

DERMOT O'LEARY

SPY FOX

AND AGENT
FEATHERS



ILLUSTRATED BY CLAIRE POWELL



HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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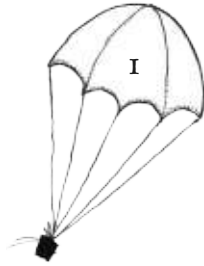
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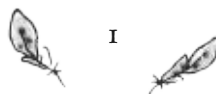
3 June 1940

Two miles inland from Dunkirk, France

The zip of the bullet passing just overhead was the first sign that things might not be going well for foxes Charles Redfearn and his French cousin Emmanuel.

'Mon Dieu! That was close!' Emmanuel laughed, despite the danger. *'Quickly, make for the hedgerow. Do you have any idea why they are shooting at us?'*

'Well, I'm glad you're finding it funny!' Charles replied as the pair sped across the fields and another bullet cracked through the air above them. *'I can't even tell who's shooting, let alone why.'*



'*Mon cousin*, we are foxes . . . It could be anyone.'

This was true; foxes weren't top of many humans' Christmas card list. But these weren't regular foxes. Emmanuel was one of the top young fighters in the French Animal Army, famed already for his bravery, speed of thought and lightning pace. He was the youngest commando in his unit, an expert saboteur . . . *and* he cooked a mean omelette. His best friend and cousin Charles was just as qualified. Charles was a dashing special agent for the British Special Animal Executive (or SAE), an elite organisation made up of the cream of the animal kingdom. He was an expert in explosives and paw-to-paw combat, had been part of the gold-winning 5000-metre digging team at the 1936 Berlin Olympics . . . *and* he could make a cracking chicken and leek pie.

As soon as war was declared Emmanuel, and most of the animals in his village, signed up to the French Animal Army. They were working day and night to help the humans try and defend their country against their invaders: the German army. Not that the humans had any idea, of



course! Charles had been tasked by his bosses in London to assist his cousin ‘in any way possible’ and keep tabs on enemy movements. What quickly became clear, however, was that the German army was a fierce enemy. Their tactics had taken everyone by surprise and now British and French soldiers – both human and animal – were retreating to the French port of Dunkirk to evacuate as fast as possible!

As far as who was shooting at them went – well, Emmanuel was right, it COULD have been anyone . . . even their own side.

To start with it could have been German soldiers. The pair of foxes had been causing chaos behind enemy lines for the last two weeks, doing whatever they could to halt the German advance to the coast to capture the town of Dunkirk. This included everything from sabotaging armoured cars and tanks by gnawing through their fuel lines, to scattering food supplies while they slept. They had even sneaked into a German field unit and bitten a general on the bottom when he was making a speech about tactics!

Then there were the British and French soldiers.



They might have been on the same side as Charles and Emmanuel, but a fox has to eat, so they *might* have taken a few – just a few! – of their rations (nobody is perfect), which the humans didn't seem to like one bit.

Lastly, and most likely, there was the French farmer whose delicious roast chicken had just disappeared from his kitchen table. With a war on, the animals had agreed a truce to stop eating each other – so cats weren't eating mice, birds weren't eating worms, and foxes weren't eating chickens . . . in theory. But Charles and Emmanuel had been *very* hungry, and since a human had already cooked the chicken, they decided it didn't count!

Anyway, *who* it was really didn't matter; the fact they were *shooting* at the foxes was far more important.

'*Zut alors!* Humans have no gratitude for our work whatsoever,' Emmanuel grumbled as the pair dropped down into the safety of a muddy ditch and the last of the bullets whistled harmlessly overhead.

'Urgh, BLAST, now my paws are all wet! Honestly, we are trying to save these people. If we have to eat a couple of



chickens to survive, what's the big problem? I say, that last one was delicious, wasn't it? Smothered in butter, mmm!' Charles licked his lips.

'If the enemy get their way, there'll be no more chickens for us,' his cousin replied gravely. 'The speed of the mechanical beasts; I've never seen anything like it. So enjoy the lick of your lips, cousin. It might be your last.'

'Nonsense, we just need to regroup, then we'll be back in the fight. Now, we're almost at the beach; let's meet this squad of yours and work out our next move. For the glory of France and all that!'

Sergeant Pierre Elliott of the Royal Norfolk Regiment was tired. He'd fought with his unit for days without rest, his trusty rifle felt like it weighed a tonne and his feet ached as his boots were worn thin.

They were low on ammunition and food, and it had been clear for some time that they were NOT winning the war they had been so eager

to come and fight. The British soldiers were in full retreat alongside their French brothers. For Pierre this was doubly painful as he was half French. His mother, a French doctor, and his father, a British pilot, had met during the First World War and settled in London once it was over. They had begged him not to sign up, but their pleading fell on deaf ears.

If there was a way he could defend both his homelands, he was going to do it. Right now, however, it didn't look like the wisest of choices.

His company had been given orders to retreat, but after a fierce skirmish he'd been separated from the other soldiers and was now lost, trying to make it to the coastal town of Dunkirk. At this current moment, though, he was more worried about being shot at by a French farmer who seemed to have it in for a couple of foxes. Goodness knows why. As Pierre crossed the field, he'd heard the shots boom out and he wasn't going

to hang around to ask. '*Ne tire pas!*' he screamed. 'Don't shoot!' Scampering across the muddy field, he looked over to see the two foxes diving down into a ditch, one of them sounding almost as though it was laughing to itself.

I'm glad someone is enjoying themselves! he thought, as he made it to the safety of the hedgerow. *Laughing foxes! I really do need a lie-down and a nice cup of hot sweet tea.*

Charles's earlier confidence disappeared as he and Emmanuel climbed up over the sand dunes at Dunkirk and caught their first glimpse of the tragic scene unfolding on the beach. As far as the eye could see (and foxes have great eyesight) the beach was littered with the signs of a failed military operation. An evacuation was in full swing, with lines and lines of human soldiers queued up, desperately waiting for a space in one of the small rowing boats that were making their way to the Royal Navy ships anchored in the deeper water.

Further up the beach towards the town, Charles could see soldiers destroying the army vehicles so they couldn't fall into enemy hands. It was clear to the young agent that this battle was lost, and if the young men – and animals – didn't get off the beach soon, they would be in very real danger.

He turned to his cousin, who seemed to be frozen in shock. 'Emmanuel, snap out of it.' He clicked his paws, but the French fox sat back on his haunches.

'What's the point, cousin? Look before you. The human armies of Britain and France are no match for the German one. It's chaos! What can we do? We are mere mammals, foxes, *vermin*! The very people we fight for detest us.'

'Well, there's no accounting for taste. Come on, old bean. I'll tell you what we do: we escape, regroup, have a lovely dinner at my favourite spot in Piccadilly, and then we come back to fight again. Now, on your paws, soldier, let's get out of this disaster.'

'But how?' his cousin protested piteously. 'The beach is crawling with humans. We'll never get on board one

of those iron whales!' Emmanuel gestured to the hulking Royal Navy ships.

'Well, that is where we come in, *mon ami!*'

The foxes turned to see a ferret, a badger and a mole emerge from the dunes.

'My friends! Charles, these are the animals from my village I've been telling you about.' The fox sprang to his feet. 'We've been fighting together since the beginning of the invasion.' Seeing his squad seemed to give Emmanuel a new lease of life. 'Corporal Marie Badger and Private Dimitri Mole are our best engineers. And Sergeant Jean Ferret, my second in command, is an expert in sabotage and skulduggery.'

'An animal after my own heart!' Charles said with a smile.

'*Enchanté.*' The ferret shook Charles warmly by the paw.

The squad had scavenged some berries, a slice of pâté, bread, cheese and milk from a local farm. The animals took a couple of minutes to rest and eat as they worked out a plan.

‘So what have you learned? Can we make our escape? It looks hopeless,’ Charles said ruefully.

‘To a lesser company of the French Animal Army, maybe, but to us? Pah.’ The ferret smiled, wiping some milk away from his lips. ‘But it won’t be easy. The poor human troops are surrounded. They have nowhere to go, so they must wait for the small boats to come and get them. It’s very dangerous, as they are being attacked by the flying German beasts, and they will capsize in the cold water if too many humans get in a boat at once.’

‘That bad?’ Emmanuel raised his eyebrows.

‘It’s awful.’ His second in command shook his head sadly. ‘But all is not lost; at the far end of the beach is a long narrow pier. It’s the only place the large ships can come in close enough to load the troops on without the small boats. You see it?’ he asked, passing the foxes a pair of binoculars.

The never-ending sea of khaki-clad soldiers waiting patiently for their salvation stretched from the tip of the pier all the way back to the beach.

‘It’s jam-packed. There’s no way we can get on there



unnoticed!’ said Charles.

‘With the two best engineer-diggers in the whole of the French Army? *Mon ami*, have some faith.’ Dimitri smiled. ‘Follow us.’

The squad led the foxes to a small hole in the side of the sand dunes, an entrance to a tunnel covered by bracken and foliage.

‘I KNEW you’d been up to something.’ Emmanuel smiled proudly at his troop.

‘Where does it come out?’

Jean explained. ‘Right by the pier. We will make our move in darkness; we climb along the underside of the pier and board the ship as it comes in. I’ve spoken to the ships’ rats and cats from earlier boats as they were docking – good animals, trustworthy – and word has been passed. There’s a boat leaving tonight, maybe three a.m. They say it might be the last to sail. If we don’t get on it, I don’t like our chances.’

Charles looked down the hole, then glanced at the pier in the far distance. It was a long way to travel in a sandy

tunnel, dug in haste, but if the others had been using it already, it had to be safe enough . . .

'We move tonight then. All of you get some rest. I'll take first watch,' Emmanuel ordered.

The squad tucked themselves down among the grasses on the dunes for an uneasy few hours. Charles looked up at the sky and thought of the war to come. If France, which had the biggest army in the world, could fall, what chance did the rest of the world have?

