

OBITUARY – Donald R. Morris

By Ian Knight

Author Donald R. Morris died on Wednesday 5th December 2002, at the age of 78.

Donald Morris was best known to students of the Anglo-Zulu War for his ground-breaking history, *The Washing of the Spears*. This was, however, just one part of an extraordinary and varied career. Morris was born in New York City in 1924, and joined the US Navy in 1942. After the war, he graduated in Electrical Engineering from Annapolis University; he liked to recall wryly that out of a class of 410, he stood 1st in Naval History, 2nd in English, and 409th in Electrical Engineering! He continued to serve with the Navy, and earned two combat stars in Korea. Although the biographical notes on the cover of *The Washing of the Spears* suggested that Morris remained a career Navy man, in fact in 1956 he joined the CIA, with whom he served until 1972. He spent five years in counter-espionage activities in Berlin, and was there when the Wall went up. After he retired from the CIA, he lived in Texas and worked as a columnist for the *Houston Post* and later published his own newsletter.

During his literary career, he wrote a number of novels, one of which – based on his war-time experiences - was made into a film. None of these has enjoyed the enduring success of *The Washing of the Spears*, however. The idea for the book came from a chance encounter with Ernest Hemingway in Cuba in 1955, and it took Morris eight years to complete. Most of it was written during his time in Berlin and the research was undertaken by correspondence with libraries and museums in Britain and South Africa. The book has since been reprinted in 17 different languages worldwide, has sold more than 200,000 copies, and has not been out of print since.

In many respects, the publication of *The Washing of the Spears* marks the beginning of modern Anglo-Zulu War studies. It was the first book to attempt to add a Zulu perspective in a field traditionally dominated by British military memoirs. Although Morris' understanding of the Zulu voice was incomplete – partly because few historians had at that placed much emphasis on African studies – the attempt earned him the lasting respect of Zulu leaders such as Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi. With its rich and literate style, the book has inspired a generation of scholars to explore further and, if subsequent research has made parts of the book look dated; few historians in the field would fail to acknowledge the debt they owe it. Wisely, Morris was seldom drawn into the debates his book engendered, preferring to see it as a statement in itself, and pointing out, with disarming frankness, that he had omitted footnotes because he did not wish to claim for the book an academic status to which he felt it was not entitled. His debates with F.W.D. Jackson on the subject of Isandlwana – still the most contentious aspect of the war! - which appeared in the Summer 1982 and 1983 issues of *Soldiers of the Queen*, the Journal of the Victorian Military Society, were a significant exception, and are among the most important and well-informed of modern discussions of the battle.

An interview with Donald Morris appeared in Issue 9 of the *AZWHS Journal*.

Whatever the direction studies of the Anglo-Zulu War might take in the future, *The Washing of the Spears* is likely to continue to intrigue and excite newcomers for generations to come – and deservedly so.

Hamba gahle, Ntshebe.