



Ferdinand Waldo (Fred) Demara The Great Impostor

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Introduction: Ferdinand Waldo Demara, Jr. (21 December 1921 – 7 June 1982), known as "the Great Impostor", was an infamous impersonator and conman. He masqueraded as many different people from monks to surgeons to prison wardens.

Early Life: Demara, known locally as "Fred", was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1921, at 40 Texas Avenue in the lower southwest Tower Hill Neighborhood. His father, Ferdinand Waldo Demara, Sr. worked in Lawrence's old Theatre District as a motion picture operator. In those days, his father did financially well and they lived in an upper class district with many larger-size, finer homes. However, during the early stages of the 1930's depression, Fred's father lost virtually all he had and the family moved to a poorer district in the city.

Demara ran away from home at the age of sixteen to join the Cistercian monks in Rhode Island, where he stayed for several years. He joined the U.S. Army in 1941.

Impersonations: In 1942 Demara began his series of new lives by borrowing the name of Anthony Ignolia, an army buddy, and going AWOL. After two more tries in monasteries, he joined the US Navy. When he did not reach the position he wanted, he faked his suicide. He borrowed another name, Robert Linton French, and became a religiously-oriented psychologist. "Robert" taught psychology in a Pennsylvania college; served as an orderly in a Los Angeles sanitarium; and, was an instructor at St. Martin's College in the state of Washington. The FBI caught

him eventually and he served 18 months in prison for desertion.

After his release, he assumed a fake identity and studied law at night at Northeastern University; then he joined the Brothers of Christian Instruction in Maine, a Roman Catholic order.

During his impersonation as Brother John Payne of the Brothers of Christian Instruction, Demara increased the prominence of the Order by founding a college in Alfred, Maine. Demara proceeded on his own and actually got the college chartered by the state. He then promptly left the Order in 1951, offended that they had not named him rector or chancellor of the new college. The college Demara founded, LaMennais College, existed from 1951 (when Demara left) through 1959 when it moved to Canton, Ohio and in 1960 changed its name to Walsh University. A number of noted persons ultimately graduated from LaMennais College before it moved to Ohio.

While serving with the Brothers of Christian Instruction, he became acquainted with a young doctor named Joseph C. Cyr.

This led to his most famous exploit, in which he masqueraded as Dr. Cyr, and served as a surgeon aboard HMCS *Cayuga*, a Royal Canadian Navy destroyer, during the Korean War.

In March of 1951, a Doctor Cyr appeared at the Naval recruiting office in Saint John, N.B., and offered his professional services to the Royal Canadian Navy.

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He hinted that if the navy didn't need him, the Army or RCAF would gladly accept him. During this stage of the Korean War, and with Canada's new NATO commitments, qualified medical officers were desperately needed by all three services, and no time was lost in processing this valuable recruit.

"Cyr's" credentials were accepted without verification, and three days after his visit to the recruiting centre, he was commissioned into the RCN as a Surgeon-Lieutenant. The normal two-month enlistment process took about one day.

The bogus doctor was assigned to the naval hospital at *HMCS Stadacona* in the Halifax area. Retired naval Captain "Mack" Lynch, who was a department head in *Stadacona* at the time, recalls "Cyr" appeared to be a fairly competent medical officer, and a pleasant enough individual, although not a great social mixer¹.

"Cyr's" hospital patients apparently survived his ministrations via the generous use of penicillin, consultation with other medical officers and, no doubt,

¹ According to a contemporary observer, his anti-social behaviour was due to his disapproval of the drinking habits of the officers in *Stadacona*.

a combination of physical fitness and sheer luck!

This idyllic existence ended on June 15, 1951, when "Cyr" joined *HMCS Cayuga* in Esquimalt, B.C.—leaving three days later for the destroyer's second tour of duty in Korean waters.

His most notable surgical procedures in *Cayuga* were performed on some sixteen Korean combat casualties². All eyes turned to Demara, the only "surgeon" on board, as it became obvious that several of the casualties would require major surgery or certainly die. After ordering personnel to transport the injured patients into the ship's operating room and prep them for surgery, Demara disappeared to his cabin with a textbook on general surgery and proceeded to speed-read the various surgeries he was required to perform, including major chest surgery. Miraculously, none of the casualties died during surgery.

Apparently, the removal of a bullet from one of the wounded men ended up in Canadian newspapers. One person reading the reports was the mother of the real Dr. Joseph Cyr. At the time of "his" service in Korea, her son was actually practicing medicine in Grand Falls, New Brunswick.

Eventually, in October 1951, *Cayuga's* Captain received a signal to the effect that his medical officer was an unqualified impostor. He found this hard to believe, as "Cyr" appeared to be a capable and popular doctor. Another message received the following day removed all doubts, and "Dr. Cyr" was transferred to a British cruiser *HMS Ceylon*, for transfer to Japan and subsequently to Canada.

² Despite the notoriety of these surgeries, there are claims from contemporaries that they never took place.

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On arrival in Canada, Demara appeared before a naval board of enquiry. There appears to be no record of disciplinary proceedings, and service records indicate that "Cyr" was given an honourable release and several hundred dollars in back pay. He returned to the United States.

After this episode, he sold his tale to *Life* magazine and worked short-term jobs. He resorted to drinking. Only after he returned to his old tricks and got fake credentials could he get another job at a prison in Huntsville, Texas. However, Demara's past became known and his position untenable when an inmate found a copy of *Life* with an article about the impostor.

He continued to use new aliases but, as a result of his self-generated publicity, impersonation was harder to accomplish. By this point, Demara's girth was so notable that he could not avoid attracting attention. In 1960, as a publicity stunt, Demara was given a small acting role in the horror film *The Hypnotic Eye*. He appears briefly in the film as a hospital surgeon. Ironically, the impostor who fooled so many people in real life revealed a total lack of acting ability in this brief role.

Later Life: In the early 1960s Demara worked as a counselor at the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles. In 1967, he received a Graduate Certificate in Bible Studies from Multnomah Bible College in Portland, Oregon.

Demara had friendships with a variety of notable people during his life. This included a close relationship with actor Steve McQueen, to whom Demara delivered last rites in November 1980.

When Demara's past exploits and infamy were discovered in the late 1970s, he was almost dismissed from the Good Samaritan Hospital in Anaheim, California where he worked as a visiting chaplain. Chief of Staff, Dr. Philip S. Cifarelli, who had developed a close personal friendship with Demara, personally vouched for him and Demara was allowed to remain as Chaplain. Due to limited financial resources and his friendships with Cifarelli, Demara was allowed to live in the hospital until his death, even after illness forced him to stop working for them in 1980.

Demara died on June 7, 1982 at the age of 60 due to heart failure and complications from his diabetic condition, which required both of his legs to be amputated.



Legacy: Demara's story was recounted in the 1960 book, *The Great Impostor*, written by Robert Crichton and published by Random House. The book was a New York Times bestseller and adapted into a 1961 film starring Tony Curtis as Demara. A second book by Crichton, *The Rascal and the Road*, recounted Demara and Crichton's experiences together as Crichton conducted research for "The Great Impostor".

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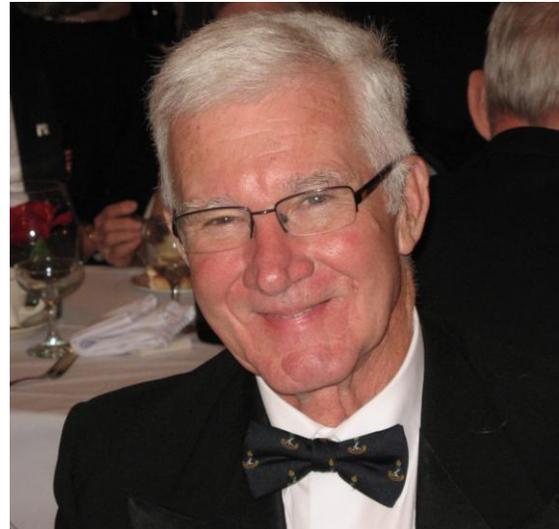
Other direct or indirect references to Demara include:

- The Band recorded a song called "Ferdinand the Imposter".
- The NBC drama *The Pretender* (1996–2000) was inspired by the life of Ferdinand Demara.

References:

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