

INTERVIEW WITH DAME STELLA RIMINGTON

former Director General of MI5



Many viewers of the James Bond films may not be aware of the inspiration for Dame Judi Dench's character of 'M'. It is widely believed to be British author Dame Stella Rimington, the first female Director General of MI5, who chats exclusively to *Dream Escape* about her pioneering career in the intelligence service.

WORDS | KARYN NOBLE

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Joining MI5 may not have been Dame Stella Rimington's first career choice, but it certainly led to a series of 'firsts': she became its first female Director General (DG) in 1992 and was also the first head of Britain's intelligence services to be publicly named.

A quiet retirement in 1996 was also never on the cards. She was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the Bath in the New Year Honours that year. Then, after publishing her autobiography *Open Secret* in 2001, Dame Stella went on to write 10 spy-thriller novels featuring an MI5 agent called Liz Carlyle.

Today, lucky *Dream Escape* guests who visit London have the exclusive opportunity to speak with Dame Stella about her life and unique experiences. We caught up with her relaxing at her Norfolk country home with her two labradors, to hear scintillating tales of working undercover and – of course – ask her about that James Bond character.



Dame Stella, you have had an extraordinary career. Thinking back to 1969, was there any hesitation before you decided to apply for a permanent position at MI5? What did you imagine it would be like? Our readers would assume it must be quite glamorous, like a riveting spy thriller. Should they reconsider a future career in intelligence?

I had no hesitation in applying for a job in MI5 when I came back to London at the end of the 1960s, after I had been working in the MI5 office in New Delhi. I was only a clerk/typist, but I was able to see the sort of work that was going on. In the 1960s, India was at the forefront of the Cold War. The intelligence services of both sides were present, working face-to-face against each other. I thought I would be doing something similar in London. I was very disappointed to find that, at that time, MI5 was operating a two-tier structure: the men did the intelligence work and the women were restricted to deskbound work. So, we filed reports, wrote summaries and assessments and generally kept the papers in order. London in the late 1960s was a gloomy →

place and our offices were no exception. To add to this, an air of great secrecy covered everything.

Given you have worked on many undercover operations, is there anything that sticks in your mind that was particularly dangerous or where you were at risk of blowing your cover?

It may seem surprising, but the time when I felt most at risk was in the early 1990s when my name was announced as the next Head of MI5. The fact that a woman was going to be Director General of one of the world's most famous intelligence organisations came as a great surprise to the world's press and it caught the attention of the IRA who were present in London, looking for targets. The result was that we had to move

house and live at a secret location for my time as DG. In contrast, when one is engaged in an undercover operation, one is surrounded by security in order that risks are minimised, although of course nothing is perfect. There is always a risk.

You have documented the changes that occurred in MI5 in your autobiography (*Open Secret*; 2001), a book that the government tried to stop going to print. Was it difficult to get your story told the way you wanted it?

About five years after I left MI5, I decided to write my autobiography. My intention was not to reveal secrets but to write about the life of a woman with two children, working in a secret organisation. At the time, there was



THE ASTON MARTIN DB5 USED ON THE SET OF THE LATEST JAMES BOND MOVIE 'NO TIME TO DIE' IN MATERA, ITALY. (© WJAREK / STOCK.ADOBE.COM)

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a lot of interest in the work-life balance. I submitted the manuscript for clearance, as I was required to do. That somehow became public knowledge, which led to all sorts of unexpected consequences, such as someone in the clearance process passing the draft to *The Sun* newspaper. Eventually, the book was cleared grudgingly but I was required to make very few alterations. It was more about not wanting me to publish it at all, rather than objecting to what was in it. So yes, I was able to publish what I wanted but the process of getting permission was very fraught.

This issue of *Dream Escape* magazine has a set-jetting theme. We’re aware that the first female character of ‘M’ in the James Bond film franchise was reportedly inspired by you and your 27 years working in MI5. How do you feel about this? Do you have a favourite Bond film? Judi Dench is an actress whom I have long admired. So when, in 1995, she appeared as M in *GoldenEye*, I was delighted and rather →



amused. My daughters went off to see the film and came back saying that she looked exactly like me, which was fairly true. She and I are almost the same age and the clothes she wore in that film were very similar to mine at the time. I was delighted that the James Bond franchise had caught up with reality, at least in one area. They had got rid of the middle-aged man in the panelled office who previously played M. My favourite James Bond film is *Skyfall* (2012), though sadly it is the one in which M dies. The scenes in Scotland are magnificent.

Since retiring from MI5, you've turned your hand to writing mystery and thriller novels. Was this a genre that interested you before joining M15? Tell us about your writing process.

Yes, I have always been a reader of spy fiction and mystery and police dramas. Some of my favourites are Dorothy L Sayers, Marjorie Allingham, Georges Simenon and of course John le Carré's Cold War novels. While I was working, I often thought that I would like to try my hand at the genre, but of course I had no time. After *Open Secret*, I did start to work on what I thought would be one with a female lead character – Liz Carlyle. The plots of the books come from my observation of what's going on in the security world. They have covered Irish terrorism, piracy, and of course espionage. I enjoy setting up the plot and then proceeding to unravel it. Sometimes it gets a bit complicated and that's fun to write. It doesn't always end up entirely as expected!

After writing 10 novels featuring heroine Liz Carlyle, an M15 intelligence officer, we were

treated to a new series in 2022 featuring a new character Manon Tyler, a CIA analyst seconded to London (*The Devil's Bargain*). Are you busy plotting the next instalment? What's coming next?

What's coming next for Manon Tyler? The Chinese. I haven't written about a Chinese plot so far, but it seems very relevant today. The plot is set in a university but I think, and hope, it's not what you would expect.

How do you like to relax? Are you able to relax?

I live in the country with my two lovely labrador dogs. I enjoy taking them for walks in the beautiful surroundings here. I have a good-sized garden that needs plenty of weeding and I listen to the news, which keeps me up-to-date with what's going on in the world and feeds my plots. My daughter lives nearby with her two children and they visit quite often. Further away, my other daughter and her two sons come from time to time, as does my fifth grandchild who is in the army. All in all, I don't have a lot of spare time and that suits me well.



DRINK DRY MARTINI WITH GREEN OLIVES
(© JULIO RICCO / STOCK.ADOBE.COM)

***Dream Escape's* readers are very discerning travellers. Do you have a favourite holiday spot?**

Nowadays my favourite holiday spot is here, where I live, in the beautiful English county of Norfolk. Here you can have countryside, or a magnificent sandy beach, we have villages with flint cottages, a duck pond, and often a really good gastro pub for lunch. And there is the beautiful cathedral city of Norwich with its open market. It's one of the oldest in the country.

Could you tell us about the strangest encounter you have had with a celebrity? Are people a little awestruck by your career? (We are.)

I won't tell you who the celebrity was. But I can say where it was. I had been travelling in Northern India with some colleagues from the Indian Intelligence Services. We were staying in Darjeeling and decided that we would get up early in order to see the sunrise over the Himalayas. I remember being woken up at 4am by a turbaned servant with a cup of tea. We set off from the hotel and arrived at a wooden platform stuck inside a mountain not far from the town. It was still almost too dark to see clearly, but getting lighter every minute. When we arrived at the platform, I was astonished to see X and a small group. We all greeted each other with a cheery "good morning" and then stood silently to watch as, in one direction, the sky began to change from black to grey to pink and then suddenly the first ray of sun appeared, striking the top of a mountain in front of us, and Mount Everest appeared with a snowcap, coloured red in the rising sun. It was a breathtaking sight. We watched all the mountains in the whole range appearing, one by one. When the show was over, we said



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"good morning" again and went our different ways.

Finally, do you have any tips for how people might go undetected if they want to be incognito?

My tips for remaining undetected are to look and behave as ordinarily as possible. No false beards, dark glasses or hats pulled down to cover your eyes; those will definitely draw attention to you! Wear unremarkable clothes, speak quietly and as little as possible. Do nothing to draw attention to yourself. Ideally, have someone with you who can do the talking. Be friendly, ask questions if necessary and just keep the attention away from you. ☺

• Visit: stellarimington.uk

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**Sally Strange,
Client Relationship Manager**

"I had the pleasure of meeting two incredible women in recent months – both Dames and legends in their respective fields. One of them is instantly recognisable, while the other is not so much – Dame Stella Rimington and Dame Judi Dench, both featured in this article. These moments will surely be unforgettable for me and our clients, as *Dream Escape* is committed to creating memories of a lifetime.

Dame Stella Rimington once said that to be a great spy, one has to be unremarkable and forgettable. However, she was quite the opposite – an extraordinary woman whose words left a lasting impression on me. Spy stories – whether true or fictional – have always fascinated me. Follow in the footsteps of James Bond, experience the world of Kingsman, or simply sip a dry martini in one of the best hotel cocktail bars, like Duke's or the American Bar. Whatever your preference, we'll make sure it's an experience you'll never forget."

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