

'Richard Hannay' U-boat saboteur dies aged 87

MAJOR Len Manderstam, who has died in London aged 87, was one of the most remarkable secret agents of the 1939-45 War. Born in Riga and a fluent Russian speaker, he was recruited to the Special Operations Executive soon after war broke out and became head of its West African section.

The SOE was charged with organising sabotage, espionage and subversion.

He was involved in a series of Richard Hannay-like operations against the Germans in Angola and Mozambique, including the blowing up of Nazi supply stores and the sabotaging of U-Boat fuel.

While in Angola he arranged singlehanded the capture of a Vichy French ship and its valuable cargo, an exploit for which he was made an MBE. He also served in North Africa, Italy, Spain, Portugal, France and Germany.



Major Len Manderstam.

Protest over prisoners

Towards the end of the war he was appointed head of the SOE Russian section, and was sent to Europe to check reports that large numbers of Russian exiles were serving in the German Army. Later he led protests against the forcible repatriation of millions of Russian prisoners.

Manderstam's protests were passed to the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden and to the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, but to no avail. A pact signed with Stalin at Yalta sealed the prisoners' fate.

It was estimated that between two and four million Russians were sent to their deaths or to Soviet labour camps in what Manderstam described as "the most horrible and despicable episode in British history."

He was instructed to liaise closely with his NKVD counterparts in the Soviet secret service. But they did not realise he had served as a Red Army officer during the Russian Revolution a fact he had also not disclosed to his superiors.

After his discharge he used expertise he had gained in working for the General Mining Co. of South Africa to build up his own international consultancy in oil and chemicals.

Until last year he always refused to discuss his life, but then prepared his memoirs with Roy Heron, a journalist and author.