the correct political standpoint. In May 1954, he was permitted to write to his parents who had not heard from him since his capture. He was tried in December and sentenced to ten years imprisonment without appeal; then told he would be 'immediately' deported – a long drawn out process of further psychological pressure which took six months.

On May 27th, 1950, he was deported to Hong Kong with six HK dollars in his pocket. *"I had to walk 50 yards across a rickety wooden railway bridge - I didn't know whether I would get a bullet in my back."* He was greeted by a British police officer whose first words, *"seemed almost irreverently casual. Five years of Communist conditioning could not be discarded in five minutes and I knew I had other bridges to cross before my spirit could follow my body into freedom."*

After reluctantly giving a press conference in Hong Kong in which he said as little as possible, he was flown to London where he was joyfully reunited with his parents.

Since Ford's death, a Chinese commentator has reported that he had been framed for the murder of Geda Rinpoche. Geda had suffered a stomach complaint and had overdosed on Tibetan medicine containing an excess of minerals, causing internal bleeding and death. Whatever Ford knew about the incident, he never revealed, other than in his book: *"I have good reasons for believing that Geda was murdered, and I think I know who killed him. I hope he will never be found out."*

After release, *"as a guest of Mao"* he had to find a new way to earn a living. The transistor had meanwhile been invented and radio technology had completely changed. Despite this, he was offered a job as Marconi's representative in Asia but decided instead to recuperate for ten months

and write a book *"Captured in Tibet"* (1957) about his experiences. There were many requests for broadcast interviews including "In Town Tonight" and for lecturing, much of it unpaid and for writing articles for, amongst others, the Daily Mail, but Ford still needed a regular income.

With his command of Mandarin, the BBC offered Ford a job in the Chinese Service and he made a couple of broadcasts, *"but it was not for me, the prospects were poor."* However, by good fortune, another opportunity arose. Ford had been debriefed by Lord John Hope - son of Lord Linlithgow the former Viceroy of India - a minister at the Foreign Office. Hope asked Ford to join the Foreign Office. Signing the Official Secrets Act, Ford not fancying his prospects, accepted a temporary job in June 1956 to analyse Chinese propaganda in a covert department. He was twice sent to Saigon, Vietnam; then to Laos and Cambodia. He then returned to the UK to successfully sit a Foreign Office exam for a permanent job in Diplomatic Service.

During his first visit to Saigon, part of the American Information Service Library was blown up by Viet Kong as he drove by, *"I foolishly went to see if anyone was in, but the Americans had been warned and the building was empty. News got into the Daily Telegraph that a British Diplomat had narrowly escaped death. My wife, due to have a baby, read it in England and was distressed. There were no 'phones then, there was no line, although the Embassy had radio contact with London."* In 1959, Ford was transferred as senior branch information officer to Jakarta, Indonesia, *"where trouble followed me again. Two air force pilots attacked the Presidential Palace; our Embassy was next door and they strafed the road outside. I was holed up for two days."* The work involved promoting Britain and making connections with local Chinese to get a feel of what was going on as the Chinese were being expelled from Indonesia. *"It was very tough, there was nothing in the shops."*

From 1960 to 1962, Ford was posted as First Secretary to the British Embassy, Washington, where amongst many duties, with his own experience, he was involved in refuting the idea of "Better Red than Dead". Here he met many American journalists who later became bureau chiefs in London. His time in Washington broke his China speciality and he began to forget Mandarin as his career prospects widened. Between 1962 and 1967, Ford was in London in charge of an information programme to the USA. He was appointed Consul General to Tangier, responsible for north Morocco, from 1967 to 1970. *"At the time of the hippies and I had to*

keep them out of prison.” After this, he was promoted Councillor and Consul General, Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe, where he remained for four years. “The Portuguese were keen to let foreigners know that they were [still] in control. “I did all kinds of exciting things there and once went on the Benguela Railway to the Zaire border, when to stay safe, the train pushed a mine blower 100 yards in front of the locomotive.”

The next four years were more comfortable as Consul General, Bordeaux, covering all of southwest France. *“I got to know all about the wines as we were invited, wined and dined by all the large chateaux/s, and when inviting them back, we served guests their own wine of a good year - with the purse to pay for it!”* His next posting, 1978 to 1980 in Gothenburg, Sweden, he found less congenial, unlike his final posting before retirement in March 1983 as Consul General Geneva. *“A very enjoyable post with good skiing and walking.”*

As a diplomat, he had to reflect the policy of British government. *“Being a Consul General did not just project image, it was much wider; reporting, assisting distressed British subjects and so on... a fascinating life. It was not just cocktail parties, you are on duty 24 hours a day and not for your own amusement; it was hard work with no private life.”*

Retiring to London, he returned to his interest in Tibet, which until then as a diplomat he had been unable to do. This resulted in renewed contact with the Dalai Lama with whom he met whenever the opportunities arose. At His Holiness’s request, he undertook a five-week lecture tour of India in 1991 accompanied by his wife. He spoke at many venues, including the Indian Military Academy, the Indian Civil Service and the Indian Parliament. On their way to Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama’s residence in exile, the Fords were put under house arrest without warning by *“a very officious District Commissioner.”* Eventually, the British High Commissioner managed to get them freed to return home. China had again intervened in his life; the reason for arrest was a coincidental visit to India by the Chinese Prime Minister.

When questioned recently whether he bore the Chinese a grudge, particularly about the hardships of imprisonment, he replied, *“no, not at all, although it is not a pleasant memory. Once I had got out, after the first year and having got married, I had a new life and new challenges. Of course it coloured my thinking. I am not rabidly against the Chinese - Tibet is more in the back of my mind than China.”*

In 1996, he organised the first meeting between the Dalai Lama and

the British Royal Family when he introduced His Holiness to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.

In March 2013, The Office of Tibet in London organised a reception for Ford's 90th birthday. He had earlier joked that he had not received his back pay, so he was presented with the last of his salary, a photographic enlargement of a 100 Srang Tibetan bank note with apologies for the delay "due to extenuating circumstances." The respect shown to him by the Tibetan community in exile on this occasion moved him deeply.

He received the International Campaign for Tibet's "Light of Truth Award" presented on 13th April 2013 by the Dalai Lama in Switzerland, in acknowledgement of his tireless advocacy on behalf of Tibet. Ford commented, *"I spent some of the happiest days of my life in Tibet. It was an independent country with its own government, language, customs and way of life...The Tibetans are devoted to their religion...They valued their self imposed isolation...and simply wished to be left alone to run their own affairs in the way they thought best."*

As one of the last foreigners who had experienced an independent Tibet, Ford's memories were regarded as important and accordingly he was interviewed in June 2013, by the BBC. Three days after his death the World Service broadcast this interview on its "Witness" programme, and two hours later his experiences were broadcast along with those of others on BBC Radio Four's "Tibet Remembered".

Ford was awarded the CBE in 1982 for Services to the British Crown. He continued to ski until the age of 86; was a founder member of The Tibet Society of the UK and a vice president for life.

In June 1956 Ford married Monica Tebbett, whom he had known since school. They had met again in 1955 after Ford's release when she was on leave from work at the United Nations, New York in the office of Dag Hammarskjold, the Secretary General. She predeceased him by one year. They are survived by two sons.

On hearing of "Phodo Kusho's" passing, the Dalai Lama sent condolences to his family, noting that Robert Ford, had occupied a special place in the history of Tibet".

Born 27th March 1923, Burton-on-Trent.

Died 20th September 2013, London.