The women agents of the Special Operations Executive F section – wartime realities and post war representations.

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis is an evaluation of the wartime experiences of the female agents of SOE F section and their post-war representation through books, films and post-war publicity. The first section looks at selection and training and whether women were treated differently because of their sex, it also shows that the various wartime experiences of the women were different and unique, not fitting into a stock scenario and showing that not all agents who were captured were tortured or executed. The fascination with women agents is addressed and why it is they who have captured the public imagination, not the male agents.

The next section provides two case studies, Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo, these two agents were both awarded the George Cross and have become household names. Odette was heavily involved in creating her own post-war image and also contributed to that of Violette. The thesis assesses why these two agents have become renowned and how their constructions have influenced public perception of the SOE and caused myths and fictions to become part of the perceived popular wisdom.

Odette’s influence is discussed further in chapters that evaluate the role of film in the post-war representation of the agents, ‘Odette’ and ‘Carve her name with pride’ are discussed in terms of how agents are represented, what liberties have been taken with the truth and the importance of historical accuracy in a film. The influence of the films ‘Odette’ and ‘Carve her name with pride’ over films made post 1958 and how they have contributed to the inconsistencies and myths that surround the world of SOE and its agents are investigated.

An analysis of memorials to the women of SOE F section highlights the difficulties in memorialising such a diverse group of women. Issues that arise include politics, the need to commemorate, the form of the memorial, whether the memorial is site specific and what that means to its impact on visitors, whether the memorial is individual or collective and how a memorial can influence personal responses.
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Introduction

After the Nazi Occupation of Europe in 1940, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, wrote a letter to the Secretary at War, Hugh Dalton, in which he said: ‘now, set Europe ablaze.’ This was to be achieved by a newly formed group called the Special Operations Executive (SOE) whose objective was to co-ordinate and assist local clandestine activity against the occupying forces, in spite of the Nazi threat that: ‘any passive or active opposition to the German armed forces will incur the most severe retaliatory measures’. SOE was divided in many different sections; F section worked in Occupied France and employed 39 women. These women came from all walks of life and showed courage and resourcefulness throughout the war years and their stories continue to be told in the press, books and films today.

This thesis will focus solely on the women of SOE F section, since it is they who appear to have a resonance with today's public due to the recent release of previously closed archives into the public domain, in addition to a surge of non-fictional literature, novels, films, TV dramas and documentaries. Due to the fact that these sources of information feature so strongly in modern life, the public perception of history is influenced by them. Fact has merged with fiction, and the public understanding of a secret agent’s life, mission, actions and fate may differ greatly from reality. The women of SOE F section appear to have become the subject of myth and it has become clear that truth does not always successfully marry with fiction.

Therefore the aim of this thesis is to rectify the perception of the SOE women agents and to show them in a true light. There were 39 women in SOE F section and yet only a few have achieved any degree of public recognition, notably Odette Churchill G.C. and Violette

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2 Text from panel in ‘Secret war’ exhibition at Imperial War Museum, London.
Szabo G.C. I intend to discover why this is the case, and how television, the press, books, films and memorials have influenced who and how the public remember.\(^3\)

The thesis will examine the popular images of Odette and Violette (both of whom were the subjects of biographies and films during the 1950s) in relation to the historical sources relating to them. Odette was heavily involved in the construction of her own post-war image, claiming to have been betrayed and tortured during her wartime career. Her claims ensured that she was revered by the press and although she said that her post-war publicity was for those who did not come back, she did well out of it, and was consistently idolised by the national papers. Odette also contributed to the post-war image and construction of Violette Szabo, (whose story was very similar to her own) to the extent that, in addition to advising on her own biopic *Odette*, she was also technical advisor on the film *Carve her name with pride*.

Both of these women became national heroines after the war and the true stories and constructions of these women in the immediate post-war years became an integral part of the national identity and recovery after the war, giving hope in the dark, austere post-war years, as the Cold War began and life remained tough for the British public when they sought to rebuild their cities and lives.

This thesis challenges the preconceptions and folklore that has grown up around the women of SOE and by careful evaluation of the sources brings fresh arguments and evidence to old stories of betrayal, capture and torture. An evaluation of the films made about SOE from *Odette* (1950) through to *Female Agents* (2008) demonstrates how myths are constructed. A study of the characterisation of the protagonists in the films made post 1958 shows the influence on the public’s memories and perceptions of SOE women agents and thus raises the crucial issue - what version of the past do people want and does it matter if it is fact or fiction. This develops Connelly’s statement that: ‘The Second World War is a visual war above all else. In popular mind the definition of a war film is one

\(^3\) At the time of her infiltration Odette’s married name was Sansom, however for continuity I shall refer to her as Odette Churchill throughout as this is her most well know name. Her archives may refer to her as Odette Sansom, Odette Churchill or Odette Hallowes depending on the date of the archive.
made during or about the Second World War. These films created and reflected reality and so informed the development of myths.\(^4\)

A unique study of SOE memorials demonstrates how the women agents are remembered and how the development of the memorial in the 20th century has affected remembrance. Highlighting issues of politics, art form, use of language and location, I will look at what influence each factor has on the onlooker of the memorial. This chapter adds to the work of Sarah Farmer’s book *Martyred Village* on the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane, and the memorialisation of the atrocity raises some interesting points which are relevant to the discussion of memorialising the women of SOE F section in chapter seven. She writes in terms of the political context in which the massacre was to be remembered but also in the way in which it was physically memorialised:

> ‘the initial efforts to commemorate the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane took place in the context of a nationwide desire to take public notice of the events of the recent past. This public notice took two forms: the first was a call to bring collaborators and perpetrators of wartime crimes to quick justice. The second entailed establishing monuments and commemorative rituals in the interest of shaping memory for the long term.’\(^5\)

As early as 1944 it was decided that the destroyed village would be its own memorial, it would be frozen in time as it was found after the massacre; houses would be left as they were with vehicles outside and children’s prams riddled with bullet holes would be on public display to serve as a shocking reminder of the events of 10\(^{th}\) June 1944. This type of memorial has parallels with those in the concentration camps where some SOE women were executed as it is site specific and the site has remained (as much as possible) as it was at the time of the atrocity.

Farmer suggests that: ‘two extremes of remembrance are represented in the ruins of Oradour-sur-Glane: highly formal commemoration by the state and individual recollection by the survivors. The key to commemoration and pilgrimage, as opposed to reminiscence or recollection, is that one does not have to have a personal memory of the event in order


\(^5\) Ibid, p.60.
to participate in the remembrance."\textsuperscript{6} This argument is again pertinent to the memorialisation of the women of SOE F section, where official memorials exist such as those at St Paul's church in Knightsbridge and the Valençay monument, as opposed to individual memorials such as the rose garden at RAF Tangmere, or the Violette Szabo museum. For the majority of visitors these memorials serve as a place of remembrance not recollection, as those who visit them will do so as spectators rather than former participants, witnesses or victims.

This thesis will only draw upon English language records, therefore information such as the Resistance holdings at Institut du Temps Présent in Paris, departmental and local archives within France and Gestapo files have not been utilised.\textsuperscript{7} The primary sources used within this thesis include items at the National Archives in Kew which holds original SOE material and agent’s personnel files (PFs). These files do not provide a full picture as several files remain unreleased and public access is not permitted.\textsuperscript{8} In addition, a fire at Baker Street in 1946 damaged or destroyed approximately 85% of the SOE files, some of which: ‘related to the activities in the field of SOE FANY agents.’\textsuperscript{9} As with any organisation of this nature, a conspiracy theory is never far away.\textsuperscript{10}

Maurice Buckmaster, head of SOE F section had said that full records were not kept during the war anyway, as he had work to do and: ‘it was unwise to take notes then, owing to the danger of such information getting into the wrong hands,’\textsuperscript{11} and he was not in the business of making records for future generations of historians to study.\textsuperscript{12}

Another reason for the lack of SOE files is the ‘weeding’ that occurred post-war. An interview with Mrs Pawley who worked in the MI6 offices as they were closing down SOE reveals how files were chosen for destruction:

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid,p.115.  
\textsuperscript{7} This sis due to the fact that author does not speak sufficient French to use the historical archives.  
\textsuperscript{8} This is for several reasons, one being the Official secrets act which does not allow papers to be released until 60 years after the event.  
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, p.18.  
\textsuperscript{12} Buckmaster also clarified this point in a letter to Cynthia Sadler author of ‘War Journey’ (Croydon: Artemis Publications, 2003).
Interviewer: ‘What do you mean weeded? Decided what to throw away?’

Mrs P: ‘Exactly….It was called weeding. And you were given a master plan of how to put things. Missions, directives, this and that, you know, and anything that was trivial you chucked out. And you put things into the master plan, kept the things that were necessary… And there were piles on the floor and I just went through one after the other…’

As a result of the Baker Street fire and ‘weeding’ the SOE F section historian is left with a small proportion of records, many of which are still under the Official Secrets Act. Those that do exist are subject to censorship which occurs in files that have potentially incriminating or damaging material. Large sections of writing are blocked out or even removed from files altogether. Censorship may have occurred during the war years, when there were strict rules, or even after the war to prevent potentially detrimental accusations such as reprisals or unnecessary loss of life. Censorship was also employed simply to stop information falling into the wrong hands such as journalists or sensation mongers. The significance of this is that an SOE scholar will never be able to construct a complete picture of an agent or of SOE F section itself simply by using primary source printed material and other sources should be utilised.

Much of the National Archives material on SOE is made up of personnel files which carry information on an agent’s training and development. Many of the files also contain an ‘interrogation’ or debrief that the agent received upon their return from the field. This was an opportunity for agents to relate what had happened to them and their colleagues while in the field. It was the clearest way of understanding the agents thoughts immediately after their arrival back in the UK, be it from the field or returning from a concentration camp.

The National Archives also hold comprehensive files on the concentration camps and war trials. After the war Squadron Leader Vera Atkins, who had worked in SOE HQ spent several months locating the concentration camps to which various agents had been sent in an attempt to determine their fate. Several interviews, affidavits and letters with concentration camp staff are contained within the files.

13 Second World War Experience Centre, Mrs Pawley, 14th September 2005, tape 2996.
In addition to studying the PF’s and in an attempt to gain a focussed picture I interviewed SOE veterans, the results of which form a key element of this thesis and provide unique material that sets this work apart. Interviewees for this thesis are in the bibliography and include former agents Yvonne Burney (née Baseden)\textsuperscript{14} and Pearl Cornioley\textsuperscript{15} (née Witherington). Interviews with actresses Virginia McKenna and Kate Buffery, and screen writer Jill Hyem provided insight into research, characterisation and writing for television and film.

The interviews with Yvonne and Pearl gave an agent’s first-hand account of what life was really like. What the attitudes towards women were, what really happened at training schools, what life was like in the field and, in Yvonne’s case, interrogation and concentration camps. The interviews also ascertained certain facts in the women’s constructions that had been written about on several occasions, each with a conflicting account, such as Yvonne’s arrest and Pearl’s hide out in a corn field.

The interviews proved to be both useful and informative; however certain precautions need to be taken whilst using this material. MRD Foot suggested I always trust the oldest source, and those that came straight from the horse’s mouth in terms of oral history. However, during interview Pearl seemed to assess the problems faced by a historian using oral history. She told me that: ‘you’re going to find yourself faced with a lot of problems, you have to be very careful of peoples’ imagination. You have to be very careful of those who say I’m the one and they just do not remember. I happen to have a very good memory, but some things I cannot remember’.\textsuperscript{16} The passage of time between the actual events and the interviews is significant as over a period of 60 years memories fade, ideals change and people become aware of the fact that some of the things they did are not acceptable in modern society.

In interview Foot assisted me in dealing with the creation of myths and development of constructions, and he gave me his opinion on various issues such as Violette Szabo’s arrest (he concurred that she did not have a gun) and Odette’s post war fame (which he maintained was a combination of her personality and Peter Churchill and Maurice Buckmaster’s desire for publicity.) Foot put SOE into historical context and we discussed

\textsuperscript{14} Yvonne Burney, 33 Napier Gardens, London, 23\textsuperscript{rd} May 2003 and August 2003.
\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Pearl Cornioley, Hotel St Aignan, France, May 2003.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
at length training and suitability of particular agents such as Odette Wilen and Noor Inayat Khan, both of whom are discussed in detail on chapter two.

The interview with Foot was very influential to the rest of my studies in terms of the way in which I dealt with material and attempted to remain objective about the subject, especially when dealing with emotive subjects such as torture and concentration camps. Meeting Foot provided a firm foundation on which I could base my studies and arguments, and provided me with opportunities to meet others involved in the SOE who were also valuable to my work.

Foot’s official history of SOE F section *SOE in France* was printed in 1966 with an amended edition produced in 1968. In the preface to the book Foot gave a brief outline of its origins: ‘The project derives from the continuing concern expressed, both in parliament and outside it, that there should be an accurate and dispassionate account of SOE’s activities in the war of 1939–1945. This concern led Harold Macmillan, while Prime Minister, to authorise some research. In the Foreign Office…it was determined to find out whether a study could be written of what SOE did in France’.18

The writing of such a book was unprecedented as it: ‘constitutes the first officially sponsored account of a British secret service made available to the general public’19 and Foot had access to SOE files and limited access to ex SOE personnel: ‘The book was officially considered a ‘companion volume to the official histories’ of the Second World War, and described later by Foot himself as a ‘quasi-official’ history.20 *SOE in France* is considered, amongst SOE veterans, to be the most thoroughly researched study of SOE F section to date.

The book deals with all aspects of SOE’s work in France explaining what the origins of SOE were and how it worked in France. It also describes the activities of the agents who

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18 Foot, *SOE in France*, pp. ix–x.
20 In a memo prepared for Harold Wilson, Trend noted that the book was not considered an official history ‘in the full sense of the term’ due to the fact that ‘it has not been written by a team of historians, as are the ordinary official histories of the war, or subjected to the full process of departmental scrutiny which the official histories undergo’. Rather, it was classed as ‘a companion volume to the official histories’, prefaced ‘with a statement that the author had had full access to all relevant material and was alone responsible for the opinions which he expressed’.
worked for F section, detailing their sabotages, successes with the Resistance and notable individual stories. Foot is somewhat critical of the way in which their stories had been portrayed by the press and believes that some women’s success and experiences had been exaggerated, whilst others had been ignored. Foot’s book is a comprehensive study and provides a thorough overview of SOE’s work in France. It is striking as it entered public discussion at the point where historical record and public contention meets. As such it still provides a source that is debated as much today as it was when it was written over 40 years ago.

Other histories include Inside SOE by former agent EH Cookridge, written in the same year as SOE in France. It has been described as: ‘an appreciation of the ingenuity, persistence, and determination’ that distinguished SOE’s “motley assortment” of personnel in dealing with SOE activities in France.\(^{21}\) It focuses on F section and is discussed in further detail throughout the thesis.\(^{22}\)

Juliette Pattinson’s thesis and subsequent book Behind enemy lines – Gender, passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War\(^{23}\) examines the SOE in a new light, and: ‘examines gender relations in wartime using the SOE as a case study.’\(^{24}\) The result is a gendered analysis of SOE and agents, which also investigates themes of: ‘passing’\(^{25}\), combat taboo\(^{26}\), and ‘the significance of “performance” in undertaking a clandestine role’.\(^{27}\)

Pattinson coins the term ‘passing’ and uses it to describe agents passing themselves as French or as a different person to who they really were. She suggests that agents: ‘crossed a number of identity borders, including Occupation, nationality, religion, gender, class and sexuality in attempts to distance themselves from their clandestine identity and

\(^{21}\) Bross, Studies 11.2 (Spring 1967).
\(^{23}\) Juliette Pattinson, Behind Enemy lines, (PhD Thesis, University of Lancaster, October 2007). p.250, subsequently published by as Behind Enemy Lines (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). For the purposes of this discussion (unless stated otherwise) the thesis has been used for reference, not the published book.
\(^{24}\) Pattinson, Behind Enemy lines, Back plate to book.
\(^{25}\) The Oxford English Dictionary defines passing as ‘to be accepted as equivalent to; to be taken for, received, or held in repute as. Often with the implication of being something else.’
\(^{26}\) The notion of the ‘combat taboo’ has been employed to explain why women have been precluded from participating in active warfare. Pattinson, Behind Enemy Lines.
\(^{27}\) Pattinson, Behind Enemy lines, p.29.
in order to enable them to carry out their undercover work." Pattinson also deals with post-war representation of agents and in keeping with the theme of the publication it has a gender focus.

The various themes are investigated in chapters that deal with recruitment, training, filmic accounts of heroism, and performance in the field. These themes appear similar to those addressed within my own thesis, but Pattinson’s sources and discussions vary greatly from my own which draws upon different material and addresses different issues. The primary difference is that Pattinson’s work is about men and women; she draws comparisons between their experiences by discussing men’s desire to display masculinity by becoming involved in active combat or displaying bravado. For example she cites that Bob Maloubier: ‘...wanted more excitement. Definitely, more excitement. So I was made a saboteur. I enjoyed blowing things up.’ This is compared to women’s roles within SOE and their exploitation of their femininity and sex to manipulate the system both in training and in Occupied France. She states that:

‘female agents, as I shall now show, adopted very different strategies from those pursued by their male counterparts and had to police their conduct to a much greater extent. There was much more precision about the codes of self-representation for women than men. Although this is generally the case in other contexts, this was especially crucial in this situation. In the same way that many male agents played upon hegemonic ideals of masculinity, most female agents performed specific modes of dominant femininity.’

Pattinson’s discussion of SOE training addresses issues such as how agents were trained to ‘pass’ once in the field: ‘Instructors then, observed students’ drinking, sleeping and consumption habits not in order to teach them to perform them better, but in order to test whether the students would be able to pass as ordinary French civilians once in the field’. In a discussion on whether men and women received the same training she concludes,
based on spurious evidence that they did not. For example: ‘Although it might be presumed that men and women would be given the same parachute training, this was not the case.’ She then cites Pearl Witherington who claimed that women did less training jumps than the men, Pattinson concludes from this that there is a: ‘disparity in training’.31 My own discussion on training discusses the background to SOE deciding to recruit women, their selection and motives for serving and the training that women undertook. It investigates if any leeway was afforded to women throughout their training because they were women.

Pattinson also discusses filmic representation of agents in the context of ‘the heroic image of the (female) British agent’.32 She discusses various scenes from both Odette and Carve her name with Pride in terms of representation of heroism. She says that: ‘The heroic myth of Odette is consolidated [in the remainder of the film] by emphasising her leadership skills, physical strength, single-mindedness and courage’ and also discusses portrayals of her physical strength: ‘She is shown rowing across Lake Annecy single-handedly to meet the leader of the Maquis’ and ‘dragging branches behind her in the snow’. Pattinson discusses heroism in terms of Violette’s character in Carve her name with pride highlighting scenes where her heroism is prevalent: the gun fight, the train journey and her execution. Interestingly Pattinson cites Carve her name with pride as a source when discussing aspects of training, and regards it as: ‘an appropriate source to examine the paramilitary training’.33

The same films are discussed at some length within my thesis, but they are discussed in terms of historical accuracy, the relevance of the biopic, Odette’s influence during the making of both films, their formulaic approach and how that affected films made afterwards and the effect these films have had on informing the public and influencing their perception of SOE. My thesis also addresses memorialisation of the women of SOE F section and this study is unique to my work.

Therefore, while Pattinson’s work has similar themes to my own, they are addressed in very different ways and her work can be considered that of a gender historian, whereas my own is that of an historian of war and its representation. My work attempts to

31 Ibid.p.142.
33 Ibid. p.129.
deconstruct the construction and graven images of SOE F section agents, especially those of Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo.

Resistance studies are also integral to this work and an evaluation of modern works on the subject and of Occupied France (the ‘field’ of action which the SOE women agents worked against) is given below. The creation of the French Resistance ‘myth’ and the parallel ‘myth’ of the SOE and its women agents will also be addressed with particular reference to Vinen’s *The Unfree French*. It is also of value to explore how female members of the French Resistance have been treated in historical works so as to provide a comparison with the women F section agents and their post-war construction and portrayal.

A work of particular interest to this thesis is the film *Le Chagrin et le Pitié*, (*The Sorrow and the Pity*) 1969 directed by Marcel Ophuls. The film was made in 1968 but not shown on television in France until 1981: ‘so shocking were its revelations thought to be’. The documentary is a unique and extraordinary insight into life in the town of Clermont Ferrand, Auvergne during the Nazi Occupation. The four and a half hour documentary challenges the popular belief held in post-war France that everyone was an active member of the Resistance (an idea perpetuated by De Gaulle at the time of the liberation) and reveals that alongside these acts of heroism was collaboration with the Nazis.

It utilises interview material with various residents of the town as: ‘well as government officials, writers, artists, and a stray German veteran or two’ who were prepared to reminisce on camera about their wartime roles and experiences. Through this a human story is revealed: a story of corruption, collaboration and denunciations as well as struggle and Resistance.

The film reveals how people behaved during the Occupation and shows them attempting to rationalise their behaviour, it gives the audience an insight into how: ‘human beings

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34 Prologue to *Le Chagrin et le pitié*. Ophuls disagrees with this notion stating that ‘for 40 years I’ve had to put up with all this bullshit about it being a prosecutorial film. It doesn’t attempt to prosecute the French. Who can say their nation would have behaved better in the same circumstances?’ Jonas Mekas, Interview with Marcel Ophuls, *Village Voice*, March 1972. This notion is reiterated by Sir Anthony Eden within the documentary who summed up the ethos of the film surmising that it is difficult to judge the decisions made by people living in an Occupied country if you have not experienced the same situation.

35 Specifically highlighted in the presence of concentration camps throughout France and the French led ‘rafle du vel d’hiv’ or round up of Jews of all ages on 16 and 17th July 1942.

behaved in the most demanding of circumstances’ and asks of them what would you have done in their shoes?37 The interviewees include people from all classes and political backgrounds, such as German soldiers, government officials, writers, artists, Resistance fighters, fascists, aristocrats and collaborators. Orphuls commented that: ‘It was not hard to make a collaborator talk. And of course it wasn’t hard to make a Resistance man talk.... The most difficult thing is to make people talk who are not aware of having done anything’.38

SOE features briefly in the documentary, Maurice Buckmaster describes agent Dennis Rake as: ‘incredibly brave’, which Rake reiterates saying: ‘I wanted to prove I was just as brave as my friends who had become pilots and so forth’. Buckmaster also describes the work of the Maquis in Auvergne and Rake’s work as a wireless operator. There is no interview with, or mention made of Nancy Wake who worked as courier in the Auvergne and who occasionally worked alongside Rake.

The majority of the interviewees are male, there is little room for stories of women’s acts of resistance or their role during the war. There are four female stories: one is a war-time cameo of a young French woman who has escaped to England and tells the audience how she is going to work for the Free French. Another is the elderly woman who is in the background while a group of former resisters are interviewed: ‘you make me laugh with your questions’ she tells the director. Lastly, following a montage of women having their heads shaved for ‘horizontal collaboration’ (sleeping with a Nazi) comes the story of a beautician - Madame Solange who tells of her arrest after the war and her torture in a ‘baignore’ because she reputedly denounced a neighbour. She denied it then and she denies it again on film, yet her argument remains unconvincing as she fiddles with a handkerchief and asks for privacy throughout the interview. The final story of a woman in this documentary belongs to her husband, who describes her brutal torture at the hands of the Gestapo before she was buried alive.

The lack of female interviews is pertinent – maybe there were no female resisters in Clermont Ferrand or if there were perhaps none of them were willing to talk, perhaps they felt that the glory should lie with the men, in what was, even in the 1960s, a patriarchal

37 ibid.
38 Jonas Mekas, Interview with Marcel Ophuls, Village Voice, March 1972.
society. However, the lack of women gives a skewed viewpoint as the ones who do feature are collaborators, sex objects or irrelevant to the story, which is unfortunate as many women successfully resisted the Nazi Occupation.

Another film made in the same year is *L’Armee des Ombres* (*Army of the shadows*) was based on the book of the same title written in 1944. The preface to the book states: ‘there is no fiction [in this book]. No detail has been forced and none has been invented’.39 Thus the reader/viewer may presume that the characters are based on real people, one of whom is ‘Mathilde’ a wireless operator for the Resistance. Mathilde shows: ‘such a gift for organisation that I [the network leader] chose to make her my deputy’.40 In contrast to *Le Chagrin et le Pitié* which does not show any female resisters, here we see a strong woman, who worked at the heart of the Resistance. Her colleague ‘The Bison’ says: ‘I knew from the chief how remarkable she was, but still she amazed me - strong willed, patient, methodical, born to lead as well as serve...’41 It is unusual to hear men speaking so highly of a female compatriot in this type of scenario. Mathilde is portrayed as ruthless and organised, donning a series of disguises to undertake her work and showing little compassion when she is informed that a colleague is dying. Her weakness is that she carries a photograph of her 17 year old daughter with her, even though she is warned against doing and this proves to be her downfall. When she is arrested the Germans give her a choice: ‘either she betrays all names she knows or her daughter will be sent to Poland to a German military brothel’.42

The strong woman depicted throughout the film becomes a threat, and somewhat typical of portrayal of women at the time and in this role, she cannot maintain her assertive façade for long, she becomes weak willed and her maternal instinct overpowers her dedication to the Resistance. The network decide to eliminate her: ‘Mathilde is a wonderful woman, more wonderful than you think – but we’ll kill her...’43 She is released and is seen walking down the street, in a drive-by shooting the very men with whom she had worked and risked her life with assassinate her: ‘The Bison fired as he always did, without missing’.44

41 Ibid. The wording in the book is similar: ‘she was born to organise, to command and the same time to serve’ Kessel, *Army of Shadows*, p.90.
42 Ibid.
In spite of featuring a woman, who, at the outset of the book and film is depicted as an asset to the Resistance network with whom she is involved, *L’Armee des Ombres* reverts to the somewhat archetypal attitude that, in the end women will let them down or change their priorities thus becoming a danger. Mathilde’s maternal instinct to save her daughter from the Nazis results in her own death, as, alive she compromised the entire network of resisters that she knew.

A book that helps to rectify this image of female resisters is *Sisters in the Resistance* by Margaret Collins Weitz.\(^{45}\) By skilfully utilising oral archive material the publication builds up a realistic and informed study of the various roles that women undertook with the French Resistance, counterbalanced with the stories of those who were collaborators.

Weitz explores the characteristics of these women saying that: ‘some were idealists. Others were outsiders, mavericks, and perhaps in a more profound sense, revolutionaries’\(^{46}\) and that they had: ‘strength, courage, daring, adaptability among others’ which provides a useful comparison to the characteristics of the women who undertook work with the SOE discussed in chapter one of this thesis. She also emphasises that ‘the Germans did not suspect them of being terrorists’ similar to the women SOE agents, they could seemingly go about their daily business whilst undertaking clandestine work or transporting illegal objects such as wireless sets or explosives.\(^{47}\)

Weitz states that: ‘one must avoid stereotypes. Each woman was individual, yet certain common traits emerge.’\(^{48}\) This is a sentiment that is present in chapter two of this thesis where it is demonstrated that not all SOE F section women had the same experiences in the field or in captivity, also that they had different motives for joining the organisation and becoming involved in the fight against the Nazi Occupation of France.

The monograph goes on to explore different themes within the Resistance and how it can be categorised. ‘War is a Man’s affair’ is the title of a chapter which addresses feminist and equality issues surrounding the Resistance, stating that: ‘over and over they [women]

\(^{46}\) Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, p.84.
\(^{47}\) Ibid. p.85 and p.264.
\(^{48}\) Ibid. p.88.
had to prove themselves – once they managed to join. Most were assigned traditional feminine support roles...49 Thus reflecting the work that women in the SOE undertook, as they mainly worked as wireless operators and couriers. Those that undertook other work such as leading a Maquis were exceptional as in the case of Pearl Witherington (discussed in chapter two). However there is also a case within Weitz’s book of a female called France leading a Maquis, but as with Pearl, doing it under the guise of taking commands from a man.

The book makes considerable use of oral accounts from women resisters, among them are some famous names: Lucie Aubrac, Genevieve De Gaulle, Danielle Mitterand and some lesser known resistsants for whom this book marks the first recognition of their work during the war. The accounts are thrilling in themselves, however Weitz does not utilise them to the full, she allows them to speak entirely for themselves, rather than analysing the material within them by making assessments of constructions, myths or their historical value.

However, Weitz puts the Resistance into context by providing a chapter on collaboration, saying that: ‘15% of the notorious Militia members were women’ a surprisingly high amount given women’s political status at the time. However, the majority of women collaborated in other ways: ‘horizontal collaboration’ or sleeping with the enemy enabled women to attain certain privileges such as food or clothing, denunciations of others (such as Jews) to the Gestapo may help buy the freedom of a family member, raise funds, settle old scores or make a much sought after house or business available at a low price.

This aspect of the study is unique to women in France during the Second World War and makes for a fascinating juxtaposition of the roles women could chose to undertake during the Occupation: they could resist, remain passive or they could collaborate. The women who became involved with SOE clearly made the former decision, to assist with the Resistance and therefore it is unlikely that they would also chose to collaborate, and there is no extant evidence of women double agents with SOE F section.50

49 Ibid. p.147.
50 One example of a female resister who became a double agent was Mathilde Carre. She was arrested by Hugo Bleicher of the Abwehr and under threat of torture she became his mistress and agreed to become a double agent.
The book concludes that female resisters took up the yoke of the women who resisted before them in the 1789 women’s march of the French revolution, implying that it is in their heritage and their blood to stand up to oppression. It also reiterates that women had to prove themselves in a patriarchal society and that: ‘female stereotype did allow women to undertake non-traditional activity – above all, fighting the enemy’. Their roles were as discussed above, stereotypical on one hand, but also ones that they comfortably undertook without risk of detection on the other. Weitz also states that many women returned to their pre-war existence after the war: ‘there were no role reversals’ although one positive outcome was that the long debated suffrage of women was granted in 1944 and women were able to vote in their first national elections in 1946.

Sisters in the Resistance provides a valuable insight into women’s work within the Resistance in France and the difficulties they faced. It provides a background against which to set this thesis in terms of how freely women could move around, how they were perceived by others in the Resistance and those who lived and worked around them. It demonstrates that the women of SOE and those in the Resistance had similar motivations and beliefs and that they were working towards a comparable goal. The main difference appears to be the recruitment process and training that the women of SOE were afforded and the support network from the UK that assisted them by providing arms and provisions. Also, there were vast numbers of women who worked within the Resistance in a huge variety of roles as compared to the 39 women of SOE F section who worked primarily as wireless operators and couriers.

The literature relating to women of the French Resistance follows a similar pattern to that involving the women of SOE F section. There are historical monographs that deal with the general subject with references to the women as a cog in the machine, other books deal with the women in general within the Resistance and there are autobiographies and biographies. The writings in this latter section tended to be written some considerable time after the war had ended, for example Brigitte Friang wrote her memoirs Parachutes and Petticoats in 1958, which describes not only her time with the Resistance but her post-war work with General de Gaulle and as a war correspondent in Indo-China.  

Other memoirs focus solely on the work the women undertook during the war such as Lucie Aubrac’s *Outwitting the Gestapo* which describes in depth her nine months of activities within the Resistance and Marie-Madeleine Fourcade’s *Noah’s Ark* which provides descriptions of her work with the Alliance network and MI6. Some of the autobiographies condense the time frame of the story still further and Geneviève de Gaulle’s *God remained outside* gives an account of her time in solitary confinement at Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1944. These books contrast with those about the women in SOE as they are mainly autobiographies, there are only two autobiographies by women SOE F section agents: Anne Marie Walters’ memoirs *Moondrop to Gascony* which is discussed in detail in Chapter two and *Pauline*, the memoirs of Pearl Witherington ghost written by Hervé Laroque and available only in French.

Vinen’s *The Unfree French* explores the role of women and the subject of Occupied France, stating that his approach differs from that of other scholars: ‘I have chosen particular issues on which I focus by looking at the flip side of academic accounts. For example, historians of the summer of 1940 look at events on the battlefield or at high politics in Vichy... I have chosen to make refugees and prisoners the centre of my narrative and try to understand the events from their point of view.’ He also deals with the subject of women in an unusual, somewhat derogatory way. If one took the chapter ‘Frenchwomen and the Germans’ at face value, one would believe that all Frenchwomen were collaborators who slept with the enemy and denounced their neighbours.

According to Vinen many Frenchwomen chose to sleep with Germans or have love affairs with them. He states that these women: ‘mainly came from an underprivileged part of society. They were often very young, almost always poor and poorly educated’. He discusses that the mothers of babies born to German fathers were ostracised from their families and villages: ‘women were treated with disdain by the authorities in France: in May 1944 a woman was refused a milk ration by the Mayor of a Breton village on the grounds

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59 Ibid. See pp 178-179.
60 Ibid. p.179.
that her child was an ‘enfant du boche’. He also discusses in detail that many women willingly chose to go to work in Germany as they needed the money, while others: ‘were effectively forced to go, and such compulsion was especially likely to be applied to particular kinds of women: prostitutes, foreigners, criminals, inmates of internment camps or simply the poor.’

Vinen deals with the subject of prostitution too, saying that: ‘prostitutes or women of ill-repute, were particularly likely to end up working for the Germans’ and states that 60 brothels were set up to: ‘... provide sexual services for foreign workers in Germany’. The chapter also deals with the marked sexism and double standards that the treatment of these ‘collaborations’ incurred after the war: ‘women were punished for sleeping with German men, though Frenchmen were almost never punished for sleeping with German women’. He also notices this type of sexism and sexual identity in terms of the Resistance, stating that: ‘in the immediate aftermath of the liberation, its spokesman made much of its masculinity.’ Even though Frenchwomen received the vote Vinen states that: ‘this innovation owed little to male perceptions of women’s role in the war.’ Whereas, by contrast: ‘the British reserved much of their admiration for female operatives, such as Violette Szabo, who had characteristics – discretion, discipline, modesty – that the mass Resistance of 1944 seemed to lack.’

*The Resistance* by Matthew Cobb provides a valuable and detailed description of the French Resistance right from the Fall of France through to the liberation. It too goes against the stereotype of the Resistance as a big happy family under De Gaulle’s guidance and combines the traditional story of the sacrifice of ordinary men and women with the fact that there was a clash between certain factions of the Resistance (especially within the communists groups). The role of SOE is subsidiary to the main role of the Resistance in this work, their interest in Moulin as a potential agent is noted, as is their assistance in getting agents in and out of France, their delivery of arms drops, their use of the wireless

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61 Ibid. p.167.
62 Ibid. p.169.
63 Ibid. p.173.
64 Ibid. p.179.
65 Ibid. p. 334. For the first time in April 1944 - the first elections with female participation were the municipal elections of 29 April 1945 and the parliamentary elections of 21 October 1945. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's_suffrage#France).
66 Ibid. p.335.
for *messages personnel* and the Carte debacle is retold. Stories of SOE agents and their roles do not feature, their networks are not mentioned and Cobb focuses on the work of SOE HQ rather than their work in the field.

It is against a background of political unease, Resistance networks and reprisals that the story of the women agents of SOE can be pitted, this thesis adds to Cobb’s story and although I do not deal with political tensions my thesis adds a significant amount of information in terms of the women’s achievements, and how they, like members of the Resistance have become synonymous with the liberation of France and the myths thereafter.

The ‘myth’ of the French Resistance is a key theme in Gildea’s *Marianne in Chains* who states that the official history of the Resistance and Occupation appear to have been written on: ‘tablets of stone’ and suggests that: ‘there were three competing interpretations of what conditions were like in France under the German Occupation.’ The first was that Resistance was the highest form of honourable conduct...the second view...was that the Occupation was characterised less by the oppression of the Germans than by the cowardice and treachery of the French...the third view...was that in what amounted to a Nazi dictatorship or SS state it was almost impossible to resist’. This description of the French is similar to the dividing lines laid down in *Le Chagrin et le Pitié* and re-iterates that everyone’s war and their post-war construction of it was different.

Gildea’s work focuses on ordinary French people and their experiences of life under the Occupation, he counters the story of the: ‘good French’ who resisted over: ‘the story of the “bad French” who had not resisted but collaborated actively with the German Occupiers.’ He describes the construction of the French Resistance myth, reiterating De Gaulle’s speech of 25th August 1945 and stating: ‘thus...was announced the gospel of the Resistance according to Charles de Gaulle’ and how: ‘collaboration was brushed aside’ to be replaced by an image of France as resisters ‘pure and heroic’.

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68 Carte told SOE that he had a substantial group of anti-Gaullist resisters at his command and could mobilise 300,000 troops, SOE were desperate to believe him as ‘they were desperate to work with an armed group that was not under the influence of De Gaulle.’ Cobb, *The Resistance*, p.124.
70 Ibid, p.4.
Vinen argues that: ‘if there was a myth of wartime France as a unified nation of Resistance supporters then it might be argued that it is the English who have done much to create that myth. The French Resistance plays an important part in English literature...[including] Sebastian Faulks Charlotte Gray’.73

My thesis will take this theory further and will examine how the female members of SOE F section have become a substantial part of this ‘myth’ not only in terms of the French Resistance but in their perception by the public as heroic, innocent women who gave up everything to fight for the liberation of France, and as with the French Resistance myth the smaller details are glossed over to provide a bigger, more heroic image than may be realistic.

Other works that address these issues include a Resistance conference that was held at the University of Salford in 1973, the proceedings of which were published as Resistance in Europe: 1939-1945 and greatly contributed to the world of Resistance studies. The speakers included former agents and active resisters such as Harry Rée and scholars including MRD Foot.74 The conference and subsequent publication aimed to provide accurate assessment of the Resistance’s successes as opposed to: ‘the romantic, popular conception of it which has been handed down by Second World War mythology.’75

The papers discuss many aspects of the Resistance, from its strategic and economic success, to the ethics of Resistance and showing that members of the Resistance were just ordinary people who occasionally showed great bravery and heroism. The aim of Harry Rée’s paper ‘Agents, Resistance and the local population’ was to: ‘try and get across to you the complete and crushing ordinariness of the people I worked with in France. He states that the difference between them and SOE agents was that: ‘we were not risking what the local Resistance were risking; true, we were risking ourselves, but we were not risking our wives and families, which the local resisters were – responsibly and unavoidably.’76 Rée debunks the myth that all resisters were full time heroes, constantly

73 Vinen, The Unfree French, p.3.
76 Ibid. 31.
fighting and endangering themselves, and shows them to be ordinary people who undertook Resistance as a necessary measure when needed. Milward also argues that: ‘most Resistance was personal, isolated and unique’ and Foot states: ‘that individual acts of Resistance were prevalent all over Europe but that not all resisters were in it for good conscientious reasons’.77

The conference and resulting book aim to debunk some myths about the resisters themselves and to add realism and truth to what their life was really like and what type of person was drawn to be a member of the Resistance. Discussions on effectiveness of the Resistance come to different conclusions, all of which add to the debate about SOE and the Resistance, and other papers bring to light aspects of the Resistance that are relatively unknown such as the underground movement at Auschwitz Birkenau, the role of the Catholic church and the Resistance movement within Germany itself.

More recent SOE studies include the SOE conference at the Imperial War Museum in 1998. It was the first major academic conference solely devoted to SOE, the proceedings of which were subsequently published in SOE - A new instrument of War in 2006.78 For the conference the: ‘programme, lecturers and veterans were selected to reflect as many of the major themes of SOE as possible. A comprehensive coverage of every aspect of SOE’s existence was unattainable but a broad spectrum was achieved.’ The conference highlighted the fact the SOE was an international organisation and challenged the public preconception that it was all based in France. As such it was decided that as F section: ‘has attracted the most public attention’ it would be treated solely as a discussion forum, with no official papers given. The decision to miss out France in the official papers leaves a gap in the publication of the proceedings. It implies that any papers given would have covered old ground and utilised older material, rather than exploring new themes.79

Through books and conferences it has become apparent that the strand of academic interest in the SOE has focussed on analysis of how successful the organisation was and

77 Ibid p.220.
79 The papers that were given covered topics including the demise of SOE, weapons and equipment, SOE’s work in the low countries, Italy, Yugoslavia, Romania, Afghanistan, Greece, Albania, Denmark and SOE’s relationship with neutral countries. Speakers included veterans, distinguished historians such as MRD Foot, Mark Seaman and Terry Charman, students such as Rod Bailey, and the SOE advisor Duncan Stewart.
what purpose it served during the war. However, there is another strand that has been introduced to SOE study and it is that of personal experience, what was it like to be an agent, what experiences did they have, how did they feel when in the field. The public is now faced with personal recollections, some of which have been embellished and distorted so as to appeal to the popular market of readers. In particular the experience of female SOE F Section agents has been prevalent and it is the fact that they were women, (some of them were mothers) that has gripped the public imagination and not the truth behind their stories, which in some cases is very different from the public's conception of it.

This thesis should not be viewed as a contribution to the history of the French Resistance and its assistance by the SOE as written by Cobb, Vinen, Gildea, Jackson and other eminent scholars, nor should it regarded as a study of military history although it does broaden the historiography of intelligence agencies and the SOE.

This thesis does contribute to the field of gender studies and continues Pattinson's debates about issues of equality and femininity. My thesis however, does not deal with all SOE agents, but solely on the experiences of women. It seems that women have attracted the most attention in the post-war years and it is their stories that have been constructed and reconstructed, sometimes, until they no longer resemble the truth. The thesis will demonstrate that there is an anomaly in the perception of SOE; women were treated the same as men throughout their training, and SOE was not a gendered fighting force. The women and men were equal in the field, they may not have done exactly the same jobs but in the end they worked and fought on equal terms, and some were captured and executed regardless of their sex but because they were British agents.

As such this work should be seen as a contribution to our understanding of the mythologisation, and changes in that mythologisation of certain strands and varieties of British female activity within the SOE – which remains under researched, and the still under-appreciated roles that were, for the women pitched into them, authentic areas of military danger and a threat to their lives.

According to Connelly in *We can take it*: ‘Myths and the study of them are vital for they reveal a great deal about how people relate to the past, particularly their own national past.
Myths are important because they help people to make sense of their lives; they provide a popular memory of the past, which can shape expectations of the present and the future. It is my hope that this thesis will continue the study of myths, how they develop and why they are important to national memory.80

This thesis also provides a contribution to the study of popular culture and cultural memory of the Second World War, an event which has left a legacy of media that attracts a wide ranging audience including film and television: ‘According to Malcolm Smith “most people learn much of their history from popular culture, and specifically from mass media”. Seeing is believing in some stories, and myths have ‘become very difficult to reinterpret.’81

According to Finney in Remembering the Road to World War Two: ‘even as it recedes further from us the Second World War thus remains vividly alive’ and there is ‘a steady stream of filmic revisionings dealing with combat, Resistance and post-war reckoning... demonstrating its continuing resonance in popular culture’ showing that film is an integral way in which the public learn and remember.82 This thesis takes this discussion further and suggests the use of films as vectors of memory and as possible celluloid memorials to women of SOE F section.

A discussion of the memorialisation of this small group of women in addition to various debates about memorialising aspects of the war - from the overwhelming numbers of the Holocaust to individual monuments and shrines contributes to contemporary debates by scholars such as Farmer, Huysen, Young, Nora, Finney and Connelly.

This study fits in with Finney’s theory that: ‘the concept of memory has become a signature of our own generation’ and in discussing the various ways it is studied he says: ‘some analyse memories of individuals who have directly experienced – often traumatic – events, other explore vectors of memory, the media of films, museums, fictional literature, political rhetoric or public commemorations...uniting these disparate studies is a common concern

80 Mark Connolly, We can take it! Britain and the memory of the Second World War, (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2004),p.3.
82 Patrick Finney, Remembering the Road to World War Two, (Oxon: Routledge, 2011) p.3.
with “the ways in which people construct a sense of the past” and this is the crux of this thesis.\textsuperscript{83}

My work will provide a study, exploration and re-evaluation of a currently under investigated area of SOE related academic research and women’s history. It explores the reasons for the many illusions and misconceptions that have evolved around the women of SOE from their wartime activity to their modern day image. Many of the available English language resources which are unique to this area of study, including personal interviews with SOE veterans and respected SOE scholars, will be examined with the aim of providing an objective, well researched approach to this area of study and not to provide a collection of popular images or under researched retellings of stories.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, p.4.
Chapter One
The women agents of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) F Section
Selection, Motives and Training

This chapter will discuss; the background to the decision SOE took to recruit women, the women’s selection and motives for serving and the training that they undertook. It will investigate the differences, if any, which were afforded them throughout their training because they were women.

Early in the Second World War a ground breaking decision was made by the War Office; it was decided women would be recruited by SOE for work ‘in the field’ providing assistance to local Resistance networks in Nazi Occupied territory. In a society where sexual equality was virtually unheard of, and where a woman’s perceived duty was to raise the family or work in non-combatant areas of war work such as munitions or driving, official government permission was given to recruit and employ women to be trained to bear arms and to be infiltrated to work behind the lines as secret agents. MP Dame Irene Ward was present when the decision was made. Sometime after the event she stated that: ‘the War Cabinet was [not] fully aware of what their decision involved. If they had been, permission would almost certainly have been refused…’

It was thought that giving women the right to ‘bear arms’ meant that they were not protected by the Geneva Convention, nor could they expect to be treated as Prisoners of War if caught as they would not be in uniform. In an attempt to forestall this most

84 Thorough searches of the National Archives and various other sources have failed to find the actual document which records this decision. It is widely believed that the decision was made in April 1942 as quoted in Hugh Popham FANY, (London: Leo Cooper, 1984) p.98 but I cannot find any extant documents to substantiate this and the first agents Christina Granville and Virginia Hall were sent to France in 1941.
85 Irene Ward, FANY Invicta (London: Hutchinson,1955). Irene Ward was elected into parliament in 1931. During her time there she became very involved with women’s rights, she campaigned for women’s suffrage in India and was concerned with the evacuation of children during the Spanish civil war. During the Second World War she was concerned with women’s employment and equal pay; ‘she chaired the women’s power committee, which advised the Ministry of Labour, and visited factories and ATS bases. From August 1943 to February 1944 she travelled through China, India, and the Middle East on behalf of the MOI, explaining the British war effort, later she visited newly liberated France’. After the war she ‘published an account of the Women’s Transport Service, FANY Invicta and lobbied for an official history of the SOE, an organisation in which she had many friends. She became Britain’s longest serving woman MP until she stood down in February 1974. Elliot and Fry, ODNB, accessed online 9th January 2011.
86 The Geneva Red Cross Convention was signed in 1864 and was revised in 1906 and 1929. PRO FO 372/33. The only mention of women in the 1929 Geneva Convention stated: ‘Prisoners of war have the right to have their person and their honor [sic] respected. Women shall be treated with all the regard due to their sex.’ Convention Between the United States of America and Other Powers, Relating to Prisoners of War; July 27, 1929. (Pattinson, Behind enemy lines, PhD Thesis).
women agents were given officer status and commissioned into the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY). However, since they would be in civilian clothing on operational deployment it was unlikely that they would receive favourable treatment if caught by the Gestapo and in all likelihood captured agents would fall under Hitler’s directive of ‘Nacht und Nebel’ in which prisoners disappeared without a trace.\textsuperscript{87}

Although the decision to use women proved to be controversial in the aftermath of war, during the war years it demonstrated that SOE was a relatively progressive organisation. MRD Foot argued that there were: ‘plenty of women with marked talents for organisation and operational command, for whom a distinguished future could be predicted if only the staff could be broad-minded enough to let them join it... SOE was such a broad-minded staff.’\textsuperscript{88} Its ‘broad-mindedness’ was demonstrated by the fact that SOE chose to utilise: ‘woman-power as well as man-power. In accordance with the body’s usual principle - go straight for the objective, across any social or military conventions that may get in the way.’\textsuperscript{89} SOE did just that, ignoring all conventions and prejudices and began recruiting women. Selwyn Jepson, who interviewed women for their roles in SOE stated that:

‘I was responsible for recruiting women for the work, in the face of a good deal of opposition from the powers that be, who said that women, under the Geneva Convention, were not allowed to take combatant duties which they regarded Resistance work in France as being…It took me some time to find a proper answer to that and then I found it, I discovered that the anti-aircraft units always had ATS Officers on their strength and that when it came to firing an anti-aircraft gun the person who pulled the lanyard that released the trigger was a woman… There was a good deal of opposition from various quarters until it went up to Churchill.’\textsuperscript{90}

By stating that the ATS effectively used arms Jepson implied that the women agents of SOE should also be allowed to use them, although in reality women were trained with

\textsuperscript{87} On 12 December, Keitel issued a directive which explained Hitler’s orders: ‘Efficient and enduring intimidation can only be achieved either by capital punishment or by measures by which the relatives of the criminals do not know the fate of the criminal.’ He further expanded on this principle in a February 1942 letter stating that any prisoners not executed within eight days were ‘to be transported to Germany secretly, and further treatment of the offenders will take place here; these measures will have a deterrent effect because - A. The prisoners will vanish without a trace. B. No information may be given as to their whereabouts or their fate.’

\textsuperscript{88} Foot, \textit{SOE in France}, p. 47.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{90} IWM Sound archive, London, Selwyn Jepson, 9331 (3 July 1986).
weapons but were not employed in combat roles. Women were to be recruited to conduct clandestine work for a number of reasons: they attracted less attention than men, their cover stories were easier to validate, because women were not required for compulsory labour under the Nazi regime and because it was thought that women would have more success in dealing with the local Resistance than their male colleagues.

Vera Atkins stated that: ‘women were suited to the job as they could move about more freely in Occupied territory... eventually, of course, several women couriers were called upon to fill a man’s place after a sudden arrest and women wireless operators did the same work as the men’ demonstrating quite clearly that SOE had a policy of equality and that women were doing exactly the same job as the men, sometimes even stepping in for them. 91

The presence of a woman might also help dissipate some of the ‘macho’ attitudes that may have arisen in an all male environment, especially when adrenalin was high and the emphasis was on espionage and Resistance. A woman’s presence may have been viewed as calming, she might have provided an alternative perspective on issues or offered support in a way a male colleague could not.

Whilst her English counterparts may have accepted the presence of a woman and treated her equally, in France her presence and in some cases authority may have caused problems as: ‘France in the early 1940s was a nation led by men, more so than Britain. French women did not have the right to vote; they were certainly not expected to take charge of anything but the kitchen and the nursery. The Resistance groups F section hoped to arm and co-ordinate were likely to be predominantly male, not to mention self consciously masculine. They might agree to take orders from a British or Anglo-French envoy, especially if he provided them with weapons – but from a woman?’ 92

It was only in exceptional circumstances that women were required to take the lead, such as in the case of Pearl Witherington who led a Maquis of 3,000 when her leader Southgate was arrested. Under normal circumstances women who were selected to work for SOE were likely to be given one of two roles: wireless operator or courier. Some were

employed in the early days of SOE to set up safe houses and work as initial points of contact for other agents but this was rare.

The work of a wireless operator required someone with mental stability and the ability to work alone. The wireless operator would be known by as few members of the network as possible and would keep a very low profile. They would pick up messages from ‘letter boxes’ or have them delivered by a courier. A wireless operator would change location as much as possible to avoid detection by Nazi Direction Finding (D/F) mobile equipment and the maximum time for a live transmission would be 20 minutes, as any longer and the wireless operator’s location risked compromise. This was often problematic as messages could become garbled or they could have an awkward signal caused by jamming or a noisy frequency. All messages were sent and received in unique codes that the wireless operator was required to memorise.

The work of the wireless operator was fraught with danger and if they were caught an entire network could fall apart as the operator was needed to ask for supplies, pass intelligence or relay other important messages such as arrest updates or requests for more agents. Wireless operators had the most dangerous job of all agents, as they risked detection whilst transmitting or moving about the country with their wireless sets. They also knew details about other members of the network and its activities that others did not. Training a wireless operator was time consuming and they were difficult to replace due to their specialised skills.

Couriers required the ability to blend in and keep a low profile to skills as their job was to carry messages, reports or any other material from place to place. Their normal mode of transport would be by bicycle or train, therefore they ran the risk of encountering spot checks and road blocks. They would help other agents find safe houses and act as look outs for wireless operators. Couriers would rendezvous with other agents, and were therefore at risk of being drawn into traps set by the Nazis or collaborators. Couriers were also required to know as few people as possible, but in practice this was very difficult because couriers were out in public and often on the move. They could cycle considerable distances in one day and did whatever was required of them by the network leader; sometimes this would involve deputising for them, assisting with arms drops and
possibly sabotage. Although this was not strictly the role of the courier it was sometimes the case that everybody was required to help.

One of the popular misconceptions about SOE is that the women they employed only worked in France, this was not the case, they were used by other SOE country sections in the roles described above and in the UK as wireless operators and cipher staff. Due to the nature of the historical research carried out by scholars (such as Mackenzie, Foot, Stafford and Cruickshank) on the women in other SOE country sections it is not possible to present their work in tabulated or statistical form as I have done in the appendix of this thesis for the women of SOE F section. Mentions of women in these works, whilst in some cases detailed, explore their roles either within SOE/FANY as wireless operators and assistants to male agents, or as resisters in their own countries since so few women outside of F section were employed as agents by the SOE. Below I offer an insight into how women were used or assisted with SOE in other country sections, what role the FANY played and what made F and RF sections unique in their employment of female agents to work behind enemy lines.

According to Mackenzie the SOE: ‘reached its maximum expansion in the late summer and early Autumn of 1944, when its total British strength was probably just under 13,000...the total includes about 450 ATS, 60 WAAF and 1,500 FANY as well as nearly 1,200 civilian women: [totalling] about 3,200 women’. The FANYs have been described as:

‘An army of women who proved indispensable as administrative, teaching and domestic staff and generally keeping the wheels functioning smoothly. While the majority were secretaries, some had important staff jobs, a few were agents and a significant number worked as cipher staff and wireless operators – the lifeline for agents in the field, whose safety and lives very much depended on messages being received and transmitted correctly’.

The wireless operators were based at Grendon Underwood and Poundon and: ‘like the other women’s services, they became absolutely indispensable and their discretion was

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impeccable.\textsuperscript{95} They received messages from agents working in the field and sent messages from HQ to them, it was vital that they were swift and accurate, agents depended on them, not only for vital supplies of weapons, equipment and ‘bods’ but their ability to transmit quickly could save an agent from the dreaded D/F and potential capture.\textsuperscript{96}

As will be discussed at length throughout this thesis, women were also selected and trained as operative agents in the field, 39 went into Occupied France as part of F section (which was under British control and mostly recruited British nationals) and by RF section, (linked to General de Gaulle’s Free French government in exile which mainly recruited French nationals 11 of whom were women). A small number of women were also trained and sent into Poland, Italy, and Holland.

The relatively small numbers of women recruited for active service behind the lines is due to the fact that the Second World War: ‘was a war fought by men – both in conventional and unconventional war...’ There was not a co-ordinated effort to recruit, train and infiltrate women secret agents from the United Kingdom and women in Occupied territories participated in the war in other ways: such as working with the local Resistance - undertaking work in the illegal press, escape lines, intelligence, safe houses, as couriers and the like.\textsuperscript{97}

France was unique in its extensive use of female agents and Seaman suggests that that the utilisation of French speaking women to become F Section agents was inspired by:

1. The strategic importance of France
2. The relative abundance of potential candidates
3. The relative ease of insertion into their operational areas
4. The political dynamic for H.M. Government to achieve a Resistance that was not inspired by/directed by the Free French.

\textsuperscript{95}Mackenzie, \textit{Secret History of SOE}, p.336.
\textsuperscript{96} The other roles were essentially jobs similar to those filled by the ATS but working for a far more secretive service. Approximately 1,200 women were based in these jobs in the UK, the others were spread out globally: North Africa and Italy, (121), Middle East (91) and India & China (18). According to figures from April 1944, Mackenzie, \textit{Secret History of SOE}, p.718.
\textsuperscript{97} Correspondence with Mark Seaman, SOE Historian at the Cabinet office, 18\textsuperscript{th} June 2011.
Some SOE sections did use women as agents but the numbers were small. Foot said that: ‘so few of the agents SOE sent to the low countries were women – three went to the Netherlands [N section] and two to Belgium [T section] – that the author hopes today’s feminists will forgive him for writing, as a rule, in the male gender only.’ 98 One agent who worked as a courier in Belgium was Elaine Madden (Imogen): ‘who said that she only once “had trouble of any kind” – when she had to shed a follower. “I found the work much easier than I anticipated....the only regret I have, is not having arrived sooner and being able to work more” for Belgium was overrun before anything could happen’. 99

In Holland a native Dutch woman, Jos Gemmeke was a member of the Resistance before joining SOE, she was infiltrated back to Holland. Jos set up the underground newspaper *Je Maintiendrai*, which by the summer of 1944 was able to circulate up to 15,000 copies of each issue. After the failure of Operation Marketgarden she cycled to Brussels to deliver some microfilms to the Prince Bernhard’s HQ. 100 From there she was sent to Britain where she was recruited by SOE. She undertook their training at Beaulieu who found her ‘outstanding’ and Ringway. She parachuted back to the still-Occupied zone of Holland on the night of March 10-11th 1945; her cover was that of being a business man’s secretary: ‘Her mission was to press forward into Germany to see what she could do about alleviating the lot of Dutch forced labourers there’. She was injured upon landing and took some weeks to recover however; she was able to: ‘accumulate some awful accounts of foreign workers’ treatment, which she sent out by courier. Her mission was aborted by the course of the war’. 101

Another agent who is attributed to the Dutch SOE is Beatrix Terwindt. She took F sections paramilitary course at Wanborough Manor, undertook parachute training at Ringway and spent a short time at Beaulieu. On the night of 13/14th February she joined a SOE parachute drop into Holland in order to set up an escape route to Belgium working for MI9.

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101 Foot, *SOE in the Low Countries*, p.421. Another Dutch woman who worked for D section (this time at its London HQ) was Door de Graaf (Dodie Sherston) who had been brought up in Britain and was working as a clerk at the Ministry of Economic Warfare in Berkeley Square. In January 1944 a Dutch Resistance fighter, Kas de Graaf, arrived in London to warn London about the *Englandsspiel* – for more than two years the Germans had been in control of all D section wireless sets and operators and agents dropped into Holland were landing straight into the arms of the Gestapo. (47 of the 50 agents dropped into Holland were executed by the Nazis as a result of this catastrophe). De Graaf stayed in London and Dodie Sherston (as she was now called) worked alongside him as his assistant. At the end of the war she went with him to Holland and they married in 1946.
She landed into the hands of: ‘a friendly Dutch reception committee,’ who took away her papers saying they were badly made and asked her the address of her safe house.\(^{102}\) A few minutes later someone threw a blanket over head and she was arrested. She had unwittingly become part of the Englandspiel, the Germans never discovered that she was not part of SOE and she survived the war.

In Poland two women were involved with the SOE, Christina Granville and Elżbieta Zawacka, the former is the subject of a biography by Madeleine Masson.\(^{103}\) The latter joined the local Resistance in Silesia in October 1939, in late 1940 she moved to Warsaw to work as a courier and as a deputy of Zagroda (the Department of Foreign Communication of the Home Army). In 1943 she travelled to Britain across various escape routes and was trained by the SOE before returning to Poland by parachute on 10\(^{th}\) September 1943. In 1944 she took part in the Warsaw Uprising and after its collapse moved to Kraków, where she continued her underground activities. There is no evidence that her mission came directly from SOE, but she received SOE training whilst in the UK.

By contrast other SOE country sections did not use women for undercover work at all, although the issue was sometimes broached as in Italy:

‘In early August 1944, when the first batch of British liaison officers (BLOs) were being sent behind the lines, there was bandied about the idea of giving a few FANYs field training and then parachuting them into Occupied territory. In a note from Gerry Holdsworth to FANY Captain in Monopoli, he suggested that “The conditions under which the personnel selected might be required to work should be assumed rigorous. It is, therefore, essential that only the toughest and most illness-free FANYs be considered”. But the idea never materialised after Major General Stawell made it clear that no British women were to be dispatched behind enemy lines.’\(^{104}\)

Instead, the FANYs in Italy took on a variety of jobs: Ensign Gundred Grogan and Ruth Hermon-Smith worked as personal assistants to Gerry Holdsworth and Peter Lee respectively: ‘Dee Evans took charge of the coding office. Lieutenant Prudence Macfie,

\(^{102}\) Foot, SOE in the Low Countries, p.157.
\(^{104}\) Stafford, Mission Accomplished, p.62. A small number of women who were Italian nationals were infiltrated from Britain dropped into areas already liberated by the Allies.
who had served as a conducting officer in Britain for female agents for the French section, was assigned to help agents with their training, and herself took a parachute course. The remaining four were coders...in the new year [1944] six FANY wireless operators arrived, from Massingham followed by two more coders in April.  

FANYs were also used in the Far East. Cruickshank states that: ‘in the early days of the India mission a few women, both locally recruited and posted from Britain, served as secretaries, typists, and cipher clerks’. But then the need for more personnel grew and in South East Asia the ‘increased need for W/T operators and cipher clerks made it necessary to recruit women in larger numbers’. By 1944: ‘the FANY complement eventually increased to over 600, of whom 400 were engaged in signals work, including 130 on ciphers, 126 on W/T operation and six fingerprint experts...most were at the main radio stations in Colombo (234) and Calcutta (135).’

The role of women was not always official and many women involved with SOE were not officially employed by them, some being locally recruited resisters: ‘In Italy an estimated third of partisans were women: ‘but although even the communists, according to the Italian Resistance veteran ‘Elena’ (Carla Capponi), were happy for women to carry bombs, because they were less liable to be challenged by the Germans, they were reluctant to accept them as equal combatants’ and in Yugoslavia ‘Tito's followers and the Resistance forces of ELAS in Greece included a higher proportion of women soldiers than the French Maquis’.

The perception described above, that women were not equal to the men and should not carry arms, was not unusual, Cruickshank states that: ‘In the nature of things they were restricted to unobtrusive backroom jobs, acting as couriers or providing backup for male counterparts. They did not take part directly in the actions in the field for which the men are remembered, although their secondary role was often of vital importance to the

105 Ibid.p.59.
106 In the course of 1944 Force 136 FANY sections were formed at Meerut (April): Colombo (July): Poona (August): Kumming (September): Calcutta (November) and Kandy (December). Detachments were sent to Bombay and Trincomalee in March and April 1945; an to Rangoon in July 1945. 106 Charles Cruickshank, SOE in the Far East, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). p45.
success of the men. Women undertook certain roles within the Resistance, but there was a line that the majority did not cross – they did not become involved in active warfare.

In spite of this women in the Resistance proved to be of vital importance: ‘...in Norway Milorg mainly recruited men, [but] many women of all ages actively supported the secret army in a variety of roles, especially in communications and the supply services. For example Mrs Elsa Endresen...made her flat in Oslo available as a safe house....and as a repository for important documents...she also acted as a courier, carrying secret papers in her handbag.’

Also in The Oslo gang: ‘Fru Solveig Wideroe found offices for its members when accommodation was scarce’ and ‘nursed a wounded member of the gang for three weeks while the Gestapo searched the immediate neighbourhood for him’. Another member Fru Gudrun Collet provided them: ‘with essential food for more than two years.’

In Scandinavia women did not join the SOE in the traditional sense (i.e being trained in the UK and being infiltrated behind the lines) but they did assist the SOE in other ways. In Nordland: ‘four women of the Grannes family were involved with SOE’ Liv, who was 23 provided members with special passes: ‘to allow them to move freely round the area’ she was also tasked to go through the packs of resting Germans to make sure they did have any D/F equipment on them. She came under Gestapo suspicion and was sent to England where: ‘for the rest of the war she worked for the SOE Norwegian section at HQ in London.’

As an undercover organisation unknown in the public domain, SOE had to recruit through many diverse and unusual channels. During the war people had to fill out forms for a variety of reasons: ID cards, joining the services or to go abroad, for example. SOE was able to utilise this great source of information to find suitable candidates. They also had an agreement with the RAF and WAAF that any persons with suitable skills or background could have their details secretly passed onto SOE. British Customs also agreed to inform SOE should anyone suitable pass through their offices. Word of mouth was encouraged.

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and in its formative months SOE resembled an ‘old boys’ network as friends and colleagues sought each other out to work together.

Many refugees and escapees from France who were sympathetic to the Resistance would find their way to the offices of General De Gaulle and the Free French in London. French nationals could be employed in the Free French Section; anyone else who was suitable would be passed onto the SOE F section office. Potential interviewees could also find their way to SOE’s door by means of personal recommendation or by answering adverts for translators or for photos of France in the papers. Odette Sansom (later Churchill) was recruited in this way. She said she saw an advert in the newspaper from the War Office: ‘asking people to send in photos of a certain section of the French coastline, that’s where I used to live. I had dozens of photos of me as a little girl standing on the beach, I sent them in….some weeks later I was called to the War Office for an interview.’

Another method of recruitment was the WAAF who put forward suitable recruits, including Yvonne Baseden. She had been in the WAAF for three years and: ‘was asked by a senior to go and see Major Jepson at a certain address in London and I was based in London at the time and so of course I went down and wondered what on earth it was all about! And I realised as soon as I arrived that it was connected with languages and as I was bi-lingual that’s why they had approached me.’

Pearl Witherington had moved to England with her family, she considered herself to be in: ‘a very privileged position in as much as I saw the beginning of the Occupation in France, we did not get out until the December, my mother, two of my sisters and myself we left Paris on 12th December 1940 and got to London on 14th July 1941’ She had served with the Air Attaché since 1933 and was bored, SOE heard about her language skills and she was recruited in a similar way to Yvonne, (her knowledge of French having been passed on to the SOE recruiters).

Nancy Wake came into SOE in a very different way; she was already well established in the French Resistance movement and escaped over the Pyrenees when things became too dangerous for her in Paris. Upon her arrival in London she reported to the offices of

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114 Interview with Yvonne Burney, 33 Napier Gardens, 25th May 2003.
115 Interview with Pearl Cornioley, Grand Hotel, St Aignan, May 2003.
the Free French, only to be told there was no position for her there. A friend recommended that she: 'look up Buckmaster’s group'; she applied and was given an interview. The SOE interviewing officer already knew of her work with the Resistance and admired her courage. She was invited to attend a training course.

Yvonne Rudellat was recommended for SOE work by Jacques de Guelis at the Central Registry at the War Office.116 Her name was provided to SOE Recruiting Officer Selwyn Jepson and he visited her himself as she went about her daily job of running a London hotel. He said that he had: 'an instinctive feeling about her potential as an agent'117 and she was interviewed. Noor Inayat Khan’s skill with a radio brought her to SOE’s attention via the WAAF, Violette Szabo responded to a letter asking her to attend an interview about her war widow’s pension and Virginia Hall was recruited through the American Embassy.

SOE did not have a prescribed method for recruiting its female agents, nor did they set out to look for women of a certain class, age or nationality. Selwyn Jepson said that: 'all he wanted to be told was the names and whereabouts of individuals men or women under the age of 45 inside or outside the services with perfect French for specialised work in connection with the war effort.'118 The potential agent’s experience, motive and personality were the most important element of their recruitment. The pre-requisites for an SOE F section agent were standard and of vital importance: ‘Well, the first qualification was that they had to be able to pass as a native of the place they were in, so they had to be French or speak native French and they had, obviously, to look French and as if they would be able to have all the other necessary qualities for it.’119

The F section candidate must; speak French fluently preferably without an accent, although even that could be explained away by their cover story; they should have knowledge of France and the French way of life; have the ability to blend in, (although appearance was a factor, decidedly British, or Jewish features could be difficult to explain away); the candidate should be sympathetic to the Resistance and Maquis; they should

117 Ibid.
119 Interview with Gervase Cowell conducted by Juliette Pattinson, 3rd June 1999.
have: ‘physical courage and sufficient intelligence combined with just enough leadership to enable them to carry out one simple and specific job.’

Jepson stated that the agents had many different motives: ‘...there were those seeking escape or relief from domestic pressure. An unhappy marriage, loss of a loved one that might be assuaged by devotion to a cause; perhaps the loss had been through the war simply to carry on where the dead had to stop. Above and beyond these personal motives one has to remember the basic fact that of all stimuli, war is the strongest, enough to deny self in a common need to defeat the enemy.’

Modern novelists and film makers give the impression that women went into the field to look for missing lovers shot down over enemy territory, to avenge a loved one’s death or to seek revenge. If an agent did have a personal or sentimental reason for joining SOE it was unlikely that they would proceed beyond the interview stage. An exception was Violette Szabo, the interviewer being doubtful about her motive, as she was a recent war widow and it was thought that she wanted to go to Occupied France to avenge her husband’s death.

For some agents the motive will never be discovered, Yolande Beekman’s own family had no idea as to why she would want to join SOE. She had led a quiet life and was not especially patriotic. On the other hand Nancy Wake, Andrée Borrel and Madeleine Dammarrdement joined SOE F section so that they could return to the Resistance work that they had been involved in prior to their flight to England; all three had worked on various escape lines; all of which had been betrayed to the Nazis. Some of the women, who were mothers, felt that they could not let the war go by: ‘without them lifting a finger to help save the future of [their] children.’

The F section agents were all interviewed and selected on the same criteria. Those women who passed the recruitment process and who accepted a role with SOE were invited for training. This training sometimes lasted several months, at other times only three weeks. Much has been written about this subject, but, there are many questions that are still unanswered - was training to become an SOE agent a mere formality to ensure

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120 NA, Use of women in F section, HS7/121.
121 Masson, Christine, p.147.
that agents whose jobs had been pre-destined at interview had some degree of skill in their career as secret agents. Or was it really designed to equip them for life in the field and behind enemy lines? Was it possible to ensure equality for men and women in terms of training and selection for specific job? Were training reports unbiased in their accounts of women’s success in SOE training, or did some instructors chose to fail women because they did not believe that women had a role in SOE? Why were some negative training reports, notably Violette Szabo’s and Noor Inayat Khan’s, overlooked by Buckmaster? This meant that agents, who were deemed unsuitable were sent into the field and ultimately to their deaths. My aim is to address these questions in the next section of this chapter which discusses the training of women agents for SOE F section.

In autumn of 1940, Major FT (Tommy) Davies devised a four stage training plan for all SOE recruits. The plan included preliminary schools, paramilitary schools, and finishing schools, in addition to a flat in London where agents would be briefed prior to going into the field. The first part of training was aimed at identifying unsuitable recruits and rejecting them as soon as possible. To house these courses SOE requisitioned several stately homes, including Beaulieu House, Hampshire, earning the training schools the nickname ‘Stately ‘Omes of England.’

There does not appear to have been a rigid structure to SOE training. Some agents trained for months, while others, such as Odette Wilen only completed half of their training as they were desperately needed in the field. The preliminary course could last up to four weeks, but in June 1943 SOE introduced the Students Assessment Board which: ‘gave the students a wide variety of psychological and practical tests over a four day period.’ The paramilitary course at Arisaig in the Highlands of Scotland could last between three and five weeks.

Those who undertook parachute training had to complete five jumps to attain their ‘wings’ and this could take between two to five days. Wireless operator training was undertaken once the student who had completed the initial training and had been chosen to pursue this course was ready, or, alternatively, once SOE needed them in the field. Wireless training was expected to last nine months but Yvonne Cormeau completed her training in

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124 Foot, SOE in France, p.54.
125 Rigden, SOE Syllabus, p.4.
16 weeks. Time spent at the finishing schools seemed to vary and neither the SOE Syllabus nor SOE in France state a particular time span, which may have just depended on the agent and when they were deemed ready for work in the field.

It is clear however that there was a four-day exercise at the end of this course which involved: ‘reconnaissance of a target, contact by pre-arranged password with other agents, and in the hardest cases the securing of dummy explosives and their conveyance to and laying on such targets as the Manchester ship canal.’ Agents were then sent to ‘operational holding schools’, agents might spend: ‘a few hours or a few months’ at these schools awaiting instructions that would see them infiltrated in Occupied France.

Also worthy of note in a discussion relating to equality and gender issues within the SOE is the language used throughout the SOE Syllabus. The majority of wording is ambiguous using ‘one’ instead of he or she, but on occasion when gender is referred to it is always masculine, for example: ‘...the man (or men) detailed to shoot the sentries’ or ‘six men may conveniently handle a container.’

The reason for this is that while women were permitted to enter SOE training from April 1942 and the SOE syllabus of lectures to which I refer was issued in 1944, women trainees remained in a considerable minority and not all sections of SOE employed them. The male majority was a foregone conclusion as many men were drafted into SOE as early as 1940 two years before women were recruited. Furthermore many potential male agents were from military or similar backgrounds.

The preliminary course would typically last between two to three weeks. It was held at various venues, primarily at Wanborough Manor in Surrey, otherwise known as Special Training School (STS) 5 or Winterfold House, (another country house in Surrey). Here trainees took tests to help determine their potential and to highlight their strengths and weaknesses. This course was conducted under commando cover, and locals were told this was what was going on, even some potential agents believing it too.

[127] Ibid.
At this stage some recruits were still not sure exactly who or what they were training for, indeed: ‘on the second Day of their paramilitary course [a girl asked a fellow student] what are we being trained for? I answered an advertisement for a bilingual secretary!’

Trainees could believe they were on a commando course as training included: ‘physical training, weapons handling, unarmed combat, elementary demolitions, map reading, fieldcraft and basic signalling. Much of this was the sort of training an army recruit might expect to receive.’ There were also theory classes conducted in French.

It was intended that men and women should receive exactly the same training. However, some sources show that small exceptions were made. Noor Inayat Khan trained at Wanborough in February/March 1943 and her biographer writes that: ‘The PT on this course was not very severe. The girls did a ten minute run before breakfast, but no PT. They were taught how to shoot, throw a hand grenade, and handle explosives, and did a great many observation tests.’

Later that year, Anne Marie Walters attended her initial training which in total lasted for five months. Her description of this time in her autobiography *Moondrop to Gascony* is very brief. She wrote that: ‘if anyone had told me that I would spend the summer of 1943 being timed on assault courses, tapping Morse messages on a dummy key, shooting at pieces of moving cardboard, crawling across the countryside and blowing up mock targets, I would have shrugged my shoulders in disbelief.’ This passage appears to relate to her preliminary training as she then moves on to discuss her parachute training and time at Beaulieu, all of which would occur after passing the initial training course.

In the above passage Walters clearly mentions that she trained on assault courses and undertook other PT exercises, which raises the question, why did Noor’s group not follow the same course? The cause for this is unclear; one reason may be that Noor trained in a group of women and was accompanied by Cecily Lefort and Yolande Beekman.

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129 Ibid.
131 Jean Overton-Fuller, *Madeleine*, p.120.
134 Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony*, p.4.
135 Overton-Fuller, *Madeleine*, p.120.
Walters does not mention any other women on her course and I have been unable to determine whether this is the case.

Another reason could have been a change in syllabus. This seems unlikely as when I interviewed Yvonne Baseden who trained at Wanborough alongside Eileen (Didi) Nearne in the summer of 1943 I asked her: ‘Were men and women really treated equally right the way through, was no favouritism shown towards women…?’  

She replied: ‘Not that I know of, any training I was involved in the men were treated in the same way as the women, except they were not W/T ops in the same training school. I did not see any men in there. In Scotland and Ringway and Beaulieu they were there.’  

She was certain that men and women received the same training.

The following example from late 1943 is of the training undergone by Nancy Wake, who was the only woman in her group. From the evidence so far it is still a possibility that when a group of women were present they were trained separately from the male recruits. They believed they were receiving the same training as the men but some dispensations may have been made. Nancy, however, was trained with the men and therefore received exactly the same training as them, including PT.

Part of Nancy’s PT course included obstacle crossing and confidence training: ‘there were trees to be climbed, gaps to be jumped, high slack ropes to be crossed with only another slack rope above to be used as a hand hold, difficult walls to be scaled, a seventy foot rope to be slid down, a dizzy platform off which one must jump to catch a rope six feet away and so slither down to safety.’

It would seem that this course was designed to test a recruit’s courage, physical ability and ability to think on their feet. Nancy was asked which she would like to attempt; her reply was: ‘none of them.’

Apparently, this sort of training was not to everyone’s taste and in the opinion of some, including Nancy, it was quite unnecessary. She had spent two and a half years working in the Resistance before she arrived in England and: ‘she had never been required to scale a 50 foot fireman’s ladder.’ However, it would seem that this course was a test and not necessarily training.

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137 Ibid.  
138 Russell Brandon, Nancy Wake, p.114.  
139 Ibid. p.114.  
140 Ibid. p.115.
for an actual eventuality. If students could not face these, almost minor tests and fears, they almost certainly would falter later in the course or in the field.

At Wanborough students were also encouraged to work together, Nancy was part of a team that included five men who were required to do several tests including manoeuvring: ‘heavy weights over high obstacles’ and to: ‘project themselves somehow over a barbed-wire barrier six feet thick, six feet high and ‘electrified’ all with a specified time.’\(^\text{141}\) For the recruits the tests required a high level of enterprise and co-operation among the team members. They also demonstrated a use of imagination and resourcefulness. Also, the fact that Nancy worked in a team of five men proves that she received the same training as them, in this aspect of training at least.

Although team spirit and camaraderie were encouraged at Wanborough Manor, recruits were known by code names and were not permitted to talk about their outside lives, this helped to instil a security routine from the outset. Free time was also monitored and agents were actively encouraged to drink, helping to determine if they would remain security conscious while under the influence of alcohol.\(^\text{142}\)

Not all potential agents passed the first stage of their training, one such trainee being Joyce Hanafy. She was accepted for SOE training in February 1944 and prior to that was a trainee teacher at Durham University. Her PF consists of 2 pages, both of which outline her unsuitability of work as an SOE agent. Her ‘Morse’ and ‘Instructional’ reports state ‘Good’, her Mechanical is ‘Average’ but her ‘General’ is ‘fail’ and initially her report (dated 14\(^\text{th}\) April 1944) states that: ‘Beyond the fact that she speaks good French, the tests brought to light no good reason why she should be sent to the field. She is intelligent, has a retentive memory, is precise and not easily flustered and has adequate courage.’\(^\text{143}\)

However, the report then goes to say that: ‘she is spoilt, affected, greedy for admiration and [sic] vain and superficial. She is attracted by the glamour of this type of work, but the fact that she has shirked entering any of the Women’s services up to now suggests very

\(^\text{141}\) Ibid. p.116.
\(^\text{142}\) Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.34.
\(^\text{143}\) NA, Joyce Hanafy PF, HS9/653/1.
strongly that she is none too keen on discipline or hard work. She has never been to France in her life. Not recommended.\textsuperscript{144}

It is noteworthy that one of the reasons given for Joyce’s unsuitability is that she had not already been engaged with war work. Was this also seen to demonstrate a lack of patriotism as well as a perceived laziness? Certainly many of the successful agents were already involved in war work, but this is the only time it is hinted as being a pre-requisite for becoming an agent, that, or it is just another ingredient in an already damning report.

Joyce’s desire for the limelight was then highlighted further when on 29\textsuperscript{th} April 1944 she was arrested for not producing a valid ID card and then giving a false name and address. It is thought she did this to: ‘keep the matter from the notice of FANY HQ’ but it was also noted that she was a: ‘bit of a show woman’ and when tried her: ‘actions in the box were the main cause for the Learned Magistrate recording a conviction.’ Through this action Hanafy demonstrated a lack of security and the inability to keep herself to herself, which further highlighted her as unsuitable for work within SOE. She failed her training and then disappears from the SOE records.

Other potential agents who failed this course and who were not permitted to continue their SOE training could not be returned to civilian life or to their former job within the military as they may already have known too much. They were sent to various institutions until their newfound knowledge became less significant and they could return home. There is no evidence of women who attended these institutions, but an all male one certainly existed at Inverlair in Invernesshire.\textsuperscript{145}

Successful recruits were sent for further training on a paramilitary course. These Special Training Schools numbered, 21 to 25c, were held in ten shooting lodges in the Arisaig and Morar areas of Invernesshire. The courses held there lasted between three and five weeks. The SOE syllabus offered:

\textsuperscript{144} ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Susan Ottaway, \textit{The Life that I have} (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2002).
‘Physical training, silent killing, weapon training, demolition training, map reading and compass work, field-craft, appreciations – planning and reports and orders, raid tactics, elementary Morse, schemes and exercises designed to bring out the lessons taught in the foregoing subjects, para-naval training and boat work.’

There are insufficient records to examine the entire syllabus in relation to the training of women. Major Aonghais Fyffe, Security Liaison Officer for the training schools in Scotland said that on this course: ‘there was no distinction between the sexes and all suffered the same rigours of Physical training in the early hours of wintry mornings, the same mud, muck soakings in peat bogs on field-craft and the same sore muscles and aching joints from the Arisaig form of unarmed combat. After all, when they were crawling flat to the ground over the peaty marshes of Loch nan Uamh, they were all just bods in battledress.’

Again it was anticipated that the training be exactly the same for the women as for the men and they were expected to partake in all elements of the course. In some aspects of the training women would be at a physical and possibly emotional disadvantage to the male recruits. Courses such as close combat and silent killing would be strenuous; the smaller female frame may have found it difficult to outweigh the heavier male build. However, this type of problem was accounted for and many women excelled in this area of study. To ensure that recruits could successfully attack anyone the syllabus stated that: ‘Students should not always be paired off in equal sizes. Sometimes, small men should be paired with big men.’ There is no mention of training women in the syllabus.

Silent killing was an unarmed or knife technique invented by Eric Fairburn and William Sykes, two former Shanghai policemen. It was a combination of Ju-jitsu, judo, karate, kung fu and tae kwon do. It had been developed to deal with the criminal underworld of Shanghai where drugs, murder and gang warfare were prevalent in the 1930s. Silent killing was added to the SOE syllabus in June 1942, when Fairburn and Sykes were employed by SOE to instruct their own course. The reason for its introduction was that an agent may have encountered a situation where they were unarmed and were required to defend themselves in addition to confidence building. They may need to kill a sentry

146 Rigden, SOE Syllabus, p.2.
147 Ottaway, The Life that I have, p.54.
quietly so as not to attract attention when attempting sabotage or executing an escape plan. Indeed it may simply be used as self defence against the enemy or as a way of quietening someone who has become out of control:

‘Interviews with returned agents furnished a continually updated programme which Sykes along with his junior instructors taught to trainees. The silent killing course was designed, taught and refined by Sykes, the last revision available is from December 1943 with a further revised Addendum - Attacking a Sentry made available in February 1944. The latter addendum was produced from Agent reports that German sentries had learned of the Sentry Removal instructions and had changed the way they held their rifle when they patrolled. Unfortunately for them the change was noted and acted upon by Sykes.’

Fairburn also published a book in 1942 in which he said: ‘some readers may be appalled at the suggestion that it should be necessary for human beings of the twentieth century to revert to the grim brutality of the Stone Age in order to live…but it must be realised that, when dealing with an utterly ruthless enemy who has clearly expressed his intention of wiping this nation out of existence, there is no room for any scruple or compunction about the methods to be employed in preventing him.’

Silent killing was described as an: ‘aggressive form of unarmed combat including the methods of defence against knife and other attacks as well as the latest methods of attacking and killing sentries and other enemy troops quietly.’ Recruits were expected to practise on straw dummies, but also on one another as the actuality of kicking, punching or choking someone, even if only feigned, would be shocking and unnerving. This course proved to be emotionally challenging for some female recruits, as close combat is markedly different from shooting at a faceless target, which in itself can be stressful. Unarmed combat (part of the close combat syllabus) can evoke physical and mental sensations that were hitherto un-experienced by certain recruits. New found feelings of fear, shock or apprehension would have been common.

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150 King, Jacqueline, p. 94.
152 Quoted from personal experience of author who has done live target shooting as well as practicing martial arts. I have also tried some exercises from Fairburn and Sykes manual.
This is highlighted by the experience of Virginia Hall, who practised with a dummy knife smeared with red lipstick to identify how accurate she had been against her target. Virginia: ‘became very adept at using a knife against a dummy. The day they graduated to working on one another, the drill was to sneak up behind one of the other recruits and slit the throat. Virginia accomplished the task with no problem. But when the man turned round and Virginia saw the lipstick smear on his throat, reality sank in…’

In interview Pearl Witherington said: ‘I personally think and believe that a woman is made to have children not to kill; she is made to give life, not take it away.’ 20 years earlier Pearl had also said that: ‘I did not have anything to do with it because I just did not want to go out and fight…I do not think it’s a woman’s job that, we’re made to give life, not take it away.’ She felt very strongly about a woman’s place in combat and whether or not they should kill, however, this may not have been the case with all the female recruits and indeed some women may have felt the need to fight or kill to protect their children.

It may be true to say that maternal instinct and a natural tendency to nurture hindered the progress of some women on this particular section of the course. But, other women excelled at this type of training. One such recruit was Yvonne Rudellat, who trained in the use of the Fairburn and Sykes knife: ‘to the considerable surprise of some of the instructors, it was found that female agents – Yvonne Rudellat included – were far more skilful at using a knife than most of the men.’

How hard one hit an opponent was of little consequence, it was where you hit them that was significant. For example, Nancy Wake weighed eleven stone and was five foot seven inches tall, and physically she was not very strong, however: ‘her instructors assured her that if she hit exactly the right spot she could still be effective enough to kill someone.’ This is reiterated by Pearl Witherington who recollected: ‘it’s not a matter of how hard you hit them; it’s where you hit them!’ She thought that even 60 years on and in her 80s she would still be able to kill someone using techniques she was taught at Arisaig.

154 Interview with Pearl Cornioley, May 2003, Hotel St Aignan, France.
156 Ibid.
158 Interview with Pearl Cornioley, May 2003, Hotel St Aignan, France.
Fortunately for her she did not have to prove this, but according to author Stella King: ‘one of SOE’s surviving women agents, now grey haired and in her 70s, was attacked twice, within minutes, by two louts separately, one armed with a knuckle duster, who tried to steal her handbag. Each assailant got rather more than he expected.’\textsuperscript{159} Proof that Pearl’s theory was right and that the techniques stayed with you forever, but also that silent killing even if not taken through to the end could help save an agent’s life.

As well as teaching silent killing and close combat, Fairburn and Sykes devised a knife for use in close combat by SOE agents and commandos. It was known as the Commando Dagger and 250,000 of these were produced by Wilkinsons, it had a double edged blade that was seven and a half inches long, the hilt was four and half inches long and was inscribed with the initials of its inventors - ‘F&S.’\textsuperscript{160} For the SOE the knife was intended to be concealed on the wearer, either in a trouser pocket or in the folds of a skirt.

The knife was held in the flat of the hand and could be used in a swift stabbing motion or an upward thrust. A downward blow was considered to be less effective. The Commando Dagger could also be used for cutting. Virginia Hall was told by her instructor that: ‘a knife should be used daintily.’\textsuperscript{161} One has to question the language used here, would a male recruit have been told to use a defensive weapon ‘daintily’ or was this just a way of making it seem less grotesque for the women?

As discussed above, training unarmed or with a knife would have been completely alien to women and some men. It would seem that the SOE expected women to fail at an exercise such as this. Yet this was obviously not the case, as highlighted through the recollections of Yvonne Rudellat, Nancy Wake and Pearl Witherington. Indeed Nancy Wake admitted that silent killing taught you to kill someone in: ‘a cold blooded fashion using only your bare hands but that she: ‘concentrated as hard as anyone on those lessons, against the day I [she] might have to use it.’\textsuperscript{162} To ensure that these techniques became second nature and that the agent could draw on them when needed the syllabus was clear in its objectives:

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{159} King, Jacqueline, p.96.
\bibitem{160} King, Jacqueline, p.95.
\bibitem{161} Pearson, The wolves at the door, p.70.
\bibitem{162} Fitzsimmons, Nancy Wake, p.178.
\end{thebibliography}
‘One of the primary objects of the instructor is to make his students attack-minded, and dangerously so. No effort should be spared to realise this object, which should be regarded as one of the instructor’s chief responsibilities. No instructor should be satisfied unless his students become thoroughly proficient in the performance of the few simple things enumerated in the syllabus. Dull as it may become, constant repetition is the only road to proficiency and constant repetition there must be, no matter how much students may complain of boredom. Their business is to learn, at any cost. By proficiency is meant the ability to execute all the requirements of the syllabus swiftly, effectively and neatly, without having to stop to think.’

One agent expressed a fear that this type of training would leak into his everyday life and that one day he would: ‘get entangled in a row’ and would run the risk of: ‘seriously injuring or even killing another man before realising what is happening.’ As stated in the syllabus it was intended to make an agent ‘dangerous’ and ‘attack minded.’ This was both dangerous and advantageous, it could make one instinctively respond in an unsuitable way to a situation, but it could also save one’s life.

In addition to silent killing and knife training, an SOE trainee was trained in the use of various firearms. The most frequently used firearms were the Sten gun, Bren gun, Thompson sub machine gun, PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-tank) and hand-held pistols such as the Colt .32 and Colt .45. The agents were also trained in the use of various calibre foreign weapons such as the Mauser, Browning and Flaubert.

The SOE Syllabus stated that: ‘as with every sport, providing the principles taught are sound, practice makes perfect. Every endeavour should be made to build up the enthusiasm so that practice is carried out voluntarily. Dummy practice in front of a mirror is particularly beneficial and should be encouraged.’ As with silent killing the aim was that use of the firearms should become instinctive. Some women recruits were already accustomed to using firearms. They were expected to train with the same weapons as the men, and many excelled in their use.

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164 King, Jacqueline, p.95.
165 SOE Syllabus, p.411.
166 SOE Syllabus, p.376.
One such recruit was Violette Szabo who was: ‘reputed to be the best shot in SOE.’\textsuperscript{167} Violette was issued with a liberator pistol, which is now housed at the Imperial War Museum, London. She had spent much of her childhood at fairs, shooting at targets, and her own Father said that: ‘she was always the tom-boy ready for excitement and adventure.’\textsuperscript{168}

Nancy Wake also achieved a reputation for being a ‘crack shot’\textsuperscript{169} this was because her shots never went too high, a problem often faced by users of the Sten gun.\textsuperscript{170} Nancy believed that this was due to her weak wrists\textsuperscript{171} which made the barrel drop so she could not aim high anyway. Nancy is self deprecating as she could easily just have been skilled with the gun but does not want to be become a spectacle. Another woman who excelled in firearms training was Virginia Hall. She was an accomplished and experienced hunter and was used to handling firearms. She was provided with a Browning repeater and told that it was: ‘the lightest gun available’ at the time (early 1941)\textsuperscript{172} and that: ‘by the end of three weeks, you’ll be very comfortable with it.’\textsuperscript{173}

Other women, who may not have been used to handling weapons, found them too heavy and were given lighter alternatives. For example Yvonne Rudellat was issued with a .32 short barrelled Colt as she found the .38 and .45 too heavy and cumbersome. Weighing just one and quarter pounds, the Colt .32 was the lightest hand gun available but even then: ‘she found it remarkably heavy.’\textsuperscript{174}

Noor Inayat Khan’s training report states that she was: ‘pretty scared of weapons but tried hard to get over it: has shown a great improvement in the last few days and with a little more training should be quite good.’\textsuperscript{175} Unfortunately, there is not a follow up report, so there is no evidence that Noor did improve her weapons skills with time.

\textsuperscript{168} Mt Bushell, \textit{Daily Graphic}, 18 Dec 1946.
\textsuperscript{169} Brandon, \textit{Nancy Wake}, p.122.
\textsuperscript{170} Brandon, \textit{Nancy Wake}, p.116.
\textsuperscript{171} The trajectory of a Sten gun was such that although the shooter may think that he was firing straight the bullets would actually be higher than they were aiming. Known through personal experience.
\textsuperscript{172} Pearson, \textit{The wolves at the door}, p.69.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} King, \textit{Jacqueline}, p.90.
\textsuperscript{175} NA, Noor Inayat Khan PF, Preliminary Report, HS9/836/5.
Part of the firearms course was ‘instinctive shooting’ which was shooting without using the sights: ‘Stalk courses were set up to practise students in fast and instinctive shooting and wooden houses to teach close quarter firing.’ Part of this course was taught by Sykes who: ‘taught unarmed combat and quick shooting reactions such as how to kill four people in a room whilst falling down on the ground near the door lintel to make oneself a difficult target.’ This type of training ensured that the recruit could think on their feet and act instinctively in a time of danger.

At the end of this firearms course recruits would have trained with and become accustomed to their own hand gun. If they chose to, they could take this gun with them into the field, however, the SOE syllabus advised recruits to question doing this: ‘Do you need a gun? It is generally only helpful when you are engaged in an activity for which there can be no cover story: e.g. landing by parachute. At other times it is likely to be an embarrassment. If you take one, decide what to do with it after landing.’ Carrying a gun heightened the risk of arrest, as there were few reasons that were acceptable for carrying a gun. Smaller, easily concealed weapons were also made available such as: ‘knuckle dusters, loaded sticks, truncheons etc.’ An agent could also fall back on their training in close combat and silent killing if required.

Recruits not only learnt the use of firearms, they were also instructed in the use of plastic explosive and hand grenades. The work of some agents was to perform acts of sabotage and for this they would need to be proficient in the use of explosives. Although sabotage was not typically the work of women, who acted as wireless operators and couriers, many received training in it anyway.

One such recruit is believed to have been Virginia Hall. Maurice Christie, the son of a demolitions instructor in 1941 (the same time Hall was training) related that his father, Arthur Christie, saw that: ‘she was sitting in a room (classroom desks and chairs) along with about 12 others that he was teaching the use of plastic explosives to. She was at the back in semi darkness, the only time he got close enough was only to see the side of her face...He could not remember hearing her say anything, as he said “I was

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177 SOE Syllabus, p.141.
178 SOE Syllabus, p.141.
concentrating on what I was teaching" as he was constantly reminded, they depended on what he said for their life, if he said anything wrong they may pay with it."\(^{179}\)

Arthur Christie said he: ‘was never given any details of who he would see for security reasons, the least he knew the better.’\(^{180}\) There were no formal greetings and everyone was known by their code names. He also stated that men and women: ‘were treated as equal, as he was made aware of the dangers they faced when they left England to do the job they had been trained to do, he had no choice.’\(^{181}\)

Unusually Arthur also believed that: ‘some of the female and male trainees were also being given tuition in disguise, but how could he be expected to be able to recognise if a woman were dressed as a man and vice versa?’\(^{182}\) For this type of training it seems reasonable that female agents would be dressed in combats or battledress, as suggested above by Major Aonghais Fyffe, when he refers to the recruits as: ‘bods in battledress.’\(^{183}\)

It seems unlikely that agents would be disguised, but they certainly might not look their usual selves as women trained in men’s clothing for reasons of comfort and practicality. Indeed, Yvonne Rudellat is said to have spent the course: ‘clad in borrowed battledress or khaki denim overalls.’\(^{184}\)

The demolitions courses would last approximately two days. Each course was in two parts and lasted between three to four hours. Students were taught about the three different types of fuses: ‘Orange that went off in seconds, Black that took minutes, (two inches equalled half a minute), and the time pencil’;\(^{185}\) The type of explosive used varied from 808, a volatile, rubbery, pale red substance that smelt strongly of almonds to plastic explosive (PE2). It was much safer to handle, had no smell or taste, and could be moulded into a variety of shapes.

Recruits at Arisaig were taught how to blow up targets using these explosives. The training was kept as realistic as possible and sometimes objects that were only meant for

\(^{179}\) Email message dated 31 March 2005 to Judith Pearson from Maurice Christie.
\(^{180}\) Email message dated 30 March 2006 to Kate Vigurs from Maurice Christie.
\(^{181}\) Ibid.
\(^{182}\) Ibid.
\(^{183}\) Ibid.
\(^{184}\) Ottaway, *The Life that I have*, p.54.
\(^{185}\) King, *Jacqueline*, p.97.
practice were destroyed such as a bridge to the north of Loch Morar and the pier at Swordland. Explosive charges were made up beforehand, and it is said that Yvonne Rudellat’s demonstration charges were made up: ‘deftly and neatly’ (again note the use of feminine language) and that she: ‘placed them well – as did all SOE’s feminine agents.’

Recruits were taught that: ‘the demolition must never fail’ and they spent many hours of the day and night familiarising themselves with various gadgets including incendiary devices, Molotov cocktails and booby traps. Another device that was used was the hand grenade. Nancy Wake was particularly averse to this weapon: ‘she loathed the rigid over-arm throw’ and seemed determined to make a spectacle of herself at training. The drill required that the class should sit in a trench; one by one the recruits got out, removed the pin from their grenade, threw it in the opposite direction and leapt back into the trench.

Nancy asked her instructor what she should do, he sarcastically replied that she should: ‘pull the pin, throw the grenade into the trench and run…with a dead pan face Nancy pretended to believe him. The class in the trench – including the sergeant instructor were last seen fleeing for cover…’ This story seems a little far-fetched, but it does highlight that women were trained in the use of hand grenades and that the instructors did not give any latitude to Nancy simply because she was a woman.

Other aspects of the training included physical training. Nancy played on the fact that she was a woman to avoid the early morning runs. On one occasion she refused to get out of bed saying that she did not: ‘feel well.’ She was left alone as: ‘such indispositions are inevitable with women.’ After three weeks a doctor was sent to her, and she refused to be examined saying that nothing was wrong. She miraculously recovered when the time of the run was changed to nine o’clock instead of six o’clock.

It would appear that some women were happy to play on their femininity if it meant avoiding too much strenuous work. Other recruits rose to the challenge and enjoyed getting fit and healthy, and saw it as a positive attribute. It is said that: ‘outdoor life suited’

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186 King, Jacqueline, p.97.
187 Ibid.
188 Brandon, Nancy Wake, p.123.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid. p.121.
191 Ibid.
Yvonne Rudellat and that: ‘years seemed to drop from her shoulders.’ Noor was said to: ‘find a renewed purpose in her life’ and wrote to her brother: ‘I am a busy little girl now.’ Noor’s instructors reported that she was: ‘in good physical condition.’

It very much depended on an agent’s physical condition as to whether they would attend a supplementary part of this course, parachute training. This course was held at Ringway Airfield (now Manchester International Airport) and it was intended that all agents should complete four jumps, three from an aircraft and at least one from a stationary barrage balloon. It was essential in this case that men and women worked on equal terms. All had to complete the same course to attain their parachute wings and therefore complete training.

Yvonne Baseden recalled that she found parachute jumping: ‘terrifying, but it was always terrifying you know, you think oh I’ve done it once it will be fine, mind you I had five jumps as part of the training and they were all just as unnatural if you like as the first one.’ Fortunately for Yvonne she was not required to jump from the barrage balloon due to bad weather. One female agent who did this jump was Nancy Wake, reputedly being terrified and recalling that she thought: ‘this is awful, I’ll be killed, you know. I’ll never do it again.’ The weather was inclement for the remainder of her course and she never had to jump from the balloon again.

Another parachutist who seemed proud to be among the men was Anne Marie Walters. She said that: ‘when I arrived at parachute school, I had realised that I never really believed it would happen. And if I had jumped, it was only because the boys expected the girls to be scared and refuse.’ This emphasises that bravado and ‘saving face’ played a big part in the training of SOE agents. Walters suggests that she would only jump to show the men that she was capable of it, not because it was a required part of her training.

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192 Ibid.
194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
197 Brandon, Nancy Wake, p.125.
198 Walters, Moondrop to Gascony, p.4.
She goes on to say that the men taunted her: “ha ha” they had said, “we just cannot wait to see you shake like a jellyfish and howl with terror on the edge of the hole” and they had rubbed their hands in anticipation of a good laugh. The reason for this type of taunting may have been twofold. It could be that the men genuinely were ridiculing her, perhaps believing that women were not suited to this type of training and that her failure to jump would prove that this really was a male domain. However, it could also have been aimed at making her so angry that she would forget her fear of jumping and thus do it, ensuring in the end that she succeeded where she may have failed.

Walters concludes by saying: ‘we [d] all jumped, and their throats had been as dry as ours when the dispatcher had laid a firm hand on our shoulder to warn us that the fatal moment was approaching. She realised that the men were just as scared as she was, and that she had made herself equal to them by performing the jump.

It seems to be the case that a trainee agent could say that they were frightened of heights, and therefore they did not have to do the course. Yvonne Baseden said that: ‘I did not know that at the time and I wonder if they were the people who went by plane, because there were some who went by Lysander and some by boat in the South, so, I did not know what the reaction was when people said that.’ Some agents were considered unsuitable for the parachute course. Noor Inayat Khan was reported to be: ‘unsuitable for jumping’ and Virginia Hall was exempt on account of her false leg.

Some agents did injure themselves on this course, Odette: ‘smashed her face on the side of the hole as she jumped’ and also sprained her ankle on a practice jump. She was signed off for several days and sent to an ophthalmic outpatient clinic. Another example is Violette Szabo who landed awkwardly on her ankle, and had to spend several weeks convalescing. When she did return this report was made: ‘this student had previously visited the school and made one descent, spraining her ankle on landing. On her return she still seemed to be as nervous as she was on her first visit, but after making her first descent she gained confidence and carried out the remaining descents with verve. She carried out the ground training in good style, having difficulty only with the

199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
202 NA, Noor Inayat Khan PF, Preliminary report, HS9/836/5.
203 Penny Starns, Odette, World War Two’s Darling Spy (Stroud: The History press 2009) p.45.
landing training. On all three descents, one from aircraft and one from balloon by day and night, her exits were good. On her first landing she parted her feet slightly and on her second she brought her knees up to her chest. These points were brought to her notice and she seemed fully to appreciate their danger, especially if she were jump into any wind.\textsuperscript{204}

This report shows what the instructors were expecting from the students and to date is the only comprehensive parachute report existing for a female agent. It highlights Violette’s strengths and weaknesses in parachuting, but does not make any allowances for the fact that she was injured or may have lost her nerve. This type of treatment typifies what one would expect towards a male student and suggests that women were not given any preferential treatment at this stage.

At some stage during the core training courses, agents were separated into various groups depending on what type of work they would be doing once in the field. Wireless operators were sent away on a course that would help perfect their skills. This course was held at a number of places, including locations in the Midlands and Oxfordshire and would take place either before or after the Scottish courses.

Most agents had to start their wireless operator training from the very beginning. They started by learning Morse Code, and gradually worked their way up to speeds in excess of 22 words per minute (at this time the average speed of a GPO telegraphist was 12 words per minute). Most operators were graded for send and receive, and it was normal for these to be different, for example a trainee might send at 20’s but only receive at 18’s. Noor Inayat Khan had been chosen for training as a wireless operator as she had already proved herself during her time at RAF Abingdon. She was already capable of 22 words per minute when she started training but was required to reach 24.

In training agents were expected to practise until they were perfect and to be perfect every time. They were often sent on clandestine exercises with their wireless sets; they would have to go to a specified location, find an area from which to transmit and send pre-arranged messages to a home station. Often they would be sent to locations where trees, mountains or tall buildings would impair their ability to transmit clearly. Occasionally SOE

\textsuperscript{204} Ottoway, \textit{The Life that I have}, p.65.
training officers would trail them and they would have to attempt to lose them. Sometimes the SOE would issue the local police with a description of trainees and told that they should be brought in for questioning if they were seen. The aim of all of this was two-fold, to make the training as difficult as it could be to test the trainee's resourcefulness and skill, but also to prepare them for life in the field as a wireless operator.

In addition to exercises such as those outlined above, trainees would spend many hours in the laboratories learning the skills of transposition into cipher, (according to their period of training several methods of encryption were used). They also learned about: ‘the refinements of atmospherics, wavelengths, oscillation, static, skip, dead spots, jamming and the mysteries of aerials, as well as ways of hiding sets and security.’ They were also taught the composition of their wireless set, how to diagnose faults with it and how to repair it.

Trainees were taught to incorporate pre-determined security checks in their messages so that the listening posts in England could ascertain whether the messages were genuine, being sent under duress or even being sent by the Nazis. Agents were made aware that once they were in the field their messages would be sent to a particular receiving station in Britain where hundreds of men and women (often FANY) would constantly listen out to receive and reply to their wireless messages.

It would seem that men and women were trained equally on this course. The content was mental rather than physical and the technical nature of their job meant that no allowances could be made simply because of a difference in sex and it is said that women excelled at wireless operator training. Some women, including Noor Inayat Khan and Yvonne Baseden had already received wireless training in their pre SOE work. On 23rd March 1943, Noor reported to Thame Park, Oxfordshire (STS 52) for specialist signals training. She was the first of the women agents to be selected for this intensive course. The SOE was always chronically short of wireless operators, the post was recognised as one of the most dangerous and vulnerable in the field and was not helped by the fact that very few wireless sets were available at the time.

205 Escott, Mission Improbable, p.33.
Owing to the shortage of wireless operators, women with no previous experience, but who showed aptitude, were also taken on for this specialised training. Yvonne Cormeau was one such trainee, she had no prior experience but took to the training so well that she completed the full wireless operator’s course within 16 weeks (the average for a WAAF was nine months and that did not include security and specialist training). Indeed Yvonne Cormeau was so good that she was said to be a: ‘first class operator.’

Another wireless trainee was Lilian Rolfe whose instructor at RAF Bicester was Bob Lyndall. At interview he said that: ‘In 1943, whilst on rest in the crew training centre at no.13 operational training unit at RAF Bicester, I was surprisingly presented with a group of newly recruited WAAF’s with orders to instruct them in Morse. One girl was outstanding in her intelligence, linguistic ability, aptitude for Morse... that her name remained in my memory.’

Lilian Rolfe already: ‘knew Morse and trained for approx six weeks’ Bob was not permitted to get to know Lilian outside of the classroom as security was always tight on these courses, so much so that Bob said that he knew there was some sort of: ‘secret service organisation, but not that it was called SOE.’ It was not only wireless operators who were taught about their role in the field, other agents were briefed on the work of the wireless operators and how to treat them, and this is clearly stated in the SOE Syllabus:

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206 Her wireless training proved invaluable, in an air ministry document it is stated that her Resistance network developed into one of the most active and important in France and for most of that time she provided the only W/T link with London. She trained a locally recruited operator to help her and during her 13 months in France she sent some 400 messages. Very nearly a record.’ Air ministry document to Vera Atkins.
207 Interview with Bob Lyndall, Belper, Derbyshire, 27th April 2004.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
2. W/T –

This is the only method for rapid communication and for obtaining immediate reply. The more it is used the more likely it is to be detected. Operator is highly trained man with special cover. To protect him and/or his activity, the following precautions are required:

a) He should not be used for other work
   Other agents should not go to his residence or place of operation. It is even better if they do not contact him direct.
   A reserve means of communication with him must be maintained if he has to go into hiding
   Only messages which cannot be sent conveniently by other routes should go by W/T

b) Messages must be between 150 – 400 letters

3. Security devices of operator

a) set disguised as suitcase
b) Bury set on arrival
c) Aerial made of local wire, camouflaged
   Must have cover which allows absence at irregular times. Routine job useless unless employer in organisation
   Should live with friends as key taps audible, Residence must supply hiding place
d) Should constantly move set and/or aerial
e) Times and length of transmission restricted according to plan.

A key instruction in the above briefing is that: ‘he must never be used for other work.’ Wireless operators were so valuable that they were kept in hiding and were only permitted to send and receive messages; they might go for weeks without any human contact and were not permitted to engage in any courier or sabotage work. Of course, these rules were sometimes broken, but this clearly shows the type of personality that a wireless

\[210\] SOE Syllabus.
\[211\] Ibid.
operator would need to have: resourceful, independent and mentally secure. Once they had passed the W/T course potential agents went onto Beaulieu, in the New Forest, for the SOE finishing school.

At Beaulieu all recruits, whether wireless operator, or courier, received their final training: ‘they were taught the elements of clandestine techniques and security; above all the importance of looking natural and ordinary while doing unnatural and extraordinary things.' Beaulieu was the place where agents learned the reality of what it would be like to live in France and what being a secret agent really meant.

This course was aimed at drilling the hard facts of life in France into the trainees, it also aimed to highlight the implications that simple mistakes could carry. It was on this course that agents were trained to think and behave as if they were actually French. Many changes had occurred in France during the Occupation, for example women were not given a cigarette ration, coffee was only available without milk, (so asking for a café noir would raise a few eye brows) and certain foods were only available on set days of the week. Agents had to be aware of these changes which would be second nature to a French person, otherwise a small error could mark them out as different and potentially cost them their lives. Other mistakes that could be ironed out at Beaulieu included teaching an agent not to put milk in her teacup first as this automatically gave her away as English and to look right and not left before crossing the road and not to cycle on the wrong side of the road.

Agents were taught about the two different zones and the demarcation lines, the importance of false documents, papers and cover stories. Agents also learnt to recognise military uniforms, ranging from the Abwehr (Nazi Military Intelligence) the Milice (Vichy paramilitary force) and the Gendarmerie. During the Nazi Occupation France was teeming with collaborators, and agents were taught that no one could be trusted.

Another vital element of training at Beaulieu was the art of clandestinity. Agents were taught various methods of contacting one another through the use of letter boxes, cut outs or dead drops. These were hidden places where messages could be left such as in church bibles, underneath a preordained stone or in between bricks of a wall. It became

\[^{212}\text{Ibid.}\]
second nature to them to use passwords when meeting with strangers and if they believed that something was wrong at a rendezvous they were to leave as there could be a trap. They were taught to write messages on cigarette papers and onion skins and the methods of passing these messages included hollowed out corks, inside cigarettes or hidden inside newspapers. Some of these methods may seem somewhat farfetched and fantastical, but this is the world in which these agents existed and had to become comfortable with, to ensure their success in the field.

Beaulieu was also the place where agents would become at one with their cover; they would learn every tiny detail of their character and would be questioned from time to time on their cover story. In Noor’s file a document is present that outlines her actual cover story, it lists her identity, ration and textile card numbers in addition to giving her a brief outline relating to her cover story. Another element of training at Beaulieu, which helped prepare the agent for life in France and its possible consequences, was the infamous mock interrogation. Although the SOE syllabus said that: ‘If you are arrested by the Gestapo, do not assume that all is lost; the Gestapo’s reputation has been built up on ruthlessness and terrorism, not intelligence. They will always pretend to know more than they do and may even make a good guess, but remember that it is a guess; otherwise they would not be interrogating you’ agents were still dragged from their beds at any time of the night and were forced to withstand a Gestapo style interrogation.²¹³

The training staff would be in uniform and the trainees would be questioned to ensure that they knew their cover story and how to react to interrogation. Verbal and physical abuse was used to ascertain an agent’s ability to stand up to the rigours of Gestapo torture and their familiarity with their cover story.

Mrs Sanderson, Noor’s escorting officer said: ‘I found Noor’s interrogations almost unbearable, she seemed absolutely terrified. One saw that the lights hurt her and the officer’s voice when he shouted loudly. Once he said ‘stand on that chair!’ It was just something to confuse her. She was so overwhelmed she nearly lost her voice. As it went on she was practically inaudible. Sometimes there was only a whisper. When she came out afterwards, she was trembling and quite blanched.’²¹⁴

²¹³ *SOE Syllabus.*
²¹⁴ *NA, Noor Inayat Khan, PF, HS9/836/5.*
The mock interrogation was fundamental for both men and women trainees. There is no evidence to suggest that men or women were treated differently. It would seem unlikely at this stage that any allowances would be made for women, especially in this form of training. The Gestapo would not make any allowances because their suspect was female, so it would be unrealistic to expect this type of allowance from the training officers. Also, Beaulieu represented the final stage of training: if trainees were not up to scratch at this point, they never would be and they would not be accepted for work in the field.

Despite all the strains and rigours of the final stages of SOE training, Beaulieu was a place of calm and tranquillity. Many agents said it was a piece of England that made them remember what they were fighting for and found time for contemplation in the grounds of the old abbey.

Once the agents had finished their training it was the instructor’s reports and a decision from Baker Street which decided whether they would continue for work in the field. The reports can seem a little confusing at times. Some agents, for example Noor and Violette have quite damning criticisms made of them, yet these were overruled and the agents continued to both work and die in the field. Examples of Noor’s reports have been cited above.

Violette was said to be was a very popular recruit, however, her character was complex and caused many problems for those deciding whether or not she should go forward for work in the field. Her motive was a cause for concern and although she had a: ‘pleasant personality’ and was: ‘sociable, likeable, painstaking, anxious to please, keen, mature for her age in certain ways’ she was: ‘in others very childish.’

The instructors were concerned that the only reason she wished to continue training was: ‘simply because she enjoys the course, the spirit of competition, the novelty of the thing and being very fit – the physical side of the training.’ It appealed to the tom-boy in her nature and the reality was not consolidated yet. After all, she was only 22 and similar to

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215 NA, Violette Szabo PF, HS9/1435.
216 Ibid.
217 Ibid.
218 Marcus Binney, Women who lived for danger (St Ives: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002).
Noor in that she was idealistic. The real danger of going into Occupied France was not realised and the course was a vehicle of fun and adventure.

However, Violette must have taken some aspect of it all seriously. She was concerned for the welfare of her child and she also returned to complete her training after recovering from the ankle injury sustained during parachute training. This shows determination and the fact that she really was going to ‘go through with it’ and was willing to go into France as an agent. There was still a drawback to overcome at this stage; her training officers were not yet convinced of her suitability. Although she was physically capable of doing the work, her attitude caused concern:

‘I have come to the conclusion that this student is temperamentally unsuitable for this work. I consider that owing to her too fatalistic outlook in life and particularly in her work [and] the fact that she lacks ruse, stability and the finesse which is required and that she is too easily influenced, when operating in the field she might endanger the lives of others working with her. It is very regrettable to have come to such a decision…with a student of this type who during the whole course has set an example to the whole party by her cheerfulness and eagerness to please.’\textsuperscript{219}

This document was dismissed and as with Noor, Violette was given permission to be infiltrated into Nazi-Occupied France.

Another agent whose report was less than complimentary was Yvonne Cormeau who was reported as having: ‘very little personality or aggressiveness’ she was also described as: ‘intelligent and quick-witted without being intellectual’ a conscientious worker with a lot of common sense who, however: ‘seems to live on her nerves and might become rattled in a difficult situation.’\textsuperscript{220} In spite of this, SOE decided to give Yvonne the benefit of the doubt and she was dropped behind enemy lines by parachute on 22\textsuperscript{nd} August 1943.

Other agents’ reports were much more straight-forward, and they were sent into the field without too much cause for concern. Among these was Madeleine Dammerment,

\textsuperscript{219} Jones, \textit{A Quiet Courage}, p.179.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
described as: ‘quiet and unobtrusive, her courage was proven, and she had seemed a good choice.’\textsuperscript{221} She was dropped by parachute on 29\textsuperscript{th} February 1944 – straight into the hands of the Gestapo.

The man who had final say over an agent’s destiny was Colonel Buckmaster and he vehemently justified his decisions in his interview at the IWM saying: ‘this was not a joke, this was not bravado’ and that an agent was: ‘not to go unless they were completely satisfied that they were alright.’ Buckmaster believed that SOE did not make: ‘any serious mistakes [with recruiting] we did nothing that led to tragedy, I think that in one or two people we were somewhat disappointed and had to, not cancel their job but put them onto something else. We had to be very tough about it because other people’s lives were at stake.’\textsuperscript{222}

However, as described above, some women, who might have been considered as unsuitable by their instructors made it into the field. Unfavourable reports were made at the training schools and yet they were still sent into Occupied France. It would seem that the need for wireless operators and couriers was very high at certain points of the war and it is probable that these agents would not have been sent to France if they had undertaken training at a different time. When the need was highest, standards were lowered and/or an agents training was cut short. This may have resulted in a more careless or dangerous agent.

In conclusion, SOE trained its agents to give them the best possible chance of survival in a difficult and dangerous situation. The training was not simply a formality for most agents; rather, for those who already had experience of working undercover in Occupied France, it was a way for SOE to be sure that it had done the best it could to prepare the operatives for their work. They were taught the latest weapons, explosive and wireless techniques, and were equipped with the most recent equipment and information to give them a reasonable chance of survival.

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid. p.216.
\textsuperscript{222} IWM Sound Archive, London, Maurice Buckmaster, BXC 8680 1&2.
It seems that the women of SOE F Section received the same training as men, and while some leeway was allowed in terms of the weight of weapons carried or distances run, the bulk of the training was the same. After all the job of a wireless operator or courier was the same once in the field, women could not be given a softer option simply because of her sex. If a job needed doing she would have to do it regardless of her physical or mental ability. This is why only women of these abilities were selected in the first place. There were exceptions to this rule and Buckmaster occasionally sent agents that his instructors believed unsuitable. For two of the most famous ones – Noor Inayat Khan and Violette Szabo his decision was fatal.

It would seem that women were judged fairly by their male instructors, although some of the comments in the reports could be regarded as sexist and one would certainly not expect to find similar references to ‘sexiness’ used in a report about a male trainee. Yvonne Cormeau was said to be: ‘the only member of the party who seemed to have sex-appeal for the male members but it was exerted in a very quiet way.’\textsuperscript{223} Whilst Marks referred to Violette Szabo as: ‘a dark haired slip of mischief.’\textsuperscript{224} However, when it really mattered the instructors said plainly what they thought and if they believed an agent was unsuitable, as we have seen in examples above, they wasted no time in saying so.

The training of female agents for SOE F Section seems to have been a success. Although for some agents training was much shorter than for others, all of them attended the basic training courses and inevitably learnt skills that they had not previously possessed and that would equip them for work in the field. The ability to shoot, operate wireless sets and use close combat and silent killing techniques may have come as a surprise to some instructors and even to the women themselves. Whether the training was comprehensive enough cannot be assessed as there is no way of measuring it. Suffice to say the women were taught the same skills as the men and were able to demonstrate their ability in these areas. It seems clear that some of the women should have gone no further than training in the safety of England, but the majority proved that there was a place for women in SOE F section.

\textsuperscript{223}Jones, \textit{A Quiet Courage}, p.179.
\textsuperscript{224}Marks, \textit{Silk and Cyanide}, p.493.
Chapter Two
The Women of SOE F Section - Successes and experiences 1942-45 and post-war publicity.

This aim of this chapter is to offer a broad overview on the overall success of the SOE in Europe, SOE F section as a whole, and the female operatives within SOE F section. Discussing their achievements in the field, their success in fulfilling their tasks as wireless operators and couriers, and, where the evidence suggests, of their personal achievements in terms of quantifiable accomplishments such as the number of parachute drops organised and the number of wireless messages successfully sent. (see Appendix 1).

SOE F section employed 480 agents, of these 130 were captured and 26 survived. The received wisdom (initially laid out in Foot's official history SOE in France), is that 39 women who trained at SOE training schools in the UK were operationally deployed as agents for SOE F section between 17th July 1942 (Yvonne Rudellat) and 7th July 1944 (Christine Granville). Of these 39 women, 13 did not return.225 The roles they fulfilled were primarily those of couriers or wireless operators, (although Virginia Hall and Lise de Baissac also worked as liaison officers within the local Resistance to find safe houses for other agents to use on their missions. Lise also worked as a conducting officer to Yvonne Baseden, and Violette Szabo at RAF Ringway, the SOE parachuting school in between her missions).

The agents were infiltrated into France by various means, most commonly by parachute from a Hudson aircraft or landing by Westland Lysander, a small aircraft designed to carry one or two people (or more in an emergency) and their luggage.226 These infiltration missions were limited to the full moon period so as maximise the natural light and see drop zones more easily. Other methods of infiltration included sailing by Felucca from Gibraltar (in the case of Blanche Charlet, Marie Terese Le Chene, Mary Herbert, Odette Sansom and Yvonne Rudellat), or by motorised boat in the case of Yvonne Fontaine.227 The agents would rendezvous with other agents and members of the Resistance or

225 The majority were trained in the UK but one exception was Sonia Olschanesky who was recruited in France and executed at Natzweiler-Struthof alongside SOE agents Diana Rowden, Vera Leigh and Andree Borrel.
226 The pilots of no 138 and 161 squadron transported 101 agents to and recovered 128 agents from Nazi Occupied Europe.
227 Foot, SOE in France, 1966 Appendix B.
Maquis in their circuits and then set about fulfilling the tasks as set out by their network leaders or SOE HQ.

Highlighted within this chapter will also be the accounts of several female F section agents which demonstrate the extraordinary and unexpected nature of their work and experiences on operations (and in some cases in captivity). These case studies will demonstrate that the work was not clean cut and simple, and that sometimes it was desirable or even necessary, to break the rules laid down by SOE. Also those missions changed due to unforeseen circumstances which in turn sometimes necessitated a change in staff or leadership. The experiences of these women also demonstrate that the training could not cover every eventuality and that an agent often had to live by their wits and nerves in order to survive.

This chapter will also examine the experiences of several agents whilst in captivity at Gestapo HQs, local prisons and concentration camps. It will look at the misconception that all agents were tortured and executed. Further demonstrating that the Nazis did not treat all suspected agents in the same way, and that claims to be of a certain nationality, be it British or French, affected the way in which agents were treated.

An overview of post-war publicity concerning F section women agents will demonstrate how some took the opportunity in the post-war years to publicise their work, while other paled into the background and decided to keep their work and experiences to themselves. Details of the press, publications and television programmes show how the agents were treated by the media.

There has been much discussion about the overall success of SOE and its place within the Resistance movement. The initial task of SOE to: ‘set Europe ablaze’ was set out more clearly in a paper by Major Bourne-Paterson published on 30th June 1946 entitled *The British Circuits in France* which states: ‘the purpose behind the work of these circuits was the encouragement of sabotage in Occupied Europe...there were two types of activity which quite definitely formed no part of what it was intended that an F section network should perform, and into which, equally, they were pitch forked by the logic of events in the later stages. Firstly they were not ‘Intelligence’ circuits. They were for action, and intelligence was a waste of time and - more valuable still - of vital wireless space...
secondly the F section circuits were sabotage circuits and not designed for guerrilla warfare and still less for open warfare..."228

Taking into account that SOE’s initial primary objective was sabotage, it is worth briefly investigating whether or not its attempts at this were successful. In the article *The SOE phenomenon* historian Mark Wheeler said that: ‘There were certainly notable successes - at the Gorgopotamos viaduct in 1942 [Greece], at the Rjukan heavy-water plant [Norway] and in Operation Animals in 1943 [Greece], during Overlord in 1944... it [SOE] need be blamed for no disaster so wasteful as the strategic bombing campaign’.229

Foot takes up the question of SOE sabotage as opposed to bombing raids in his article *Was SOE any good?* he asks:

‘How much actual use was SOE in the winning of the war?... Former members of Bomber Command get understandably upset when anyone tries to suggest that a great deal of their effort was wasted, and that many of the tasks on which expensive aircraft carried almost irreplaceable aircrew could have been much more cheaply performed by half a dozen discreet agents on the ground, introduced clandestinely with a few pounds of plastic explosive and exact knowledge of where and how to use it. There are a few specific instances of the value of sabotage as a superior instrument to mass bombing - only a few.’230

One such success came on 6th June 1941 when four RF section agents cycled to the power station at Pessac and executed Operation Josephine B.231 One of them climbed the outer wall and cleared the high tension wire; he then went inside and opened the main gates. He was joined by the rest of the team and within 30 minutes they had fitted a charge of plastic explosive weighing three and a half pounds which was in a magnetic case with an incendiary bomb attached to each of the main transformers, and then they left: ‘Just as they rode off on their bicycles, all their charges went off...six of the eight transformers were destroyed by these small, but exactly sited charges...All the spare transformer oil in France was needed to effect repairs, which were not completed until

231 RF Section was linked to General De Gaulle's Free French government in exile. Most native French agents served in RF.
early the next year. Meanwhile attempts to run the all electric railways of South-Western France from Dax power station alone had simply blown a lot of fuses, and steam trains had to be reintroduced to keep the lines going; while work in the Bordeaux submarine base and in numerous electrically powered factories was held up for some weeks'.

News of this triumph reverberated throughout Whitehall and put SOE firmly on the map, proving that you did not need a squadron of bombers to disrupt the German war machine. This SOE operation led to hundreds more in Europe and in the Far East against the Japanese.

In September 1942, a small group of British SOE officers parachuted into Greece near Mt. Giona, their mission was to blow up one of three bridges (Gorgopotamos, Papadia or Asopos) of the country's main railway line, and to get the two main, but competing, guerrilla groups of ELAS and EDES to cooperate. On 14th November, the operation started and ten days later they arrived at Gorgopotamos. At 11pm on the 25th November, the guerrillas started an attack against the Italian garrison. After they had defeated the Italians, the saboteurs set the explosives. They also placed ambushes on the routes to the bridge to block the approach of Italian reinforcements. The explosion occurred at 3am and was successful in stopping vital supplies from reaching Rommel's desert army.

Another act of sabotage that heavily affected the German war effort was ‘Operation Gunnerside’ which took place on the night on 27th/28th February 1943. Several SOE agents entered the Norsk Hydro Plant, in Vermork, Norway, which was making elements that would be used in Germany’s first atomic bomb. SOE had a Norwegian agent within the plant who supplied detailed plans and schedule information. The demolition party used this information to enter the main basement by a cable tunnel and through a window.

Explosive charges were then placed on the heavy water electrolysis chambers, and a time fuse was attached allowing sufficient time for the saboteurs to escape. They allegedly left behind a Sten gun to show that it was the work of British forces and not of the local Resistance, in order to alleviate reprisals. When the explosive charges detonated they completely destroyed the electrolysis chambers: ‘One of them Knut Haukelid, later made sure that a hundred weight or so of heavy water waiting at the lakeside below to set off on its journey to Germany was sunk with the ferry that carried it across the lake’.

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232 Foot, *SOE in France*, p.159.
233 Foot, *SOE 1940-46*, p.211.
3,000 German soldiers were dispatched to search the area for the commandos, all of them escaped.

The raid was considered successful, Foot described it as: ‘a model little sabotage operation: a few civilians had to die when the ferry sank, but otherwise no one was hurt. The break in their supply of heavy water was so abrupt and so complete that German scientists who had been working on the project gave it up...if SOE had never done anything else ‘Gunnerside’ would have given it claim enough on the gratitude of humanity’.234

‘Operation Anthropoid’ had a huge impact on the war when one of Hitler’s head Henchmen was assassinated. However the reprisals it provoked were one of the greatest war crimes of the Second World War leaving two villages razed to the ground and 1,300 dead. The aim of the operation was to assassinate Reinhard Heydrich, who was the Reichsprotektor in Prague and who had announced that the SS intended to: ‘Germanize the Czech vermin.’ Two Czech nationals Jan Kubiš and Josef Gabčík were trained by SOE before being infiltrated into German Occupied Czechoslovakia to undertake Operation Anthropoid. At 10.30am on 27th May 1942 Heydrich was in his car on the way to Berlin, as the car slowed down for a hair pin bend in the road, Gabčík stepped out from a tram stop in front of the car and levelled his Sten gun at it. The Sten jammed and Heydrich stood up with his pistol in hand ready to kill or arrest the ‘would be’ assassin, however, Kubiš threw a hand grenade at the car which exploded wounding Heydrich. The two men sped away on their bicycles and Heydrich was taken to hospital where he died from blood poisoning and his wounds on 4th June.

Whilst the operation was a success in terms of achieving its goals, the consequences were serious; the assassins and those involved in the plot hid in the church of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Prague. Their hideout was betrayed and the SS troops laid siege to the church but, despite the best efforts of over 700 German soldiers were unable to take the paratroopers alive; three, including Heydrich’s assassin Kubiš, were killed in the prayer loft. The other four, including Gabčík, committed suicide in the crypt after fending off SS attacks. These included attempts to smoke them out, and fire trucks being brought in to try to flood the crypt.

234 Ibid.
Amongst the belongings of one of the assassins the Gestapo found addresses of two Czech villages and orders were given to: ‘Execute all adult men, transport all women to a concentration camp, gather the children suitable for Germanisation, then place them in SS families in the Reich and bring the rest of the children up in other ways and burn down the village and level it entirely’. On 9th June 1942, the day of Heydrich’s funeral in Berlin the Czech village of Lidice was destroyed. In the garden at Horáks estate 173 men were shot (another 26 Lidice residents were executed on 16th June 1942 at Prague-Kobylisy). 196 women were deported to Ravensbrück (53 of whom died) 88 children were murdered at Chelmno and 8 were taken for adoption by German families (17 children survived the war). The death toll resulting from the effort to avenge the death of Heydrich is estimated at 1,300.

Reprisals were an unfortunate but likely part of sabotage or assassination attempts. In most cases they did not involve such horrific actions as at Lidice. The village of Pressac was fined one million francs for the sabotage on the power station and a new curfew of 9.30pm to 5am was imposed. Following the assassination of Lieutenant Colonel Hotz in Nantes, 50 men were killed; the villagers being given 48 hours to find the perpetrator before another 50 were shot. In an effort to avoid such reprisals and retributions SOE attempted to carry out ‘invisible sabotage’, which left no trace and did not implicate anyone.

The overall success of SOE in France has been the subject of numerous articles and books. Perhaps the most obvious success of SOE RF and F sections were in their contributions alongside the Resistance and Maquis to the success of D-day: ‘when on Eisenhower’s orders the whole of French Resistance mobilized, and brought the country’s railway and telephone system to a virtual standstill as well as blocking most of the main roads’ and: ‘as the Allied columns advanced [on 4th/5th August 1944] these French forces ambushed the retreating enemy, attacked isolated groups and strong-points, and protected bridges from destruction’.

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235 A small Czech village called Lezaky was also destroyed two weeks after Lidice, here both men and women were shot, and children sent to concentration camps or germanised.
236 This count includes relatives of partisans, their supporters, Czechs suspected of disloyalty and random victims like those in Lidice.
237 Foot, SOE in France, p.158.
239 Ibid p.408.
These large scale successes were due to the enterprise and skill of individual agents and the part they played in assisting their circuits and local Maquis to undertake sabotage and prepare for D-Day. The success of women SOE F section agents is most obvious in terms of the work of the wireless operators. By ascertaining the number of messages they sent, over what period of time, how well coded they were and what the outcomes of these messages were (for example if an arms drop took place or an act of sabotage was undertaken). The success of the couriers is more difficult to determine as their main duty was to act as go between for other agents and by their nature they were required not to draw attention to themselves. In some circumstances though they were directly involved in acts of sabotage, reception committees at parachute drops or passing on valuable information.

Other ways in which success may be evaluated is in the way in which the agents acted in terms of security, such as the way in which they operated or blended in with the locals. Also, their obedience to SOE rules such as how they ‘filed’ their messages, whether they became involved in relationships with one another or how they dressed. Indiscretions or mistakes could lead to an agent coming to the attention of the Gestapo or becoming the victim of collaboration and betrayal.

Another element by which success may be judged is whether or not an agent was captured and if they survived the war. 15 F section women agents were captured and three of them survived their incarceration and were repatriated after the war. However, an agent’s capture did not necessarily mean that they were not successful or good agents. Most agents were caught by chance or due to betrayal, not their own lack of security or skill. Lilian Rolfe was caught by chance, Violette Szabo was reputedly betrayed, Yvonne Baseden was in the wrong place at the wrong time and Madeleine Dammerment was captured as she landed by parachute and did not even have time to prove herself. It is unlikely that these agents could have avoided their fates by exercising better security as their capture was the result of circumstance rather than judgement on the part of the captors. However, exercising better security may have prevented the arrests of agents such as Noor Inayat Khan and Odette Churchill, both of whom displayed

\[240\] Captured agents were: Yvonne Rudellat, Yvonne Baseden, Odette Churchill, Violette Szabo, Denise Bloch, Cecily Lefort, Lilian Rolfe, Vera Leigh, Diana Rowden, Andree Borell, Madeleine Dammerment, Yolande Beekman, Noor Inayat Khan, Elanne Plewman and Eileen Nearne. Yvonne Baseden, Eileen Nearne and Odette Sansom survived, the rest were executed or died at Natzweiler-Struthof-Struthof, Ravensbrück, Belsen or Dachau concentration camps.
lax security and drew attention to themselves. Odette was frequently seen dining out in Marseilles and speaking English and Noor made several mistakes which are outlined below.\(^{241}\)

The wireless operators employed by SOE F section had varying degrees of success. Arguably the most successful wireless operator in terms of messages sent was Yvonne Cormeau (Annette), who was parachuted into Hamlet St Antoine (125km from Bordeaux) on 22\(^{nd}\) August 1943 to work as a wireless operator for George Starr (Hilaire) and the Wheelwright circuit.\(^{242}\) She was described as: ‘a perfectly unobtrusive and secure craftsman’, ‘a first class operator’ and ‘a quite remarkable woman’.\(^{243}\) Yvonne Cormeau transmitted 400 messages over the next 12 months: ‘without a single miscode’.\(^{244}\) With her help Wheelwright: ‘developed into one of the most active and important [circuits] in France and for most of that time she provided the only W/T link with London. She trained a locally recruited operator to help her...She never had a days leave or rest.’\(^{245}\)

Yvonne Cormeau: ‘lived with the Maquis and helped her organiser in the reception and planning of operations... her consistent efforts enabled the most spectacular development of a very fine and active organisation.’\(^{246}\) Due to her flawless wireless messages the Wheelwright network received approximately 140 arms drops and Yvonne was present at several of these. She also assisted in the cutting of the power and telephone lines, resulting in the isolation of the Wehrmacht Group G garrison near Toulouse.

Yvonne Cormeau was very security conscious on these drops, and in other aspects of life in France such as the listening to the advice of others when it came to appearance: ‘do not do too much dying of your hair or have very noticeable make up or things like that as you’ll fall foul at some time or other. Try and dress as they do locally as much as possible...’\(^{247}\) However: ‘she broke one of the strictest rules of wireless security i.e. always

\(^{241}\) Interview with MRD Foot, Saville Club, London 14\(^{th}\) January 2003.
\(^{242}\) Hilaire had requested a radio operator over the age of 35 (due to German conscription) and had been sent a woman. He was a friend of her late husband’s and looked after her, not allowing her to carry a pistol and providing her with ample ID.
\(^{243}\) NA, HS8/999 and IWM, Air ministry document to Vera Atkins 27/7/46.
\(^{244}\) *Oxford Dictionary National Biography*, accessed on 10\(^{th}\) October 2010.
\(^{245}\) IWM, Air ministry document to Vera Atkins. 27/7/46.
\(^{246}\) IWM, Air ministry document to Vera Atkins. 27/7/46.
\(^{247}\) Ibid.
keep on the move – with success; she transmitted for six consecutive months from the same house. She could see for three miles from the window where she worked, which was one safeguard; a more effective one was that there was no running water in the village, so the Germans who knew there was an English wireless operator somewhere close by never thought of looking for her there’ as they did not believe an English person could survive without their basic amenities.\textsuperscript{248}

As with other wireless operators, Yvonne Cormeau worked under constant threat of arrest: ‘the soldier presence was ample, but nearly all of them were too old, too young or too injured to be any threat, but after D-Day the SS were sent in. There was always a Gestapo presence, always informers willing to fulfil a personal vendetta for cash... we were more frightened of the Milice, they were very politically dedicated.’\textsuperscript{249} On one occasion she was stopped at a German road block whilst travelling with Hilaire, they were questioned at gun point and she was asked what was in her suitcase which was on the back seat of the car: ‘I opened it and knelt on the seat and showed it to him. He asked me what it was and I said ‘radio’ which in German means x-ray as well as radio set. In view of the fact that I was meant to be a district nurse he thought it was an x ray set. He said “get out” the engine was already running so we got out very fast.’\textsuperscript{250} ‘...Cormeau distinguished herself repeatedly by keeping to her scheduled times of transmission with home station as battle raged around her - once so closely that a bullet tore through her skirt’.\textsuperscript{251}

Although Phyllis Latour was parachuted into France on 5th July 1943 as a W/T for the Scientist network in the Normandy area, she was only employed in her primary role after D-Day. She had been in the Resistance for 18 months previous to her SOE training. She: ‘was soon in the thick of the battle area but continued her work, sending 135 messages, until overrun by the Americans in early August 1944. She had many narrow escapes and had to be on constant guard against D/F (Nazi Direction Finding) in this particularly difficult area. She was absolutely fearless and ready to run any risk.’\textsuperscript{252}

Although Phyllis Latour: ‘did not start using her W/T set until D-Day, she had 17 sets hidden around the countryside both indoors and in tin boxes outside’ and was considered:

\textsuperscript{248} NA, Use of women in F section, HS8/999.
\textsuperscript{249} IWM Sound archive, London, Yvonne Cormeau 7369, (9\textsuperscript{th} February 1994).
\textsuperscript{250} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{251} The Sunday Times, Obituary, Yvonne Cormeau, 8\textsuperscript{th} January 1998.
\textsuperscript{252} IWM, Air ministry document to Vera Atkins 27/7/46.
'too valuable as a W/T operator to be allowed to participate in any operations’ and was: ‘never allowed to participate in reception committees.'

The close encounters referred to above included: ‘a little adventure with two German soldiers who looked in [on me] whilst sending; they were looking for ravitaillement [supplies]. I pretended to be packing and told them I had scarlet fever as there was an epidemic, and was going away. They soon left!’ Phyllis also transmitted from a farm and had a near escape when: ‘a German officer entered while I was sending, but as it was so dark in the building he did not see me and the farmer’s daughter got him out by offering him a glass of cider.’ She was later detected by Nazi D/F: ‘the warning coming from Gesures I was working in the Foret de Pail; the D/F auto was destroyed and the occupants killed by some unknown patriots.'

Noor Inayat Khan was a wireless operator who trained alongside Yvonne Cormeau and yet their successes in the field and reactions to certain situations were very different and their experiences of working as agents in Occupied France bore few similarities. Noor arrived in France by Lysander on 16th June 1943 and was accompanied by Diana Rowden. She got to Paris on 17th June and her first wireless transmission was received in England on 22nd June. During her first few days Noor met with Suthill (codenamed Prosper) and his contacts. She met her organiser Garry (Cinema later known as Phono) but she did not move out to Le Mans where she was expected to go. Garry was carrying out much of his work in Paris where he was also spending time with his fiancée, so Noor also stayed there. Within a week the entire Resistance network that Noor had entered fell apart around her. The arrests began with Prosper and his agents, followed by Resistance members, reception committees and agents in neighbouring circuits. She moved to ‘chestnut’ network but within days this was also out of action. Noor was the only W/T in Paris and one of the only W/T left in the surrounding area and was dealing with large amounts of traffic.

Buckmaster radioed Noor and told her it was too dangerous to work and that she should return to England. Noor refused, and said she wanted to stay, since she was the only link between Paris and London she was crucial. Buckmaster: ‘knew that Noor’s life was in

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253 NA, Lise de Baissac, HS6/587.
254 NA, Lise de Baissac, HS6/587.
danger and it was only a matter of time before she was arrested. But Poste Madeleine was now the last link with Paris and it had a crucial role. Buckmaster accepted Noor’s offer as the sacrifice of a soldier and allowed her to remain.\(^{255}\) Noor was advised to lie low for a while; she could receive but was not allowed to transmit as D/F could find her, especially now she was alone. She agreed, but within two days was back on the air. Noor was Garry’s only radio contact with London and he used her to arrange arms drops and to report on successful sabotage. At this stage Noor was transmitting daily from a house to the East of Paris.\(^{256}\)

The only record of the actual number of messages sent by Noor is mentioned in an undated citation, it states that: ‘she had sent about 20 messages for Phono, giving information about the network and locations for dropping grounds, when, in October 1943 we received reports that she and her organiser were arrested.’\(^{257}\) It is not clear when she began transmitting for Phono and this citation may not refer to all her traffic. Noor did extremely valuable work for the SOE as a W/T. It was the element of the job that she had always been good at but in spite of this she displayed lax security and an apparent obliviousness to danger; an element of her character that had been highlighted in training.\(^{258}\)

Within the first few days of her mission beginning, Noor went to visit members of the network and made several mistakes that gave her away as being English she: ‘poured the milk into the cups before the tea’ and: ‘began to toast before the fire some slices of bread she had brought in.’\(^{259}\) The women remonstrated her for the errors, these things: ‘would be sufficient to betray her.’\(^{260}\) A few minutes later Professor Balachowsky came in

\(^{256}\) A file in her PF that reads ‘please will you listen every day at 15.00 hours for Nurse’. Then in pencil ‘until further notice’. On the same day an order is also given ‘if Nurse does not take message no. 6 on her QRX at 17.30 today will you please ensure that it is sent on the first possible occasion as it is urgent. It will be remembered that she will be listening at 15.00 hours GMT daily but the message is so important that I particularly want her to get before 15.00 hours tomorrow August 16\(^{th}\).’ Not only was Noor listening at 15.00 hours, she may have been transmitting at that time as well as at 17.30 hours daily.
\(^{257}\) NA, Noor Inayat Khan, HS9/836/5.
\(^{258}\) On 24\(^{th}\) May 1943 a report was filed that read ‘from reports on the girl I suggest care be taken that she be not given any task which might set up a mental conflict with her idealism. This might render her unsuitable from our point of view.’ Report, 21.5.43, HS9/836/5. National Archive, Kew, Richmond. Her inappropriateness also attracted the concern of two other agents, who wrote to Vera Atkins at SOE head office saying that they ‘did not think she was the type to be sent.’ The letter was brought to Noor’s attention, she ‘was apparently ‘shocked and hurt’ and ‘insisted that she felt she was the proper person for the job.’
\(^{259}\) Overton-Fuller, *Madeleine*, p.129.
\(^{260}\) ibid p.146.
carrying a portfolio, which Noor said contained her codes, she had left it lying around in the hall of a busy building where anyone could have picked it up.

There was also an occasion where Noor needed to give Madame Balachowsky (a fellow Resistance member) a plan which was drawn on a piece of paper. They had rendezvoused in front of a fountain and Noor simply handed Madame Balachowsky the paper, in broad-daylight where anyone could have seen her. Madame Balachowsky was: ‘shocked that Jeanne Marie [Noor] should give her such a paper in a public place, She felt she did not sufficiently realise the condition of France, and explained to her…’

This episode highlights Noor’s inaptitude for security, and even when in France she was still making silly and dangerous mistakes.

In addition Noor broke one of the golden rules of SOE which was that an agent should not approach people who they may have known before the war. She ignored this rule several times and called on her old harp teacher and some neighbours to help her find safe houses and somewhere where she could transmit. She broke another rule by telling them that she was an English agent, and yet another by allowing a friend to help her encode and decode messages. She also left messages with her land ladies and asked them to give them to whoever called for them.

Noor also stayed with a lady called Madame Peineau and transmitted from her house: ‘On the first morning when she came downstairs Madame Peineau scolded her “Ma petite, what do you think you left on the kitchen table last night? Your notebook, containing all of your decoded messages – lying flat open!” Fellow agent ‘Rolande’ also said that he felt: ‘a little more familiar with its [the codebooks] appearance than he liked to be, because she was always opening it when they met’. He told her: ‘this is a very dangerous document’ and that: ‘if the Germans capture you, they capture this on you.’ He pleaded with her to burn it, and each message as soon as she had finished with it. But she insisted that London had told her to: ‘be extremely careful with the filing of your [her] messages’ and she would not part with it. The briefing from SOE had also said that: ‘you are the

261 ibid p.150.
262 Overton-Fuller, Madeleine, p.168.
263 ibid p.179.
264 Ibid p.179.
265 NA, Noor Inayat Khan, Mission Statement, HS9/836/5.
ultimate judge as regards the technicalities of W/T and W/T security.\textsuperscript{266} This seems an extraordinary burden to lay on someone who was incapable of exercising even the most basic security.

This phrase ‘filing’ has become synonymous with Noor, as although she was not the only agent to receive these instructions, she was the only one to take them literally. SOE meant for her to burn her messages once they were finished, and that is what they had meant by ‘filing.’ However, Noor believed that she was to keep a record in code and clear of every message she transmitted and received. Since she was not allowed to leave it on the kitchen table, she would carry every incriminating word with her instead.

Another cause for concern to Rolande was Noor’s appearance. She had dyed her hair blonde and was often seen wearing a very English looking mackintosh. He said that: ‘she seemed…typically English, in her walk, in her manner, in everything.’\textsuperscript{267} To rectify the situation he bought her new French clothes and insisted that she dyed her hair to a natural brown colour: ‘With these her new and more soberly coloured hair, and these new clothes, she looked to his eye like a French girl.’\textsuperscript{268} At least some things could be done to lessen Noor’s chances of being caught.

These few incidents serve to highlight that the instructors had been right, Noor’s security was lax. She did not comprehend the situation that she was in, her naivety and desire to be friendly with everyone she met only served to place her and her colleagues in more and more danger. The job of the W/T was the most lonely and dangerous job in SOE. Apart from her skill as a W/T, Noor proved that she was completely unsuited to it in every other way. In mid October Noor returned home to find two Gestapo men in her flat, they arrested her and took with them her: ‘incriminating, horribly informative exercise book.’\textsuperscript{269} Noor had been active in France for four months. After incarceration at Avenue Foch and Pforzheim prison she was taken in chains to Dachau where she was executed on 13\textsuperscript{th} September 1944.

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{267} Overton-Fuller, Madeleine, p.191.
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid p.91.
Lilian Rolfe was an English woman who had moved from her home in Buenos Aires to undertake war work. She did not survive the war. After training she landed by Lysander on 6th April 1944 near Orleans and her task was to act: ‘as W/T to an organisation based in Orleans’ and to secure radio links between them and SOE HQ in London. During her time in France Lilian managed to send 67 messages back to England. These enabled the Maquis at Loiret to receive substantial supplies of arms at a very difficult time by: ‘helping to coordinate parachute drops of arms, ammunition, money and clothes for the Resistance.’ This enabled the organization to build up maximum strength and to carry out some important actions.

A key to Lilian’s success were her excellent wireless skills: ‘those in London who received Lilian’s messages commented on her consistent accuracy despite the difficult conditions in which she had to operate.’ These conditions were that the area was swarming with Gestapo by June 1944 and Lilian had to keep moving constantly to avoid discovery. Her ability to keep working during throughout these difficulties was also recognised in her citation for the Croix de Guerre in January 1946: ‘although the region was fully controlled by the enemy, she succeeded, thanks to her good technical knowledge and presence of mind, in transmitting regular messages for two months, which led to the arming of the Maquis of the region by parachute drops. After the arrest of her superior officer she courageously continued her work in the midst of increasing danger.’

Because of the danger Lilian moved regularly to avoid the risk of detection, she transmitted from various places including the homes of various Resistance members and her wireless was hidden in all kinds of places: ‘a wine barrel, under a baby’s mattress and in the roof of a dog’s kennel.’ Lilian’s organiser was arrested in June 1944 but she continued work until her own arrest on 31st July 1944. This came about through a cruel twist of fate: ‘Lilian Rolfe was caught quite accidentally when the Germans raided the house she was staying in looking for someone quite different.’ She was found asleep on her bed with her wireless transmitter next to her, she had fallen asleep before hiding it.

The Gestapo had not expected to find a wireless operator there although they were aware that...

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270 IWM, Air ministry document to Vera Atkins. 27/7/46.
272 IWM, Air ministry document to Vera Atkins. 27/7/46.
273 Ottaway, The Life that I have, p.134.
274 Citation for Croix de Guerre, 16th January 1946, English translation.
276 Foot, SOE in France, p.410.
of her existence. She was taken to Fresnes Prison and then transported with Denise Bloch and Violette Szabo to Ravensbrück, where the three were executed in early 1945.

Odette Wilen (Sophie) was a wireless operator who had no success in the field. She was parachuted into France on 11th April 1944 to work with Maurice Southgate (Hector) and Pearl Witherington (Marie). Southgate states in his PF that: ‘on the very first night of her arrival in Montluccan we put her on a test, and she proved to be useless as a W/T. I sent a report about her to London in March ’43.’ Pearl Witherington had trained with Odette Wilen and was shocked when she was told by Odette Wilen that: ‘I do not know my codes.” They sent a radio operator without knowing her codes, this is impossible so I said to Maurice you’ll have to get rid of her you cannot keep her, it was too dangerous, anyway, I took her away and said stay there till I come and get you, and when I went to get her she had gone...she made her own way back and was back in London by August.’ Pearl Witherington thought that Odette Wilen had traced her fiancée and worked with him until he was arrested and then she went back to London. Southgate’s version differs slightly, he says that ‘Marie [Pearl Witherington] took Sophie [Odette Wilen] to her fiancée at Le Blanc in agreement with London.’ Odette Wilen was never used again by SOE having proved she was unprepared and unsuited for the work.

Women agents also worked as couriers. They were: ‘emphatically more than the name suggests: they not only took messages but worked closely with radio operators, finding them safe houses, providing them with look-outs and arranging transport of their sets from place to place, they also deputised for the organiser in dealings with the French groups, helped to organise reception drops and in many cases were fully involved in sabotage work.’ Couriers were considered essential and supplied a: ‘means of circumventing censorship by having messages carried by hand or verbally. [They are] slow but surer than other methods.’ It was thought women would make better couriers than men since they could move about more freely than men and were not required to undertake forced labour (Service du Travail Obligatoire).

277 NA, Southgates PF, HS9/1395/3.
278 Interview with Pearl Cornioley, Grand Hotel, St Aignan, May 2003.
279 NA, Southgates PF, HS9/1395/3.
280 Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.34.
281 SOE Syllabus, p.117.
Andrée Borrel was one such courier. She had already been involved with the Resistance having worked on the PAT escape line and escaped to England before the line was destroyed. She returned to France on 24th/25th September 1942 (the first woman to be infiltrated by parachute). Her task was to work as courier to Suthill (Prosper/Physician) in the Physician network (also known as Prosper) which was to replace Autogiro in the Paris area. Andrée had intimate knowledge of Paris and during her nine months working for SOE acted as courier and Lieutenant to Suthill. Her training instructors had said that: ‘she should develop into a first rate agent’ and by all accounts she was reputedly: ‘an able and devoted Lieutenant’ and was appointed second in charge of the organisation. Her cool judgement meant she was always chosen for the most delicate work and dangerous work such as recruiting and arranging rendezvous, and acted as “cut out” for her commanding officer.

Andrée Borrel was put in charge of several parachute operations including ‘a December reception committee’ with Suthill and others and: ‘took part in several coup de mains, notably an operation at Chevilly power station in March 1943. She distinguished herself by her coolness and efficiency and always volunteered for the most dangerous tasks.’

Suthill said of her that: ‘Everyone who has come into contact with her in her work agrees with myself that she is the best of us all’ and she often acted as Lieutenant (second in command). He told London that she: ‘has a perfect understanding of security and an imperturbable calmness’ adding ‘Thank you very much for having sent her to me.’ Andrée Borrel was described as: ‘wholly lacking in nerves; she was un garcon manque’ and fellow trainee Adele Le Chene described her as: ‘brave, without blemish, modest and strong.’

Andrée Borrel was arrested on 23rd June 1943 and Suthill was arrested the next day. She was taken to Gestapo HQ for interrogation, and then transferred to Fresnes prison, from there she was taken to Natzweiler-Struthof-Struthof, where, on 6th July 1944 she was executed by lethal injection. Several Germans have testified that she never talked at all – she treated them with fearless contempt throughout and maintained a silence so disdainful that the German’s did not attempt to break it.

282 NA, Andree Borell, Military Cross citation, HS9/183.
283 NA, Andree Borell, Military Cross citation, HS9/183.
285 Foot, SOE in France, p.316.
Eliane Plewman was a successful courier who was described by SOE officers as: ‘a very tough woman with unexpected charm. She was obviously most capable and acted with discretion. She was calm and efficient, nothing rattled her. We have much esteem for her.’

She was parachuted into France on 23rd August 1943 to work with the Monk Network in the Marseille area. She was dropped in the Jura and was: ‘separated from her network for some time. Instead of remaining in hiding, she showed outstanding initiative and made several contacts on her own, which were later of great value to her circuit.’

When Eliane met up with her network she worked as a courier for six months and carried out several liaison missions, assisting her network leader (Charles Skepper) in contacting and arming Resistance groups.

The network she worked for was successfully involved in sabotage on a large scale and: ‘in January [1944] they blocked the main line to Toulon...and in the first fortnight of the new year they put 30 locomotives out of action, and damaged 30 more in the middle of March,’ much of this success was attributed to Eliane’s work: ‘Her untiring devotion to duty and willingness to undergo any risk, largely contributed to the successful establishment of her network. She travelled constantly, maintaining liaison between the various groups, acting as a guide to newly arrived agents, and transporting W/T equipment and compromising documents’. Her work was also described as: ‘calm and efficient.’

Eliane was arrested by the Gestapo on 24th March 1944 and was executed at Dachau on 13th September 1944. It was recommended by Major Gubbins that she: ‘be appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (Civil Division).’

Some women’s experiences in the field were unusual and not at all what they had been trained for, or had come to expect. Their roles were clearly outlined to them, wireless operator or courier, their missions were clear cut and succinct and they knew what was expected of them. Sudden arrests, illness, pregnancy, or being on the run was something they were not trained for, and they had to use their wits and nerves to deal with these situations.

286 NA, HS9/1195/1 28.12.45.
287 Gubbins 5.1.46.
288 Foot, SOE in France, p.375.
289 NA, HS9/1195/1 28.12.45.
290 Gubbins 5.1.46.
Pearl was parachuted into France on 22/23rd September 1943 to work as a courier to the Wrestler network in the Valençay-Issoudun-Châteauroux triangle and where she was to: ‘act as a liaison officer to a Maquis group in the Pay de Dome.’ Her specific role was to act as a courier carrying coded messages and she once: ‘cycled 50 miles to deliver a message, only to find that a bridge she had to cross was heavily guarded. Carrying her bicycle on her shoulders, she waded across the freezing river Cher.’

However, Pearl really came into her own after the arrest of her network leader Southgate on 1st April 1944, when she took over the command of the group whilst awaiting a replacement: ‘I cannot say I was in charge...they all came to me because they knew I’d been sent to help them...before I knew where we were, we had 1,500 chaps! Now what do I do with 1,500 chaps? The thing is, I was not there to order them about. I was there as a liaison officer between the French Resistance and HQ in England.’

During this time she: ‘became responsible for arming and training the Maquis in this area. She organized sabotage of the important Michelin works and finally lead her groups into battle when the German armoured columns in the south tried to reach the Normandy beachhead...23 parachute operations were sent to her and her reception committees never failed.’

‘Anyway there I was from the 6th June until 25th July on my own! I was helped, of course, by the chaps who wanted to get on with it and go home, in the meantime arms were dropping... they had to find food and they would go and pinch things from the group next door and I said no this wouldn’t do. So we got out of that and we split them up into four and said this is your territory, you are not to do anything in your next door neighbours, you keep to yourself...by the time we had finished we had over 3,700 men.’

Although Pearl was in charge for a while she maintained that she did not: ‘have anything to do with the fighting, the only thing I did with them was the first parachute operation because it was three planes and nothing had been up until then, I spent three days and three nights doing this, I had to get it all in the woods.’

291 The Telegraph, 26th February 2008.
293 IWM, Air ministry document to Vera Atkins. 27/7/46.
294 Interview with Pearl Cornioley, Grand Hotel, St Aignan, May 2003.
295 Ibid.
Pearl’s Maquis were attacked by 2,000 Germans on 11\textsuperscript{th} June 1944, she described the situation in which found herself during an interview in May 2003:

‘It was 8.30, on a Sunday morning... I hurried over to the place where we put some arms that had arrived, at least there was something. I sat down on my own. I did not have time to look at the things at all, the hand grenades and the Sten magazines until a chap came up and said “you’d better get moving they’re coming up the alley.” Well, Henri had arranged with me to meet at the Miller farm if something happened, it was through the woods and I went there and there were five or six of us including the wife and daughter of the farmer, I thought I saw a German coming up the alley and he took a pot shot and he hit the head of whoever, I do not know, six or eight Germans were there and they were so mad that this chap had been killed that they started firing. I thought they’re not going to catch me in a house, not in a thousand years so I left through the back of the barn and into a wheat field. I thought I can get out of the other end and into the woods, in June it was a lovely sunny day, it was hot. It was there I stayed from about 11am...until 10.30 at night. I could not move, because up and down this country road there were lorries full of Germans and I wouldn’t have had time to get out of the field and into the woods which I thought I was going to be able to get to...I thought I shall never see my life again, it is impossible, we were completely surrounded, it was bang bang bang all day, and in fact we lost one chap and the communists lost six, it was their own fault, silly asses because they were in a farm.’ \textsuperscript{296}

Pearl returned from France safely at the end of the war and remained in uniform until December 1945 and was awarded the civil MBE but she declined saying: ‘why should secret agents who risked their lives be treated like someone who sat behind a desk during the war.’ Some months later she was awarded the military MBE and said: ‘I never thought of anyone as being an amazing hero, we were just doing our work.’\textsuperscript{297}

\textsuperscript{296} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{297} Ibid.
Mary Herbert was infiltrated by Felucca on 31st October 1942 to work as courier to the Scientist network in Bordeaux. She became pregnant in spring 1943, the father of the child was the network leader Claude de Baissac. Mary was said to carry out her work: ‘with great tact and discretion’. She seemed very security conscious too and: ‘had a rule that she kept very strictly, of never talking to David [Claude] if she saw him in conversation with someone she did not know.’ 298 Yet, despite being very careful with her security towards David (Claude) in public she embarked on a love affair with him and also became very close to his sister visiting her in Poitiers several times: ‘exchanging information with Lise de Baissac and bringing messages which had come for her over the Scientist radio. She and Lise liked and trusted one another.’ 299 All this went against SOE’s instructions that agents should not form an attachment to one another but Claude felt: ‘his network was so secure he could afford to ignore such regulations.’ 300

Mary discovered she was pregnant in the early spring of 1943, just as a series of arrests in the Prosper network began threatening both Lise and Claude due to their connections with them. Both were ordered to return home by Lysander which they did in August, leaving a distraught Mary in France alone and pregnant. Claude had told her he would marry her but they had not dared do it in case their forged papers gave them away. He had also signed a document stating that he was the baby’s father. 301 Mary continued to work in Bordeaux for as long as practicable, when she became too big to cycle she started to use trains and buses, but the situation was becoming increasingly dangerous and the Scientist network was breaking up. Mary moved to a safe house outside Bordeaux and severed all ties with the Resistance, giving birth at the end of 1943. ‘The child was just a few weeks old when news came that she and other Resistance members were being hunted in the city. She left and went to Poitiers, taking refuge in Lise’s old flat.’ 302 As Lise had already left Poitiers for her own safety it seems odd that Mary would chose to live in her old flat, which may have come to the Gestapo’s attention already, but Mary had written to the flats owner (Mme Gateau) who had said she thought it was: ‘quite safe.’ 303 On the morning of 18th February 1944, the Gestapo looking for Lise found Mary in bed feeding her baby. They asked her if she was Madame Brisse (Lise’s cover name)

298 NA, Mary Herbert, HS6/567.
299 Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.208.
300 Escott, Mission Improbable, p.54.
301 NA, Mary Herbert, HS9/567.
302 Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.209.
303 NA, Mary Herbert, HS9/567.
and other questions relating to Lise’s whereabouts. She was told she would have to go away for interrogation, and was taken to Gestapo HQ, leaving her child with her maid.

Mary was interrogated by the Gestapo but there is no evidence in her PF of any torture, on one occasion however she was put into solitary confinement because she looked out of her window: ‘with [a] stone slab as only bed, no blankets or chair, she was kept there for 24 hours and the next morning said she felt very ill.’ The prison was described as: ‘very clean and the inmates had a bath every Saturday.’ Mary was questioned about her life history, her relationship with Lise and was shown photographs and asked to identify people in them (she said she did not know them). She was also asked to account for her: ‘queer accent’ which she said was down to living in Alexandria and speaking: ‘French, English, Spanish and Italian plus a smattering of Arabic which was enough to upset anyone’s pronunciation.’ She repeatedly declared her innocence saying she knew nothing of the woman who had the flat before her: ‘There was no reason for the Gestapo to suspect Mary of not being the young French woman she said she was. It hardly seemed likely that a woman who had just given birth could be a British agent.’

Mary was released at Easter, she was told that if she talked about what she had seen or the question she had been asked, she would be re-arrested. She was given back her belongings except a ring that was mislaid. She picked it up the next day and the interrogators returned it to her: ‘with apologies.’ She found her baby had been taken to the convent where she had been very well looked after and after convincing them she had been wrongly arrested her daughter was restored to her.

While Mary is unique for having her baby whilst working in the field, there was another agent who was reputedly pregnant before she was infiltrated - Yolande Beekman. She landed in France on 18th/19th September 1943 by Lysander to work as W/T to the Musician network and its leader Gustave (‘Guy’) Bieler. During her time in the field: ‘her first priority was her skeds (schedules), but she also helped Guy with local liaison work...through her sked she organised arms drops and sent the news of sabotage strikes

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304 Ibid.
305 Ibid.
306 Ibid.
307 Ibid.
308 Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.209.
308 Easter Sunday was 9th April 1944 making her captivity approx two months.
309 NA, Mary Herbert, HS9/567.
to London.\textsuperscript{310} She is said to have been present at over 20 parachute drops and she saw to the distribution of materials to the local Maquis. She operated her wireless from an attic room in Fonsommes, thereby breaking SOE security practices of moving around to avoid D/F and this was to prove to be her downfall. Foot commented that she: ‘was committed to the imprudence of transmitting from the same spot at the same hour on the same three days of the week for months on end; it is not surprising that her journey to Dachau began with the detection of her set. Why did she do something that must have run counter to her training? Presumably because she and her organiser agreed it was safer to use a well hidden transmitter in a reliable house than to risk the dangers involved in finding other transmitting stations and other sets to work from.’\textsuperscript{311} In mid January 1944 the D/F vans pin pointed her house as: ‘the source of transmission and observed it.’\textsuperscript{312} The next day when Yolande attended a rendezvous with Guy in St Quentin a Gestapo officer arrested them both. After imprisonment in Fresnes and Karlsruhe prisons she was executed at Dachau on 13\textsuperscript{th} September 1944.

Yolande Beekman’s story has an extraordinary twist that emerges through study of her PF. While training at Thame Park in Oxfordshire during August 1943 she met and fell in love with Jaap Beekman who was training for the Dutch section and they married later that month. In mid 1944 Yolande’s mother, Mrs Unternahrer contacted SOE requesting an interview at which she stated that: ‘when her daughter parachuted into France last September her mother knew she was pregnant, and consequently expected by now to have some news of a new arrival.’\textsuperscript{313} To this news SOE replied: ‘we stated, as is the truth, that we had received no report on Mrs Beekman’s health that confirmed that she was pregnant when she left, as Mrs Unternahrer claimed she was.’\textsuperscript{314} It is not mentioned anywhere else, either in official documents or eye witness statements that Yolande was pregnant, so the case remains open.

Extraordinary experiences did not just happen whilst working in the field and did not all include babies and love affairs. Blanche Charlet had an incredible experience after her arrest and imprisonment. She was infiltrated into France on 1\textsuperscript{st} September 1942 by Felluca, her mission was to act as courier alongside wireless operator Brian Stonehouse

\textsuperscript{310} Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.204.
\textsuperscript{311} Foot, SOE in France, p.106.
\textsuperscript{312} ibid p.205. The date given by a German document is 15.1.44. NA, HS9/114/2.
\textsuperscript{313} NA, Interview with Mrs Unternahrer, Mother of Yolande Beekman, HS9/114/2, 19.7.44.
\textsuperscript{314} NA, Mrs Yolande Beekman, HS9/114/2, 17.8.44.
(Celestin) for the Ventriloquist network in the Orleans-Blois area. Although very little is
documented of her actual work and impact on this network it is noted that she took over
the work that Virginia Hall had been doing. According to Foot this was: ‘the [more]
exacting tasks of being available, arranging contacts, recommending who to bribe and
where to hide, soothing the jagged nerves of agents on the run and supervising the
distribution of wireless sets.’ After several weeks in the field Blanche was arrested by
the Gestapo on 24th October 1942 as she turned up for a pre-planned meeting with
Stonehouse who had just been tracked down by D/F’s.

Blanche was taken to the police station and interrogated: ‘when they asked me whether I
knew that Celestin was a W/T operator, I replied that I did not even know what a W/T
operator was.’ She also refused to give her address in order to prevent her friend Mme
Jourdan from being arrested and gave: ‘a long story of some lover of hers who had a
family and was scared of scandal etc etc, the matter rested like that for the first few
days.’ Blanche said that she was: ‘interrogated every day on small details. The men
were put on a different floor from the women, but the women were allowed out into a
courtyard for a walk every day and as the men’s cells were on the ground floor, I was able
to communicate with Celestin and we were able to find out what each had said.’

On 13th November 1942 Blanche, Stonehouse and another W/T were taken to Chastres
prison where: ‘the discipline was fairly lax. We were not locked in our cells, and the door
of each floor was the only one locked.’ She made friends with a Yugoslavian cleaner, she
asked him to help her escape. Two days later at nine o’clock at night: ‘the door opened
and the Yugoslav appeared, telling us that the prisoners had free run of the prison for two
hours. The warders were all locked in the cells apart from one or two who were in on the
plot.’ A group of about 50 prisoners broke out that night, Blanche and a fellow
Resistance member Suzanne Cherisse asked for help from a priest and farmer before
finding refuge in a monastery. They stayed there for two months before the monks
managed to get them onto an escape line across the Pyrenees but heavy snow made
their journey impossible and they returned to the monastery. In early 1944 Blanche began
to do courier work for the escape line and in April, they got a message via their French

319 Miller, *Behind Enemy Lines*, p.80.
contacts from Baker Street telling them to return home. A sea pick up was arranged from
Brittany and they returned across the channel back to Britain.

Those agents who were unfortunate enough to get arrested and put into prison had varied
and different experiences, showing that not all of them were put into solitary confinement,
tortured and maltreated. Some agents found the prison experience surprisingly different
from what they had been led to expect. Not all interrogations were carried out under
harsh conditions and evidence is limited to suggest that any of them were tortured. The
reason seeming to be that if the captives were thought to be British they were handled
differently from those who were thought to be French and were less likely to be tortured.
It is also clear from the PF’s and available sources that not all guards and interrogators
were the brutal thugs that have become the stereotype of post-war films and
representations.

An agent whose capture is of particular interest is Noor Inayat Khan, because her
treatment by the Gestapo changes from relatively humane to brutal due to her actions and
behaviour. After her arrest Noor was taken to Gestapo HQ at 84 Avenue Foch. The
stories of her attempted escapes are well documented in Madeleine. The sources
suggest that on arrival at the Avenue Foch Noor already had escape in mind and yet it
was only through her tame treatment by the Gestapo that she was able to attempt this
escape. She asked her guard if she: ‘might be allowed to take a bath’ they said yes, as it
‘did sometimes happen.’ This is incongruous with popular mythology; this was the same
infamous Gestapo HQ where (as will be discussed below) Odette was supposedly burnt
and had her toe nails removed, and where according to the construction Violette suffered
intolerable interrogation. Yet they allowed Noor to take a bath and lock the door behind
her. Usually a brick was placed to keep the door ajar and so that the guard could see the
window, Noor protested her modesty and they took it away. Kieffer stated: ‘she made an
attempt at escape, when she got on to the roof through a bathroom situated on the fifth
floor. She was re-arrested after the alarm was given by Vogt.’

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320 NA, Translation of voluntary statement made by the Commandant of the Paris Gestapo, Hans Kieffer,
HS9/836/5.
A further example of the Gestapo’s relatively kind treatment of Noor is when: ‘she asked for writing materials, saying she was bored with having nothing to do.’ She received these and began to write poems and stories for children. In Madeleine it also says that: ‘meals were more than adequate’ and ‘there was a small library... prisoners could always borrow a book.’ This does not match the way in which Odette, Violette and other agents were supposedly treated. However, in an interview Bob Maloubier informed me that: ‘no agent was ever mistreated or tortured at the Avenue Foch, not Odette, not Yeo-Thomas, they were simply interrogated there.’

The fact that Noor was ‘interrogated’ or questioned is supported by the Gestapo’s own testimonials: ‘We got no information out of her. We had however, found a good deal of material which helped in her interrogation.’ Noor’s notebook provided them with all they needed. Kieffer treated her relatively kindly because he needed her assistance in playing her radio back to England, meaning that SOE HQ would continue to receive messages on her frequency and from her wireless and therefore believe she was still operational in the field. When the radio play started up, Kieffer asked Noor simple questions about herself and home, in reality these were the checks London was putting into the wireless transmissions to find out if they were really dealing with Noor. Her answers provided the Gestapo with the material to convince London that they were.

Noor, John Starr and Faille (fellow prisoners) did attempt another escape, however an air raid prevented them getting away and they were recaptured. Kieffer then arranged: ‘immediately for Madeline and Faille to be transferred to Germany. Madeline and Faille had again refused to give their word of honour not to attempt further escapes. Bob [John Starr] signed a paper saying that he would not make another escape.’ Noor would not sign this document and Kieffer had her transported to Pforzheim prison.

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321 Overton-Fuller, Madeleine, p.226.
322 ibid p.227.
323 Odette Churchill states that her ‘first interrogation was rather like visiting a psychiatrist’ she was told that the Gestapo ‘had ways and means of making her speak.’ The actual torture was carried out when: ‘a Frenchman came into the room, and they made Source [Odette] sit on a chair and the tall thin interrogator held Source’s hands behind her back. The Frenchman then burned Source on the shoulder, with what she did not know.’ They then left Source alone for a while and the tall thin man said he would think of something else that might make her talk.’
324 Interview with Bob Maloubier, Paris, 27th July 2006. Does Maloubier mean that they were not tortured at all, or that it took place somewhere else such as the Gestapo HQ at Rue de Sausaisses on the other side of Paris? The use of the word ‘interrogating’ here is in its contemporary form meaning to question.
325 NA, HS9/836/5.
326 NA, Translation of voluntary statement made by the Commandant of the Paris Gestapo, Hans Kieffer, HS9/836/5.
she was regarded as a: ‘very dangerous prisoner’ who was to be kept under: ‘the most severe regime’ and to be treated in accordance with the ‘Nacht und Nebel.’ She was chained hand and feet and was given fresh clothes once a week. Eventually her guards took pity on her and removed the chains to allow her to exercise, within a few days a phone call from the Karlsruhe Gestapo ordered them to replace the chains and obey orders. An affidavit from a fellow prisoner stated that: ‘I could hear the blows she received.’

Noor was executed at Dachau concentration camp on 13th September 1944. Her execution was as brutal as her treatment during her last weeks in prison: in two accounts given by German officials at Dachau it has been apparent that Noor was abused before her death: ‘She was stripped, kicked and finally left lying on the floor battered and bruised’. A guard named Yoop said that she had been “…abused all night by an officer called Ruppert”. When Ruppert got tired and the girl was a “bloody mess”, he told her that he would shoot her. He ordered her to kneel and put his pistol against her head. The only word she said before dying was “liberte.”

An agent who was abused during her time at Gestapo HQ was Eileen (Didi) Nearne. She had worked as wireless operator for the Wizard network and had been arrested at 11am on 25th July 1944 at Dourglareine. Eileen was taken to the Rue de Saissaies and interrogated, she was asked questions such as: ‘what nationality was she, whose was the gun they found in her house? [Eileen] Didi said she was French...There was a gardener who used to work at the house, the gun had been left by him.’

Eileen was also asked how long she had been a W/T and who she worked for: ‘I said three months and most of the codes were made up by my chief. They then asked me what organisation I worked for. I said that I had joined in France, and that I met my chief in a coffee shop and he engaged me there. They asked me if I had any other friends working with me. I made up some addresses of people. They put me in a cold bath and tried to make me speak but I stuck to my story.’ The cold bath was the baignoire, a torture device used to extract information, the victims head would be forced under the water until the point of drowning, they would then be dragged out and questioned, this could be

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327 Overton Fuller, Madeleine, p.243.
328 NA, Translation of voluntary statement made by the Commandant of the Paris Gestapo, Hans Kieffer HS9/836/5.
329 Basu, Spy Princess, p.179.
330 ibid pp 179.
331 Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.278.
repeated several times. The water would be contaminated from the bodily fluids of previous victims. Eileen was asked by the Gestapo interrogators if she had: ‘had a nice bath’ she said ‘yes, I’ll complain to the town hall for what you’ve done.’

Whilst still wet she was taken to a railway station where she claimed to have a rendezvous with her chief: ‘we went to the Gare St Lazare at 7 o’clock and waited until 7.15pm. No-one came but an air raid warning was sounded and I said he must have been delayed because of it. They then took me back to interrogate me again. The chief of the Gestapo said he would give me a last chance. I stuck to the same story. They then found out that the addresses I had given them were false.’ Eileen was told that: ‘they said they’d given me the benefit of the doubt but they were sending me to a concentration camp, it will not be like here, it’ll be your punishment for working against us…’ Thus implying that she was (in the opinion of the Gestapo) being well treated at the Rue de Saussaies. She believed she had been tortured because she had maintained she was French. Eileen was sent to Ravensbrück on 15th August 1944 and was sent on various working parties, she escaped on 5th April 1945 whilst on a death march.

Another agent who escaped from Ravensbrück was Yvonne Baseden. Immediately after her arrest on 26th June 1944 she was taken to a local Gestapo HQ for interrogation. During questioning she stuck to her cover story which the Germans did not believe, and so she was taken from the interrogation room to the basement of the Gestapo HQ building:

‘where I was placed in a cell which had no light and one tiny window blacked out, and which only had two boards to act as beds one of which was completely covered with blood and with one blanket. I was left in this cell for three days and three nights without any food, water or amenities of any sort other than those mentioned above. I was visited twice during my incarceration in this cell and asked if I was yet prepared to talk and on the morning of the fourth day I was taken from the cell and taken back to the interrogation room...’

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333 Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.278.
334 IWM, Affidavit by Yvonne Baseden. In the matter of war crimes and in the matter of ill treatment of British nationals at Dijon, France and Ravensbrück, Germany June 1944 and April 1945.
Despite the lack of amenities in her cell and the fact that she was deprived of basics such as food and water Yvonne was not the victim of physical violence or torture during her time at Gestapo HQ. As she continued to refuse to answer questions the interrogators attempted to intimidate her by drawing: ‘his revolver and [firing] one or two shots into the ground directly between [her] feet’ but torture was not used.\textsuperscript{335}

From Gestapo HQ she was sent to Dijon jail for two weeks during which time she had: ‘one or two casual interrogations and suffered no ill-treatment.’\textsuperscript{336} Yvonne was then transferred to Saarbruck concentration camp and again claimed that: ‘we were not ill treated and food of a sort was provided and the accommodation was not unreasonable. I did however witness the ill treatment of other internees by camp staff on more than one occasion.’\textsuperscript{337} From Saarbruck Yvonne was transferred to Ravensbrück and was given a red triangle to wear, marking her out as a political prisoner but nothing more to single her out as a suspected British spy. Despite the horrific deprivations that all inmates suffered at the camp Yvonne was not singled out for maltreatment because of whom or what she was (i.e. a SOE agent). She did however narrowly miss injury because of an incident that occurred at the railway sidings of the camp:

‘I nearly got badly injured on one occasion because I was unloading pillows, of all things and the guard, the guards were throwing them for us to pick up and put somewhere else and one of the cushions burst open as I was getting it and went all over this chap, he was furious and he something in his hand which was either something like a revolver, or something, he was furious and tried to hit me with this thing, I just missed it, I was lucky because he could have used that revolver or anything, anyway I did not get injured on that occasion.’\textsuperscript{338}

Yvonne Baseden escaped from Ravensbrück when Mary Lindell (a fellow prisoner) ensured that Yvonne was on a Swedish Red Cross convoy as she was suffering from TB and desperately needed medicine.

\textsuperscript{335}ibid.  
\textsuperscript{336}ibid.  
\textsuperscript{337}ibid.  
\textsuperscript{338}Interview with Yvonne Burney, 33 Napier Gardens, London. May 2003.
The prison experiences of these women vary greatly and do not conform to the popular images and familiar stark representations as depicted in popular culture of Nazi prison, interrogations and concentration camps. They do nonetheless give a clear representation of life and treatment in some camps, and that not all SOE agents who were caught were maltreated or executed. Most of the agents discussed above survived their experiences and yet these accounts are relatively unknown. Indeed, not all agents who died whilst working for SOE did so as a result of Nazi maltreatment. However, a significant number did die in the camps, just as the Nazis intended, the ‘Nacht und Nebel’ being relatively successful in that one third of women F section agents did die and were difficult to trace after the war had ended.

An agent who died whilst in the field but not in a camp was Muriel Byck, she was parachuted into France on the night of 8th/9th April 1944 to work as W/T to Resistance leader de Vomecourt of ‘Ventriloquist’ in the Orleans-Blois area. Her task was also to recruit and train W/T operators and to supply London with the details of new recruits. She was also to establish post boxes for contact should W/T break down.

Ventriloquist had four transmitters in different locations covering a wide area which were constantly moved so as to avoid the D/F. During her active service in the field Muriel sent 27 messages and received 16 messages. Her security was said to be excellent, she never used the same set consecutively or at the same hour on any day: ‘Rushing from location to location, she would encode, send, receive and decode messages, always on schedule, and on her own initiative often do this for other circuits as well, so messages would not ever be delayed. She also acted as a courier, alerting sabotage teams over a wide area.’

On 7th May, Muriel received a message from London saying that the nearby German ammunition dump at Michenon would be bombed the following night. The raid was successful but soon afterwards Muriel’s health gradually deteriorated and she collapsed. A doctor was called and diagnosed meningitis and she was immediately hospitalised under a false name in Romorantin. She was operated on but she died in de Vomecourt’s arms at 7pm on 23rd May 1944 aged 25. She was buried under a false name in a zinc coffin and put in a temporary vault so that: ‘you will be able to transport her later if you

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339 SOE Foreign & Commonwealth Office files, Muriel Byck.
wish.\textsuperscript{340} Muriel’s story is unique and shows that not all who died in the field did so under horrific circumstances or as the result of capture.

Although men continued to work in the roles of couriers and wireless operators after the decision had been made to employ women within the SOE, women were given these particular jobs for various reasons. It was felt that women did not have the military experience to become network leaders and they would not be respected as such. Nor could they establish rapport with the men of the Maquis or Resistance in French patriarchal society. Pearl Witherington discovered this when she had to take over from Southgate and Foot states that said: ‘the position of a woman, a foreigner at that, as a network commander was perhaps a trifle invidious; she was not the sort to be put off by a point of etiquette… she found a complaisant local Colonel to mouth the orders she composed.’\textsuperscript{341} This way her decisions were respected, because they seemed to come from a man.

Women were also thought to be more patient than men and therefore could cope with the monotony of the work, sitting and waiting for hours for a schedule and painstakingly encoding, decoding and memorising messages. Men, especially at times of war are more likely to want to do something physical and active and to feel they are making a difference, and therefore roles such as weapons instructors and saboteurs suited them, although, judging by some of the earlier training reports for some women, they also would have excelled in these roles.

In terms of wireless operators it was felt that women would be suitable for this type of work because: ‘women were used to waiting and to fulfilling repetitive tasks quietly. They were also, many of them, practised in dexterity, through typing, sewing…even playing the piano.’\textsuperscript{342} It certainly would seem that women with: ‘nimble fingers’ could make easier work of wireless operating especially if they had experience with typical women’s jobs as listed above.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{340} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{341} Foot, \textit{SOE in France}, p.381.  \\
\textsuperscript{342} Jones, \textit{A Quiet Courage}, p.35.}
The fact that women were not part of the German round-ups for forced labour meant that they could move about the towns and countryside more easily. They used transport such as trams, trains and bicycles (for which they needed a permit) as unlike the men they were not in constant fear of spot checks and looking conspicuous. For example women agents could undertake everyday tasks such as shopping this not only gave: “female agents a reason for being out of the home, but also shopping baskets could hide weapons and radio parts: “messages and packages were concealed in bicycle-frames, shopping baskets, hand-bags, the lining of clothes or round the waist under the clothes.”343

That is not to say that women’s papers were not checked. Pearl Witherington was on a train when a check took place: ‘I want[ed] to get this over, he finished off with me and said “das is nicht gut” I had to give myself some kind of countenance, so I turned to this chap and said “what does he say, I do not speak German?” He had not turned the page over, it had to be stamped 1942 and he had not turned the page! We always travelled at night, because German sentries did not like working at night, there were few checks at night.”344 Other women who were caught out at checks managed to flirt their way out of them, Nancy Wake encountered several checkpoints on her travels as a courier and said that: ‘I would just look over to the officer, flutter my eyelashes and say “do you want to search moi?” And they would laugh flirtatiously, “No, Mademoiselle, you carry on.”’345

Women were also able to engage their feminine charms to help themselves out of other awkward situations. After his capture George Starr’s courier Christine Granville: ‘by a combination of steady nerve, feminine cunning and sheer brass persuaded his captors that the Americans arrival was imminent and secured the party’s release three hours before they were to have been shot.”346 Women also found themselves being helped because of the fact they were women. One instance was when Noor was trying to hang her aerial onto a tree one evening, she heard a man’s heavy tread behind her: ‘the man offered to help and then looped the aerial over the branches, bowed politely to her [and said] “At your service Mademoiselle” before walking away...’347

343 Pattinson, Behind Enemy lines. Also, NA HS7/66.
344 Interview with Pearl Cornioley, Grand Hotel, St Aignan, May 2003.
345 Fitzsimons, Nancy Wake, p.239.
346 Foot, SOE in France, p.412.
347 Escott, Mission Improbable, p.74.
Eileen Nearne also had a narrow escape when travelling by train, her: ‘cover was nearly blown by a German soldier, who offered her a cigarette and asked if he could help carry her suitcase (which contained her wireless): she told him it was a gramophone, hurriedly left the train and walked the rest of the way, carrying the heavy case.’ This highlights that women were more likely to avoid unwanted interest because they tend to find themselves in a situation where the chivalric actions of men would assist them such as lifting heavy cases.

Some women were considered to be better at French than their male counterparts, in *Specially Employed* Buckmaster relays an incident which happened to an SOE agent codenamed Jacques whilst travelling on the metro: ‘He was in a great hurry and as he pushed his way through a crowd of German soldiers standing on the platform he kept saying “sorry...so sorry...excuse me...I beg your pardon...sorry”.’ There were also occasions when women agents would do the talking so as to hide their colleague’s bad pronunciation or imperfect French.

Despite the huge publicity that was given to certain agents such as Violette Szabo and Odette Churchill in the post-war years, other agents were not afforded much time in the limelight. For some agents this was a matter of choice, as they had fulfilled their job and wanted to return to normal life. Others had difficulty re-adjusting to life back in England, Eileen Nearne: ‘was very ill when she was brought back to England in 1945 and for months lived in a state of physical and emotional collapse’ and Yvonne Baseden was hospitalised for a year. Other agents felt bound by the Official Secrets Act not to reveal anything, while others (Lise de Baissac, Yvonne Cormeau and Jacqueline Nearne) were still directly involved with the ‘Judex Mission’ in which Buckmaster visited the former networks in France and met those who had assisted the F section agents throughout the war.

For those agents who had not returned it was of vital importance to find out what had happened to them and how so that their families could be told. Vera Atkins decided that she would visit Germany to try and trace them, she had to fight to be allowed to go and the job was huge: ‘it involved her in travels to numerous camps and prisons, and in

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349 Buckmaster, *Specially Employed*, p.129.
interviews with the German officers responsible for the British prisoners.’ She succeeded in tracing all 117 agents, all of whom had been killed. Vera also attended the war trials relating to the deaths of the women agents who had died at Natzweiler-Struthof, Ravensbrück and Dachau as well as Sachsenhausen. She attempted to keep the names of those involved from the press, but was not successful and stories of the executions made it into the public arena: ‘British women burned alive’ was a headline in The Daily Telegraph on 30th May 1946. The fascination of the press with these executions continued as demonstrated by an article dated 22nd May 1948 entitled: ‘Women who died for their country’ picturing 11 of the 13 women who were executed (a) and continue to be retold in articles such as the one pictured below from The Daily Telegraph, 25th April 1975 (b) (which is an account of the unveiling of the memorial to the SOE women executed at Dachau) and ‘The lost secret agents’ in BBC history magazine 2005.

The stories of those who did not come back were also depicted in two books. Death be not proud by Elizabeth Nicholas: ‘considers the fate of seven brave young women agents of the S.O.E. (sic) Four of them—Diana Rowden, Vera Leigh, Sonya Olschanesky, Andrée Borrel were thrust into the Nazi crematorium at Natzweiler-Struthof and burned...
alive. The other three also died in a concentration camp, if not quite as horribly.\(^{352}\) Its publication was said to leave the: ‘press and public wondering just how good British intelligence really was... [it] dealt with the French Section of Special Operations Executive, which was responsible for dropping agents and weapons to the French Resistance.'\(^{353}\) While \textit{Flames in the field}, first published in 1995, told the story of the women who died at Natzweiler-Struthof Struthof. In the book she: ‘pieces together the women’s stories, how they came to be involved in such a dangerous operation as well as their experiences in France, and also analyzes the controversial methods of SOE at a crucial period in the war.'\(^{354}\)

In the immediate post-war years, newspaper articles were written about the women including a series by James Gleeson entitled \textit{Commando Girls}, a series published in \textit{The Daily Herald} in 1950. They are sensationalist with passages such as: ‘If this recital horrifies you, if you would rather not be told of it, consider it that the price that one woman had to pay for our freedom’.\(^{355}\) To add to the mystery and intrigue the articles carry headlines such as: ‘Torture, despair, then rescue,’\(^{356}\) ‘she lead 3,500 guerrillas’\(^{357}\) and Peggy blows up a German convoy.’\(^{358}\) The articles do not mention SOE and instead state that these are: ‘stories of the heroines of the FANY’. It also states that some of the women’s names: ‘cannot be revealed’\(^{359}\) adding to the air of mystery that the writer is attempting to build up through his series of articles. It is likely that this series contributed to the public fascination with the female agents of SOE during the 1950s.

Television programmes projected some women to the foreground and two agents appeared on \textit{This is your life}, Yvonne Baseden in the mid 1950s and Yvonne Cormeau in 1989. Documentary series also included the stories of the women agents including, \textit{Churchill’s Secret army}, \textit{Secret agent}, \textit{Ten days to D-Day} and \textit{Behind the lines: The Real Charlotte Grays}, Channel 4 in 2004. This series: ‘The story of the women who operated behind enemy lines as agents and couriers during World War II, four, of the then surviving

\(^{352}\) The cremation followed an injection with phenol that was supposed to be lethal, but in some cases did not kill the victim, hence ‘burned alive’

\(^{353}\) \textit{Time Magazine}, 15th December 1958.


\(^{355}\) \textit{The Daily Herald}, 27th April 1950.

\(^{356}\) \textit{The Daily Herald}, 27th April 1950.

\(^{357}\) \textit{The Daily Herald}, 6th May 1950.

\(^{358}\) \textit{The Daily Herald}, 25th April 1950.

\(^{359}\) \textit{The Daily Herald}, 27th April 1950.
eight, F Section women took part in filmed interviews and two were movingly reunited with wartime comrades.’ (Pearl Witherington, Nancy Wake, Sonia Butt and Lise de Baissac).360

A Documentary film about F section agents was also made - School for Danger – which was released in 1946 and filmed by the RAF. The film ‘stars’ two former SOE agents, Captain Harry Rée and Jacqueline Nearne who: ‘as agents Felix and Cat they recreate for the camera some of their adventures in France’.361 The film shows training scenes and life in the field, and the agents’ narrative gives a clear impression of how they felt about and adds a human aspect to the documentary. For example of the ‘death slide’ Rée comments: ‘they took a delight in making us climb up things then jump down or slide down!’ while shooting Nearne comments: ‘we were taught all about firearms British and foreign’ and about parachuting: ‘the first jumps were pretty nasty’ and ‘the balloon jump was the worst, the awful silence as the earth receding and the gathering noise of the wind as we went higher.’362

As a representation of F section agents the documentary is well executed, the fact that SOE chose a man and woman to play together rather than two men in this film is itself ground breaking, demonstrating the equality of men and women within SOE and the way in which partnerships formed very well. Using real agents put their work in the public domain and also made the public aware that women had worked as SOE agents as early as 1946.

In the same year (1946) the autobiography of SOE F section agent Anne Marie Walters Moondrop to Gascony was published.363 Walters, who was parachuted into France on 4th January 1944 to work as a courier to the Wheelwright circuit, did not attempt to make her work seem glamorous, nor did she over sell her achievements as an agent; her writing style is plain and sincere. In 1947 the book was awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys prize for literature.364 SOE historian MRD Foot commented that: ‘it communicates vividly the hectic life of the Maquis,’ although his access to files enabled him to notice: ‘some

361 Sleeve of video, Now it can be told, distributed by IWM, 2001.
362 Dialogue from ‘Now it can be told’, 1946.
363 Walters, Moondrop to Gascony, 1946.
364 The prize is for the best work of literature by any author from the commonwealth aged 35 or under and printed in English in the UK and was founded in 1946.
pardonable exaggerations\textsuperscript{365} and Mark Seaman comments that: ‘eschewing the temptation to over glamorise the clandestine life, the book has a freshness not often to be found in published accounts of other agents who played a more prominent role in the Resistance.’\textsuperscript{366}

\textit{Moondrop to Gascony} has all the elements of a great war story: near misses, gun fights, torture and betrayal, and is told with sincerity and clarity. It is clear that the author is consciously attempting to regale her experiences in a way that will thrill and amuse the reader, while, at the same time remaining relatively true to the actual events. She did not overplay her own experiences and as such she does not construct herself as a heroine or resort to melodrama.

Walters comes across as a very down to earth young woman who typically enjoys things that most young ladies do, such as clean clothes, nice smelling toiletries and a comfortable bed. This is demonstrated in a passage when her colleague asks her for help packing up arms: ‘I will not. I’ve got a new skirt on and I’m not going to mess it up just to save you an hour’s work.’\textsuperscript{367} Later, while living with the Maquis, she says: ‘we were both filthy; but we had nothing to change into and no time to wash’\textsuperscript{368} demonstrating that when she needed to, she was literally prepared to do the dirty work and make sacrifices.

Because of this she is easy to empathise with and does not come across as affected or artificial. Her very genuine emotions and needs are relayed several times throughout the book. After her arrival at a safe house she says: ‘what was my life going to be like?’...suddenly I felt very lonely and very tired’\textsuperscript{369} and following a long bicycle ride she says: ‘again this feeling of being very small and very alone in a big world came over me. Small fears like those one has as a child crept up my spine: I imagined animals jumping out of the dark rustling bushes and slimy things following me on the long empty road’.\textsuperscript{370} She does not portray herself as selfless and it is obvious she prefers her home comforts to undertaking hardships for the common good as shown when she states: ‘I had to be

\textsuperscript{365} Foot, \textit{SOE in France}, p.463.
\textsuperscript{366} Mark Seaman, \textit{Good thriller, bad history, Essays in honour of MRD Foot}, (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1999) p.122.
\textsuperscript{367} Walters, \textit{Moondrop to Gascony}, 1946. p.129.
\textsuperscript{368} Ibid. p.215.
\textsuperscript{369} Ibid.p.41.
\textsuperscript{370} Ibid. p.63.
happy with bug ridden mattress. I was peeved and tired. I could not sleep through the noise the men made, talking and singing all night. I got up the next day stiff and bad tempered..."\textsuperscript{371} The realism of these emotions enable the reader to relate to her character and form a connection with her.

The relationships that she forms are also portrayed in a sincere and believable manner. She seems to make friends easily, and enjoys the company of the men in the Maquis, often commenting on their looks and personalities. Her relationship with her network leader ‘The Patron’ develops in an interesting way. At first he is concerned for her safety: ‘I do not want you running any unnecessary risks’,\textsuperscript{372} then he expects her to: ‘leave my [her] books or whatever I [she] was doing at the sound of his velo-moteur, sit in the garden or kitchen and chat with him.’ She writes that: ‘Talking has never been difficult for me, but I often wished I had more independence’.\textsuperscript{373} Their relationship changes as he becomes more involved with the Maquis, he tells her to: ‘go and help with the washing up and other fatigues “proper for a woman”’\textsuperscript{374} and that she must do what he says and stay up writing reports for a member of the Maquis because: ‘it pleases him, and I want him happy’.\textsuperscript{375} It becomes clear that he has less respect for her than at the outset, a point that is reiterated when he abruptly sends her back to England, giving her no reason other than he needs to get a report to London. This also highlights the issue of women’s inferiority in the French Resistance which is an issue not addressed in the later books biographies of Odette and Violette.

\textit{Moondrop to Gascony} relays life in the Resistance in a simple, believable way. When she refers to torture, she does not overplay it or exaggerate the effects, as demonstrated in the passage where she relays what had previously happened to the Patron: ‘he told me how he had been caught by the Gestapo and tortured for a month two years before. His teeth had been pulled out one by one. High tension current was shot through him by means of electric gadgets attached around his arms, legs and kidneys. He had been beaten until his body was raw...he showed me scars on his arms and legs, scars that were not healed yet.’\textsuperscript{376} She also tells of the fate of a Resistance member: ‘Lépine was

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{371} Ibid. p.214.
\textsuperscript{372} Ibid.p.80.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid.p.65.
\textsuperscript{374} Ibid.p.165.
\textsuperscript{375} Ibid.p.174.
\textsuperscript{376} Ibid.p.45.
\end{flushleft}
tortured, but he did not talk; he was deported to Germany and assassinated a year later’.\(^\text{377}\) The facts are clean cut with no propensity for melodrama or hagiography.

Likewise with the Maquis battle with the Germans, she describes how: ‘the 80 men fought to their last bullet’ and the massacre that ensued. Her disgust and anger become apparent as she describes the aftermath, men shot in the back of the neck, machine gunned down or their skulls: ‘smashed in with rifle butts’. ‘The whole thing was over by 8am. The Germans and Miliciens, proud of themselves, got back into their truck laughing and singing. But a last idea made them...rush to the farm where I spent the night 24 hours before, murder the whole family and burn the farm down.’\(^\text{378}\)

*Moondrop to Gascony* is a well written, well observed piece of literature which gives an insight into the emotions and work of a courier in SOE F section, as well as life in the Resistance and Maquis. The deprivations that Anne Marie Walters suffered and the relationships with her colleagues make the book vivid and engaging. Her story telling style is genuine and believable with no propensity towards elevating her own role or resorting to melodrama. Her emotions are real and her character easy to empathise with. The book seems to address many of the points raised in later books; the danger, the torture of men, and reprisals. Unfortunately, despite all its good features it is rarely regarded as a work of literary or historical longevity. A reason for this may be that because the book was published immediately after the war, the public were not interested in it or able to absorb what it was saying. In the immediate post-war years the public was inundated with stories relating to the war and becoming aware of events that had happened, that during the war they were unaware of such as concentration camps, conditions in prisoner of war camps, battles, deaths and injuries, in addition to coming to terms with continued rationing, repatriation of servicemen, rebuilding homes and families. The public interest in the war truly began in the 1950s when a new generation sought to be regaled with stories and to discover new heroes in war stories such as *The Dam busters,*\(^\text{379}\) perhaps if *Moondrop to Gascony* had been written then it would have received the acclaim it deserved.

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\(^{377}\) Ibid. p.122.

\(^{378}\) Ibid. p.243.

The only other auto biography of an SOE agent is *Pauline* which tells the story of Pearl Witherington and was written with the help of the journalist, Herve Laroque. It was published in 1997 and is currently only available in French. Agents also became the subject of biographies: *Jacqueline*, *Christine*, *Madeleine*, *Spy Princess* and two volumes on Nancy Wake have served as well-researched and informative pieces of historical literature. Each written biography has constructed the lives of their subject matter from the outset and the reader is able to put the subject into perspective and to view the agent as a person who had a life before and sometimes after SOE. Such books enable the reader to evaluate the subject’s motives, actions and relationships.

The authors of *Christine*, *Jacqueline* and *Madeleine* were close friends of their subjects and their studies are as much a labour of love as a piece of historical writing. The authors were keen to discover what drove their friends to become SOE agents, what work they pursued and what fate befell them. To this end the books are sometimes shrouded with an air of emotion and personal involvement that make them imbalanced in their depiction of human interest and historical evidence. As such a potential problem with these books is that they are hagiographic.

In the case of Noor Inayat Khan’s biographies the authors fail to make adequate use of the most valuable resource that is available on her life in SOE her 200 page PF and information in Vera Atkins file at the IWM. Combining these two primary sources gives the historian a fascinating, detailed and yet confusing insight into the work of Noor and her subsequent fate at the hands of the Nazis.

There are two books that focus entirely on Noor as the subject matter. The first, written in 1952, was called *Madeleine* by Jean Overton Fuller and uses letters and personal recollections to provide a full and seemingly accurate description of Noor Inayat Khan’s pre war and wartime life. Such is the reputation of the work, that even SOE historian

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381 King, *Jacqueline*.
382 Masson, *Christine*.
383 Overton-Fuller, *Madeleine*.
384 Basu, *Spy Princess*.
386 The latter material was used in the book ‘*A life in Secrets*’ which sets out to discover the work of Vera Atkins and which provides a comprehensive insight into the work that she did to establish the fates of the missing SOE women after the war ended.
MRD Foot quotes it in his official history *SOE in France*. Although a friend, Overton Fuller does not hesitate in including material such as Noor’s security lapses, nor her fragile state of mind.

A more recent book written about Noor is that entitled *Spy Princess* published in 2006. This does not add anything new to Noor’s story and the author repeats many facts that are already in *Madeleine*. The author does not ask questions or challenge frequently held beliefs about Noor, however, as the author is Indian she inspects Noor’s life from an Indian point of view. She frequently mentions Noor’s religion and desire for an independent India. Sharabani Basu also discusses what Noor may have done had she survived. The details of Noor’s death as described by two German guards are also included in this book, although they may be known amongst historians of the subject, this is the first time that the details have been printed in a book with public appeal.

Most biographies of SOE F section women were not written in the immediate post-war era, but their subject matter is one that few have dared to contend. There are tales and fictions that have evolved around these agents, that, even if they are unfounded in the truth the authors dare not contradict as they are so intrinsic to the agents’ construction. It seems that the objectives of these authors was to protect the agents reputations, the nature of the work is therefore to construct the agents in such a way that will ensure that they are looked upon favourably.

Agents also feature in works of fiction. In *A Man Called Intrepid* the author, William Stevenson claimed to have met Noor in India: ‘on a tiger shoot’ and says that he played a role in getting her into SOE. He goes on to describe Noor’s career with a series of startling errors including where she was dropped (he said it was in Le Mans) the name of the network (he cites Physician, she worked for Phono) for and important dates regarding her work, for example he says that both she and the Canadian officer, Pickersgill and MacAlistair were imprisoned in Paris at the same time.

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388 Foot, *SOE in France*.
389 Basu, *Spy Princess*.
390 Overton-Fuller, *Madeleine*.
392 West, N., ‘*Counterfeit Spies*’ (London, 1998). This is an error as the Canadians had been transported by the time Noor arrived at the Avenue Foch.
She is also the subject of a novel entitled *The Tigers Claw*, in which Noor’s relationship with Arnaud (her fictional fiancée) is central. The character of Noor has also had an abortion and much of the text is directed at her unborn child. The story is said to: ‘open[s] a primeval forest – of racism, betrayal, hypocrisy, evils of the war, sexist undergrowth, Sufi universalism, war time espionage, inner conflict, exile and above all love.’\(^{393}\) It is a complex novel and much of it is pure fantasy using Noor’s name, work and death as its basis. There are many other novels that use SOE and SOE agents as their theme, including Alexander Fullerton’s *Rosie Ewing series*\(^{394}\) and Robert Ryan’s series starting with *Early One Morning*.\(^{395}\) However these are novels and are fictitious, and whilst the agents may have inspired them they are not representative of their life or work.

In conclusion; the overall success of SOE in Europe is evident through operations such as the blowing up of the Gorgopotamus Bridge in Greece, the destruction of the heavy water plant in Norway and the assassination of Heydrich in Prague. On occasion these large operations would incur reprisals including executions within the local population or destruction of property and these actions marred the successes. SOE also undertook industrial sabotage and derailments. The former succeeded in reducing the collateral damage and civilian casualties of air raids by undertaking controlled explosions often from within the factory itself, and the latter not only delayed essential supplies to the German army but also lowered their morale.

While some would argue that: ‘as an individual act Resistance was liberating, satisfying and necessary; on a co-ordinate level it seems to have been seldom effective, sometimes stultifying, frequently dangerous and almost always too costly.’\(^{396}\) Others maintain that SOE’s contribution in France was significant and after the war General Eisenhower wrote: ‘Throughout France the Resistance had been of inestimable value in the campaign. Without their great assistance the liberation of France would have consumed a much longer time and meant greater losses to ourselves.’ It was estimated by General Eisenhower, that their efforts in preventing German troops from attacking the Allied invasion forces were the equivalent of 15 Allied divisions. Eisenhower also commented that it was not just the practical assistance that the SOE and Resistance provided that was vital to the liberation but: ‘they had, by their ceaseless harassing activities,

\(^{393}\) http://www.chillibreeze.com/articles/Tiger-Claw.asp.
surrounded the Germans with a terrible atmosphere of danger and hatred which ate into the confidence of leaders and the courage of soldiers.\textsuperscript{397}

In terms of women operatives, the better women agents worked very efficiently given the dangers that they faced not only in the obvious ones such security checks, D/F, capture and imprisonment, but also the unlikely events such as replacing a network leader, sabotage, even illness and childbirth. The weaker agents did not cope so well in these situations and those who failed to observe security such as Noor endangered their own lives as well as those around them. In some agents, such as Odette Wilen, these faults were spotted early and the agents were removed from the situation but others remained in the field and were eventually captured and imprisoned.

The prison experiences of the agents who were captured vary greatly, from the initial relatively humane treatment at Gestapo HQ of Noor Inayat Khan, and Mary Herbert and Blanche Charlet in their respective prisons, to the attempts to scare but not necessarily harm Yvonne Baseden, to the torture and near drowning of Eileen Nearne. This goes to prove that there was no set pattern that the Nazi's followed when it came to suspected SOE agents, and each case was dealt with individually. Noor, Yvonne, and Eileen were deported to Nazi concentration camps. Noor was brutally treated and executed by her guards, whilst Eileen and Yvonne managed to escape - perhaps they too would have been executed had they not got away.

It is noteworthy that some agents’ stories are not as well documented and publicised as others. Few of the names listed above are famous or well known, whilst other agents, notably Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo are folk heroines and part of popular consciousness. The reason for this could be because that:

\begin{quote}
‘at the end of the war Sir Archibald Sinclair revealed in parliament that some young women had been parachuted into France to assist Resistance operations. This precipitated a flurry of excited newspaper comment, and since then official revelations have been few indeed. History and journalism, like nature, abhor a\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{397} Ibid p.408. But with such success again came reprisals and these were ‘even more savage than before’. In March of 1944 an entire Maquis band numbering more than a thousand Resistance members were wiped out in the Haute Savoie region. In July 1944 another Maquis force of similar size was destroyed at Vercors.’
vacuum, and into the vacuum of official silence ghastly imputations about what happened to these girls has been freely inserted by sensation mongers.\textsuperscript{398}

These stories were dominated by betrayal, interrogation, torture, prisons, concentration camps and executions, which, as demonstrated above was not the case for all women agents, some of whom enjoyed a high degree of success whilst in the field and underwent extraordinary experiences as part of their work.

This chapter has demonstrated that the wartime experience of female SOE agents was varied and unique. Their work in the field, roles and prison experiences were all different, some were unexpected and some were occurrences they could not have trained for or planned. Their post-war representation is also very varied, some chose to dwell in the limelight others shied away from it, keeping their experiences to themselves. The television, press and books all contributed to publicising their work: 'Some of these women have received a great deal of attention, much of it ill-informed and ill-intentioned, while many others have been ignored and it is an issue which will be addressed throughout the remainder of this thesis.\textsuperscript{399}

\textsuperscript{398} Foot, \textit{SOE in France}, p.48.
\textsuperscript{399} Foot, \textit{SOE in France}, p.48.
Chapter three
Odette Churchill G.C. - The construction of a post-war heroine

This chapter gives an overview of the ‘popular’ facts and challenges some of the tales that have developed around Odette Churchill and offers an analysis of books about inspired by her. It also demonstrates her influence on her own post-war reconstruction and how she was viewed by the press.

Odette’s story contains a heady mix of populist subjects: glamorous heroine, Nazis, capture, betrayal, torture and concentration camps; making it immediately appealing to journalists, novelists, scholars and the public alike as they are subjects which capture the imagination. These elements are so prevalent and integral to the story that they are visually realised on the front covers to different editions of the 1949 semi-biography Odette by Jerrard Tickell. The first edition from 1949 and published by Pan depicts a man, in Nazi uniform, brandishing a whip, whilst a woman sits on a stool hugging herself and looking away. Their body language showing that he is dominating and intimidating her and she is the victim. The setting is a dark cell, the door is open and the grill is visible, as it is on the front cover for the 1955 version. This time the woman wears a ripped shirt and looks out of the corner of her eye at a SS Officer, his swastika armband is dominant and he too brandishes a whip establishing the victim and captor roles, thus maintaining the theme. The front covers of these two editions belies what is inside the book and therefore making it appealing to the public who are seeking a particular kind of story.
Odette’s story also feeds the British public’s interest with the Second World War. Immediately after the war stories abounded and 60 years on TV programmes, films and books still feed the public’s obsession for the subject. At the time, Odette’s story added to the mix and brought with it new elements, not least the fact she was a mother who had left her children to go and fight for her country. Her story was also remarkable in that wars were typically fought to protect women - not by women.

A combination of these elements gave scope for myths, self-construction and self-publication. Odette was aware of the public’s fascination with her, and the over-dramatised and romanticised story told in Odette fuelled their appetite for her story even more. Perhaps the public did not care that her story was inaccurate in parts, indeed they had no way of knowing. To the public she came to represent something intriguing and exotic. She became a national heroine and it was only those who had been directly involved with the Resistance and SOE who questioned her integrity, because to them it did matter if she was telling the truth or not. To them she was cashing in on something that was at best unsubstantiated or even just not true.

Odette took the opportunity to construct a personal profile for herself as the mother who had been tortured and imprisoned in a concentration camp but who had survived. A woman who had taken the blame, so her colleague and lover would not be harmed and who was now (in the post-war years) engaging in a publicity campaign not for herself but for her fallen comrades to make sure they were never forgotten. Ironically in doing so her story dominated that of others and the fact that she is known and recognised simply as ‘Odette G.C.’ proves how far her fame spread and how much a part of British popular culture her story became.

Although RF section agent Tommy Yeo-Thomas was gazetted for a George Cross (G.C.) only a few months before Odette in 15th February 1946, it was Odette’s G.C. decoration that really caught the public imagination. It seemed that Yeo-Thomas and Odette had suffered similar experiences at the hands of the Nazis; capture, torture and concentration camps, yet, because Odette was a woman: ‘her story managed to capture the popular imagination even more than that of Yeo-Thomas and it was to exert a powerful hold over the British public for generations to come.’

In the years following the Second World War numerous books and films were produced about the SOE. Within months of the end of the war stories of love, heroism, and previously unimagined tortures were being told and re-told through the medium of books and films and the fine line between fact and fiction became blurred. For several reasons; including the lack of official SOE files available in the public domain, the Official Secrets Act, the destruction of many files and the reluctance of some agents to speak publicly about their wartime experiences (contrasted with the eagerness of a few such as George Millar and Odette Churchill), it was easy for the general public to confuse the fiction with the reality.

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3 Mark Seaman, Good thrillers but bad history, War Resistance and intelligence, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 1999). p.121.
4 Yvonne Burney interview 33 Napier Garden, London, 23rd May 2003 and Pearl Cornioley interview Grand Hotel, St Aignan, 3rd June 2003.
This chapter will discuss the development of accounts of the work of the SOE F section agent, Odette Churchill, to demonstrate the difficulty involved in producing an objective version of her work with SOE and life afterwards. She was, and remains, the source of much debate among scholars, because of the claims she made after the war through media publicity and due to the book, and subsequent film Odette. This chapter will also provide a brief list of sources that are relevant to Odette Churchill, and an evaluation of the reliability of the sources taking into account the uniqueness of SOE archives and the semi fictionalised account of Odette’s life in Odette. It will discuss war literature and its intended audience with the intention of placing SOE literature into context in addition to summarising Odette’s work ‘in the field’, her relationship with Peter Churchill, arrest, and incarceration. A section of this chapter will evaluate several claims made by Odette and occurrences in her post-war life, these include; her torture, allegations made by Henri de Maval, a member of the French Resistance regarding Odette’s work and behaviour, Odette’s relationship with MRD Foot and his treatment of her story in his official history SOE in France and Dame Irene Ward’s campaign to strip Odette of her G.C.

Because the events of Odette’s life and work in SOE have become fabricated, I will first outline the facts as they appear in archive material. Odette was born to French parents on 28th April 1912 and grew up in France. In 1931 at the age of 19 she married an Englishman called Roy Sansom, and a year later moved to England with him. By the outbreak of war Roy and Odette had three children and had separated, however Odette maintained her British nationality making her eligible for service with SOE F section.

Following a period of training Odette entered Occupied France on a felucca on 31st October 1942 and was destined for work as a courier in Auxerre. However, some of her papers were delayed and she began to do some work for Peter Churchill, leader of the ‘Spindle’ circuit. Her first task was to take a case of money to Marseilles but, things did not go according to plan. Odette was unable to make her initial contact and waited in

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5 Conversations with MRD foot, Mark Seaman, Ted Harrison and Barry Rolfe.
8 Foot, SOE in France.
9 Foot, SOE in France, Map inserts.
10 Networkoperating in the South of France, networkleader – Peter Churchill, codenamed Raoul.
Marseilles until she was able to meet them, she then had to attend a second rendezvous by which time she had missed her train. Fearing punishment for being out after curfew, Odette stayed overnight in a brothel and returned to Cannes the following day. Upon her return Peter Churchill requested Odette stay and work for him, to which she acquiesced. In early 1943 a message came from London instructing Peter to return to England. A landing ground was established, but, on the night of the pickup it was over-run by Germans - Odette, Peter and two others got away, but had to flee the area. Peter and Odette moved to St Jorioz on the shores of Lake Annecy, and the two worked together until Peter finally returned to London on 14th March 1943.11

During Peter’s absence Marsac (a French member of their former Resistance group) and his secretary were arrested by the Abwehr and taken to Fresnes prison in Paris where they received a visit from Hugo Bleicher, a member of the Abwehr who claimed to be anti-Nazi.12 He told Marsac that if he gave him the name of someone who could assist in getting him to England to discuss ending the war, Marsac could go free. Marsac believed Bleicher to be genuine, and passed on the details of Odette’s Resistance group. Some days later a member of Odette’s group was approached by Bleicher in St Jorioz, who was now calling himself Colonel Henri. Bleicher was introduced to Odette, and he asked her to arrange for him to be sent to England by aircraft so he could try to end the war. She later sent a message to him to say that a Lysander flight was scheduled to land nearby on the night of 18th April 1943, and he could go to London on the return flight, she thought that this would buy her some time and assumed that Bleicher would return to Paris.13

Odette informed London of Bleicher’s existence and was told to: ‘cut all contacts with him.’ She was also told to cut her contacts with the now compromised St Jorioz and Annecy groups. She was to go into hiding across the lake: ‘and they were to find a landing ground

12 The Abwehr was the German intelligence and counter-espionage service. Bleicher was based in France during the war. He also posed as ‘Colonel Henri’ and claimed to be anti Nazi with a desire to defect to the Allies, whilst actually intent on arresting members of the Resistance and SOE. Bleicher destroyed the Free French Interallie network and captured both Roman Sziarnewski and Mathilde Carre, who he persuaded to become a double agent. In March 1943 he arrested André Marsac, of the Carte network, this in turn led to the arrests of Odette Sansom and Peter Churchill. In June 1943 Bleicher also captured Robert Benoist and William Grover-Williams and infiltrated the Prosper network leading to the arrests of Francis Suttill, Gilbert Norman, Jack Agazarian, Yvonne Rudellat and Andrée Borrel. He arrested Henri Frager (head of Donkeyman network) in July 1944. After the war he was arrested by the Dutch and was put on trial and subsequently imprisoned by the Allies. In 1954 his memoirs were published under the title as ‘Colonel Henri’s Story’. Hugo Bleicher, *Colonel Henri’s Story*, (London: Kimber, 1954).
urgently for Peter Churchill who would return at the earliest moment. Odette found the landing ground and told her various colleagues to change location; she stayed put and remained in residence at the Hotel de la Poste, in St Jorioz. On 14th April 1943 the message came through on the BBC ‘messages personnel’s’ that Peter was due to land, London had instructed Odette not to attend. She disobeyed orders and went with three other people to the landing ground to receive Peter Churchill. They both returned to the Hotel de la Poste, Odette still believing they had four days before Bleicher’s return. Bleicher arrested them both the following day. Odette was taken to various prisons including Fresnes, where Bleicher visited her on several occasions and where she was condemned to death. She was then transported via Karlsruhe and arrived at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp on 18th July 1943.

Odette was kept in solitary confinement and received ‘special treatment’ because she was British. The claim she made that she was married to Peter Churchill and that he was Winston Churchill’s nephew paid off, and as a result her death sentence was never carried out. Instead, she was taken by Fritz Sühren, the Commandant of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp and handed over to the Americans. She was repatriated to England on 8th May 1945. In 1945 she was awarded the MBE, and on 20th August 1946 she became the first women to be awarded the George Cross for gallantry. In 1950 she was appointed a Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur for her contribution to the French Resistance movement. She married Peter Churchill in 1947, but they divorced in 1956. Her third husband was Geoffrey Hallowes, a former SOE agent who she married later that year.

In 1950 Jerrard Tickell published a semi-fictionalised book of her life entitled Odette and this was made into a film in 1956, on which Odette herself acted as technical advisor. In 1958 a group of Frenchmen questioned her contribution to the SOE and Resistance during wartime and in the same year MP Dame Irene Ward began an investigation into why she had been awarded the George Cross. Further unease was caused in 1966 with the publication of SOE in France, in which the author MRD Foot insinuated that Odette had not been tortured as she claimed. Odette died on 13th March 1995. Her post-war life was fraught with debates and disputes relating to claims she made about her war work.

\[14\] Ibid.
\[15\] NA, Peter Churchill’s file, HS9/315.
\[16\] Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.121.
and treatment by the Germans. She has become the subject matter for many books and articles, the most relevant of which are discussed in detail below.

This brief overview of sources aims to show how Odette has been treated by various authors over the years and serves to put the rest of the chapter into some historical and literary context. It investigates why several parts of Odette’s story have been fabricated and why an unrealistic image of Odette has developed. This will be achieved by examining several sources: SOE archives released at the National Archives containing Odette’s training reports and post-war interrogation (here in referred to as de brief to avoid confusion), papers and newspaper clippings from SOE escorting officer Vera Atkins file held at the Imperial War Museum, Odette’s entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and several secondary sources including SOE in France, A Quiet Courage and The German penetration of SOE.

The official SOE files are incomplete and therefore this chapter deals with the archives that are currently available, including Odette’s personnel file which was released in 2003. That this file is incomplete has caused some controversy: during her initial interrogation upon repatriation Odette claims she gave a full description of her toe nail removal and a sworn affidavit incriminating several members of SOE F section as being double agents. However, when the file was looked at subsequently these pages were missing which raises questions about whether Odette ever made these statements and why are the pages missing. This supposed incompleteness of the sources highlights the problem of a scholar trying to reconstruct Odette’s SOE career.

Another primary source that is double edged in its usefulness is Odette’s Sound archive at the Imperial War Museum. Penny Starns makes considerable use of this throughout her recent book Odette World War Two’s Darling Spy. As with any oral history source the scholar needs to exercise due caution. The date that the archive was recorded can have some bearing on the information given by the interviewee, hindsight can alter perceptions of events, facts can be changed, taken out or added and scenes may be remembered that did not occur. One instance which causes concern is Odette’s archive is her recollection

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17 Foot, SOE in France.
18 Jones, A Quiet Courage.
19 Jean Overton-Fuller, The German Penetration of SOE (Maidstone: George Mann, 1996).
20 Starns, Odette, p.132.
21 Starns, Odette.
of her time at Fresnes: ‘for six months Henri came to see me every day. He was clever, he used to try and break me down that way. He would say “I went to a beautiful music concert last night and thought of you”. He would describe the music. He said “I am coming to fetch you to take you to Paris; you can have a bath and a good meal”. This recollection is remarkably close in content to the corresponding scene in the film of Odette, so either the film was faithful in its recollection of this event or Odette recalls that scene as being what really happened in her interview.

Odette’s entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography by Lynette Beardwood is neatly written and succinct. The facts are laid out very clearly with no bias or speculation about various events such as Odette’s supposed torture, and unlike other works about Odette, it does not resort to hagiography in any way. The author makes reference to Odette’s pre and post-war life as well as outlining the facts of her wartime career and incarceration utilising various sources including FANY archives and obituaries.

There is a substantial amount of SOE literature that deals with its history and agents, some of these books only give Odette a cursory mention. In The Secret History of SOE Odette is mentioned in a paragraph about Peter Churchill as being: ‘his courier Mrs Odette Sansom G.C.’ and again in a discussion about Henri Bleicher. Her personal story does not feature and this book attempts to discuss the whole war in France in the course of two chapters.

In Inside SOE Odette is mentioned several times, but her story is not told in full as the author believed it: ‘is too well-known to need recounting.’ Instead there is a brief overview of her early work in France and her time in Cannes saying that: ‘Peter Churchill had now become Mr Pierre Chambrum; Odette Sansom was now his wife and it looked more genuine to pose as a happy couple on a winter holiday in Savoy.’ EH Cookridge also states that Odette identified 40 drop zones and that they had many new recruits to
their section. Her feature in this book is brief, little is told of her work and this seems to be something that rarely occurs in accounts of her SOE career.

MRD Foot mentions Odette in two of his books one of which, *SOE in France* will be discussed in depth later, he also alludes to her in *SOE 1940-46* in a discussion about captured agents: ‘sometimes it might be to a captured agent’s advantage to claim a married state that did not exist: Madame Odette Sansom for example, claimed prematurely but wisely to be Mrs. Peter Churchill.’

In books that focus on SOE history Odette is occasionally and briefly mentioned, the reason for this is likely to be that such writings try to deal with and make palatable a mass of information - SOE was large, full of politics, double agents and mistakes and books such as *The Secret History of SOE* and *Inside SOE* chose to deal with these issues as opposed to individual stories. Therefore a trend for books that told the stories of individual SOE personalities developed tangentially and books such as *Death be not proud* *They feared no Evil* and *A Quiet Courage* emerged to inform the public of stories of the women and their heroism.

In *Death be not proud* the author comments upon the book *Odette* and questions why she was treated differently from the other women, and was the only one sentenced to death who survived. However, *Death be not proud* mainly focuses on trying to retrace the last days of the women who died at Natzweiler-Struthof and Odette’s character remains peripheral.

The story of Odette is featured as an entire chapter in *They feared no Evil*. Published in 1976, the author retells Odette’s story and utilises short passages of interview with Odette to verify it. The book is written in a rather sensational manner and the chapter about Odette reads like an abridged version of *Odette*. Another source that uses interviews with

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28 Foot, *SOE in France*.
29 Foot, *SOE 1940-46*.
30 Ibid.
32 Cookridge, *Inside SOE*.
35 Jones, *A Quiet Courage*.
36 Nicholas, *Death be not Proud*.
37 Gleeson, *They Feared no Evil*. 
Odette is *A Quiet Courage*⁴⁸ by Liane Jones, who personally interviewed Odette and formed a friendly relationship with her. This seems to have influenced her investigation as her opinion of Odette is tinged with sympathy rather than objectiveness.

Other books about the women agents do not refer to Odette. *The women who lived for danger* by Marcus Binney makes no reference to Odette.⁴⁹ His book is a series of short biographies about women agents (similar to *They feared no Evil* in its format). Perhaps the author felt that enough was already written about Odette and that other agents should share the limelight, albeit briefly, in his book. However, no mention at all, of the only surviving G.C. recipient is strange and in not writing about Odette, Binney has failed to put the other agents that he writes about into context.

For such a well know SOE character it is noteworthy that until recently the only full-length biography of Odette was the fictionalised version of her story written in 1949. Then, in 2009 *Odette – World War Two’s Darling Spy* was published with the intention of utilising oral archive material and Odette’s personnel file. Penny Starns wrote the biography of Odette including in it passages about her childhood and post-war life as well as her SOE career. Unfortunately the 200 page book does little to add anything new to Odette’s story and is verging on a hagiography. It fails to deal objectively with issues surrounding Odette such as: her affair with Peter saying that: ‘despite the pervasiveness of this myth it has no basis in fact’.⁴⁰ With regards her torture Starns states: ‘it was clearly impossible for anyone to exaggerate the level of torture that Odette [and her fellow comrades] had at the hands of the Gestapo’⁴¹ and regarding her publicity campaign in the post-war years: ‘precisely how Odette was persuaded to enter this media circus is not entirely clear. She was a humble, quiet, charming and unassuming woman.’⁴²

Starns also has a tendency to interpret the sources in such a way as to ensure they comply with her own theories. This is particularly evident in her discussions about Odette and Peter’s relationship. She states that: ‘throughout her time in the field Odette had operated as though she were Raoul’s wife, since couples generally attracted less

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³⁸ Jones, *A Quiet Courage*.
⁴⁰ Starns, *Odette*, p.81.
attention’ but later states that the husband and wife act was their actual cover story and they were only obeying orders by sticking to it.

Starns rigidly believes that the commonly perceived version of Odette’s story is the correct one and does little to question her story or utilise the archives in such a way as to find answers or explanations to the holes in her story. The very title of the book belies what is within its pages *World War Two’s Darling spy*, and unfortunately only serves to perpetuate the confusion surrounding the true facts about Odette Churchill.

An examination of the secondary sources along with those from the National Archives and Imperial War Museum helps to redress the balance, and ascertain to what extent the truth about Odette’s experiences can be established. The confusions about Odette’s story include her recruitment, her work in the field, and her relationship with Peter Churchill, her arrest, torture and release from Ravensbrück Concentration Camp.

Much of the public’s perceived knowledge about this subject area comes from the literature; fictional and non-fictional that was written in the immediate post-war period. This was a time of mass scale production of ‘heroic-triumphalist’ British war films and ‘tie-in’ books, as such the market was inundated with war tales and memoirs, stories of the *Cockleshell Heroes*,43 *The Dam Busters*44 *The Battle of the river plate (the Royal command performance for 1956)* and the RAF pilots such as Douglas Bader in *Reach for the sky*45 were popular with adults and children alike. The heroes of these stories became the heroes of the nation and a trend developed in popular literature and cinema. In the main the subjects of these wartime adventures were men and they achieved heroic status by recounting acts of bravery or courage, their stories made them individuals that the public could admire and allowed the people of Britain to be part of the victory in Europe and the defeat of the Nazis, even those who had not seen active service. These stories allowed the reader to revere the war’s heroes, and to help boost the country’s confidence by reiterating that the war had been worthwhile. They also provided a form of escapism for the reader, by taking them away from their tough post-war existence, and allowing them to share the pride of something extraordinary. The stories effectively gave the

reader and cinema goer an escape from the dullness and greyness post-war Britain in the 1950s.

Finney suggests that: ‘narratives of heroism were fundamental to a national recovery but these mingled with stories of victimhood and martyrdom – even in perpetrator nations, both were needed to provide a mnemonic foundation for the restoration of national pride that yet approximated to lived experiences of the war’.46

This search for a hero may also be attributed to the: ‘shifting sands of the 1950s’, although a materially preferable era, the 1950s did not possess the same certainties as the preceding decade which had the values of self sacrifice and steadfastness. Instead the 1950s saw a devaluing of the pound, losing of colonies and the upsurge of the teenager, these contrasted greatly with the 1940s where Britain: ‘had stood alone,’ had provided ‘the few' and had a true leader in Winston Churchill. The 1950’s were an unsettling time and a harking back to the war seemed natural.

The role of women during wartime differed greatly from the role of men.47 The majority of women who joined the Armed Forces stayed on the home front. Members of uniformed women’s services and those who worked on the home front greatly contributed to the war effort, and although some of them were heroines in their own right, their stories were not on a par with the male dominated ‘war story.’ The women involved in these occupations had not experienced hand-to-hand combat or the full horrors of the battlefield; therefore there was not a female equivalent of the male ‘war hero’ within contemporary thought and writing.

This trend changed with the introduction of stories about SOE agents, in which, (in contrast to most war stories) some of the heroes were actually women. The female characters were not there to provide a love interest or motherly figure (as women were typically presented) they were secret agents infiltrated into Occupied France to fight the enemy. The experience of women matched that of men: women too could be considered war heroes.

The intense interest in SOE seems to have been brought about by the awarding of several decorations to agents, (including the George Cross being awarded to three women agents, two of them posthumously) and the subsequent media publicity in various newspapers. The public seemed to desire more exciting and thrilling stories about SOE and accordingly the national press recorded the lives of particular members of the SOE and presenting them as heroes or even celebrities.\textsuperscript{48} The agents themselves also fuelled the interest in SOE and began to publish their experiences. In 1945 SOE agent George Millar wrote the first personal account of SOE’s work, \textit{Maquis}.\textsuperscript{49} It was an instant success, which, despite paper shortages, was printed into 70,000 hardback volumes by Heinemann, receiving much public and critical acclaim.\textsuperscript{50} General De Gaulle was impressed by the candid nature of the book, saying: ‘this is the truth about the Maquis’ predicting correctly that: ‘the Maquis is something that will be untruer, year-by-year for decades ahead.’\textsuperscript{51}

SOE Headquarters were less enthusiastic about the book, telling Millar that it would have to pass the SOE censors before it was put into print. Vera Atkins, a member of the SOE staff asked Millar: ‘must you write a damned book, it seems rather a cheap idea, as though you did what you did to make money out of it and I know you did not.’\textsuperscript{52} In spite of this \textit{Maquis} is an exciting and realistic account of life in the French Resistance as well as a frank personal account. If this was anything to go by, SOE’s activities would be well recorded and the truth would be widely acknowledged. Fortunately this was true of the next account of SOE life. \textit{Moondrop to Gascony}\textsuperscript{53} by Anne Marie Walters was printed in 1946, just two years after the author’s infiltration into France and has been discussed in detail above.

The next book to be published about a female SOE agent seemed to have instant public appeal; the heroine was Odette Churchill, the book was entitled \textit{Odette} and it was published in 1949 as a partly fictionalised version of the tale of the woman who left behind three young children to become an SOE agent. The book contributed greatly to the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Imperial War Museum, V. Atkins file, Various Newspaper clippings GB62/IWM also Daily Herald, Mon 24\textsuperscript{th} April 1950 and News Chronicle article, undated.
\item \textsuperscript{49} George Millar, \textit{Maquis}, (London: Pan, 1945).
\item \textsuperscript{50} Seaman, \textit{Good Thrillers but bad history}, p.120.
\item \textsuperscript{51} George Millar, \textit{The Road to Resistance}, (London: Pan, 1945).
\item \textsuperscript{52} Seaman, \textit{Good Thrillers but bad history}, p.120.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Walters, \textit{Moondrop to Gascony}.
\end{itemize}
confusion and fictions that surround Odette's experiences and was responsible for creating a construction of her that is difficult to challenge.

The increasing interest in SOE had attracted the attention of War Office publicist Jerrard Tickell and, fuelled by Peter Churchill's insatiable desire to be in the spotlight, Tickell began to write a book about Odette's experiences. She had first come to the public's attention when she received her George Cross in August 194654 the citation for which was printed in several newspapers of the day and: 'the interest was fuelled rather than sated by the publication in 1949 of her story Odette - it seemed to have instant public appeal, in an era when there was a: 'popular movement to establish gallant, pure war heroines'.55 The heroine of his book was an ordinary mother who suffered at the hands of the Nazis, but who miraculously survived and came home to tell the tale. Although fictionalised and hagiographic, Odette was and still is marketed as a biography. The book became a best seller, sold over 500,000 copies and had four impressions printed within a year.56 The fact that the book was made into a successful film in 1950 highlights her popularity and ensured that Odette Churchill became a household name. The film will be discussed at some length later.

The book received rave reviews and write ups: on the cover to Odette Compton McKenzie wrote: ‘Nobody who claims to be living rather than existing in this crucial time of ours can afford not to read this book’ 57 and John Gordon of the Sunday Express wrote: ‘I confess I could not lay it down. The story of what Odette endured makes the most moving narrative of all the war memoirs I have read.’58 But, not all were so keen, in his annotated bibliography in SOE in France Foot writes of Odette: ‘a popular and partly fictionalised life of Mrs Sansom. Also accurate in parts.’ Foot takes the book at face value, he recognises its appeal but also states in a round-about way that because it is: ‘accurate in parts’ it must be inaccurate in others.59 Other scholars such as Mark Seaman (historian at the Cabinet Office) believe that: ‘the book reads like a novel and is imbued with hagiographic emphasis that is on occasion all but overwhelming.’60

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54 George Cross Citation published in The London Gazette, 16th August 1946.
55 Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.7.
56 Starns, Odette, p.125.
57 Tickell, Odette, Quoted on the frontispiece.
58 Tickell, Odette, Quoted on the frontispiece.
59 Foot, SOE in France, p.463.
60 Seaman, Good thrillers but bad history, p.121.
Another contemporary writer, Elizabeth Nicholas, found *Odette*: ‘an idea that was far from complete; it was an impression merely, a veneer laid over a world that was in reality dark, devious and confused.'\(^6\) She went on to say that: ‘there was no inkling of the cold and dreadful world of subterfuge and deception, treachery and counter treachery, espionage and counter espionage in which the agent, in reality lives; a world in which many strange and devious forces are inextricably locked.'\(^6\) She found *Odette* romanticised and diluted, it lacked the reality of the real world of SOE and in the parts where the horrors are depicted such as torture and Ravensbrück Concentration Camp; it is over the top and resorts to stereotyping. Nicholas also points out, the idea of: ‘deception’ and ‘treachery’ (i.e a traitor in England) is barely touched upon, and yet became a big part of Odette’s claims after the war. Even so, Nicholas did not find the book a comfortable read, and was: ’provoked ...rather against my will, into thought.’\(^6\) What she learned through *Odette* prompted her own research and writings into Diana Rowden and the other women of SOE who had not come back. Through her newly acquired knowledge of SOE she was able to: ‘fill in the background’ which Tickell failed to achieve.\(^6\)

Liane Jones also found the same problem when referring to *Odette* that the: ‘book[s] whetted my appetite, not so much by what they told me but by what they did not tell me...[they] were highly coloured and dashing; they contained little reflection and very few of the insights which I sought.’\(^6\)

The 'background' is merely that in Tickell’s book, he does not say much about SOE and F section as he focuses far more on Odette’s character, and emphasises her ‘female’ qualities rather than her qualities as a secret agent. The latter chapters that graphically describe her torture and imprisonment effectively set Odette upon a pedestal. Whereas most women involved in war work had remained in the relative safety of England, Odette had stepped beyond the norm. She went behind the lines in Occupied territory and had extraordinary experiences. Her story was remarkable as she was in the minority for being a woman who had seen active service during the war and for experiencing life at the hands of Nazis. Odette represented women in a society where men were predominant

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\(^{61}\) Nicholas, *Death be not Proud*, p.31.
\(^{62}\) Ibid.
\(^{63}\) Ibid.
\(^{64}\) Ibid.
and effectively held the monopoly of war heroism, and interestingly the book was written by a man, as Jones said: ‘I felt sure if the women themselves had told their stories, I should have read something very different.’

Odette did assist with writing the book by relaying her memories to the author. Colonel Maurice Buckmaster also contributed his thoughts and memories, although it became clear later, in his own writings, that Buckmaster had a tendency to mix fantasy and reality, and was prone to getting dates and places wrong. It would seem that the aim of getting Odette and Buckmaster involved was to add authenticity and gravitas to the story and presumably ensure that Odette was satisfied with whatever was written about her, albeit the truth or a fabricated version. (Her later response to written pieces not authenticated by her was unfavourable, as demonstrated by her reaction to SOE in France).

In the preface to Odette the author makes reference to the fact that he had accessed War Office files and, as a result, wireless messages, training notes and other such information are quoted in the book. This was unusual so soon after the war and as War Office publicist Tickell was privileged to gain such information. It is doubtful that he had access to anything of any particular consequence, as the files about agents were not available to the public, therefore, the references used in Odette are unremarkable in their content as such they do not highlight any personality flaws, but neither do they paint a glowing picture of her. Below are a few examples that are quoted in Odette and an explanation of why they may have been included:

‘She has enthusiasm and seems to have absorbed the teaching given on the course. She is however, impulsive and hasty in her judgements and has not quite the clarity of mind which is desirable in subversive activity.’ This quote highlights Odette’s character flaws and also shows that SOE instructors did not necessarily hold in her in high regard at this stage of her training. It does however contradict an earlier character trait, where Odette took a rather long time to decide whether or not to join SOE at all:

‘She seems to have little experience of the outside world. She is excitable and temperamental, although she has a certain determination.’ The fact that Odette shows

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66 Ibid.
67 Foot, SOE in France.
'determination' is a characteristic that will endear her to the reader, she will not give up and is eager to do her bit for the war effort:

'Her main asset is her patriotism and keenness to do something for France; her main weakness is a complete unwillingness to admit she could ever be wrong.'68 This quote will also appeal to the reader as it makes Odette seem exotic and adventurous; a French woman willing to risk everything for her country. The above material forms part of Odette Churchill’s personnel file held at the National Archives.69 Further evidence that he had access to files is demonstrated in Death be not proud with regards to Diana Rowden: ‘interesting that the Christian name of her cover name was Juliette, for this was the code name Jerrard Tickell gave her in Odette, instead of her true code name of Paulette, he must, it seems, have had access to official files in respect of other women – including Diana- as well as those of Odette herself.’70

The author also makes a rather grudging reference to members of the SS who filled in the: ‘many sinister gaps in the story.’71 These claims are more difficult to substantiate. With acknowledgements such as these the reader could be forgiven for assuming that what they are reading is factually correct. Unfortunately, this is not entirely the case, poetic license is frequently employed and Odette often verges on hero-worship.

However, Odette was written as a fictionalised biography and apparently the main objective of this book was to excite rather than offer historical accuracy. However, it should be noted that the book was written at a time when official files were still closed, making it impossible for an author or film maker to relate a more archivally grounded set of narratives. Fiction was therefore unavoidable and was the only medium by which to construct the narratives and heroic presentations of the SOE and its female agents who went into France and fascinated the 1950s audience. In the post-war era these films filled a blocked space within commemoration which would later be filled by film makers, novelists and TV documentaries which could offer a more comprehensive and nuanced accounts of the women of SOE.

70 Nicholas, Death be not Proud, p.60.
71 Tickell, Odette, p.9.
On the other hand, Tickell and the others involved may never have intended the book to be read for anything other than recreation and pleasure. In the aftermath of the Second World War the government had the task of getting women to leave their wartime jobs so that the returning soldiers could have their jobs back, expecting women to go back to their pre-war duties at hearth and home. Women were expected to forget the liberty they had found during the war and to return to their jobs as housewives and mothers. These women may have turned to a book like *Odette* for a bit of excitement and escapism, and would have found within its pages a woman they could, to a certain extent empathise with. For the opening scene of the book Tickell chose a monumental moment - the announcement of the outbreak of war. This scene would resonate with those who experienced the radio broadcast which, presumably, would include the majority of those who read *Odette*. Using this event would allow the reader to identify with the character of Odette: ‘sick at heart, Odette pressed a frock for her daughter and answered the door to the grocer…Francoise must still be taken to school, Lily must sail her boat round the pond and Marianne continue to throw everything out of her pram as soon as it was picked up.’

At this point Odette fits into the stereotypical role of housewife as constructed by 1940s society. Her activities are routine, focusing on her family and caring for her home. She behaves as society would expect of any woman, and one that behaved differently would be regarded as unusual. Because of this ‘construct’ it would seem, certainly from Tickell’s point of view that most mothers and housewives in Britain would identify with Odette’s reaction to the outbreak of war and with her thoughts and feelings. Instantly they have a connection with her and can imagine themselves in her predicament. Tickell achieves a most important emotional response from his readers – empathy.

He has carefully created a character that from the outset is likeable, easy to identify with and who is initially unremarkable. Odette has three children and a house, she carefully weighs up her responsibilities before accepting war work away from home, she thinks of her children and their future and ultimately she leaves them in order to protect them - all predicaments that many mothers during the war may have experienced to some extent with evacuation and war work. In the character of Odette the reader had found someone they could relate to, therefore as the tragedy unfurls the reader is swept along with it.

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72 Tickell, *Odette*, p.23.
Through Odette the reader was offered a different aspect of the War, the emotive way in which it is written makes the book moving and emotionally engaging, however, the reader could not be sure that Odette was historically factual and probably did not care. Indeed, what Odette Churchill ‘endured’ is the main component of the book that ensured its success and appeal to the post-war audience, it also contributed to the image and mythology that became Odette. Her extraordinary tale was ample to ensure that she was the heroine of many 1950s housewives, who grew to admire her courage, endurance and to believe that she was the greatest war heroine of them all. Odette certainly ensured she was the most famous of them all until the story of Violette Szabo G.C. – Carve her name with Pride was published in 1956.

Until the post-war period the war story had been aimed at a male audience, but Odette was aimed at a wider audience, which encompassed women as well as men. It differed from the typical war story as it had a new element: it did not deal with battlefield heroism. It dealt in the pain inflicted on an individual; Odette describes torture that is deliberately inflicted by one human being onto another, in this case by a man on a woman. The themes of torture, brutality and the mal-treatment of women were unfamiliar and therefore shocking. Up until this point the theme of torture was generally an unfamiliar one in literature of this type, and it was alien to the majority of cinema audiences. The fact that torture is featured in Odette has contributed to the greatest controversy that arises from her story: that she was tortured by the Gestapo. It is the most disputed and contested part of Odette Churchill’s story, the evidence to support the fact that she was tortured is mixed and at best unreliable. Below is an examination of some of the evidence surrounding Odette’s torture which will demonstrate how it has become part of her construction.

In her SOE de-brief dated 12th May 1945, Odette states her: ‘first interrogation was rather like visiting a psychiatrist’ she was told that the Gestapo: ‘had ways and means of making her speak.’ The actual torture was carried out when:

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73 Rubeigh James Minney, Carve her name with pride, (London: Pan, 1956).
74 Wilcox, Odette, 1950.
75 Discussed at length with Pearl Cornioley, Yvonne Burney, Mark Seaman and MRD Foot.
77 Ibid.
'A Frenchman came into the room, and they made Source [Odette] sit on a chair and the tall thin interrogator held Source’s hands behind her back. The Frenchman then burned Source on the shoulder, with what she did not know... They then left Source alone for a while and the tall thin man said he would think of something else that might make her talk'.

It is notable that she does not mention the toenail removal which later became synonymous with her construction. Starns attempts to explain this: ‘unbeknown to the international heroine...certain sections of her SOE personnel file had mysteriously disappeared. These sections included a substantial part of her debriefing interrogation, where she described her toenail torture’. This is reiterated in a letter written by Lt. Col. Boxhall in 1966:

'It is unfortunate that part of the interrogation of Odette Sansom dated 12th May 1945, and the shorter interrogation on her return of the same date are incomplete. There has clearly been removed from the main document at folio 326 certain pages at the end...Admittedly the reference to the removal of her toenails by the Nazis would have appeared in the middle of the interrogation if it had been dealt with in the normal order.'

In *SOE in France* Foot notes that Odette did not refer to this incident in her interrogation, although he does quote a Doctor’s report which states: ‘the nails on her toes were missing’. Starns also states that: ‘substantial medical evidence [however] did support Odette’s version of events. It took three years for her toenails to grow back and a medical officer confirmed in writing that they had indeed been ripped from their beds' and Jones

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78 Ibid.
79 Starns *Odette*, p.132.
80 Starns, *Odette*, p.158. Letter to Col Boxhall of the treasury dated 18th April 1966.Boxhall was SOE advisor to the Foreign and Commonwealth office after SOE was disbanded. The last page of Odette’s folio is page 22 and ends mid sentence ‘they were to be...’ The section that mentions the burning is on page 13 and if Odette had given her statement in chronological order the part relating to her toe nail removal should still be there.
82 Starns, *Odette*, p.148. No source is stated making this reference difficult to substantiate
states: ‘[he] began with a pair of pliers, to pull out her nails one by one’. Odette’s G.C citation also refers to her toenail removal as does her oral archive at IWM.

By contrast, on 1st May 1966 a *Sunday Times* article questioned whether or not Odette had her toenails removed. The article highlights the fact that no one from 84 Avenue Foch was put on trial for torturing a woman. Also that fellow prisoner Laura le Bras had stated in *L’Express* that: ‘she was convinced Odette had never been tortured,’ a theory that is re iterated by prison chaplain, Father Steinhardt who also had: ‘no recollection of seeing Odette under the influence of torture at Fresnes or bearing signs that her toenails had been ripped out’ and he: ‘never saw any sign of injury or blood on Odette’s nails.’

Despite Odette’s claim that she was tortured, records of her interrogations also indicate that physical violence was not used: ‘On 11th November Source was again interrogated at the Avenue Foch...the interrogation was short and lasted for about an hour’ and ‘...Henri [Bleicher] came and visited Source...after a short time Raoul was brought into the room. Raoul was there about one and a half hours and a general conversation took place’.

It would seem on some occasions that she was treated very leniently, for example on one occasion some women in the prison at Fresnes were making some noise: ‘Two men and two SS women came to Source’s room, pulled Source out of bed, and one of the women smacked Sources face twice’. The next day Odette demanded to see the Captain in charge: ‘...the Captain was full of apologies and did not want Source to think ill of all Germans’. He also moved her to a new cell as she looked ill. These actions do not fit with the stereotypical image of the sadism associated with the treatment of female SOE prisoners in captivity or with Odette’s construction of her torture.

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83 Jones, A Quiet Courage, p.299. Liane Jones spent much time with Odette whilst researching and writing her book, *A Quiet Courage*; however, regrettably, she does not refer to any contemporary written evidence regarding the toenails and her version is anecdotal.

84 ‘the Gestapo tortured her most brutally to try to make her give away [this] information. They seared her back with a red-hot iron and, when that failed, they pulled out all her toenails. Mrs Sansom however refused to speak.’ It is unclear where the evidence for the citation came from, but some information was supplied by Buckmaster for her recommendation for an MBE. G.C citation dated 20th August 1946.

85 ‘Having torn out my toenails, they were going to do my fingers, but they were stopped, the commandant came in and said ‘stop’ and then they would burn my back’ IWM Sound archive, London, Odette Sansom, 9478 A (31st October 1986).

Her torture has become a lasting part of her construction. Even without conclusive evidence it crops up time and again in literature and websites relating to SOE women.\textsuperscript{87} The topic of Odette’s torture was frequently seen in the press in the immediate post-war years. Her citation was widely quoted and interviewers fought their way to her front door to obtain interviews. The press repeatedly reported that she refused: ‘to betray her comrades despite brutal Nazi torture\textsuperscript{88} and that she had: ‘her toenails torn off and her body seared by a red hot poker.\textsuperscript{89} These articles repeated the story of Odette’s torture so many times that it became part of popular folklore, and the truth of the matter became irrelevant.

The matter of her torture continued to be repeated throughout her life, and even her obituaries refer to it without question or doubt: ‘she endured excruciating torments including having her toenails pulled out (for a year after her homecoming she could not wear shoes and had to walk on her heels until several operations restored her to normal mobility)\textsuperscript{90} and: ‘Odette had a frightful time as a prisoner. Bleicher and his Italian army companions treated her properly; the Gestapo in Paris did not. They tortured her, horribly; but they got nothing useful out of her.’\textsuperscript{91} The New York Times also reported her death and said that ‘Mrs. Hallowes said her back was burned with a hot iron and her toenails wrenched out, but she refused to identify two agents sought by the Gestapo’ thus subtly insinuating that it may not have occurred.\textsuperscript{92}

These articles highlight the issue that whether or not the torture actually took place, the public were led to believe that it did happen and that Odette’s version of events as portrayed repeatedly by the British press was accurate. Even those who did question it did so very late in the day and not whole heartedly as demonstrated in the New York Times obituary. This demonstrates that as long as the story is repeated the public will believe it happened regardless of what the evidence suggests.

\textsuperscript{87} See Gleeson, They feared no Evil, p.144 and http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/SOEsansom.htm.
\textsuperscript{88} William O’Brien, The Daily Sketch, 21\textsuperscript{st} August, 1946.
\textsuperscript{89} Cecil Wilson, The Daily Mail, 2\textsuperscript{nd} October 1950.
\textsuperscript{90} The Times, 17\textsuperscript{th} March 1995.
\textsuperscript{91} MRD Foot, The Independent, 17\textsuperscript{th} March 1995.
\textsuperscript{92} New York Times, 21\textsuperscript{st} March 1995.
The paragraph relating to Odette’s incarceration and torture in the official history *SOE in France* caused much controversy:

‘Stories of torture come from the prurient imaginations of authors anxious to make their books sell, apparently with one exception, the story that Mrs Sansom had all her toenails pulled out at the Avenue Foch. She did return from Germany with some of her toenails missing, unfortunately her experiences in Ravensbrück had induced in her a state of nervous tension so severe that she had considerable difficulty for many months in distinguishing fantasy and reality, and it is likely enough that she got the two confused in trying to give her honest account of what she had been through’.  

And: ‘it is neither charitable nor magnanimous to complain as some brave men and some vindictive gossips do that her G.C. should never have been given to her.’

Foot claims that Odette Churchill may not have undergone the tortures as described in the book or film *Odette*; he believes she was ‘confused.’ Where he got the evidence to support such a statement is unclear as Foot did not speak to Odette about her experiences before writing his book. Odette’s reaction to Foot’s comments was unfavourable. It was generally believed that when writing *SOE in France* Foot had unlimited access to files, but very limited access to the agents themselves. When I interviewed him on 14th January 2003 he denied this, claiming that he could interview whom he liked. Why then did he not take the opportunity to approach Odette to discuss his interpretations with her prior to publication and avoid any confusion. Odette was angry that he had not interviewed her, saying that: ‘if he had something critical to say about me, some comments to make about my personality, then surely he should have seen me before publishing this book.’

A public dispute ensued and Odette made several national statements in the broadsheets. Even Anna Neagle who had played the title role in the film wrote a letter to *The Times* on 28th April 1966:

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93 Foot, *SOE in France*, p.431.
94 Ibid.
95 Interview with MRD Foot, Saville Club, January 14th 2003.
96 Ibid.
97 IWM, Vera Atkins file, *Daily Express*, 26th April 1966, GB62/IWM.
Sir – knowing Odette probably better than anyone outside of her own family, and having covered the ground of her activities, including the room at the Gestapo headquarters where she was tortured, and having met her contacts in France, many of whom believing her to be dead wept when they saw her, I can vouch for her sense of balance and realistic candour and burning integrity. Toenails pulled out, red-hot poker on her spine and tuberculosis in Ravensbrück: is that fantasy or reality?98

Neagle and Odette had become friends during the making of the film. Neagle must have shared moments of intimacy with Odette as she tried to recreate the life of this woman under the Gestapo and in a concentration camp. No doubt, emotions ran high during filming, and although Neagle’s letter to the newspaper is touching, it does not prove that any of these events actually occurred, it does however express her understanding of the situation and attempts to act as a character reference.

Other newspapers rallied to support Odette, reporting that: ‘Mrs Hallowes G.C. who was refused an advance copy by the Stationery Office said she had been embarrassed by critical reference in the book read to her by reviewers.’99 Foot responded that: ‘I am sorry that Mrs Hallowes has only had extracts read out to her, I believe out of context’ adding that: ‘there will be thousands who will say why did not he come to me, Mrs Hallowes is one. But I only had two years to complete a history of the whole of SOE’.100 Foot correctly points out that Odette was effectively one of many who had not been approached, but by now the press were so used to backing her that, in this debacle, it found another chance to put Odette in the spotlight and depict her as the innocent victim.

A sensational article in The Sunday Express states that: ‘although a foreigner by birth, she volunteered for dangerous work against the Nazis. For our sake she endured torture by the Gestapo. For our sake she underwent all the horrors of Ravensbrück concentration camp. What return have we made? Well, our government has just issued a book which says in effect that she allowed her affection for a man to get in the way of duty. It hints that she revelled in a life of luxury while others were in danger. And although she is still

98 IWM, Vera Atkins file, The Times, 28th April 1966, GB62/IWM.
100 The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post, 26th April 1966.
living it quotes confidential papers to suggest that she went through some bouts of mental illness after the war and that, as a result, part of her story is fantasy not fact... This article reiterated that Odette was beyond criticism and doubt, according to the press her story was true and they would defend her again and again.

It was argued in The Sunday Times on 1st May 1966 that Foot was not making disparaging comments about Odette but about the: ‘sensationalised accounts of others of her sufferings.’ The article was referring to the fact that Father Steinhardt who was chaplain at Fresnes said he never saw evidence of torture on Odette contradicting the book by Tickell which contains several passages where he is supposed to tend to her after her toenail removal. This article is unique in that it examining all the evidence, however, it does still conclude that there is: ‘no doubt that she was tortured by the Germans’.

Foot was also given the opportunity to defend himself and blamed the press for sensation mongering saying that: ‘distress has been inflicted on several people by exchanges with the press and on television that should never have started had the book been read as a whole’. He stated that: ‘I would have naturally been happy to enrich and improve it [the book] by seeing many more people that I did, but it seemed more important to get it published at all, while people were still alive to comment...as it is my list of sources and people seen has a big double gap: hardly any Frenchmen and not very many French archives...the French have shelves full already of books on their own work in Resistance; books with a common gap of their own – hardly any reference to SOE. This gap at least can now be filled.

Odette’s fury at the publishing of SOE in France was also made very public, and prompted letters to the press by members of the public keen to protect Odette’s reputation: ‘Sir...to prevent the perpetuation of the official slurs on Mrs Odette Hallowes and the late Mrs Violette Szabo G.C. be more effectually realised by the Stationery Office being required to print and send to all know buyers of Mr MRD Foot’s volume, corrigenda slips to be pasted

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101 The Sunday Express, 1st May 1966.
104 Resistance author hits at critics, unknown date and paper.
over the offending passages? This one letter demonstrates the public support towards Odette over the scandal and their belief that Foot was in the wrong.

Odette attempted to sue Foot, but the case was resolved in an out of court settlement which resulted in a revised version of *SOE in France* being published in 1968. The substituted paragraph in this publication reads: ‘terrible things were done to Mrs Sansom in the Avenue Foch, including burning her near the shoulder blade...Mrs Sansom’s heroic silence received the exceptional distinction of the George Cross, of which she is the sole surviving woman holder.’

Foot retracted his former remarks about Odette’s torture, saying that Odette was tortured and retracts any allusions to the contrary. He still tacitly maintains that he does not believe the toenail story by failing to mention it altogether. He mentions her George Cross, observes that she held out under duress by saying: ‘those tortures were wholly useless; as is proved by the survival of Rabinovitch and Cammaerts’ and he also demonstrates a new found respect for his subject by calling her Mrs Sansom (all the other women agents are called by their first names in his book).

Following on from Odette’s torture is the construction of her incarceration at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp. After the arrest of Peter and Odette, they were separated, Odette was sent to Fresnes prison and she frequently visited 84 Avenue Foch, the Gestapo headquarters, where she claims to have been tortured. After several weeks Odette was taken to Karlsruhe where she remained from 12th May to 25th July 1944 – when she left and: ‘travelled in convoy with Andréé Borrel, Martine Dussautoy, Vera Leigh, Eliane Plewman, Dianne Rowden, Yvonne Unternahrer and one other...’ (later identified as Noor Inayat Khan).

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106 Interview with MRD Foot, Saville Club, January 14th 2003.
107 Foot, *SOE in France*.
On arrival at Ravensbrück Odette was treated as any other inmate stripped and examined: by SS Doctors and dentists, she was then: ‘put into an underground dark cell as a punishment‘ this was away from the others and in solitary. There was no bed, table, chairs, light or windows. In Odette her solitary imprisonment is described thus:

‘she stepped into a cell whose darkness was opaque. She had to feel her way with her foot and she stretched out her hands before her like the sightless so as not to walk into the far wall…for three months, eleven days, for two thousand four hundred and seventy two hours, she was to live in a darkness only broken and made more intense by the brief and blinding visits from her jailor‘.

In her evidence at the first Ravensbrück-Prozess in Hamburg on December 16th 1946 Odette answered the following questions about her confinement:

‘Q: Will you describe to the court your cell in the underground part of the bunker, in the basement?

A: It was a small room of about ten feet by six, very dark, and in it I had a wooden bunk with some straw, two rugs, the usual table against the wall and a wooden stool.

Q: How long did you spend in this cell in the basement?
A: Three months and a week.

In SOE in France Foot writes of Odette’s treatment: ‘she was kept for many months on end in solitary confinement in a small concrete cell, hard by the execution ground where every day the sound of shots would tell her that her enemies had killed some more of her allies. In moods of sadism or Anglophobia her captors would starve her, or subject her to extremes of light or darkness, heat or cold; in occasional moods of sycophancy they would feed her up and cosset her.’

This story is re-iterated through Odette’s own oral
archive and interviews relayed in *A Quiet Courage*. This treatment is also reiterated by Genevieve De Gaulle, a Resistance member and niece to General De Gaulle who was also put into solitary confinement in the bunker at Ravensbrück: ‘there’s no blanket, no mattress, bread is given out every three days, soup every five…”

Also from this cell Odette could hear the screams of other prisoners: ‘now and then she could hear women being brought into the next door cell and horribly beaten.” This was common practice in the Zellenbau or jail, one woman testified that: ‘there was the notorious and much feared beating rack in a room in the Ravensbrück detention building. Hilde was pulled across it naked...two ‘bought inmates’ gave her a beating. She was given 25 strokes ‘on the arse’ *(officialise!)* and on her abdomen while the clock was running’ and another woman who was sentenced to 25 strokes twice over: ‘…was ordered to count the strokes out loud, but I only made it to eleven.” To be in a cell near to these beatings was, in itself mental torture and was most likely deliberately inflicted by her guards. In the Zellenbau at Ravensbrück today there is an interpretation panel detailing the type of treatment carried out there which supports Odette’s claims of darkness, a plank and fluctuation in heat: ‘the commandant was authorised to put prisoners in solitary confinement on bread and water....the windows of the cells were sometimes blacked out and the prisoners had to sit in complete darkness’ and ‘the guards in the cell buildings were able to further aggravate the conditions of the prisoners by individually adjusting the heating and water supplies in the cells.’ Prisoners were sometimes submitted to: ‘aggravated detention’ which could ‘last up to six weeks in a blacked out cell with full rations of food and drink only every four days’.

Another prisoner who experienced a similar treatment to Odette was Maria Fischer, a communist from Frankfurt who was put in the Zellenbau. She said that:

‘I was then put in a dark cell in the notorious prison. I had nothing to eat for the first three days and no bed for three weeks. I had to spend nights either lying on the ground or sitting on the stool bolted to the floor with my head resting on the

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118 Interpretation panels in the Zellenbau at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp National Memorial as of January 2009.
table. For three weeks I was given two thin covers. On day four, after being interrogated, I had a midday and evening meal comprising a watery soup. Then nothing for the next three days. And then all over again...after five months I was released from the cell back into the camp, half insane and with acute pyelitis.\textsuperscript{119}

These punishments resemble what Odette claims to have been subjected to, and substantiate her claim. It also seems from these statements that Odette’s cell was in the Zellenbau, not the punishment block. This was a different building, as stated in the interrogation of Dorothea Binz, a female SS guard: ‘The bunker was a proper concrete bunker and the punishment block was an ordinary block.’\textsuperscript{120} It also had a different purpose: ‘unlike the jail the punishment block was comparable to a courthouse jail, this was where inmates ended up who were found guilty of disciplinary offences or theft or who rebelled or in some way contravened the rules of the camp system.’\textsuperscript{121}

As a result of the treatment Odette received she is said to have developed several medical conditions, including TB and is quoted in \textit{A Quiet Courage} as saying: ‘I had TB and I’d read a book written by a Belgian Doctor before the war – which said the treatment for TB was all wrong; you should starve yourself and clean your body…And I thought, well I’m starving alright! I’ve got nothing to do... And that’s what I did, and by the time I came back there was a scar on my lungs but no active TB.’\textsuperscript{122} Whether or not Odette had TB is debatable. According to the evidence in her PF, she was given an X-ray after which she was told she had TB, but after insisting on viewing the plates for herself: ‘it was apparent that she did not have TB.’\textsuperscript{123} She was however given infrared treatment, vitamins and moved to a fresh cell. Her Doctor’s report on repatriation does not mention TB.\textsuperscript{124}

Odette was moved from her cell in the Zellenbau to: ‘a fresh one’\textsuperscript{125} which was near number two crematorium and which was: ‘full of dust and hair’. She claimed to hear screaming women being taken into the crematorium and believed that they were burned

\begin{footnotes}
\item[119] Krause, \textit{Through the eyes of survivors}, p.52.
\item[120] Information from Janna Löike, Ravensbrück Memorial Site. After the description Odette gave about the cells and the location of the building she calls “bunker” Alyn Beßmann (scientific assistant for the Zellenbau exhibition in Ravensbrück) also concluded that Odette was definitely speaking of the Zellenbau.
\item[121] Ibid, p.29.
\item[122] Jones, \textit{A Quiet Courage}, p.307.
\item[123] NA, Odette Churchill, HS9/648/4, p.22.
\item[124] Geneviève De Gaulle was also suffering from a ‘sharp pain below my right lung’ and was given ‘four tablets to take during the next two days and I can remain on my mattress’.
\item[125] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
alive: ‘The guards had opened a small gap in my cell window to let in some air. The ashes of the dead seeped into the cell every day. My cell was covered with pieces of hair and cinders of the crematorium. I did not see victims but I heard them, I heard everything.’ \(^\text{126}\) The fact that Odette witnessed this made her invaluable at the Ravensbrück War Trials held in Hamburg in December 1946 at which she was questioned:

JUDGE ADVOCATE Q: And after the three months and a week were you taken up to a cell on the ground floor - The same building?
A: In the same building.

Q: Was the cell on the ground floor any better or any worse than the cell you have described previously?
A: Much better.

Q: In which respect?
A: I had a bed for one thing and light...

Q: Was there a window?
A: Yes, a small window.

Q: Could you see out of the window?
A: Yes.

Q: What did you see when you looked out of that window?
A: I could see the crematoriums and the building outside the crematorium.\(^\text{127}\)

_The Times_ newspaper reported that: ‘Mrs Sansom said that she saw screaming and struggling women dragged to the crematorium. Doors opened, the women disappeared, and then the doors closed again. She heard more screams and then there was silence. The women did not come out again. Mr C.L Stirling, the Judge Advocate General saying

\(^{126}\) IWM Sound archive, London, Odette Sansom, 9478 A (31\textsuperscript{st} October 1986).

\(^{127}\) NA, Ravensbrück-Prozess in Hamburg, WO 235/305, 16\textsuperscript{th} December 1946.
that the witness had made a most serious accusation, asked whether she swore that the women were burnt alive. She replied that all she could swear to was she saw them taken to the crematorium.\textsuperscript{128} Also present at the war trails was Odette’s biographer Tickell: ‘researching his book’ and: ‘keeping the chaps and chapesses perpetually entertained.’\textsuperscript{129}

One more, intrinsic part of Odette’s construction is her adoption of the name ‘Churchill’ which famously won her freedom. In \emph{Odette} she had told her captors that she and Peter were married, in a conversation from \emph{Odette} Bleicher says to her: ‘you told the Italians that you and Raoul were married and that your real name was Mrs Peter Churchill. That is [also] untrue.’\textsuperscript{130} Even if it is true that Bleicher believed this to be ‘untrue’ other Germans prison officers found Odette’s story convincing.

In \emph{SOE in France } MRD Foot states that: ‘Mrs Sansom was given special treatment at Ravensbrück – sometimes specially severe, occasionally specially mild; the Germans had got it into their heads that she was Winston Churchill’s niece by marriage and therefore kept a particular eye on her.’\textsuperscript{131} This story is reiterated in a sworn affidavit from Fritz Sühren, the Commandant of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp. From this it is clear that he believed that Odette was a relative of Winston Churchill: ‘One of the inmates of the camp was a French woman called Edith [sic] Churchill, who claimed to be a cousin of the Prime minister, Winston Churchill.’\textsuperscript{132} That Sühren believed Odette seems clear and could explain why he chose to take her to the Americans – he had nothing to gain at the time he gave this statement, he was a captive and about to undergo a trial for war crimes. Her account is further validated by that of Genevieve De Gaulle whose story was similar to her own. She was kept in solitary, moved to a fresh cell when she was too ill to remain in the bunker and released as a result of her name: ‘De Gaulle, Himmler himself ordered her to remain alive so she could be used as a pawn and Sühren took great care in a ensuring she was kept in reasonable health, giving her vitamins, warm clothing and work in the infirmary’.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{128} The Times, 17\textsuperscript{th} November 1946 p.3.
\textsuperscript{129} Helm, \textit{A life in secrets}, p.306.
\textsuperscript{130} Tickell, \emph{Odette}, p.203.
\textsuperscript{131} Foot, \emph{SOE in France}, p.430.
\textsuperscript{132} IWM, Vera Atkins file, Affidavit of Fritz Sühren, 1700 hours, 15 June 1945. Law Courts, Recklinghausen.
\textsuperscript{133} De Gaulle Anthonioz, \textit{God remained outside – an echo of Ravensbrück}. 
After the War Trials were over Odette claimed she wished to be a ‘housewife’ and not to be thrown into the limelight, but both Peter Churchill and some publicists had other ideas. Her story was carefully constructed as detailed in Odette the book and the film, and she ensured that a good clean-cut image of herself was portrayed at all costs. She was depicted as a simple, clean living and honest woman, this possibly being because the moral standards of the time were very high and anything else would have made it impossible for her to be a heroine.

It was due to this ‘image’ and construction that Odette and Peter maintained that their relationship in France was romantic, that they had fallen in love and could not bear to be apart. No sexual connotations were ever made, and the story that they were in bed together when they were arrested caused much dismay and debate, since in both of their books they claimed that they were not together.

On the night of their arrest Odette Churchill was staying at the Hotel de la Poste in St Jorioz, she had been instructed by London to move, but had not gone, in a further defiance of instructions: Peter had been instructed by: ‘Humphreys and Buckmaster...to avoid Odette Sansom [as well], till she had broken with Bleicher. As it turned out she was on the reception committee; greeted him affectionately and persuaded him to spend a few nights at the hotel she was using in St Jorioz’ and ‘Spindle (Raoul) [Peter Churchill] stayed the night at the Cottet hotel with Clothier [Odette] instead of, as they had both been told to do, going immediately to Glaieuls and they were both arrested by the Gestapo.’

Further noncompliance of the rules is demonstrated through the likelihood that Peter and Odette were in same room, if not in bed together at the time of their arrest. The popular version suggests that Odette was alone in her hotel room, however, according to her PF she was not - she was almost certainly in bed with or at least in the same room as Peter Churchill:

‘We had supper, did some work and I told Raoul [Peter] all about Henri [Bleicher]. About 11 o’clock I was just taking my clothes off when Monsieur and Madame Cottet came up and into the room (that struck me as rather peculiar even though

Foot, SOE in France, p.252.
we were very friendly with them) and told me that Louis le Belge was asking for me. As no-one knew that Raoul [Peter] was back yet I told him to stay in the room’.

The above source states that the two were sharing a room at the time the Gestapo came to find them, highlighted by the use of ‘the room’ not ‘my room’ or ‘his room’. The fact that this part of the story is changed in the book and film highlights Odette’s wish to maintain a clean image. Her relationship with Peter is constructed as romantic and bitter sweet, not sexual and certainly not a physical extra-marital affair, bearing in mind that at this stage Odette was married to (but separated from) Mr Sansom. The fact that Peter and Odette were sharing a room is also mentioned in Peter Churchill’s interrogation: ‘at about half past nine, still being very tired from the past two rather hectic days, we were already asleep when there was a knock on the door…Lise [Odette] immediately got up and wished to go down to see him.’

Both of these accounts are significantly different from the passages that relate to their arrest in *Duel of Wits* and *Odette*: ‘…with a heavy heart she took the enemy to the room of the man for whom she was then, and subsequently, prepared to lay down her life. Michel’s [Peter’s] door was opened and when the light was switched on he awoke to find Henri [Bleicher].’

And:

‘Dimly in the veils of sleep, she heard someone knocking on her door. She switched on the light and glanced at her watch. It was a few minutes after eleven and she could only have been asleep for a matter of minutes.’ The emphasis on her having her own room is further emphasised when Odette is led up the stairs at gunpoint and: ‘…opened Raoul’s [Peter’s] door and switched on the light. She saw that he was in bed and sound asleep. There was nothing she could do, nothing…’

136 NA, Odette Sansom, HS9/648/4, p.12, 12th May 1945.
139 Tickell, *Odette*, p.196.
140 Ibid.
The style in which both of these passages are written is dramatic and emotive, the final sentence of the above passage emphasises Odette’s innocence and helplessness; she is a victim of the Gestapo and is the epitome of a virtuous woman. When Odette joined SOE she was already separated from her English husband Mr Sansom. While in France she became involved with Peter Churchill, this was a potential security risk for everyone in their network, personal relationships were not encouraged as they compromised the circuit’s safety and anonymity. Odette had not been deployed to work with Peter Churchill, he asked her to stay. It is unclear as to whether this was for professional or personal reasons.

An agent’s need for physical and emotional contact during a time of such pressure is understandable, and the growth of their relationship is acknowledged tactfully in both the book and film.

Certainly this demonstration of romance would acceptable to a 1950s audience. Books with sexual content were frowned upon and the base human desire is not viewed as an appropriate emotion to be displayed by a hero or heroine, who by the nature of their being is expected to be above these desires. Therefore, in the book Odette and Peter’s relationship is shown as being professional and caring, their primary concern was their work not their passion. The strains, stresses and attractions that may have led to a sexual relationship are overlooked; romance and selflessness prevail.

Whether Odette and Peter Churchill shared a bed will not change the course of Second World War history, but Dame Irene Ward considered it enough to attempt to strip Odette of her G.C. Ward maintained that Odette and Peter had been in bed together when they were arrested, she accused Odette of having an affair with Fritz Sühren and claimed that Odette exaggerated her tales of torture. In what appeared to be a personal vendetta Ward apparently considered Odette to be unworthy of the decoration and went to the

142 This appeared to be the reason for her vendetta, she disagreed that ‘George Cross should have been awarded to a woman who had a lover’. Starns, Odette, p. 151. Authors footnote states NA, Treasury files, T350/11 (reference is incomplete).
143 According to Starns ‘this did appear to gain some ground within French section, and, despite the lack of evidence, Selwyn Jepson was prone to repeat the slur as fact.’ (Starns, Odette, p.149). The story was repeated in interview by MRD Foot in which he stated that Odette was seen by inmates at Ravensbrück sitting on a deckchair by Fritz Sühren’s swimming pool. (Interview with MRD Foot, January 2003, Saville Club, London). The affair with Sühren was impossible to prove or disprove and as such had to be discounted.
highest levels of government to try and rally support to have it rescinded, including the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. Her efforts were in vain and the G.C remained.\textsuperscript{144}

In addition to Ward's campaign, and perhaps more importantly, Odette's torture and subsequent award of the George Cross were also questioned by a group of six SOE agents and French Resistance leaders including Baron Henri de Malval and Captain Basil. They along with Ward did not believe the claims made by Odette and in November 1958 the following statement was printed in a number of national and French newspapers:\textsuperscript{145}

‘We, the undersigned, would be happy to know of, or have confirmed by witnesses of the period; one single effective act of sabotage, one single effective act of hostility and one single effective act of damage by Odette Sansom and Peter Churchill.’\textsuperscript{146}

The men who had put this document together had done so in 1950, and said they were mystified: ‘that it should now come to light so late.’\textsuperscript{147} However, it was in the public domain and so had to be dealt with. They claimed that they were not trying to harm or undermine the work of Peter and Odette Churchill merely that: ‘they have made capital out of stories that are not altogether correct. They made heroes of themselves, when, in fact, other people were called on to do far more than they.’\textsuperscript{148}

De Malval’s criticisms were not necessarily a result of jealousy at the ‘celebrity status’ of Odette and Peter Churchill. Their doubts also arose out of suspicions that the two British agents negligence in their duties had contributed to Nazi arrests of French Resistance workers. In *The German Penetration of SOE* Jean Overton Fuller writes that she had contact with de Malval over these allegations and: ‘it was not the absence of sabotage, however, which so infuriated de Malval and his fellow Resistance members, but the way in which the publicity machine picked out just two people.’\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{144} Ward was also involved in trying to change Violette Szabo’s G.C to a Victoria Cross but as Violette was not in the armed forces she was not eligible.
\textsuperscript{146} IWM, Vera Atkins file, *The Telegraph*, 25\textsuperscript{th} November 1958, GB62/IWM.
\textsuperscript{147} Daily Express, 24\textsuperscript{th} November 1958.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Overton Fuller, *The German Penetration of SOE*, p.36.
There are other factors outlined in Fuller’s book that demonstrate clearly why de Malval had such cause to distrust Peter Churchill. Odette appears to have been drawn into the matter because of her romantic and professional connections with Peter. In Odette’s PF she suggests that ‘MALVAL thought that RAOUl had involuntarily given him away’\(^{150}\) and was therefore responsible for his arrest. After his arrest, de Malval was beaten about the head, which resulted in the loss of sight in one eye. While de Malval was at the Avenue Foch he was shown a piece of paper that Peter Churchill had allegedly had in his pocket at the point of his arrest, it read: ‘ON LANDING IN FRANCE THE SEVEN PASSENGERS WILL PROCEED STRAIGHT TO BARON DE MALVAL VILLA ISABELLE ROUTE DE FREJUS CANNES.’ (sic)\(^{151}\) This of course immediately implicated de Malval and gave the Germans all the evidence they felt they needed to arrest him.

De Malval also claimed that Peter Churchill had written a diary whilst he was working in France, which was kept buried along with several other papers, in de Malval’s garden. In February 1943 Peter asked that it be returned to him. After they had been dug up, de Malval looked through them and saw that Peter had listed names and dates of contacts, all of which compromised their circuit, in addition to some notes implying Peter Churchill’s involvement in taking 600,000 francs from Bodington. De Malval was furious that Peter should possess a journal which was a breach of security. He cut out the incriminating names from the diary before returning it to Peter Churchill.

De Malval’s anger was further inflamed when, several years later, upon reading Odette he noticed that several passages read exactly the same as those in Peter Churchill’s diary. De Malval therefore assumed that Peter Churchill’s diary had been kept so that it could be published as a book after the war and the incriminating telegram was possibly kept as a souvenir to be included in the book. De Malval felt that he had lost his eye because of Peter Churchill’s vanity and his lack of consideration for security and the safety of others.\(^{152}\)

In response to the question of sabotage Odette retorted: ‘I was not a saboteur, so of course I did no sabotage. I did my job as a courier and it was for that I got my MBE...’\(^{153}\)

\(^{150}\) NA, Odette Sansom, HS9/648/4, p.20.
\(^{151}\) Overton Fuller, *The German Penetration of SOE*, p.36.
\(^{152}\) Overton Fuller, *The German Penetration of SOE*, pp.35-37.
\(^{153}\) *Daily Telegraph*, 24\(^{th}\) November 1948.
she felt that: ‘the idol topplers are at work…I have been turned into a kind of Joan of Arc. Is it my fault that this has happened? Should I have to prove myself? Is not the citation of the government that gave me the George Cross enough?’ At interview Peter Churchill said: ‘They say we did nothing. If Joan of Arc had done nothing she’d never have been burned at the stake. She’d have been forgotten now. Odette did not win her G.C. for ‘offensive acts’ she won it because under fourteen interrogations and torture by the Gestapo she refused to name ANY Resistance workers.’

Odette and Peter Churchill turned to the public for support by publishing such articles in the national papers. It now seemed very important to Odette Churchill that the public believed her story as written in Odette. The press rallied to her aid, as it seemed to them that this was a time when a hero’s image should be protected rather than questioned. However, the public’s perception of Odette Churchill was biased. Their knowledge of her was limited to what they had read in her book and seen in the film, and the files containing the facts were unavailable to the general public or journalists.

Odette’s image of a martyr was recognised not only by the public but by her former colleagues in SOE. Selwyn Jepson her original interviewer stated in a letter to the Treasury that: ‘Odette was so keen to be a martyr that she ought to be tied to a bedpost and whipped.’ He recognised that: ‘Odette was encouraged by the War Office to speak about her internment’ but ‘believed that she had revealed too much about SOE by doing it.’ On the other hand, Odette maintained that she was not involved in the publicity for her own glory but: ‘from a sense of responsibility to her murdered comrade.’ ‘My comrades who did far more and suffered more profoundly, are not here to speak. Because of this I speak for them.’ Whatever her reasons, her personal publicity campaign had called the work of SOE into public question, along with two sensational publications by Jean Overton Fuller and Elizabeth Nicholas, brought SOE under scrutiny and it was decided than an official history of F section should be undertaken.
Odette’s post-war life was well-documented by the press and the public held her in very high regard. Events ranging from her decoration with the MBE and George Cross, her marriage, the film premiere of *Odette*, her reaction to *SOE in France*, her divorce from Peter Churchill and the theft of her medals were all made public. Everyone had an opinion from journalists to the public themselves.

Odette’s marriage to Peter Churchill was popular in the press too, photographs of her were accompanied by text such as: ‘her wedding...to Captain Peter Churchill with whom she suffered torture by burning and starvation at the hands of the Gestapo...despite her cheerful looks she is still suffering from the terrible effects of the Nazi torture...she has been described as one of Britain’s best Secret Service agents.”

The failure of this marriage also made it to the press stating that Peter Churchill: ‘accuses her of misconduct with a man whose name is given as Hallowes’ whom she subsequently married.

The release of the film *Odette* was the subject of many reviews and discussions which are mentioned in chapter five. However, the premiere was also of interest as the King and Queen were present. Reputedly 3,000 people turned up to see them arrive and the Odette stated that it: ‘is the most nervous moment of my life’. ‘After the film the Queen chatted for five minutes with Anna Neagle and Odette. She told them: ‘It was a very moving picture. I am so glad it was made. There was such a depth of sincerity to it. To Odette she said: ‘you must be very brave. I do not know how you could bear to be reminded of it all.’ Odette told the filmgoers ‘I am so ordinary.’ That was a line that echoes an interview to the *Daily Sketch* on 21st August 1946 in which Odette declared: ‘I have never been very strong nor very brave...I am a very simple, ordinary sort of woman who is very pleased to be back with my children.’ An image which she continued throughout her post-war career, maintaining the construction she had created.

In addition to other events in her life such as the theft of her medals (which were duly returned with a note of apology) and the De Malval letter detailed above Odette undertook some work that was not made public. In 1967 Odette became a vice-president of FANY and: ‘was a prominent member of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association, a

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161 The Sunday Dispatch, February 16th 1947.
162 The Daily Telegraph, 16th September 1955.
163 The Daily Mail, 5th October 1950.
founder vice-president of the Woman of the Year luncheon, vice-president of the Military Medallist League, an honorary member of St Dunstan's Ex-Prisoner-of-War Association, and president of 282 Air Cadet Squadron. Odette attended the unveiling of the SOE memorial at Ravensbrück in 1994, it was the first and only time she returned and found it: ‘a profoundly moving experience’. She died at home on 13th March 1995 aged 82. Throughout her life she was subject to press attention, ensuring that she was constantly in the public eye and never forgotten.

This chapter has aimed to demonstrate that the fiction and reality of Odette’s story have been intermingled to such an extent, that the truth about Odette Churchill has become intrinsically merged with popular misconception. The fact and the fiction have become indivisible as well as interchangeable. It has also highlighted that the principal element of Odette’s story that concerns the public is her heroism under torture, not her effectiveness as a SOE operative and her subsequent security lapses.

This is mainly due to the book and film *Odette*. The story as constructed by these was dramatic and captured the public’s imagination. The authors were not necessarily seeking authenticity or accuracy, but an exciting tale which thrilled, excited and disgusted. Odette fulfilled the criteria for a post-war heroine, and the characters that surrounded her played on the fears and stereotypes of the post-war years. As an advisor to this book, published after the award of her G.C, Odette could influence the expansion of her story and ensure it was told her way, and thus it affected her post-war image and construction for years to come.

One part of her construction is her torture even though there is little or no evidence to suggest that she was tortured at the Avenue Foch itself. Her claims to having her back burned and toenails removed are debatable but torture is a part of her tale that is so horrific to the public, that it catapulted her to heroine status. No one would dare question a woman that had been reputedly through so much and therefore as the years passed the torture story became embedded within the Odette story and has become an intrinsic part of her post-war image.

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Odette’s time at Ravensbrück is easier to substantiate. Her claims to solitary confinement, lack of food, fluctuations in temperature and aural witnessing of beatings are backed up by other eye witness accounts of prisoners. After her arrival at the camp she is not mentioned in accounts given by other SOE agents there such as Eileen Nearne, or Yvonne Baseden, which implies that she was elsewhere in the camp, i.e solitary confinement. This part of her story, although dramatised in the film and book, appears to be true and is backed up by the sources cited above.

It is arguable that Odette’s claim to be married to Peter Churchill, supposedly Winston Churchill’s nephew does hold some credibility. Sühren himself claimed knowing that a Mrs Churchill was in the camp, towards the end of April 1945 he took her on a journey which ended with him handing her over to the Allies: ‘approaching an officer Sühren said to him briefly and formally that this woman with him was Mrs Churchill, a relation of the British prime minister. She had been a prisoner and he was now releasing her to American troops.’

The story is further supported as a likely event by the fact that Geneviève De Gaulle (a member of the Resistance who was General De Gaulle’s niece) was also kept in solitary confinement at Ravensbrück and on Himmler’s orders kept alive for use her as a possible exchange prisoner. She was released in April 1945, and, as with Odette, delivered to the Allies.

It seems that the main reason Odette, the only SOE F section woman condemned to death who was not executed, was not killed was because Sühren believed that in her he had a trump card that he could play to the Allies. He had kept her safe and was perhaps hoping (mistakenly) that this would buy his freedom.

Odette’s post-war career ensured that she was kept in the public spotlight, and some people found that disagreeable. Her claims of torture, her version of events as told in *Odette* and her various relationships came under scrutiny from fellow Resistance members, MP’s and historians. But, she was still revered by the general public who stood behind her in the face of the controversies.

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Odette’s story took Britain by storm. Her wartime experiences were highly sensitive, and it seems that anyone who questioned her integrity was dealt with harshly by herself and the press. For some it did not seem appropriate for the public to call into question the claims of a woman who they believed had carried out dangerous war work, been tortured and maltreated. Odette fell foul of the conventional celebrity problem - where does the truth end and fabrication begin? She was idolised by the public and as such was given scope to self-publicise and to create her own construction. She claimed she was doing it for her fallen comrades and yet it was her story that dominated the headlines, bookshelves and cinemas.

Odette’s story illustrates the scope for self-construction and publicity. Only she really knew what she actually experienced during her captivity at Fresnes and at Ravensbrück. Tickell over-dramatised and sensationalised the events that may (or may not) have happened to Odette, and because the book achieved biography status the statements it makes are rarely challenged or addressed. The problem is further impacted by the film, which visualises these events and reaches out to a much wider audience than the book.

For Odette the publicity machine that surrounded her had fulfilled its function - her story, as told in *Odette* became the accepted truth about her and part of the fabric of perceived public wisdom and many parts of this wisdom are unsubstantiated.

This chapter has shown that Odette’s story is one that has captured the public imagination, and that the facts have become intermingled with half-truths and misconceptions of her time in France and her treatment by her captors. Her story was constructed to fit with the image that she, Peter Churchill and Jerrard Tickell wished the public to acknowledge as the real Odette. Her experiences were tailored and carefully constructed to suit this image which appears to be one of an ordinary woman who experienced extraordinary things.
Chapter four
Violette Szabo G.C. - Disentangling the reality from the fiction

Violette Szabo came to the public attention when on 17th December 1946 she became the second women to be gazetted for the George Cross. In a similar vein to Odette, a fictionalised version of her story was published in 1956 entitled *Carve her name with pride* by RJ Minney and this was made into a film starring Virginia McKenna in the lead role in 1956. Violette was deceased, and unlike Odette, could not offer her version of events, and so details were pieced together from archives and the personal recollections of others. Fellow agent Odette Churchill and Leslie Fernandez (an SOE instructor) served as technical advisors on the film and this served to give it an air of reality and credibility.

There are elements of Violette’s story that have become part of the perceived wisdom of SOE women; however, in contrast to Odette, the construction of Violette’s story is the result of the work of others put together from oral statements, files and sometimes hearsay. As with Odette - Violette was captured, supposedly tortured and taken to Ravensbrück - but unlike Odette she was executed.
Violette was the subject of intense public interest and conspiracy theories. The book and film of *Carve her name with pride* have contributed to the myths and fictions that surround Violette’s complicated story. In addition, much has been written about her and a stream of inconsistencies has arisen. This makes it difficult to ascertain exactly what happened to Violette, especially immediately before, during and after her arrest by the Germans. Many of those who could enlighten us on these questions have passed away and, those who have spoken out give a conflicting set of evidence so it is unlikely that the scholar will ever actually discover the truth.

The aim of this chapter is to use all the currently available sources to discuss the facts behind Violette’s SOE career, the myths that surround her and the reasons why they have developed, in addition to discussing the truth about her life, her capture and her imprisonment.

Violette was born to an English father and French mother on 26th June 1921. From 1931 onwards she lived in Brixton, South London. Violette had left school when she was 14 and had worked in a variety of jobs. Her aspiration was to become a hairdresser, but her family had insufficient funds to support her apprenticeship. On 21st August 1941 she married Etienne Szabo, a Sergeant Major in the French Foreign Legion. After he had returned to active service Violette took a job with the ATS and soon afterwards discovered she was pregnant. Their daughter, Tania was born on 8th June 1942 and soon afterwards she received news of Etienne’s death, saying he had been killed on 24th October 1942 at El Himeimat, South of El Alamein.

In 1943, at 22 years of age, Violette was invited to attend an interview at the Ministry of Pensions in London. Believing the meeting to be about her late husband Etienne, she attended. However, the interview was taken by Selwyn Jepson (SOE’s interviewer) and was not about war pensions: he had used that as a cover to persuade Violette to attend. He explained to her that women were required for dangerous work in Occupied France and that there was a high risk of capture and torture. Without a hesitation she said that she would do it. This rather shocked Jepson, who sent her away to give himself time to think. He did not wish to send out someone made ‘unstable by grief’ but they decided that she was suitable and a few weeks later Violette joined the FANY and was subsequently called in for SOE training.
Violette’s PF states that she was trained at: ‘Winterfold, Knoydart, Ringway and at Blackbridge.’ Records show that during parachute training Violette sustained a twisted ankle, but after some time she recovered and completed her training. She was sent home and told to await further instructions. Violette was selected to go to France and work alongside F section agent Major Staunton (an SOE agent deployed in France who was also known as Phillipie Liewer) and who was already well known to the Gestapo in Rouen.

She arrived in France by Lysander on 5/6th April 1944, with Staunton for whom she was to act as courier. In 1943 Staunton had established the Salesman network, and had escaped the Gestapo in February 1944 and returned to England. The two agents landed near the village of Azay-le-Rideau and from there they made their way to Paris. Since Staunton was too well known, Violette then travelled alone to Rouen. His face was on posters calling for his arrest and his presence would have been an unacceptable security risk. Violette’s job was to follow the trails of arrested agents and Resistance workers, visit those remaining and gather what information she could. On one occasion Violette was called in by the Gestapo for questioning, but she was released within a few hours. Her first mission lasted two weeks, she rendezvoused with Major Staunton and they returned to England by Lysander on 30th April 1944.

Violette’s first mission was a success; she was awarded her FANY commission and was requested to undertake a second mission. For this mission, Violette along with Major Staunton and Bob Maloubier (Bob or Paco, another SOE agent), was taken to France in a B-24 Liberator. The mission was to intensify Resistance activity in the Haute Vienne and to aid the Allies in D-Day, hence the mission date, 6/7th June 1944.

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1 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957.
3 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, 30th December 1944.
4 Clarke, Agents by Moonlight, pp.232-3.
5 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, undated.
6 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, 4th May 1944.
7 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, 7th June 1944.
Three days later on 10th June 1944 Violette was sent to rendezvous with Jacques Poirier, a Resistance leader who had just taken over the Author and Digger networks after the arrest of their SOE leader, Harry Peulevé. On the way to this meeting Violette’s car was intercepted by a detachment of the 2nd SS ‘Das Reich’ Panzer division. What happened next is unclear and has been the source of many contradictions. Various accounts state that Violette shot her Sten gun from between 20 minutes to several hours and that she had as much ammunition as she could manage, which varies in accounts from eight magazines to just two magazines of 64 rounds.

After her arrest she was taken to Limoges prison and from there to Fresnes prison, where, some believe, she was tortured. After several weeks of incarceration at Fresnes, Violette was transported by train to Germany. Violette arrived at Ravensbrück in the company of SOE F section agents Lilian Rolfe and Denise Bloch. They were sent out together on a working party, and were said to have found the work endurable, and were asked to go on another when the first was done: ‘They heard of a second party which they joined, only to find the conditions were atrocious...by the time they returned to Ravensbrück in early February only Violette Szabo’s irrepressible cheerfulness and stamina could keep the other two going at all.’

One evening, towards 19.00 the three women were called out and taken to the cemetery yard by the crematorium and were then shot: ‘with a small calibre gun through the back of the neck.’ ‘Their bodies were immediately burned’. A German guard was an eye witness and said that ‘all three were very brave and I was deeply moved, Sühren (Commandant of Ravensbrück) was also impressed by the bearing of these women.’ It is said they died within earshot of Odette’s cell.

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8 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, 8th October 1946.
9 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957.
10 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, 26th June 1945.
12 Foot, SOE in France, p.431.
13 Imperial War Museum. GB62, (Squadron Officer V M Atkins). 2/2.
15 Imperial War Museum. GB62, (Squadron Officer V M Atkins). 2/2.
Violette Szabo was posthumously awarded the George Cross on 17th December 1946, the Croix de Guerre in 1947 and the Médaille de la Résistance in 1973. She is listed on the "Roll of Honour" on the Valençay SOE memorial as an SOE agent who died for the liberation of France.

This chapter will examine various aspects of Violette’s story and discuss the construction of an incomplete and inaccurate wartime career. This will be accomplished by examining several sources; SOE archives containing Violette’s training reports, the PF of her SOE colleague Major Staunton, other files and affidavits that refer to Violette Szabo including her entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. It will also scrutinise several secondary sources including *SOE in France*, *A Quiet Courage*, *Women who lived for danger*, *Between Silk and Cyanide*, *The Life that I have*, *Young, Brave and Beautiful*, and the semi-fictional book *Carve her name with pride* (the film of which will be evaluated later).

The aim of this brief overview is to provide an indication of how Violette Szabo has been treated by various authors over the years and to put the rest of the thesis into some historical and literary context. It is also to demonstrate how complicated Violette’s construction has become, and how in her case it is almost impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction.

It has been established that the SOE archives are incomplete and that they cannot be relied upon to present a complete interpretation. Records relating to Violettes are scarce, as her PF and interrogation after her first mission were either never carried out, have been destroyed, or are still officially embargoed. She is mentioned in Major Staunton’s PF and her George Cross citation can be found at the National Archives.

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16 MRD Foot, ODNB, accessed online 12th October 2010.
17 Foot, *SOE in France*.
18 Jones, *A Quiet Courage*.
19 Binney, *Women who lived for danger*.
21 Ottaway, *The Life that I have*.
22 Tania Szabo, *Young, Brave and Beautiful* (Jersey: Channel Island publishing, 2007).
23 Minney, *Carve her name with pride*. 
Other details about her life are few. Files and records include very bland and basic information such as can be found on these ID cards:

Szabo, Violette Reine Elizabeth  
Born Paris 26-6-21  
Ensign FANY  
Leroy Corrine  
Louise/Seamstress  

Left UK 7-6-44 [sic]  
July 44. Was on convoy which left Fresnes in July 44. Possibly using alias Corrine le Roy.\(^\text{24}\)

Brown hair, brown eyes, matt complexion.  
Believed to be at Ravensbrück\(^\text{25}\)

Violette’s entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* states the known facts about her pre-war life and war-time work and is written by Foot. As with Odette’s entry it does not make any judgements or assumptions and is written in a factual, un-sensational manner. It is noteworthy that the author recognises the inconsistencies in Violette’s story and when referring to her capture states that there was more than one version of events. The author also does not implicitly refer to torture but states that: ‘brutal interrogations got nothing out of her’.\(^\text{26}\)

Other primary sources are statements by various people who knew Violette, which include; Jacques Dufour (Resistance member who shared the car at time of arrest), Bob Maloubier (fellow SOE agent), Yeo-Thomas (RF section agent), Madame Solange Roseau, Marie Lecomte and Huguette Desors (fellow prisoners and cellmates during Violette’s captivity). Other people who did not personally know Violette have made statements about her, but these are to be treated with care, as they may have been constructed on hearsay, rather than fact.

\(^\text{24}\) NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957.  
\(^\text{25}\) NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957.  
The tale of Violette has become part of SOE’s heritage and she is a household name. A construction of her wartime career has developed and she is known to many as the beautiful tom boy from London, who left behind her baby to fight the Nazis with the aim of: ‘taking a few with her.’ The popular story has her falling in love with her colleague and fellow agent Harry Peleuve; being trapped by Nazis at a road block; fighting them off for hours with her Sten gun; being taken defiant and ‘kicking’ to Gestapo HQ; undergoing terrible torture but not giving in; suffering at Fresnes prison; being transported to Ravensbrück and dying a heroic death at the hands of her Nazi executioners.

In *Inside SOE* Violette has several pages dedicated to her in a chapter provocatively entitled ‘Success and failures.’ The author’s opening lines epitomise much of the writing that surrounds Violette: ‘Her story of courage and sacrifice is well known from books, articles and a film, and needs only brief recounting.’\(^{27}\) By saying that he need only ‘recount’ her story Cookridge implies that he has not done fresh research and is repeating the perceived wisdom about her as an agent and by doing this he adds to the myth instead of getting behind her story and checking that his facts are correct. Much of this section refers to the way in which Major Staunton’s actions affected Violette. His ‘retelling’ of her story proves to be inaccurate when he gives the dates of her landing in France as 15\(^{th}\) April 1944, according to Freddie Clark in *Agents by Moonlight*: ‘there were no Lysander operations that night.’\(^{28}\) Cookridge gives details of a rescue operation planned by fellow agents Major Staunton and Bob Maloubier, which, according to him, was never undertaken because Violette moved prison, a fact reiterated in Ottaway’s and Tania Szabo’s books.

Violette is only mentioned in passing in David Stafford’s book *Secret Agent*\(^{29}\) in which she is described by an SOE seamstress: ‘as the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen.’\(^{30}\) The use of ‘The life that I have’ as a code poem is mentioned and SOE F section agent Yvonne Baseden’s sighting of Violette at Saarbrucken is also briefly recalled in order to highlight her own story.\(^{31}\)

\(^{31}\) The poem is discussed in greater detail in chapter five.
MRD Foot mentions Violette in three of his books. In *SOE in France* he cursorily describes Violette’s time at Ravensbrück and states the facts of her execution. However further down the same page his own opinions of the construction of Violette’s imprisonment are vented: ‘One tale of torture deserves particular notice, for it is only a tale. The ghastly story of Violette Szabo’s sufferings, published in her mother’s and daughter’s lifetime is so far as I can ascertain completely fictitious; no other evidence I have seen suggests that she was ever subjected to personal violence at all.’ This statement is obviously aimed to put RJ Minney’s work into its correct literary place, as a piece of fiction. MRD Foot had privileged access to otherwise restricted files, and according to former agents Pearl Witherington and Yvonne Baseden he above all others should be trusted.

Violette is also mentioned in the chapter relating to Harry Peleuve in *Six faces of Courage*, the mentions of Violette serve as illustrations in his story and for this reason are short and to the point. She is described as being: ‘a cheerful cockney girl, high spirited and an excellent shot, with whom nobody could be enemies.’ Her final meeting with fellow agent Harry Peleuve at the farm during deportation is also mentioned: ‘He and Violette – each still chained to a companion – were in adjacent stalls, and were able to talk through a chink in the woodwork; they talked in whispers, in fact, all the night through. Next day the women were sent off separately, to Ravensbrück; Harry was never to see Violette again.

In *SOE 1940-46* Foot is generous in his praises for Violette: ‘The FANY’s relaxed their social standards enough to let in the fiery Violette Szabo, nee Bushell (‘Louise’), the half-French daughter of a Brixton motor car dealer, who was reputed to be the best shot in SOE and certainly among its most outstanding characters, as her posthumous G.C. testifies. She was one of the few FANY’s who were allowed to move out of housekeeping, transporting, clerical or signals tasks into actual warfare.’

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32 Foot, *SOE in France*.
33 ibid, p.431.
34 Interviews with Yvonne Burney, 33 Napier Gardens London, 23rd May 2003 and Pearl Cornioley, Grand Hotel, St Aignan, May 2003.
36 ibid, p.59.
38 Foot, *SOE 1940-46*.
In this short paragraph Foot gives a vivid and succinct description of Violette. In a few lines the reader is made aware that she was different from the others in her unit, that she was a crack shot and that she was an exception to the rule. She is described as being: ‘fiery’ ‘outstanding’ and ‘one of the few.’ The reader cannot fail to build a mental image of Violette and Foot does an excellent job in describing her qualities.

Author Elizabeth Nicholas wrote *Death be not proud* as she was anxious to discover what had happened to several of the lesser known SOE women.\(^40\) She only mentions Violette once during her work, but what she writes is particularly interesting. Violette’s citation for her George Cross contained gross inaccuracies with regards to where she was when arrested and her actions during that time. Elizabeth Nicholas damns the citation by saying that: ‘...her citation, written when the true circumstances of her arrest could have been ascertained, was in considerable part fictitious. It is not the case that the facts were such that they could not be checked with living persons; they simply were not.’\(^41\) By the time that she was writing in 1958 the truth about Violette, Lilian and Denise had been ascertained; as Vera Atkins had conducted her research into the fate of the women who had disappeared and Elizabeth Nicholas is correct to criticise the inaccurate citation.

The next two books to be discussed were by characters that Violette had actually met and worked with - Leo Marks (SOE codemaster) and Maurice Buckmaster (Head of SOE F section). She has an entire chapter dedicated to her in Marks’ *Between Silk and Cyanide*.\(^42\) He discusses meeting Violette and mentions several times her aptitude for encoding and decoding: ‘[Her message was] flawlessly encoded and contained 200 letters instead of the minimum of 100 I’d stipulated…I realised that she was intelligent as well as quick witted and said a silent prayer that she was not also telepathic...’\(^43\) He also makes it clear that he was attracted to Violette and found her to be a: ‘a dark haired slip of mischief' whose ‘cockney accent...added to her impishness.'\(^44\) Such comments assist in building a mental picture. Marks primarily describes Violette using sexual overtones as he is obviously drawn to her. He does however redress this by discussing her aptitude for code work and so the description has some substance.

\(^{40}\) Nicholas, *Death be not Proud.*
\(^{41}\) *ibid,* p.273.
\(^{42}\) Marks, *Between Silk and Cyanide.*
\(^{43}\) *ibid,* p.494.
\(^{44}\) *ibid,* p.493.
Specially Employed by Maurice Buckmaster was published in 1952 in between the publications of Odette and Carve her Name with pride. A chapter of ten pages is dedicated to Violette but, unfortunately this book contains inaccuracies: Buckmaster collates Violette’s missions, and in doing so the dates and sequence of events become confused. According to Buckmaster, Violette was arrested in the spring of 1944 and was as a result of the fact that: ‘the Germans were more than a little concerned about the activities of this fabulous terrorist’ and they therefore: ‘hunted’ and ‘surrounded’ her.

Buckmaster adds yet another strand to the already complicated matter of Violette’s arrest and suggests that Clement (presumably Jacques Dufour): ‘passed her his revolver and clip and left her.’ A revolver is not mentioned in any other account. Buckmaster is following the trend of the time reiterated in They feared no Evil and Heroines of World War Two and makes the story emotional and dramatic, but in doing so more implausible. He says that while Violette was hiding during the gun fight she: ‘watched an ant reconstruct his pathway’ and that she was: ‘fascinated by this insect.’ This dramatisation makes one question the rest of his writing. If it is artistic license then it only serves to blur the distinction between fact and fiction. Further examples of this are that Violette suffered: ‘days of black despair intermingled with occasional rays of hope’ and that when she was tortured: ‘she became conscious of a stoicism of whose existence she had been unaware.

Buckmaster also says that Violette decided to try and escape and: ‘began working to loosen one of the bars in the crazy roof-high window of her cell’ but that she taken from Fresnes before she got to use it. He seems to have confused this with the aborted rescue that Staunton had planned or perhaps her planned escape from Königsberg. Many of Buckmaster’s statements are inaccurate or fictionalised: he had no evidence that any of them happened and this book therefore fails historical scrutiny.

45 Maurice Buckmaster, Specially Employed.
46 Buckmaster, Specially Employed, p.108.
47 Ibid.
48 Buckmaster, Specially Employed, p.109.
49 Gleeson, They Feared no Evil.
50 Taylor, Heroines of World War Two.
51 Buckmaster, Specially Employed, p.109.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Buckmaster, Specially Employed, p.110.
They Feared no Evil by James Gleeson and Heroines of World War Two by Eric Taylor both mention Violette, but their descriptions of various events surrounding her arrest greatly contrast. The latter states that: ‘not a bullet touched’ Violette as she ran from the gun fight. However, according to They Feared no Evil she was: ‘hit in the arm, but she continued to run and run and fire bursts from her Sten gun at the pursuers.’ The difference of these accounts highlights the confusing and difficult nature of trying to ascertain the reality of what happened.

Both of these books read like adventure stories, and it seems that the aim of the authors was not necessarily to produce an accurate account of events but to provide high adventure and excitement. An example of this is the passage relating to Violette’s capture in Heroines of World War Two. ‘Violette however was now surrounded. Figures closed in and seized her. Soon, after months of torture and incarceration at Ravensbruk (sic) she was to pass, in the euphemistic jargon of the SS into the night and fog.’ The passage is lyrical and emotive, and, as with Buckmaster’s Specially Employed, this only serves to make one question the integrity of the book.

A further problem arises in Heroines of World War Two when the author uses an account of Violette’s arrest from a member of the local communist Maquis, George Guingoin. He was not an eye witness to the gun fight, nor was he present at Violette’s arrest yet he still states that: ‘Strenuously refusing to let her companion help – he wanted to carry her – the English girl bravely told him to save himself. With superhuman effort she held out against the pursuers, firing machine gun bursts at them while Anastasie [Dufour] made a desperate run for safety.’ Guingoin’s account is used as definitive proof of what happened, yet, since he was not there, his statement can only be based on hearsay which is perhaps why other writers have overlooked it.

55 Gleeson, They Feared no Evil.
56 Taylor, Heroines of World War Two.
57 Ibid p.158.
58 Gleeson, They Feared no Evil.
59 Ibid p.106.
60 Ibid p.159. Arguably she was already in the ‘Nacht und Nebel’ as soon as she arrived at Ravensbrück.
61 Buckmaster, Specially Employed.
62 Taylor, Heroines of World War Two.
63 Ibid p.159.
Women who lived for danger\textsuperscript{64} by Marcus Binney also recounts Violette’s story. He introduces some new quotes from people such as Madame Solange Rosseau (who worked at Ravensbrück with Violette), Violette’s father and Major Staunton’s PF. In addition to citing this material, Binney examines reports, Minney’s novel and Dufour’s eye witness accounts relating to the gun fight. However, he fails to deduce anything or draw any conclusions from his studies and he does not adequately call into question their accuracy.

Young, Brave and Beautiful was written by Violette’s daughter Tania and published in 2007.\textsuperscript{65} The book deals with Violette’s SOE career in chronological order, starting with her drop into France on 5/6\textsuperscript{th} April 1944 and ending with her death at Ravensbrück in early 1945. Any references to Violette’s childhood or marriage are included within the text and are not the subjects of separate chapters. Tania Szabo states in the introduction that: ‘this is not a biography but an informative and deeply researched reconstruction of the dramatic events of her two real life missions during 1944 and her fate in January 1945’ and: ‘my aim is to breathe life into Violette. The two existing biographies, although each great in their unique way, did not do that for me, the daughter.’\textsuperscript{66} The book utilises interviews, archives and the author’s accumulated wealth of knowledge of her mother’s work and contains a substantial amount of detail from which the author: ‘glean[ed] answers to form the bedrock of ‘factional’ areas requiring imaginative reconstruction.’\textsuperscript{67} This implies that the book is (in part) dramatised and that scenes are reconstructed using dialogue, presumably to make it easier to digest and more palatable to the reader. However, by doing this, the book lacks historical integrity; by including conversations that no one overheard and superimposing Violette’s thoughts the book resembles its predecessor Carve her name with pride making it difficult to take it seriously as a work of any scholarly value.

Problems therefore arise when the author states a fact because the reader is treating everything with caution. Tania Szabo attempts to rectify this by using footnotes, but unfortunately rarely cites her sources and makes sweeping statements that are impossible

\textsuperscript{64} Binney, Women who lived for danger.
\textsuperscript{65} Szabo, Young, Brave and Beautiful.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid p.xi.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid p.xi.
to prove, admitting that: ‘I have used footnotes...they are the only place for extraneous but interesting detail’. 68

Fact and artistic license becomes difficult to separate, especially since she states in the introduction that: ‘it is to be understood that all errors, historical or otherwise and intentional and unintentional liberties are mine and mine alone.’ Although this is a fairly standard disclaimer it leaves the reader with a dilemma – how are they to establish fact from fiction when the author is not prepared to state it one way or another. Why would the author choose to write something that is not factually correct and that perpetuates the myth of her mother?

One further flaw with this book is that Tania has a tendency to contradict herself and to mix up details from one page to the next. When referring to the march to Ravensbrück she says: ‘they were made to line up five abreast’ but by the next page they are: ‘stretched out in ragged lines of four’. Also in referring to the gas chambers she states that they came into being in: ‘January 1945’ 69 and a few pages later she says: ‘late 44.’ 70 These minor inconsistencies are irksome and jar the text. She makes mistakes throughout, notably calling Gestapo Chief Kieffer by the name Lieffer. Whether or not this is one of her ‘liberties’ with the truth is hard to know, but if so it is a strange thing to do when Kieffer is such a key character in many other SOE agents’ stories.

The author has a tendency to superimpose her own opinions onto the characters in her story. She clearly has an issue with the communist Resistance cells. She makes much of this in the last 200 pages of the book, for example: ‘he could not live to see his country freed from the Nazi yoke only to be dragged under the yoke of communism.’ 71 She also seems convinced that Violette was captured because of the use of a black, gasogene car. She states that: ‘the whole trip was pushed by Anastasie [Jacques Dufour], especially the use of the car’ and other quotes about this include: ‘she felt unbelievably conspicuous in this large black car,’ and: ‘in this conspicuous car they would not be considered quiet country souls,’ all within two pages of text. 72 This tendency to state her own feelings by superimposing them onto the characters in the book makes for an uncomfortable read.

68 Ibid p.xii.
69 Ibid p.459.
70 Ibid p.463.
71 Ibid p.381.
72 Ibid p.383.
and again questions the historical integrity of the writing and her motive for writing the book.

As discussed Tania Szabo makes statements without using sources or referencing them to interviews. For example some of her claims that Violette was betrayed and tortured are not corroborated in any way and so must be treated with caution. This is strange because the author clearly recognises the importance of source material given that her inscription to me in the front of the book reads: ‘the devil’s in the detail but it is also in the original sources.’ While this book was not intended to be an academic monograph it would be beneficial to the reader to have names, or sources cited, not necessarily as standard footnotes but certainly within the text to aid understanding and reinforce historical reliability.

*Young, Brave and Beautiful* provides interest, because it is written by the subject’s daughter, who has grown up with stories of her mother and has taken the opportunity to write them down. Unfortunately because she does not cite her sources the book adds to, rather than resolves, any myths and fictions surrounding the life of Violette Szabo.

In contrast to *Young, Brave and Beautiful*, Susan Ottaway’s book *The life that I have* is an account of Violette Szabo’s life which makes use of much original source material including interviews, PF’s and oral archives. The author has a tendency to be a little opinionated and personal in her writing, but she makes use of the archives to construct reasonable deductions and arguments about certain events. For example in discussing Peleuve and Violette’s relationships she examines Peleuve’s PF statement and compares it to RJ Minney’s version of events. She concludes that: ‘in spite of an extensive search, I have not been able to uncover one shred of evidence of a romantic liaison...’ Likewise, when discussing Violette’s alleged torture she draws a conclusion that: ‘in spite of claims to the contrary, notably by RJ Minney in *Carve her name with pride*, I have not been able to find any conclusive proof that she was ever tortured.’ This is followed by a short evaluation of the sources and the reasons for their conclusion, which forms a succinct argument that is easy to follow and sheds light on some of the murkier areas of Violette’s construction.

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73 Hand written note from Tania Szabo to this author, 22nd November 2008.
74 Ottaway, *The Life that I have*, p.128.
Susan Ottaway’s biography is refreshing as she states that some people: ‘are frightened that another book about their idol might destroy the myth, perhaps it will. The woman I discovered in my research was much less perfect that had been portrayed, but certainly much more interesting and real’. Ottaway does not have an obvious personal motive for writing the book, and is keen to uncover the truth or at least get closer to it rather than perpetuate the myth. Although she does not discover anything new in her book, her use of sources and willingness to challenge certain aspects of Violette’s construction makes this an unusual work within the sphere of SOE literature relating to women agents.

This section of the chapter will aim to examine the sources to establish whether various elements of this construction are accurate and to ascertain the truth. Firstly Violette’s reputation at training is that of a: ‘high spirited 22 year old’ who was: ‘apt and interested’ during training hours and: ‘mischievous, boisterous and tireless in off duty hours’. She also has a reputation for being a crack shot and: ‘the best shot in SOE’. Unlike Odette there is ample primary source material from which a scholar can draw conclusions regarding Violette’s training.

The PF from her preliminary course at Winterfold mentions that she was: ‘a quiet, physically tough, self-willed girl. Has plenty of confidence in herself and gets on well with the others. Plucky and persistent in her endeavours. Not easily rattled. She could possibly do the work of a courier.’ Her firearms work was exceptional and her need for revenge which became apparent at her interview also shone through this aspect of her training as she commented to Mrs Turbett (her escorting officer) that: ‘I only want to have some Germans to fight and I should die happy if I could take some of them with me.’

The physical aspects of the training course were described as being Violette’s: ‘cup of tea’ - she rose to every challenge, and was well respected amongst her peers. She was described as being: ‘essentially feminine with something gallant, debonair and quite genuine about her.’

76 Ibid p.2.
77 Gleeson, They feared no Evil, p.101.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
Violette was a popular recruit, but her character was complex and caused many problems for those deciding whether or not she should go forward for work in the field. Her motive was still a cause for concern and although she had a: ‘pleasant personality’ and was: ‘sociable, likeable, painstaking, anxious to please, keen, mature for her age in certain ways’ she was: ‘in others very childish.’

The instructors were concerned that the only reason she wished to continue training was: ‘simply because she enjoys the course, the spirit of competition, the novelty of the thing and being very fit – the physical side of the training’. It appealed to the tomboy in her nature and the reality was not consolidated yet. After all, she was only 22 and very idealistic. The real danger of going into Occupied France was not realised and the course was a vehicle of fun and adventure. However, Violette must have taken some aspect of it all seriously; she was concerned for the welfare of her child and she also returned to complete her training after recovering from an ankle injury sustained during parachute training. This shows determination and the fact that she really was going to ‘go through with it’ and was willing to go into France as an agent.

There were obstacles to overcome at this stage; her training officers were not yet convinced of her suitability. Although she was physically capable of doing the work, her attitude caused concern:

‘I have come to the conclusion that this student is temperamentally unsuitable for this work. I consider that owing to her too fatalistic outlook in life and particularly in her work [and] the fact that she lacks ruse, stability and the finesse which is required and that she is too easily influenced, when operating in the field she might endanger the lives of others working with her. It is very regrettable to have come to such a decision…with a student of this type who during the whole course has set an example to the whole party by her cheerfulness and eagerness to please.’

In spite of these reports Violette went into the field twice as described above. Her second mission saw her arrive in France at the same time as the D-Day landings, she went to the village of Sussac twenty-five miles south-east of Limoges to work alongside SOE agent Major Stauton and the local Maquis which: ‘was roughly 600 strong, plus 200 French

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84 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, 21st September 1943.  
85 Ibid, 13th October 1943.
**gendarmes** who joined up on D-Day...[they] were commanded by the most incapable people I had ever met, as was overwhelmingly proved by the fact that none of the D-Day targets had been attended to’.86

A few days after their arrival disaster struck the Limoges area twofold. On 10th June 1944 the whole of the Limousin was being patrolled by the ‘Der Fuhrer’ panzergrenadier brigade of the Das Reich 2nd SS Panzer division. They were trying to find Major Kampfe the head of the 3rd battalion who had gone missing the day before: ‘At dusk on 9th June, as his [Kampfe’s] car approached a road junction at the tiny hamlet of La Bussiere, fifteen miles short of Limoges, he saw a lorry approaching and flashed his lights in greeting. With extraordinary lack of prudence, he halted and found himself surrounded by a ring of armed men’.87 A group of Maquis who were returning from blowing up a bridge at Brignac ‘chanced upon Kampfe... [who] was bundled into the lorry’. There remains no reliable information about Kampfe’s fate after that but it is certain that some time after his kidnap and disappearance he was killed by the Maquis.88

Just after 10am on the morning of 10th June, at Salon-la-Tour: ‘soldiers probably from the 1st battalion of the Deutschland regiment’ were approaching the village when they saw a black Citroen approaching. A young boy got out and ran away, then a man and woman got out of the car - the events that ensued have become legendary, the woman was Violette Szabo and the man Jacques Dufour [Anastacie]. Their encounter with the Das Reich was most unfortunate as: ‘for months the Maquis has travelled with impunity by car and truck across the Limousin and the Corrèze. The FTP Maquis in the area had no knowledge of the presence of the Das Reich and, as so often, their lack of intelligence was fatal’.89

In addition to these events, that afternoon, having been informed that: ‘there was a Maquis headquarters in Oradour’ which was possibly where Kampfe had been taken and that the village was riddled with weapons and explosives stashes the 3rd company of Das Reich approached the village of Oradour-Sur-Glane.90 The massacre that followed left 642 people dead (80 survived) the men were shot and the women and children put into a

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87 ibid p.173.  
88 Ibid.  
89 Ibid p.176.  
90 Ibid p.183.
church which was set alight, the village was then razed to the ground.\textsuperscript{91} By then, Violette was already in Gestapo hands.

The reason that she and Anastasie were travelling by car that day was because Major Staunton, Violette's leader, wanted to make contact with: 'some of the more amenable Maquis of the Corrèze and Dordogne' and he wanted Violette to liaise with them. Anastasie offered to take her thirty miles south to Pompadour, and there he would pass her over to local leaders.\textsuperscript{92} En route they were ambushed and following a chase and/or gun fight Violette was arrested. Below, I will examine the various sources about this 'gun fight' to ascertain initially whether she had a gun and if she used it.

The notion that there was a gun fight is perpetuated by the film \textit{Carve her name with pride} and in the scene is dramatic and action packed. The storyline resembles Anastasie's account and utilises the available evidence: they got out of the car, she had a Sten gun and began to run into the field, however her weak ankle gave way and she was not able to run as fast as her colleague. He swam across the river leaving her behind a tree shooting at the Germans with her Sten gun until the ammunition runs out, after which she was then arrested.

As with Odette's arrest, the facts surrounding Violette's capture on 10\textsuperscript{th} June 1944 have become blurred and it is difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Several people relay what they believe to be the correct account of the events leading to Violette's arrest: Jean Bariaud (who got in the car at Salon la Tour), Anastasie (who drove the car), Major Staunton (network leader) and eye witness Guingoin (senior Resistance member).\textsuperscript{93} As

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid. p.177.
\textsuperscript{93} Guingouin, who was an eye witness at the arrest of Violette Szabo was, by 1944 a prominent figure in the Maquis and even addressed himself ‘the first Maquisard of France’. Cobb describes Guingouin as ‘a charismatic local communist leader who from the very beginning of the Occupation had run into difficulties with the Party high-ups, because of his determination to fight the Nazis and his refusal to accept the ambiguous position that marked the PCFs [Partie Commune Française] politics in the early phase of the war......’ (Cobb, \textit{The Resistance}, p170).

In September 1940 he left his teaching job as he was politically ‘unreliable’ and began to organise small scale Resistance activities including duplicating leaflets whilst hiding in farmyard outhouses. For the next three years he went into hiding in the Limousin countryside, his Resistance activities included: sabotaging agricultural machinery to prevent peasants delivering produce to the Germans, sabotaging a railway between Limoges and Ussel and blowing up a rubber factory near Limoges. He also ‘began to impose his own counter-authority against the Vichy regime, fixing agricultural prices and banning the black market in the area he controlled. Approved prices were posted in villages and signed “Prefect of the Maquis” in Guingouin’s own
with Odette, the event is immortalised in film but the difference is of course that Violette was not able to corroborate and if she had, would she, like Odette, have carefully constructed it to show herself as blameless and innocent, or would she have told what really happened? So it is left to the scholar to evaluate the sources that are available today.

One account of these events is given in Violette’s G.C. citation, published in the London Gazette on 17th December 1946. It does not paint an accurate portrayal of events (for example they were in a field not a house) and may be partly responsible for the myth of the gun fight that permeates Violette’s story. Part of the citation reads:

‘Eventually however, with other members of her group, she was surrounded by Gestapo in a house in the South-West of France. Resistance appeared hopeless, but Madame Szabo, seizing a Sten gun and as much ammunition as she could carry, barricaded herself in part of the house, and, exchanging shot for shot with the enemy killed or wounded several of them. By constant movement she avoided being cornered and fought until she dropped exhausted…’

Various sources imply that Violette took a Sten gun from the car and ran into a nearby wheat field, firing as she went. In an undated recommendation for her MBE it states that: ‘refusing to surrender, Szabo stood her ground and fought it out for 20 minutes with her Sten gun until she fell exhausted and was captured (after having killed a German)’ and a further recommendation for the same award says: ‘with great coolness and gallantry she fought it out for 20 minutes with her Sten gun, giving covering fire to Anastasie while he was retreating, and getting covering fire from him while she was retreating through fields. She only surrendered being completely exhausted and short of ammunition, and she is handwriting - which many recognised since he had been a local teacher’. (Obituary, The Guardian, 3rd December 2005)

After D-Day Guigouin was once again in conflict with the PCF, they wanted Resistance groups to mount a ‘national insurrection so as to maximise PCF influence in post-liberation France’ but Guingouin refused to attack Limoges as instructed believing it to be a suicidal mission. (Obituary, The Guardian, 3rd December 2005) He subsequently become the most powerful man in the Resistance and in July 1944 he was appointed head of all Resistance forces (about 20,000) in the Haute Vienne. He became involved in a battle with the Germans on Mont Gargan, they took 340 casualties and the Maquis 92.

As the Germans retreated Guingouin’s Maquis took Limoges and accepted the Germans surrender on 21st August 1944: ‘Guingouin, greeted as a hero, was rewarded by being elected mayor of Limoges in 1945’. (Obituary, The Guardian, 3rd December 2005).

Minney, Carve her name with pride, p.188.
believed to have killed one German.\textsuperscript{95} She is also said to have killed between one German and ‘several’ Germans. Tuck and Hastings both accessed the Das Reich files and concluded that: ‘not a single soldier died during the fire fight.’\textsuperscript{96}

It is remarkable that these three documents, seemingly written by the same department (i.e. SOE F section HQ), contain varying accounts. At interview Anastasie said:

‘Szabo had taken up a similar position to mine on the other side of the car and was firing too. By that time, though one of the Germans had been hit, the other two were spraying us generously. I ordered Szabo to retreat through a wheat field, towards a wood 400 yards away, under cover of my fire. As soon as she reached the high wheat, she resumed firing and I took advantage of it to fall back...we heard the rumble of armoured cars and machine guns began spraying close to us, as they could follow our progress by the movement of the wheat. When we were not more than yards from the edge of the wood Szabo, who had her clothes ripped to ribbons and was bleeding from numerous cuts all over her legs, told me she was unable to go one inch further.’\textsuperscript{97}

Major Staunton distinctly recalls giving Violette a Sten gun: ‘I saw them both off, made sure that Anastasie’s Martin GMG was in working order and handed Szabo a Sten gun, loaded with two magazines for her, as she specifically insisted on carrying a weapon for the car journey.’\textsuperscript{98} This in reiterated by Tania Szabo: ‘the loaded Sten, safety catch on, was at her feet with her luggage. The two magazines in her pocket\textsuperscript{99} and Taylor: ‘With a Sten gun and eight magazines cradled in her lap she was being driven along quiet country roads near Salon la Tour.’\textsuperscript{100}

In a BBC documentary film about Violette Szabo a Resistance agent named Jean Bariaud said that he was also in the car with Violette and Anastasie:

\textsuperscript{95} NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, 30\textsuperscript{th} December 1944.
\textsuperscript{96} Script for Secret Agent – The True story of Violette Szabo - aired on BBC TV 2002, see also Hastings, Das Reich, p.176 footnotes.
\textsuperscript{97} The Sunday Times, 27/4/03 & Violette Szabo, NA, HS9/1435 – 109957. Unfortunately it was impossible to re interview him to ascertain further information as he was killed in Indo –China in 1946.
\textsuperscript{98} NA, Pearl Witherington, HS6/579.
\textsuperscript{99} Szabo, Young, Brave and Beautiful, p.383.
\textsuperscript{100} Taylor, Heroines of WWII, p.158.
'Jacques [Anastasie] opened the car door and he jumped out and he was shooting his Sten gun, it all happened very fast and it’s not very easy to describe but he jumped out shooting. They were chasing us and I ran off and they started running after me, they were right behind me. We did not have any rifles, just one machine gun a Sten and there was only one and there was a bomb it was Plastic Explosive. I really do not know why the bomb was there, it was between Violette’s feet when I got into the car.'

It is evident from the two ‘eye witness’ accounts that there is some confusion as to what really happened. Anastasie recalls Violette having a Sten gun and shooting until she ran out of ammunition, Jean Bariaud however, says that Anastasie had the only Sten gun and Violette had plastic explosive, he was not armed. A reason for this confusion is ‘the fog of war’ - those who were present at the scene were running for their lives, all around was chaos and there was no chance to see what was really going on therefore it would not be until afterwards that they had time to sit and recall the events that had occurred.

Pearl Witherington said that: ‘I cannot say if she was armed or not, but she was with a chap that belonged to us and he came out of the war and he was there and he said they were fighting, whether they both had arms or not I do not know, but they started to run up the vineyard and she could not follow and she said “do not wait for me I’ve had it”, that’s according to him. But they found the door of the car with bullet holes.’

If Violette did have a Sten gun, the accounts of what she managed to achieve with it are also varied. Conflicting evidence suggests that Violette shot her Sten gun from between 20 minutes to several hours and that she had as much ammunition as she could

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101 Secret Agent – The True story of Violette Szabo - aired on BBC TV 2002. Historian Howard Tuck claims to be the first person to discover that Violette was carrying such a weapon and says ‘the only people who could explain why are dead.’

102 Tania Szabo said that Bariaud ‘could not be relied upon’ (as he was unpopular and disliked after the war even though he became Mayor of Salon la Tour). She and her grandparents visited the town several times during the 1960s and spoke to various residents who remember a gun battle going on for between 20 and 30 minutes, and Tania states that there is ‘no doubt the battle took place if people say there is they need to do their research, if they do, they will find that it did’. Interview with Tania Szabo, Holiday Inn Express, Leeds, 28th November 2008.

103 Interview with Pearl Cornioley, Grand Hotel, St Aignan, May 2003.

manage, which varies from eight magazines to just 64 rounds – certainly not enough to keep an entire SS detachment at bay for several hours.105

This episode in Violette’s life is surrounded with myth and intrigue. The two eye witness at the scene had fled and those who recall the incident have their own view. This can often be seen as positive since different witnesses will remember and recall different things about the same event and it is only when everyone’s memories corroborate exactly that one has cause to doubt. This is perpetuated by the film and the novel, which have become interchangeable with the truth.106

After her arrest Violette was taken to the Avenue Foch in Paris and was reputedly tortured. As with Odette, the story that Violette were tortured forms a major part of the construction, but, as we do not have Violette’s own words to examine and as there is no extant evidence to confirm whether or not Violette suffered at the hands of the Gestapo it is unclear what really happened to her at Fresnes prison and at the Avenue Foch. The evidence is sparse – the majority of the Gestapo files no longer exist as they were mostly destroyed107 and Violette’s PF is insubstantial as she did not survive to give an affidavit as Odette did.108

The stories of torture initially arose from two sources, firstly her G.C. citation which said: ‘She was then continuously and atrociously tortured but never by word or deed gave away any of her acquaintances or told the enemy anything of any value. She was ultimately executed. Madame Szabo gave a magnificent example of courage and steadfastness.’

105 If, as has been suggested, Violette managed to shoot continually for two hours she would have used an extraordinary amount of ammunition. It is more likely that she would have used the gun on repeat and shot in bursts of two or three rounds at a time as she had been trained to do. The cyclic rate of Sten Mark II is 550 rounds per minute, if Violette had shot at that rate for two hours she would have used 66,000 rounds, equalling 2062.5 magazines – that is, if the barrel of the gun had not melted first or the spring mechanisms jammed up first.106 See Minney, Carve her name with pride, p.158.


108 SOE Records of Service were usually completed by the individual on ceasing to work for SOE. When staff or agents were killed in action, therefore there was no Record of Service. In these cases the best we can do is to reconstruct their SOE careers from such documents as are on the Personal File (PF). These are frequently incomplete but are usually sufficient to provide a reasonable complete and factual picture. In Violette Szabo’s case, the file is very thin indeed...’ Letter to Roger Tobbell from Duncan Stuart, SOE advisor. 16th December 1998.
The second source which includes references is *Carve her name with pride*. Minney writes that: ‘the most atrocious torture’ occurred and the accompanying passage says:

‘As the questioning proceeded and she still proved recalcitrant, implements of torture were produced and each was held up before her. The Inquisitor said “will you answer now” and, just as defiantly as when she was a child she replied, “I will not, I will not.” The young German then gave the sign. There followed the most atrocious torture. She winced and bit her lips. Her face was contorted in her agony.’

As Foot stated in the 1968 publication of *SOE in France*: ‘what happened to the captured women has been a good deal exaggerated.’ Some think this exaggeration was put into the book to win the sympathy of the reader, as Foot implied: ‘...stories of torture come from the prurient imaginations of authors anxious to make their books sell’. Ottaway, Violette’s second biographer, also believed she was not tortured stating that: ‘I do believe she may have been subjected to some personal violence, but nothing that could be described as torture’ perhaps akin to Foot’s statement that: ‘apart from a few cuffs from angry wardresses, none of these women except Mrs. Sansom [Odette] and Noor Inayat Khan were picked out for special treatment...’

There are no extant records of the actual events, and until recently there were no eyewitness accounts. Evidence to suggest that Violette was tortured comes from somewhat unreliable sources. Firstly in an article in the press on 28th April 1966 Mrs Julia Kilburn describing herself as: ‘an interpreter appointed by the Nazis at their Ravensbrück concentration camp’ said ‘Torture? Of course they had been tortured...She told me she had been tortured but did not give details. You see those who talked about it were not always telling the truth’. Another source is Huguette Desore who was Violette’s cellmate at Fresnes prison. In a documentary aired on the BBC in 2002 she said:

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109 Minney, *Carve her name with pride*.
110 ibid, p.161.
111 Foot, *SOE in France*, p.430.
112 ibid, p.431.
113 Ottaway, *The Life that I have*, p.116.
114 Foot, *SOE in France*, p.430.
115 Newspaper article, 28th April 1966, John London.
‘I’ll never forget it the cell door opened and Violette came in, she had not been harmed she seemed alright but maybe a bit frightened…they were trying to get her to talk, they had badly tortured a young Resistance fighter, they showed her how they had smashed his face.’

Huguette also recalls a conversation that she had with Violette upon her return from questioning by an SS guard. Violette reputedly said that: ‘the SS man said he wanted her, he put his revolver to the back of her neck and he told her that “if tomorrow I want to kill you I’ll do it and that will be that.” He then raped her.’ However, in *Young, Brave and Beautiful* Tania Szabo writes that: ‘Huguette wanted the author to understand why she believed, why she imagined, the evening Violette came back later than usual, that she had been subjected to that very cruelty. Violette never (sic) told her that, Huguette said. Huguette then begged the author’s forgiveness for having recently revealed this to someone who then betrayed her - meaning the film crew.’ This implied that Huguette either said something she wished she had not or the film crew had cut her testimony to fit their needs to say that Violette was raped.

Whilst this is the only first-hand piece of evidence to suggest that Violette was abused during her time at Fresnes prison, Huguette did not state it publicly until she revisited Fresnes as part of a documentary made for the BBC in 2002 when she was taken into her old cell. It is possible that a combination of emotion and years of reliving the scenes caused her to remember or construct conversations that did not take place or were different from those she recalled. Huguette is also quoted in Tania Szabo’s book as reporting a similar conversation with Violette who apparently said: ‘Something unimaginable happened to me! He was furious tonight, crazy and furious, unbelievably worked up.’ This is not sufficient to assume that Violette is referring to torture or rape, although the author then goes on to surmise that: ‘women are always vulnerable in certain areas – and these areas do not show the marks of abuse or torture’ thus implying that Violette was sexually abused or raped.

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117 Ibid.
118 Szabo, *Young, Brave and Beautiful*, p.405.
Although no method of torture is ever specified in Tania Szabo's book she makes a statement that is not backed up by sources in any way: 'Violette spent two weeks in the cells at Fresnes prison, and they were not kind to her. Here, she was severely beaten and subjected to all manner of humiliating torture and sadism, as had so many women.'\textsuperscript{120} Tania later states that 'the other injuries were hidden from sight, some so internal that she might now never have another child, should she survive.'\textsuperscript{121} It would seem that Tania Szabo is assuming Violette received the same treatment as other women who had given their accounts but the evidence is unsubstantiated.

In a conversation held with Minney whilst writing \textit{Carve her name with pride}, Peleuve said that: 'either through modesty or a sense of delicacy, since some of her tortures were too intimate in their application; or perhaps because she did not wish to live again through the pain of it, she spoke hardly at all about the tortures she had been made to suffer.'\textsuperscript{122} Peleuve is half-remembering what Violette might have told him, if she had told him anything. He assumed that she may have been raped and for that reason did not want to tell him, he does not think that the reason she did not tell him about her torture was because she was not tortured at all.

The other torture referred to in Tania Szabo's book is psychological in that shootings would happen outside Violette's cell and that she was forced to watch two young men being tortured in front of her. Other material from Huguette's interview is cited, such as both women noticing whip marks on each other bodies when they stripped to wash.\textsuperscript{123}

An interview with SOE agent Eileen Nearne, who was also captured, is quoted in Liane Jones \textit{A Quiet Courage} and implies that Violette was not tortured: ‘Didi [Eileen] warned Violette that she was passing herself off as French. Violette asked her what the Gestapo had done to her, and when Didi told her about the ‘baignoire’ in the Rue des Saussaies, she was horrified. She told Didi that neither she nor Lilian nor Denise had been tortured.’\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid p.422.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid p.419.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid p.442.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid p.409.
\textsuperscript{124} Jones, \textit{A Quiet Courage}, pp. 313-4.
This quote contradicts Szabo’s statement that: ‘she had been subjected to the cold bath, a favourite pursuit at Avenue Foch and a little electric shock treatment to coax her stubborn mouth to spill out all she knew...’ In his work *SOE in France*, Foot also stated that: ‘the number who were ever seriously tortured is small’ and that Violette was not tortured.

As with Odette, the tale of torture has become part of Violette’s construction and myth. To most, it does not matter what the evidence says and they will always believe that she suffered dreadfully to protect those in her network and to prevent the ‘hated’ Germans from getting any useful information from her. The fact that she had only been in France for two days at the time of her arrest and would not know many people is unimportant (as mentioned by Bob Maloubier) and the public will believe what the construction and hearsay tells them.

After several weeks’ incarceration at Fresnes, Violette was transported by train to Germany on 8th August 1944. On board that train were several male SOE agents, including Yeo-Thomas and Harry Peuleve. During the journey the train was attacked by allied aircraft, one of the carriages was destroyed and those inside were killed or injured. The men were handcuffed to each other and could not move about inside the train and many of them began to panic. Fearing that they may be hit by an incendiary they threw themselves on top of one another, as there was not room to lie on the floor. They were also parched with thirst as all the water from the Red-Cross bottles had been consumed during the night. In his PF Yeo-Thomas said that: ‘We all felt deeply ashamed when we saw Violette Szabo, while the raid was still on, come crawling along the corridor towards us with a jug of water which she had filled in the lavatory. With her, crawling too, came the girl to whose ankle she was chained’. This is re-iterated in his auto-biography. This act of bravery is a strong ingredient in the Violette Szabo myth, it is undisputed and keenly reiterated by various sources.

Unlike Odette, Violette’s time at Ravensbrück was either spent in the main camp, or on working parties. Violette was also seen by several other SOE women including Eileen Nearne, and spent much of her time with SOE agents Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe. The

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125 Szabo, *Young, Brave and Beautiful*, p.424.
126 Foot, *SOE in France*, p.431.
women arrived at the camp on 22nd August 1944 and on 3rd September 1944 were sent on a working party to Torgau, a camp where they: ‘farmed vegetables, dug roads and worked in machine factories.’\textsuperscript{129} They worked in a factory where the work was hard, but conditions were slightly better than at Ravensbrück and the food was significantly better.

At Torgau Violette began to plan her escape. The camp was less closely guarded than Ravensbrück and: ‘behind the washroom was a hut inside a barricade, beyond the barricade there was a wall with a door in it, beyond the wall was an open field.’\textsuperscript{130} She got a key cut with the help of someone in the camp and told Eileen Nearne of her plan. Eileen wanted to escape immediately but Violette said it would be better if it was properly planned. Before they got chance to use the key someone denounced Violette to the authorities and she had to throw it away to clear her name.

Eileen stated that the: ‘women were in good spirits; particularly Violette who was planning to escape.’\textsuperscript{131} A few weeks later Eileen was moved to another sub camp of Ravensbrück and she never saw them again. Eileen had stuck to her cover story of being Mme du Tertre and had maintained that she was French but Violette had tried to convince her otherwise saying: ‘you should have said you were English. English girls are treated better than the French’ but Eileen refused saying: ‘No, I’m sticking to my story.’\textsuperscript{132}

One of the communist prisoners at Torgau advised the other women to stop working on the munitions that will: ‘kill our brothers...No one was sure what to do’ they were told that: ‘...they would be wise to stay where they were and work in the munitions factory where conditions were far superior to Ravensbrück.’\textsuperscript{133} The camp authorities were unable to deal with the situation and Fritz Sühren went to Torgau to sort out the situation. He decided to send 250 women to work in Leipzig and the other 250 including Violette, Denise and Lilian to a harsh work camp in Eastern Prussia called Königsberg. After a short visit back to the main camp they went to Königsberg and here the work was much harsher, exacerbated by the severe weather, Violette reputedly wore only her: ‘summer dress and clogs.’\textsuperscript{134} ‘They worked in the forests and on building an aerodrome’, the food

\textsuperscript{129} Jones, \textit{A Quiet Courage}, p.314.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{131} NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957.
\textsuperscript{132} Jones, \textit{A Quiet Courage}, p.314.
\textsuperscript{133} Ottaway, \textit{The Life that I have}, p.143.
\textsuperscript{134} Szabo, \textit{Young, Brave and Beautiful}, p. 474.
was meagre and: ‘Violette’s health was finally on the decline. That of Denise and Lilian was dangerously low...’

The above pattern of events is corroborated by several sources, but in Szabo’s book she states that not only was Violette out on these two working parties, she was also sent to work in a brothel: ‘Violette and other women having been cleaned up, were forced to make a number of appallingly degrading visits to the Sachsenhausen camp bordels and sub camps where a group of SS guards and officers took photographs of the sexual acts committed on Violette and other women.’ There is no other evidence or even mention of this anywhere in other works relating to Violette or her files. Eileen does not mention it and neither does Marie Lecomte who spent much time with the three and survived her ordeal, providing details to Violette’s mother in the mid 1950s.

Also the dates do not withstand scrutiny, if this was indeed the case: Violette arrived at Ravensbrück on 22\textsuperscript{nd} August 1944, she was moved to Torgau on 3rd September 1944 and returned to Ravensbrück on 5\textsuperscript{th} October 1944, leaving again for Konigsberg on 19\textsuperscript{th} Oct 1944. The women were recalled to Ravensbrück on 20th January 1945 and were immediately put into the punishment block and they were moved three or four days later to the bunker and a couple of days later this they were ‘taken away’ to be executed.\textsuperscript{136} This leaves a two week gap between 5\textsuperscript{th} October and 19\textsuperscript{th} October 1944 for Violette to be sent to be sent to Sachsenhausen, approx 70 km from where she was at Ravensbrück. While this is not impossible, the lack of evidence makes it highly unlikely that this event took place.

Violette’s reputation as always being cheery and in high spirits is somewhat apocryphal. Marie Lecomte recalled how: ‘one evening, when Violette arrived back at the hut at about 6pm, she was almost out her mind with the cold. The cheerful optimistic girl, who, only a short time before had planned to escape, was gone. The girl who replaced her was depressed, exhausted, and devoid of any hope for the future’.\textsuperscript{137} The image of Violette as always: ‘in a cheerful mood, her spirits high...’\textsuperscript{138} is unrealistic, but has become part of her construction that places her as a heroine and an extraordinary woman.

\textsuperscript{135} NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ottaway, The Life that I have, p.144.
\textsuperscript{138} Minney, Carve her name with pride, p.169.
On or around 20th January 1945 the women were: ‘recalled to Ravensbrück and there was some speculation as to the motive. The girls were hopeful they might be repatriated via Sweden or Switzerland.’\textsuperscript{139} This may have been because they were given clean clothes, soap and a comb and Violette’s friend Marie thought they might be going to a British camp. On the contrary, orders had been sent to all the camps with the names of British prisoners who were to be dealt with, and made to disappear under Hitler’s ‘Nacht und Nebel’ directive. As outlined above they were kept in the punishment block and then moved to the bunker.

Sometime between 25th January and 5th February 1945 all three were taken to a passage behind the crematorium and were executed by a: ‘single shot to the neck’, Violette being the last to die.\textsuperscript{140} This is reiterated in the affidavit of Johann Scharzhuber who said: ‘the shooting was done only by Schult [SS] with a small caliber gun through the back of the neck. He also said that: ‘All three were very brave and I was deeply moved. Sühren was: ‘impressed by the bearing of these women.’\textsuperscript{141}

After their deaths rumours abounded about what had happened to them. A nurse at Ravensbrück said they had been hanged: ‘she said that she had seen her clothes in the disinfection room and that there was blood on them’ and that the clothes were identified by Marie Lecomte as being Violette’s but: ‘when a person is hanged there is no blood.’\textsuperscript{142} Others said that their clothes were cremated with them. However, not everyone believed they were dead. Another prisoner believed they had even been repatriated with: ‘rumours that Denise and Lilian had been liberated and seen in Switzerland and France: ‘Vera had even heard tantalising stories of a woman answering Violette’s description being seen amongst repatriated women in France.’\textsuperscript{143} Although it took a long time for SOE Officer Vera Atkins and SOE officials to find out what happened to these women the various affidavits and evidence all concur - that the women were killed by gun shot in early 1945, the actual date being difficult to verify.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{140} Philipp, Kalendarium der Ereignisse im Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück 1939-44.  
\textsuperscript{141} NA, WO 235/309 Bl.11, March 1946.  
\textsuperscript{142} Ottaway, The Life that I have, p.151.  
\textsuperscript{143} Helm, A life in Secrets.  
\textsuperscript{144} According to the ‘Kalendarium der Ereignisse im Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück 1939-45’ it was 27th January 1945. ‘The sources of the Kalendarium are mainly autobiographical reports, testimonies and memories of former prisoners….. [and] are not completely reliable.’ The Kalendarium also mentions that Odette heard
Perhaps it is because of Violette’s untimely death and the fact that she left behind an orphan who received the G.C. on her behalf, or perhaps it is the stories of her beauty and courage, that she has become something of a national heroine. There are men and women all over the world who hold her in incredibly high regard, who almost feel that they own her memory and who dislike anyone who questions the construction and seeks to find a more complete picture. There are those who have pictures of her tattooed on their arms, those who hold séances with her, those who undergo past life regression to discover if they knew her in a former life and there is a little group of people who regard Violette Szabo as their personal property who will criticise and damn anyone who destroys the myth that they have come to love and who is ‘our Violette’.

Each 26th June or the weekend closest to it (Violette’s birthday) crowds gather for a picnic in Wremelow, Herefordshire (where Violette holidayed in between missions). Here people recite poems, gives talks, sing songs and perform a traditional act of remembrance in Violette’s memory. There is also a small museum full of Violette memorabilia, including (apparently) the door of the car she was said to be in when she was ambushed.

Violette has a reputation as being an extraordinary woman, who excelled at everything and who was exceedingly beautiful. The latter seems indisputable as many agents, colleagues and instructors commented on her beauty and she certainly stuck in the memories of those who met her for years after her death. A vivid picture and representation of Violette may be gained through the training notes in her PF, which assists the scholar with piecing together something of her character and aptitude for the work she was to undertake with SOE. Her reputation as crack shot seems deserved with her instructors stating that she had the eye of hawk, and she is described as: ‘sociable, the shootings and remembers the day as 27th January, but this too has to be treated with caution, as how could she know the date if she was in solitary confinement. Frauke Podszus writes in her thesis on the SOE agents - ‘Weibliche Agenten der Special Operations Executive (SOE, 1940-1946)” (Female agents of the SOE) that the women were presumably shot during the night of the 26th/27th January but does not give a source.

Johann Schwarzhuber (a German eyewitness) also states in his deposition that ‘I declare that I remember that I had delivered to me towards the end of January 1945, an order from the German Secret Police countersigned by the Camp Commandant Sühren, instructing me to ascertain the location of the following people: Lillian Rolfe, Danielle Williams, Violette Szabo… One evening towards 19:00 hours, they were called out and taken to the cemetery yard by the crematorium….The shooting was done only by Schult.” Sarah Helm uses this source in A life in Secrets. At best all that can be ascertained from the sources is that in early winter 1945 the three women were shot within earshot of Odette’s cell by a small calibre pistol.

Conversation with Roger Tobell at Violette Szabo memorial picnic.
likeable, painstaking, anxious to please, keen.... However, instructors pointed out several flaws with her personality and skills: ‘she seems to be uncertain of her own mind,’ she: ‘speaks French with an English accent’ and: ‘she is very temperamental, ranges from enthusiasm to depression for no apparent reason at all.’ This last statement possibly implies that Violette was still grieving for Etienne and possibly for the fact she has had to leave her daughter behind.

Violette was said to be: ‘temperamentally unsuitable for this work,’ but Buckmaster overrode the instructor’s recommendation and sent her into the field anyway. As Ottaway states, these reports show that: ‘Violette was an ordinary, albeit extremely pretty young girl. She was not some super heroine of whom great things were expected; she was the girl next door...’ Violette demonstrated extreme bravery and resilience after capture, and during her time with SOE she undertook the training and work well, she did what was expected of her, no better and no worse than any other agent.

Violette’s reputation and confused construction really starts at the point of her arrest. Did she carry a Sten gun, if she did was it used and did she kill any Germans with it? Accounts are so varied for this part of her story that it is impossible to ascertain the truth as to what actually happened due to the ‘fog of war’ effect. More important is the part that this constructed image of her wielding a gun and mowing down Germans plays in the public’s overall perception of what she and other SOE agents did. It has permeated the public’s perceived wisdom of the SOE and has given rise to the myth that all agents were involved in such hand to hand combat, and that all of their work was so dangerous and adventurous. The reality however is that most women worked in solitary, hardly seeing anyone. Their main danger was being caught transmitting, rather than getting involved in gun fights or carrying incriminating material.

As with Odette, the story of Violette’s torture has come from the fictionalised book of her life and the film Carve her name with pride. Other than this there is no extant evidence to suggest that she was tortured at all during her time at the Avenue Foch or Fresnes prison. Accounts from her cell mate Huguette Deshors make assumptions that certain things happened to her such as rape, but Huguette herself stated that ‘Violette never said that.’

146 NA, Violette Szabo, HS9/1435 – 109957, 13th October 1943.
147 Ottaway, The Life that I have, p.59.
rather she just assumed that it was the case. It would seem that Violette was mentally
tormented by being forced to watch a man being tortured and others shot, but no physical
violence can be proved from the sources available.

Violette’s treatment at Ravensbrück is relatively straightforward to substantiate; unlike
Odette she was housed in the main camp and therefore others saw her, spoke to her and
worked alongside her. Marie Lecomte was a prisoner alongside Violette and spent much
time with her and Marie’s letters to Violette’s parents in 1953 provide graphic information
on how Violette was treated and what she had encountered in her time at Ravensbrück,
Torgau and Königsberg. Other evidence comes from the accounts of Eileen Nearne, who
was also on the same working party as Violette.

Violette’s image and story is used repeatedly when discussing female agents of SOE F
section and she has come to represent the SOE on a number of occasions. For example
her image is used on the SOE memorial on the Albert embankment in London; a poster at
King’s Cross entitled George Cross at Kings Cross featured her (inaccurate) citation and
image. A conference was organised in November 2008 to commemorate the fiftieth
anniversary of Carve her name with pride and focussed on her above all others. In
interview Tania Szabo suggested that the reason for this was: ‘if people do not write about
the others and give them prominence then Violette must stand as tribute’ and she does
just that.\footnote{Interview with Tania Szabo, Holiday Inn Express, Leeds, 28th November 2008.}

Although she may not have killed any Germans and may not have been tortured or raped,
she still undertook valuable work for the SOE. One must wonder, would we have known
much at all, had she survived the war and returned safely to Britain. Would she have
enjoyed the same level of celebrity as Odette Churchill, or would she have had no more
than other SOE agents such as Lise De Baissac or Nancy Wake whose reputation and
memorialisation lies with a handful of scholars, enthusiasts, journalists and TV producers
who have taken an interest in their wartime activities.

This chapter has shown that there are many images and theories surrounding Violette’s
character, her behaviour and her personality. Some of them are validated up by sources,
but others are part of an intricate and confusing construction as the result of many books,
articles and retellings of her story. While it is not my aim to destroy Violette’s reputation, it is important that the truth about Violette is known and as such the various sources have been examined thoroughly to ascertain as true a picture as possible of her. The facts are clear; she was an extraordinary woman, as were all the women who were infiltrated into France by SOE F section. However, her looks, her personality, and the fact that she was executed ensured that she became famous, whereas others are virtually unknown. The book and the film *Carve her name with pride* and her decoration with a George Cross ensured that Violette Szabo would become a household name but also that the fictions that surround her would continue to evolve in the post-war years and beyond.\(^{149}\)

\(^{149}\) An XBOX 360/PC game *Velvet Assassin,* is based on her life and was released in 2008.
Chapter five

*Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* as Celluloid Memorials

This chapter discusses examines *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* and the place of the SOE war film within the genre of the war film. It also sets out the various types of film categories that SOE films fall into. The chapter will also demonstrate Odette’s involvement in both films as technical advisor and the impact this had on the women’s post-war construction and their impact on public perception of the SOE.

This thesis deals with wartime experiences and post-war representations (in particular constructions) of the women of SOE F section - the medium of film incorporates and links these themes in that it shows representations of agent’s experiences and is responsible in part for the post-war constructions of their stories and characters. An agent’s portrayal on film forms the basis of the public’s awareness of them and their stories. It is the purpose of this chapter to look at the representation of Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo on film and to assess how their portrayal has influenced SOE mythology and the SOE films that follow them. Film is easily accessible to a wide audience but can be prone to exaggerations and inaccuracies that permeate the public consciousness and become part of perceived wisdom, even though they may have no basis at all in reality.³

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¹ Film poster for *Carve her name with pride*, 1956.
² Film poster for *Odette*, 1950.
³ Examples include *Braveheart* and *The Patriot* where history was rewritten to suit the needs of the directors and to make it attractive to the target audience. History was depicted in a biased manner and yet many of the public believed that the films depicted the historical truth.
The films *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* have affected and to some extent dictated the public’s perception of the life of a secret agent. These films are based on semi-fictionalised biographies supposedly depicting real events and as such have become part of the mythology and popular culture that surrounds the women agents. The films were released relatively close together (1950 and 1958), and were heavily influenced by Odette Churchill who advised on both. They also have similar stories, themes and characters – they show women leaving their children to join the SOE, they are subsequently arrested, allegedly tortured and sent to a concentration camp. The depiction of these themes within SOE films makes it difficult to ascertain where reality stops and fiction starts, causing a contamination of the truth which now relates to most women of F section.

The aims of this chapter are; to demonstrate how film can be considered a type of memorial; to show the role of women in film in post-war Britain and how the films about female SOE agents were unique at the time in having female protagonists; how these films have influenced the public’s perception of the agent’s lives and work. The chapter will demonstrate Odette’s influence over the two films in terms of authenticity, recurring themes and characterisation and how that has influenced subsequent films relating to the women of SOE F section.

The chapter will evaluate the claims of ‘historical accuracy’ and authenticity in *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* and whether the biopic is the most suitable form of film to represent the lives of these two agents. It will also demonstrate the public interest in this type of film and their propensity for Second World War nostalgia and explore the exploitation of the public’s susceptibility to believe what is put on the screen in front of them and whether the public care about accuracy. It will show that film conveys an image of the past that fixes into the mind a basic reference image which then becomes part of the perceived wisdom of a certain subject like torture or imprisonment that is not questioned for its accuracy.

The second part of this chapter will analyse filmic representations of torture and the concentration camps that are an intrinsic part of the stories of Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo and have become part of SOE mythology as they have captured the public imagination. This has affected the public perception of all SOE agents and it is a common
misconception evident in books and on websites that most women agents were subjected to torture, imprisonment and death. In reality two thirds of SOE F section agents were not captured and survived, but it is those who were that seem to attract most attention.

It is arguable that Odette Churchill is largely responsible for this biased view of the SOE. She was a great self publicist and heavily influenced the film of *Carve her name with pride* as technical advisor. The similarities in certain scenes discussed below are not coincidental, they were manipulated by Odette perhaps to add validity to her own original story, confirm certain perceptions, or perhaps reiterate that she was involved in all of this publicity to ensure the stories of her fallen comrades became public. Her influence is clear and she not only constructed her own story but that of Violette Szabo.

Films with female SOE protagonists followed in the wake of war films with women in central roles. In addition to Mass observation records and magazine articles much has been written about wartime films showing women and their perception of the war. 4 Wartime cinema served as a place of escapism from blackouts, rationing and queuing where one could suspend ones disbelief. It also played a major role in keeping the general public up to date with current affairs abroad through news broadcast and where one could see public information films and propaganda (although on occasion the boundaries between these and feature films became blurred as they also served as recruitment machines i.e. *Millions like us*). 5 It is widely acknowledged that cinema formed a large part of people’s leisure time and recreational habits.

During the war (1939-1945) films were under the command of the Ministry of Information (MOI). 6 ‘The Kinematograph weekly’ noted that the: ‘MOI [now] only wanted films which

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5 In a survey carried out by the Wartime Social Survey entitled: ‘The cinema audience’ it was found that ‘70 percent of adults claimed they sometimes went to the cinema and 32 percent overall, went at least once a week’.
6 MOI was formed on September 4th 1939, and the day after Britain’s declaration of war, the Ministry of Information (MOI) was the central government department responsible for publicity and propaganda in the Second World War. The initial functions of the MOI were threefold: news and press censorship; home publicity; and overseas publicity in Allied and neutral countries. In the 1930s communications activities had become a recognised function of government. Many departments however had established public relations divisions, and were reluctant to give this up to central control. In early 1939 documents noted concern that the next war would be ‘a war of nerves’ involving the civilian population, and that the government would need to go further than ever before with every means of publicity ‘utilised and co-ordinated’, as it fought against a well-funded and
were not nostalgic about the old ways and old-Days...but realistic films of everyday life. Producers were not given the artistic license previously enjoyed and had to obey a strict set of rules if their film was to be successful in attaining a public release into cinemas. Films such as *Mrs Minniver* and *Went the day well*, (1942), *Millions like us* and *The Gentle Sex* followed these rules and catapulted women to the forefront of the action. Storylines focussed on the female experience of war including life on the home front and employment in war industries.

Post-war films reverted women to ‘stock’ roles such as a love interest, as part of the domestic setting such as home maker, mother or wife or in the case of war films taking minor roles such as clerks or drivers. The films were naturalistic in style and about reinstating women’s place in the home and her return to normality and monogamy. The decline in the presence of women in films is so great that: ‘in the popular war films of the 1950s…the Second World War is almost exclusively male. Female characters are completely absent from six of the most popular films of the 1950s…and in most of the rest women occupy more or less marginal roles that serve to enhance the masculinity of the enterprise.’

Cinema-going habits in the 1950s were influenced by the fact that very few people had a television set and that evening entertainment was very limited, for the majority of the British public their entertainment was the cinema, the pub or a night at home. In 1950s the floodgates opened as the British (and American) film industries looked back at the recent hostilities for inspiration on a new set of films. These films have become broadly known as ‘war films,’ a definition of which is: ‘a film genre concerned with warfare, usually about naval, air or land battles, sometimes focusing instead, on prisoners of war, covert operations, military training or other related subjects...Their stories may be fiction, based

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established Nazi machine. Threatened by censorship, the press reacted negatively to the MOI, describing it as shambolic and disorganised, and as a result it underwent many structural changes throughout the war. Four Ministers headed the MOI in quick succession: Lord Hugh Macmillan, Sir John Reith and Duff Cooper, before the Ministry settled down under Brendan Bracken in July 1941. Supported by Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the press, Bracken remained in office until victory was obvious. (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/inf3.htm).

8 *Mrs Minniver* dir. by Wyler, 1942.
9 *Went the day well* dir. by Cavalcanti, 1942.
10 *Millions like us*, dir. by Gilliat and Launder, 1943.
11 *The gentle Sex*, dir. by Leslie Howard, 1943,
on history, docudrama or occasionally biographical. Most war films often include a romance somewhere in the plot.\(^\text{13}\) Women remained in supporting roles as cinema produced tales of daring exploits like *The Dam Busters,\(^\text{14}\) Sink the Bismarck,\(^\text{15}\) Bridge on the River Kwai,\(^\text{16}\) and *The Great Escape*\(^\text{17}\) all of which had male protagonists.

Film scholars recognise that war films produced by the British film industry of this period fell broadly into three categories: POW films, Resistance and Espionage films, and military campaigns.\(^\text{18}\) These films dealt mainly with themes of ‘national identity, social hierarchy and male bonding’ indicating that these films were aimed primarily at a male audience.\(^\text{19}\) After 1950s the generation gap began to open up: ‘war films were one of the few things that fathers could enthusiastically share with their sons’\(^\text{20}\) and: ‘for those too young to have experienced it, the war was an endless subject of excitement and adventure – the blackout, the Blitz, the Resistance movements, the glories of aerial combat and naval endeavour.’\(^\text{21}\)

Of war films made during the 1950s only four out of 50\(^\text{22}\) British films have female protagonists: *Odette*, *Carve her name with pride*, *A Town like Alice*\(^\text{23}\) and *Conspiracy of Hearts*.\(^\text{24}\) The first two films are based on the fictionalised biographies of their protagonists and present a number of problems in terms of translating the literary semi-biography into a filmic biographical picture or ‘biopic’. These semi-biographies raise several contentious issues as both are based on biographies of women by male authors.\(^\text{25}\) Also both are based on books that catapulted the female protagonists to national heroines of an unprecedented scale as both books verge on being hagiographies and both contain detailed descriptions of events that are not based on any documentary evidence.\(^\text{26}\) To some scholars this type of artistic license in a biography is warranted: ‘who can write a


\(^{15}\) *Sink the Bismarck!* dir. by Lewis Gilbert, 1960.

\(^{16}\) *Bridge on the river Kwai*, dir. by David Lean, 1957.

\(^{17}\) *The Great Escape*, dir. by John Sturges, 1963.

\(^{18}\) *Murphy, British Cinema and the Second World War*. Also *Summerfield, Public memory or public amnesia*.

\(^{19}\) *Summerfield, Public memory or public amnesia*.

\(^{20}\) *Murphy, British Cinema and the Second World War*, p.205.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) *Summerfield, Public memory or public amnesia*.

\(^{23}\) *A Town Like Alice*, dir. by Jack lee, 1956.

\(^{24}\) *Conspiracy of hearts*, dir. by Ralph Thomas, 1960.

\(^{25}\) *Jones, A Quiet courage*, p.7. Also ‘Neither woman narrates her own story. Tickell and Minney provide intrusive masculine omniscient narrative voices’ Osborne. D. ‘I do not know about politics...I am a house wife’ *Women: A cultural review. Volume 17, issue 1, April 2006*.

\(^{26}\) *Seaman, War, Resistance and Intelligence*, p.126.
biography without inventing a life? A biographer, like a writer of fiction imposes a pattern upon events, invents a protagonist and discovers the pattern of his or her life.\textsuperscript{27} But the ‘biographer’ is distorting the truth and creating fictional scenarios and a protagonist who may differ greatly from the original. How can a whole book or film be regarded as historically accurate when some of it is fabricated or fictitious?

Rosenstone says that: ‘facts cannot explain the configuration that constitutes a life. Often biographers depart from the facts or bend them in order to create a particular atmosphere or mood or a more consistent figure of a historical person.’\textsuperscript{28} By doing this the biographer distorts the truth and in veering away from the facts he creates a myth. If his book is then used as reference material the myth becomes perpetuated until the story and persona of the protagonist is no longer a true representation but a parody.

The same issues arise with film biographies or ‘biopics’ some of which engage a: ‘cunning mixture of diverse visual elements – fact, near fact, displaced fact and invention’\textsuperscript{29} to produce a rough resemblance of something that formerly had its basis in hard fact. This may make for a more entertaining and imaginative filmic representation of a character and their experiences, but it is risky when the public are unable to distinguish fact from fiction.

This questions the film or the ‘biopic’ as an appropriate medium for portraying historical characters and events: ‘It refers to the past, it prods the memory but can we call it history? Surely not history as we usually use the word, not history that attempts to accurately reproduce a specific, documentable moment of the past.’\textsuperscript{30} A biopic takes factual historical events and characters and adds a fictional narrative. It not only tells the ‘what and when’ but the ‘how and why’ of the situation. Characters are given depth, motivations and emotions that may not necessarily be true but give the audience an opportunity to empathise with the character and their predicaments. This makes the story more palatable in terms of entertainment and human interest but risks sacrificing truth and historical integrity to drama, emotion and adventure. A documentary book or film curbs: ‘the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{27} Robert Rosenstone, History on film, Film on history. (Harlow: Longman, 2006) p.91.
\textsuperscript{28} ibid
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid p.112.
\end{footnotesize}
projective activity of identification with character and action and respects the “having been there” of the past.31

The issue is that an audience may engage with a film to such a degree that when they see a historical film or a biopic they may believe that it is factually accurate and based in reality and not realise that some events and characters are fictitious.32 This is much more likely if the film has a prologue/epilogue or uses real people’s names and situations as in Odette and Carve her name with pride. It poses problems in that it creates or perpetuates fictions and myths as: ‘film representation has such power that it overwhelsm other forms of recollection by imposing indelible ways of the past on the public imagination.’33 The film has such power over the viewer that they believe what they see, perhaps to such an extent that it replaces the actual event in their minds as: ‘historical fictions tend to replace the real documents of events in the public imagination.’34 For example: ‘the images of the revolution of 1905 which dominate our memory [are] those from Eisenstein’s work [in The Battleship Potemkin]35 or the storming of the winter palace, which was a filmed reconstruction made in 1920 of the 1917 revolution.

This replacement of ‘the real’ with filmic images is evident in Odette and Carve her name with pride. The directors of both films were already well known for producing biopics and therefore understood the need for historical authenticity and accuracy whilst delivering an engaging and entertaining film.36 An impression of ‘historical authenticity’ is given at the beginning of the film Odette where a list of ‘gratefully acknowledged’ includes: Odette (Mrs Peter Churchill), Captain Peter Churchill D.S.O. Croix de Guerre, Colonel Maurice Buckmaster O.B.E and Jerrard Tickell. According to Osbourne this list also: ‘signals that the screen adaptation is another representation of her experience, rather than a scrupulous translation to film of Tickell's narrative.’37 Thus reinforcing the notion that

31 Guynn, W. Writing History in Film. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).
32 An example of this was the first episode of the ‘X Files’ which stated it was based on a true story, the audience believed it was a true story and that every episode afterwards was too.
33 Guynn, Writing History in Film, p.165.
34 Ibid.
36 During the 1930s and 40s Wilcox who directed ‘Odette’ had made films about Nell Gwyn, Queen Victoria, Edith Cavell, and Florence Nightingale many of which starred his wife, Anna Neagle in the title role. Daniel Angel and Lewis Gilbert, who made ‘Carve Her Name with pride’ had previously made ‘Reach for the Sky’ which told the life story of Douglas Bader.
37 Deidre Osborne ‘I do not know about politics...I am a house wife’, Women: A cultural review, 17.1, (2006) 42-64.
biopics utilise pockets of material and in doing so run the risk of creating an unbalanced representation.\textsuperscript{38}

In an attempt to ensure authenticity Wilcox (as stated in his autobiography)\textsuperscript{39} and Anna Neagle accompanied Odette and Peter Churchill together with the script writer Warren Chetham Strode: ‘on a tour of Odette’s wartime operations in France.’\textsuperscript{40} During which time Odette had several flashbacks to her time in prison:

‘Throughout the entire journey and even in the torture room, Odette had been calmly objective. But as she started to walk down the main stairs, her feet hurt and she walked on her heels – as she had done when she came out of the torture room with no toe nails. She apologised and for the first time was near to tears as she relived that terrible occasion.’\textsuperscript{41}

These original locations were then used during the film itself: ‘in a sober semi documentary style’ thus adding authenticity and realism to the scenes in France as well as the prison and interrogation scenes.\textsuperscript{42} Neagle also mimicked Odette’s actions following the torture scenes which will be discussed in depth below.

Other indications that imply that the film is historically sound are that it was made: ‘with the co-operation of the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry’ and also uses Buckmaster to authenticate the story and provide historical gravitas in a prologue by stating: ‘I know this story to be true...as accurately as human memory permits.’\textsuperscript{43} This insinuates that he (and perhaps other members of SOE) cannot remember exactly what happened it does: ‘provide an escape clause for any interpretative inaccuracies that may emerge or creative license the director Wilcox may employ’.\textsuperscript{44} Buckmaster also plays himself throughout the rest of the film, and as a non-actor he: ‘functions in terms of idea and exposition, rather

\textsuperscript{38} In this case as Tickell’s version also employs significant artistic license it is to no real effect.
\textsuperscript{39} Herbert Wilcox, \textit{Twenty five thousand sunsets} (London:The Bodley head, 1957).
\textsuperscript{40} Rosie White, \textit{Violent Femmes} (Oxon: Routledge, 2007) p.53.
\textsuperscript{41} Wilcox, \textit{Twenty five thousand Sunsets}, p.181.
\textsuperscript{42} Jeffrey Richards, \textit{Film and British National identity} (Manchester: MUP, 1997) p.132.
\textsuperscript{43} This echoes his disclaimer in ‘Specially Employed’ in which he ‘pleaded that the passage of time, an absence of contemporary notes, a proliferation of pseudonyms and the need to maintain secrecy regarding methods and plans might affect the books accuracy’ as well as stating ‘I do not claim that the incidents described in these pages are completely factually accurate’.
\textsuperscript{44} Deidre Osborne, ‘I do not know about politics...I am a house wife’, \textit{Women: A cultural review}, 17.1, (2006) 42-64.
than to provide character and psychological insight.\textsuperscript{45} His frequent appearances, the fact that all the wireless messages they receive are signed ‘Buck’ and his name is used several times in conversations between agents such as: ‘take a message for Buck’ and ‘Good old Buck’ reiterate his presence as a figure of authority both as commander of SOE F section but also in terms of historical integrity and the fact that he believes that what is being portrayed is ‘true’ as such underlies the whole film.

Odette’s own influence is also clear throughout the film. As previously discussed, she was able to define what parts of her story were told and what was not, for example she is depicted as a housewife and mother who hates leaving her children (depicted in two scenes where she makes phone calls to them) but also chooses to leave out the fact she was in bed with Peter when she was arrested, that she was still married to Roy Sansom or that she should never have returned to the Hotel de la Poste.\textsuperscript{46} Her mark is clear in the narrative of the film too: ‘she advised on every phase of the production’ and through her involvement: ‘the film emerges as dramatic entertainment rather than a documentary’ thus implying a successful merging of fact and drama.\textsuperscript{47} Another reviewer stated that: ‘although every care has obviously been taken to achieve reality in detail, the effect is totally artificial’ which he blames on an unimaginative script, direction and acting.\textsuperscript{48} A reviewer for \textit{The Times} said that the film: ‘is almost self-conscious in its conscientiousness, and what faults it has spring from its apparent conviction that a matter of history does not need any imaginative treatment in its presentation’ thus implying that the film relies too heavily on ‘fact’.\textsuperscript{49} Another reviewer for \textit{The Mail} sees that as being the film’s strength saying that: ‘it triumphs primarily on its documentary merits as an honest, straightforward, uncompromising, unglamourised picture.’\textsuperscript{50}

This uneasy relationship between the representation of historical fact whilst trying to be entertaining and maintaining the audience’s attention is a concern with most biopics. If the facts are interesting enough (as could be argued they are in the case of Odette and

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} MQ Jr, \textit{Product digest section} in the \textit{Motion Picture Herald}, January 6\textsuperscript{th}, 1951.
\textsuperscript{48} PH, \textit{Monthly film bulletin} (British Film Institute) undated.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{The Times}, 7th June 1950.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{The Daily Mail}, 7th June 1950.
Violette) a good director and scriptwriter could turn those facts into an engaging and entertaining piece of cinema.

Aside from striving to be factually correct in terms of content it is clear that the film *Odette* was heavily influenced by Buckmaster, Peter Churchill and the War office which ensured that it toed the official line: ‘that not only downplayed the role of the French Resistance circuits, but in places portrayed Odette as being a mere appendage to her commanding officer’. Not only did the addition of her name and presence on set add to the idea of historical accuracy and gravitas, Odette herself was more involved with the film itself than she had been in *Odette* and was: ‘given a degree of freedom to portray events as they really were’. Therefore some elements which were flawed in *Odette* were rectified in *Carve her name with pride*. For example: ‘it emphasised the role of the Gestapo in the capture and interrogation of female agents’ and included training sequences which although jovial in atmosphere demonstrate the physical and mental strength required to be an SOE agent. *Carve her name with pride* was dubbed as: ‘the true story of Violet Szabo’ [sic] and so blurred the distinctions between real life documentary and fictionalised drama. One review observed:

‘Like many other British war films, *Carve her name with pride* is unable to resist the temptation to combine the truth with a cosy, soft coating of ‘love’ and ‘adventure’... the strength of a real-life situation is not trusted; this element of fictionalisation and contrivance persists throughout the picture.’

The director of *Carve her name with pride* seemingly strove for sincerity and accuracy. To assist with this various technical advisors were hired: the head of SOE F section Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, who again introduced the film to re-iterate its credibility and was also able to ensure that the story and turn of events happened in the way he wanted it to; Vera Atkins, an SOE officer also advised; and Odette who was always present at filming and would not accept any money for her work. The script was also sent to Violette’s family,

51 Starns, *Odette.*
52 Ibid.
53 Untitled review, by JG 1958, Virginia McKenna’s personal collection.
54 Interview with Virginia McKenna, Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey, 30th January 2003.
her daughter Tania, then a teenager, initially refused to sign it off believing it was not a true representation of her mother, but she eventually capitulated.\textsuperscript{55}

In common with many other war films of the period including \textit{Odette}, \textit{Carve her name with pride} was filmed in black and white and not in colour. This contributed to the documentary feel of the film, as it gave the impression of being made during the war. The intention was to give a ‘gritty’ reality and harshness to the feel of the film, thus enhancing the illusion of wartime filming.

To assist further with the authenticity and documentary feeling of the film Virginia McKenna was given parachute training (and was awarded her parachute wings), judo training and Sten gun training, which she said was ‘horrid’.\textsuperscript{56} This highlights that it is possible to represent: ‘a professional female agent on screen without the necessity of enshrining her as a national heroine as in \textit{Odette}’.\textsuperscript{57} The audience was encouraged to believe that the actress is actually experiencing the events that they are witnessing: ‘It was a mentally challenging role...it helped having Odette around who had lived and breathed it. She knew what it was like every inch of the way and that helped.’\textsuperscript{58}

Elements were added to Violette’s story for dramatic effect that were known to be fabrications of the truth. One critic noted that: ‘The true story has been fictionalised in some matters, a thin coating of romance is spread over the film...’\textsuperscript{59} and McKenna agreed saying that there is: ‘a tendency to romanticise everything and heighten the person and relationship side of the story’.\textsuperscript{60} Violette’s relationship with her colleague Tony Fraser (who is a character amalgam of Harry Peuleve and Major Stanton) is depicted as romantic as opposed to professional and platonic. There is no historical evidence to suggest that Violette had a romantic relationship with anyone and it therefore seems that this element was added for drama and to attain the audience’s sympathy as it shows Violette’s character as a ‘real’ woman with passion and emotions. Virginia McKenna said that: ‘It is

\textsuperscript{55} Interview with Tania Szabo, Holiday Inn Express, Leeds, November 2008.
\textsuperscript{56} Interview with Virginia McKenna, Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey, 30\textsuperscript{th} January 2003.
\textsuperscript{57} White, \textit{Violent Femmes}, p.56.
\textsuperscript{58} Interview with Virginia McKenna, Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey, 30\textsuperscript{th} January 2003.
\textsuperscript{59} Newcastle Sunday Sun. 27\textsuperscript{th} April 1958, Virginia McKenna’s personal archive.
\textsuperscript{60} Interview with Virginia McKenna, Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey. 30\textsuperscript{th} January 2003.
not impossible that she [Violette] did take a fancy to some other man; she was young and full of emotions’ but nothing was proved.\(^{61}\)

Another aspect that is added for dramatic and emotional purposes is the scene where Etienne reads Violette the now famous poem ‘The life that I have’. This is known to be fantastical since, if the poem even existed before the film was made, Etienne would not have known about it as he was already dead when Violette joined SOE. It was said to be Violette’s code poem given to her by Leo Marks, who in turn wrote it for a girlfriend before the war. The poem is central to the film and is heard four times: the first time it is spoken by Etienne Szabo to Violette on their honeymoon, then when Violette recites it to the SOE coder, again when Violette’s recites it in her head when she is in the hands of the Gestapo, and at the end of the film as Tania receives the George Cross on behalf of her mother.\(^{62}\) The poem acts as a ‘leit motif’ and the meaning and emotional impact is revised and reinterpreted to make it appropriate to the time and place in the film where it is used.

The scenes in \textit{Carve her name with pride} that depict life in the field, capture and torture are done with as much historical integrity as was possible (given the details available at the time) and are an attempt at representing the truth. In comparison to \textit{Odette} this film is more engaging, more accurate in historical and technical detail and although slightly romanticised, it has an air of reverence and authenticity that \textit{Odette} lacks.

Three of the films with SOE heroines feature scenes of interrogation and torture. Of these two \textit{Odette} and \textit{Carve her name with pride} were made during the 1950s (the other is \textit{Female Agents}, 2008). As well as containing sensitive biographical subject matter they also had to adhere to censorship laws which did not allow such scenes to be shown in explicit detail. In the post-war years, full depiction of torture was unusual in war films. Other forms of personalised physical violence or punishment were depicted, such as the

\(^{61}\) Interview with Virginia McKenna, Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey.

\(^{62}\) There is much debate around this poem, Summerfield, Pattinson and Helm all discuss it in their works relating to SOE. The former goes so far as to say that the poem ‘appears to have been a filmmaker’s invention’ as Minney does not mention it, Marks only publicly laid claim to it in the 1990s and Ottaway questions why Violette would have had a poem at all. The latter argument is valid, Violette was a courier, not a W/T, therefore she would have had no need for a code poem so perhaps it is a filmic device. However, it seems to be an irrelevant argument, it does not matter who wrote it or when, what is important is that it is the poem that has come to represent Violette to today’s public. As discussed above Virginia McKenna is frequently asked to recite it and even reads it at an annual picnic in Violette’s honour so synonymous is it with her memory.
incarceration of Colonel Nicholson in ‘the oven’ in *Bridge on the River Kwai*, the crucifixion of Joe Harman in *A Town Like Alice*, use of the truth drug in *The Guns of Navarone*, and implied electric shock treatment in *633 Squadron*. As such these films served to: ‘establish the cruelty of the enemy and the resilience of Allied service personnel’. However, actual torture was not typically depicted and: ‘audiences rarely saw men suffering in similar ways to Odette and Violette.’

*Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* would have been shocking and disconcerting to a contemporary audience. The films are very similar in how their treatment of interrogation and torture scenes are handled. The reason for this could be that Odette Churchill acted as technical advisor on both films and therefore used her first hand knowledge to influence both of the films, and because both had comparable story lines and heroines which were dealt with in a similar manner. There was no fore-runner for such films in British cinema and no established trend or common practice upon which to base these scenes.

For the purpose of this discussion ‘interrogation/torture’ refers to the scenes in which the principle female characters are in contact with an interrogator(s) whilst being held in Fresnes prison and/or visiting Gestapo Headquarters following their arrest but before they are transported to Ravensbrück. Initially, in both films, the heroines are in their cells when they have their first visit from an interrogator. In the case of *Odette* this is Bleicher who offers to take her out: ‘do you care for music. because there is a Mozart concert tomorrow night at the Salle Royale. And I have discovered an admirable little restaurant – with the best wine and food in Paris. I impose no conditions’ to which Odette curtly responds: ‘but I do.’ At this refusal Bleicher leaves her.

Violette too has her initial interrogation in her cell, after trying to get information from her, the interrogator changes tack by referring to her child and asking: ‘what would become [of her].’ He continues in a similar vein to Bleicher in *Odette*: ‘You are young, you are

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64 *A Town Like Alice*, dir. by Jack Lee, 1954.
67 Summerfield, ‘Public memory or public amnesia’.
68 In 1958, *Battle of the V.1* includes scenes of Zofia’s torture, semi-clothed, by the Gestapo in the baignoire, resulting in her death.
attractive, you are in Paris and the sun is shining. Would you like some new clothes, the theatre perhaps, supper at Maximes? I should be honoured…’ Violette’s response is to slap him in the face. In both films the interrogators begin by using an amiable, subtle approach, they play on the heroine’s femininity (with invitations to dinner, concerts and theatres) as well as referring to their maternal instincts by mentioning their children and their fates to try and convince them to speak.

In both films the next sequence takes place in an elegant, bourgeois suite reminiscent of descriptions of Gestapo headquarters. The sun is shining and in Odette noises of traffic and children playing permeate the room. Her interrogator shuts this noise out, symbolising that she is now cut off from the real world and is in their control, to the extent they can control what she sees and hears. In Carve her name with pride Violette’s interrogator leaves the shutters open, this could be because her interrogation goes on for 72 hours using a spotlight in her eyes for sleep deprivation and is therefore a cinematic device to provide a contrast with subsequent scenes which are darker and emphasise the passage of time. Alternatively it could be a reminder of what she has left behind and will only ever see again through a window.

Violette’s interrogation begins with an altercation between herself and the interrogator from the previous scene, he asks her questions that seem routine but imply some knowledge of her role with SOE and the work she carried out: ‘When and where were you dropped? Who is your commanding officer? What contacts did you make in France?’ She answers: ‘I refuse to tell you anything’ and ‘I’ll tell you nothing’ reiterating Odette’s response to her interrogator ‘I have nothing to say.’

However, in Odette the interrogator’s questions are far more specific in their detail. For example he knows about the: ‘plans of the port of Marseilles’ from one of her missions. He also pushes her to talk about Peter and she tells him that: ‘it was I who persuaded him to come to France. What he did here – and it was really very little – he did under my influence.’ Her seeming willingness to take responsibility for both Peter’s and her own actions imply a desire for martyrdom, she knows that by trying to save him she is condemning herself. It appears that this is another attempt by Odette herself to manipulate her post-war image by depicting herself as being selfless and gallant.

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69 At interview Tania told me that Violette’s interrogators knew her English codename and that she had a child.
Odette’s refusal (and that of Violette’s) to answer the interrogators questions lead to scenes of implied physical violence. Both interrogators give up on their victims, in the latter: ‘you have only yourself to blame now’ and the former: ‘we have way and means of making you talk’ followed by ‘pity’ said as they press a bell on their desks and another male character enters the room. In Carve her name with pride the torturer approaches Violette but the audience do not see the torturer’s face and at a nod from the interrogator something happens off camera, the audience hear a semi shrieked: ‘no, no’ as the torture occurs, meanwhile the interrogator turns his head away and smokes a cigarette.

In Odette the nature of the torture is more explicit - the torturer burns her with red-hot poker, and while the audience does not actually see him do it, they see the poker removed from the fire and him approaching Odette with it. The audience also later learns that her toenails have been removed. The next time the audience sees Odette she is deliriously repeating: ‘I have nothing to say.’ This is mirrored in Carve her name with pride - Violette has collapsed on the desk having been kept awake for 72 hours, and her blouse is partially unbuttoned, un-tucked and wet with sweat. The film takes on a dreamlike quality by using close ups and distorted camera angles, as her poem goes round in her head, taking on a new, darker meaning as the ‘sleep’ and ‘rest’ come to symbolise escape from torture and death.

This dreamlike, expressionist quality is utilised throughout these scenes as the camera work changes from narrative realism (in that they do not disrupt the audience’s viewpoint with unusual or expressionist camera techniques) to engaging elements typical with film noir. For example in Odette the scene with Bleicher in the cell: ‘introduces off kilter camera work with low – and high-angle framing’ and the equivalent scene in Violette’s cell make use of shadows, expressionist type lighting effects and low angles:70 ‘The subsequent scene where Odette is tortured at Gestapo headquarters becomes distinctly noir with low angle shots and shadows offering a distorted perspective and only a partial view of this graphic scenario.’71 In Carve her name with pride, the intrusive proximity of men’s faces and bodies is suggestive of sexual abuse or rape, the use of expressionist

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70 White, Violent Femmes, p.55.
71 Ibid.
camera angles puts the audience in an uncomfortable position. This is emphasised by the fact that no torture actually happens on camera and it is left to their imaginations as: ‘film noir offer a means of indicating the horror of such events without having to depict them explicitly, thus avoiding censorship.’

These cinematic devices make the audience uncomfortable, both in terms of the gaps that the directors have left for their imaginations to fill in, which, depending on the individual can be as graphic or horrific as they chose to make it. They also make voyeurs of the audience as they inadvertently witness the physical and mental degradation of a woman by sadistic torturers who undress, abuse and de-humanise their victims with no sign of remorse.

The physical break down of these characters is demonstrated through the change in the bearing of both actors. Following the torture scenes they no longer hold themselves proudly or stride with a purposeful step, however, they still maintain a brave composure that the British public came to admire. McKenna stated that the interrogation scenes were: ‘Intimidating and scary’ and said that she: ‘could not imagine being in that position and deprived of sleep.’ While Neagle as Odette after the torture sequences is very different; lighting and make up contribute to her gaunt expression, while Neagle twists her body and shuffles on her heels to indicate the pain Odette was subjected to. The tension between Neagle and the character she was playing is said to have been so great that: ‘the part pushed its star to the point of breakdown.’

This change of characterisation is noteworthy as the actors (in particular Neagle) had been accused of not being able to portray weighty parts in the past, and doubts had been cast over the casting of McKenna for the role of Violette as she was considered too young and inexperienced. In these scenes both actresses demonstrate a skill in managing to attain the audience’s sympathy, whilst also shocking them out of their comfort zone. Odette was the first film to imply torture on a woman and even if the audience knew her story through the book, citations and publicity to come face to face with it must have been unnerving. The critics too noticed the feats of acting from Neagle and McKenna, and

72 Summerfield, Public lecture, Public memory or public amnesia, University of York, 17th January 2008.
73 White, Violent Femmes, p.55.
74 Interview with Virginia McKenna, Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey, 30th January 2003.
75 White, Violent Femmes, p.55.
76 Ibid.
were also shocked by these scenes, however, far more notably with *Odette* than *Carve her name with pride*.

It was noted that in these scenes Neagle: ‘…with her hair dark with sweat and matted on her forehead, wild hollow eyes and agonised mouth…throughout she plays this difficult role with admirable restraint, complete lack of sentimentality and real authority’. Other critics chose to comment on Wilcox’s decision not to realise the torture: ‘Her producer – Herbert Wilcox – has wisely played down the brutalities but the one torture scene is classic of direction. We do not see the Gestapo sadist tearing her toenails out, and applying a red-hot poker to her bare back – but the impact is vividly recorded.’ Also: ‘even the vile torture scenes are toned down so that it is mainly the knowledge that a real woman actually endured such suffering that makes us shudder.’ However, the use of the torture sequences in these films is questionable, not only due to their graphic nature but because doubts have been raised in both cases as to whether Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo were actually tortured at all as has been discussed in some length throughout this thesis.

The idea that both Violette and Odette were tortured is central to the public’s perception of the SOE and to the commemoration of these agents as women. The depiction of the two women standing up to torture is at the heart of the creation of a popular memory of them as powerful wartime women. Also, due to the nature of biopics it is now commonly perceived wisdom that, as far as the public are concerned, these women undoubtedly suffered terribly at the hands of the Gestapo, because the films show that to be the case. These films therefore contribute to the post-war myth, that most women SOE agents were caught, suffered and even died at the hands of the Germans. This image has influenced other films with SOE F section heroines and another representation of torture is in the 2008 film *Female Agents*.

The next part of the films to be discussed is the visual realisation of concentration camps and the scenes that join them to the previous, ‘torture’ scenes. This occurs in both films, in *Odette* the adjoining scenes consists of her receiving her sentence in which she has

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77 Northern Chronicle, 7th June 1950.
78 The Daily Mirror 7th June 1950.
79 Sunday Dispatch, 11th June 1950.
been condemned to death as a French woman and a British spy to which she wittily responds: ‘you must make your own choice, I can only die once’. She also sees Bleicher again and when he asks if he can do anything she asks him to wash her dirty blouse, which symbolises him metaphorically washing her blood from his hands. As she is transferred she sees Peter again and learns that he has not been tortured. She hides her own torture by dismissing the fact she is walking on her heels: ‘I walk so much round my cell I get blisters’. In the next scene she is limping into Ravensbrück itself.

The linking scene in Carve her name with pride is the bombing of the train en route from France to Germany which is documented by Yeo-Thomas and Harry Peuleve. Violette and Denise are chained together and take water to men who are trapped in their carriage, one of whom is Tony Fraser (Violette’s colleague and love interest). When they are all taken from the train to spend the night in a barn, Violette and Tony spend all night talking, the next morning they are separated and are taken to their respective camps. The romantic scene is fictitious but serves to show her optimism and makes her execution all the more poignant.

Violette then arrives at Ravensbrück, and the last sequence is relatively short. These were the last scenes to be filmed and in terms of characterisation this helped McKenna with development of Violette. As with a stage play she was able to work chronologically, this enabled her to ‘live’ the role of Violette. Towards the end of filming she said that: ‘it was difficult to switch off at the end of the working day’ she was becoming so involved with the story and its: ‘rapid progression towards an inevitably gloomy ending’.81

After arriving at the camp Violette, Denise and Lilian are next seen in their sleeping accommodation. Lilian is ill but Violette and Denise force her out of bed to report for work detail. However, instead of going to work they are held back as they have been summoned before the camp commandant. They are taken to a square behind the camp, Lilian says: ‘Vi, this is it,’ to which Violette replies: ‘we’re all together’ the death sentence is read out and they are executed by machine gun. All three women remain composed, standing proud with their chins up and shoulders back, McKenna has a heroic and stoic look on her face and as the rattling of the gun rings out the camera pans upwards and the

81 Interview with Virginia McKenna, Game keepers Cottage, Surrey, 30th January 2003.
execution is not shown instead the sun breaks through the clouds as the poem is recited.\textsuperscript{82}

This was in contrast to the director's original wishes as McKenna said he asked her to have a 'beatific' smile on her face when she was shot, comparable to Ingrid Bergman's execution scene in \textit{Joan of Arc} as the director wanted her to look saintly and at peace.\textsuperscript{83} McKenna refused to do so; she felt that it: 'nullified all the other emotions in the film and the atmosphere that had been built up.'\textsuperscript{84}

These last scenes jar: the depiction of the camp is un-naturalistic and theatrical, (the set being purpose built at Pinewood studios),\textsuperscript{85} the camp victims look too healthy\textsuperscript{86} and the overall tone is cheerful.\textsuperscript{87} An inmate from Ravensbrück said that: 'I feel shocked when I see pictures of the film on Violette with the women in the camp wearing so much clothes – my poor darling had only one blue silk frock, a fringe from hem to her knees and short sleeved, this is the way we were clothed to face the Prussian winter.'\textsuperscript{88} These problems could have been avoided in \textit{Carve her name with pride} as there was no need to show the other inmates or the camp itself, perhaps it may have better just to show their execution, or have the last scene in the train and an epilogue stating what happened. One critic stated that this: 'horror beyond art' was unsuitable for entertainment purposes and went on to say that: 'Perhaps her last days should not have been shown at all. The equipment to make Ravensbrück credible is mercifully missing today...to show it as merely a crowded, grubby place with some plump extras made up to look gaunt and hungry, wearing striped pyjamas and pottering about a yard with pick axes, is to prettify the horror to a ludicrous extent.'\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{82} Fritz Suhren commented that he was ‘impressed by the women’s bearing’ IWM, Affidavit of Fritz Suhren, 1700 hours, 15 June 1945.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Joan Of Arc}, dir. by Victor Fleming, 1948.
\textsuperscript{84} Interview with Virginia McKenna, Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey, 30\textsuperscript{th} January 2003.
\textsuperscript{85} Unknown article by Trevor Popple, p.51.
\textsuperscript{86} Victims were described as ‘human beings whose sex I could not determine – their heads shaved, dirty, cadaverous, dress in rags, barelegged, with wooden shoes. And all of them had dead eyes’ Sylvia Salvesen.
\textsuperscript{87} For example when one inmate asks another why she is putting on face powder, she shrugs and glibly answers ‘because it makes me feel better’.
\textsuperscript{87} Ottaway, \textit{The Life that I have}, p.146.
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{The Spectator}, 28\textsuperscript{th} February 1958. These problems are encountered with many films that represent the concentration camps or the holocaust. Films such as \textit{The Counterfeiters}, \textit{The boy in the striped pyjamas}, and \textit{Life is beautiful} give a biased and unnatural view of life in the camps because the film footage of the camps and their survivors is so etched in public memory that they are something that is almost impossible to reconstruct. The buildings will never be dirty or ramshackle enough, the inmates will not have the haunted, cadaverous look that is seen in documentary films of holocaust survivors, and the atmosphere of terror cannot be recreated on a film set.
The directors can only give an impression of what the camps were like, just as they only give an impression of any location that isn’t the actual site i.e. Hitler’s bunker in *Downfall*\(^90\) Wansee haus in *Conspiracy*\(^91\) and the Wolf’s lair in *Valkyrie*.\(^92\) The alternative is to use real footage, such as is used in *Frieda* made in 1947 which is unique in that it utilises newsreel footage of Belsen. However, to mix real footage with film material could be deemed unsuitable for several reasons; as it may cause offence to survivors, distress to the audience, or compromise the films narrative and overall tone.

It is thus striking that *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with pride* include scenes of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. In both films, the camp scenes illustrate horrific Nazi methods of repression applied to female inmates who are evidently civilians: brutal guards make the women do arduous work and keep them in subhuman conditions. The heroines are abused and kept in inhumane conditions either in solitary or in overcrowded huts and their health suffers as a result. The image the films establish of the concentration camps would, for many become a lasting image of the camps and the women who were in them, and was something the British audiences had not seen on their screens before.

There were many flaws with these images and similar problems are encountered in *Odette* as with *Carve her name with pride* in which the first glimpse of the camp is as the heroine limps into Ravensbrück past a women’s orchestra. She meets the Camp Commandant and is told she will now be known as Frau Schürer, a female SS guard is put in charge of her and she is taken to a solitary cell with the words: ‘no privileges for you; no exercise; no bath; and no light’. Because she is in solitary there is no interaction between her and the camp outside, her relationship with her guard becomes important as she is her only contact. The next time the audience sees Odette is when her guard appears to tell her about the D-Day landings and tells her: ‘by order of the Gestapo you get no food for a week’. She also goes to the radiator and the audience sees a plume of steam coming out, as she turns the heating up: ‘to make you more comfortable’. As with the earlier torture scenes much of what happens is left to the audience’s imagination, they do not see inside the cell and so do not see Odette’s suffering as her solitary extends. They just hear the results of the maltreatment as it is reported back to the Commandant or

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\(^90\) *Down Fall*, dir. by Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2006.
\(^91\) *Conspiracy*, dir. by Adam Marcus Director, 2008.
\(^92\) *Valkyrie*, dir. by Brian Singer Director, 2008.
when her cell door is opened and they catch a glimpse of her. Otherwise she remains in her own private world.

When Odette becomes ill she is moved to a new cell, from there she can see the world of the camp outside her window, and there is a shot of the orchestra playing again with a backdrop of the crematorium chimneys pouring out heavy, black smoke. As with Carve her name with pride the camp film set is too clean and manufactured to appear real, and the actors are too well fed and groomed to look convincing as concentration camp victims. But the solution is not simple: the director could have left these scenes out but risked leaving a hole in the narrative. He could have used real footage but risked insulting those who were there, or he could re-engage film noir methods as in prior scenes to make the atmosphere dark and oppressive but not naturalistic.

In conclusion film can act as a celluloid memorial and for the women of SOE F section several of the films including Odette and Carve her name with pride act as a place of memory where the deeds and events around certain agents’ lives are depicted as a biopic. The issues of accuracy and historical integrity of such depictions has been addressed because these films brought the names of Odette and Violette into the public spotlight and are a conduit by which the public remembers them.

This is because: ‘film...engages the public in a collective recollection that revivifies or creates a meaningful link between a past event and the identity of the social group in the present.’ A film brings the public together in their commemoration of events, and as an audience member an individual may then link their lives with the past, as the film may provoke an empathetic reaction, as such the audience is prompted to think ‘what would I have done’ or ‘how would I have reacted’.

The relationship of films to memory is complex. Summerfield states: ‘a helpful starting point is offered by the French historian, Henry Rousso, who suggests that one may think of historical films as: ‘vectors of memory’ that carry interpretations of the national past to their audiences.’ This filling of the public memory with images and emotions means that film as an entity directly counter balances the ‘voided space’ that many contemporary memorials seek to physically realise (to be discussed in Chapter 7). The use of imagery,

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93 Guynn, Writing History in Film, p.178.
94 Summerfield, Public memory or public amnesia.
language, empathy and emotion in films to create a memorial with which the public can engage on a natural and unaffected level, rather than their interaction with physical memorials is discussed in chapter seven.

Both Odette and Carve her name with pride could be regarded as ‘vectors of memory’ in that they are interpretations of a ‘national past.’ Both women were dubbed as British wartime heroines and their films served to reiterate that to the public, and to provide a visual stimulus which could be called to mind when remembering and commemorating these women. Even the titles of the film have become such a part of British commemoration of the SOE that the SOE memorial on the Albert embankment states that: ‘In the pages of history their names are Carved with pride’ highlighting the fact that the films have so saturated public memory that they cannot or will not distinguish the film from the reality that has become part of public memory.

In Odette the public saw someone who claimed she was: ‘just an ordinary woman’ undertaking dangerous work, falling in love and suffering dreadful things at the hands of the Nazi’s. They were (and in the most part still are) unaware that many of the events portrayed in the film are fabricated, unsubstantiated or just not true. Nor that Odette disobeyed several SOE rules and orders - nor do they care. Odette, Peter Churchill and Buckmaster ensured that the story was remarkable and inspiring. The linking of Odette’s name with it ensured that she became the ‘darling of the press’ and a national heroine.

Likewise Carve her name with pride was influenced by some of the same technical advisors (Odette and Buckmaster) who were able to construct an image of SOE F section that suited them and their post-war needs. They did not want to publicise the mistakes, and betrayals, they made a film that would reiterate the messages in Odette and develop a positive public perception that informed the SOE mythology and perceived wisdom for generations to come.

While employing a former agent, (in the case of both of these films Odette Churchill), does to some extent try to ensure accuracy of general facts, locations and technical details it also allows an individual to influence their own construction and that of other SOE agents. Odette Churchill claims that she wanted Odette: ‘to be a window through which may be
seen those gallant women with whom I had the honour to serve\textsuperscript{95} the films do the opposite and reflect her influence and her attempt to manipulate the story of her own heroism.

These films act as memorials, they are a means by which the public can learn about Odette and Violette easily, they have wide public appeal and even today are regularly shown on the television and in cinemas and are available on DVD. The films both make claims that they are historically accurate and both make use of factual evidence. However, they embellish the narrative and add fictitious elements to provide drama and excitement. The films used the evidence that was available to make the film viable, however in the light of more recent research and release of archives the authenticity of the storylines of these films is called into question, and as such they appear dated, hagiographic and blur the boundaries between fact and fiction.

As Starns states: ‘cinematic representations of SOE women [are] therefore obviously flawed; although they [do] at least ensure that their sacrifices [are] acknowledged.’\textsuperscript{96}

Although all of the films discussed above were made with as much (or as little) integrity and historical accuracy as the director wished to employ, they sadly end up mis-representing the women agents and falling short in terms of historical accuracy. They leave a void in the representation and cinematic memory of the SOE women.

\textsuperscript{95} Wilcox, \textit{Odette}, (Epilogue).
\textsuperscript{96} Starns, \textit{Odette}, p.129.
Chapter six
Representations of SOE Agents in film post 1958

This chapter will address film and television representations of the women of SOE F section that were made after Odette and Carve her name with pride but were influenced or inspired by them, and that have contributed to the inconsistencies and myths that surround the world of SOE and its agents. Many of the heroines of these films and programmes have become household names and are part of the public consciousness. The activities of real agents such as Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo have influenced the creation of, and merged with the fictional ones of Charlotte Gray, Louise Desfontaine and Liz Grainger, ensuring that many members of the public feel they know something, if only a small part, of these women’s stories, fictional or otherwise.

These confused images and myths have become integral to the understanding of SOE. Many female SOE agents are dubbed as ‘The real Charlotte Gray’ in the press and media and to some extent Charlotte Gray has replaced Odette as the darling of the press despite the fact that she is fictional. In an attempt to understand this, it is necessary to analyse the films not only in terms of the film’s historical accuracy but the characterisation of the lead characters, as it is they who undertake certain roles and who engage the audience’s emotions and empathy. The circumstances and events surrounding the characters influence the public’s memories and perceptions and thus raise the crucial issue - what version of the past do people want and does it matter if it is fact or fiction?

This evaluation will ascertain how these particular films have contributed to the myths about the women of SOE and to understand why the public view of these women has become skewed and unrealistic. The films and programmes discussed in this chapter were produced after the 1950s and are; Plenty, (Fred Schepisi, 1985), Wish me Luck (1988) Charlotte Gray (Gillian Armstrong, 2003) and Female Agents (Jean Paul Salome, 2008). These films demonstrate the popular market for SOE films which panders to the public’s nostalgia for the Second World War and secret agents: glamour, betrayal and torture are all ingredients that add to the success of these films and the TV drama. As such this chapter will also address, where appropriate, themes common to Odette and Carve her name with pride.
This chapter will also discuss how the characters in films about or relating to SOE F section have been influenced by *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* and how that has come to influence the public perception of what an SOE agent was and how representative of SOE agents these characters really are. Particularly interesting is Odette’s overall influence. She sets up the initial structure of how an agent is portrayed to the public in the two films she advised on, therefore all films that follow are in some way influenced by her construction of what an agent was.

The similarities and differences in characters will also be discussed and how they react to various ‘stock’ themes such as torture, loneliness and relationships that occur in some of the films. The historical integrity of these films will also be evaluated in terms of how ‘realistic’ they are in how they portray SOE and agents motives. The reason why characterisation is such a key issue is that human interest is such that people like characters they can sympathise with and relate to. By watching how another human being behaves in certain circumstances, the audience empathise with and relate to those characters above all else. Because the characters of Odette and Violette were based on real people it made the link between them and the audience more pertinent, as it was (supposedly) real events and emotions that were being portrayed. This type of relationship between audience and character is also present in films where the characters are fictitious: the audience suspends their disbelief and is swept along in the story just the same as if it was real, the line becoming blurred and almost irrelevant.

In the late 20th and early 21st century there was a resurgence of interest in the Second World War, with major anniversaries (50th and 60th) of the D-day landings and VE day fuelling public interest. A younger generation became interested and excited by the living memory of their grand-parents generation. Projects such as the BBC’s website ‘People’s War’ asked for oral archives and ‘Their past, your future’ encouraged Second World War veterans to share their stories with younger generations in an attempt to preserve their stories and memories.
Films and television both acknowledged and contributed to this intense interest, *A Bridge too Far* (1977), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001) all received laudatory reviews as they portrayed Operation Market Garden, the D-day landings, and the Battle of the Bulge, with such realism and authenticity that the latter two are used by the British Army as training material to show the reality of battle.¹

Films with female protagonists also caught the public’s imagination and *Charlotte Gray* (2003) reignited the public’s interest in SOE’s women agents. In the wake of this film a series entitled *The real Charlotte Grays* was produced for Channel Four television and within five years another film entitled *Female Agents* was a box office success. These films differ from their forebears in that they brought 20th/21st century values to the screen with prevalent themes such as feminism and sexual equality. Since the 1950s film standards had changed, with audiences now more used to violence and films depicting torture on screen became more acceptable. The public were also more forgiving of their heroines, for whom it was no longer necessary to have exemplary morals, in a world where the contraceptive pill, casual sex and relationships were the norm. It was no longer necessary or relevant to portray the heroine as rigidly upright and virtuous as for example with Odette Churchill in *Odette*.

These post 1950s films featured fictional characters, either born from books or from the script writer’s imaginations engaging the public’s fascination for fictional spies. None of the films made with women SOE protagonists after *Carve her name with pride* were biographical in nature. Audiences were excited by the world of spies and espionage, and it may be argued that SOE themed films also fitted into a broader genre that expanded to include fictitious spies and fantastical weaponry such as *James Bond* and *Mission Impossible*.

The public’s fascination with the Second World War is further emphasised by the actors who have come to represent and empathise with the characters that they played. An example of this is the appearance of Tom Hanks (who played Captain John Miller in *Saving Private Ryan*) at the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings alongside veterans from Easy Company, with the strap line: ‘Tom wanted to be there for the Vets.’ He attended Normandy again five years later and is pictured alongside the veterans, this picture demonstrating that he has become synonymous with them, and represents them.

¹ Conversation with Army officers at the Officers mess, the Tower of London, November 2006.
as if he were a veteran himself. Hanks is also the Honorary Chairman of the National D-Day museum in New Orleans.²

This fine line has also been navigated by actress Virginia McKenna who played Violette Szabo in Carve her name with pride. She is frequently asked to make appearances at events commemorating Violette or to read the poem from the film The life that I have. In the public eye Virginia and Violette have become synonymous. She is also a supporter of a museum relevant to her character - the Violette Szabo museum and pledged some money to help its foundation.

Virginia McKenna said that: ‘fact and fiction cross over, [you see] in people’s minds, it’s quite fascinating, look at people who think characters on Coronation Street or the Archers are real, they send them birthday cards and wedding presents. It’s quite touching in a way because it means you are playing a character convincingly.’⁵ The public’s ability to suspend disbelief and engage in such a way with a character or film implies that the default state is that they are willing to believe what they see on screen as being true. Michael Paris also suggests that: ‘in the darkened auditorium, the audience became part of the unfolding narrative on the screen, identifying with those portrayed on film, sharing their struggles, their fears and aspirations.’⁶ The audience become caught up in the narrative and believe in the characters.

⁵ Interview with Virginia McKenna, Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey, 30th January 2003.
The first film to be discussed in this chapter is *Plenty* and was written as a stage play in 1978 by David Hare, becoming a film in 1980. Unlike the other SOE films to be discussed *Plenty* is only topped and tailed by scenes showing the character in her SOE role. The bulk of the film shows the effects of her wartime role on the rest of her life, including her steady decline into insanity and her desperate attempt to claw back the glory days of the war by trying to re-discover the SOE colleague with whom she had a one night stand.

*Plenty* is the story of fictional agent Susan Traherne who is dropped by the SOE into Occupied France to work as a courier. The opening scene of *Plenty* is similar to that of other Resistance films and sets the mood from the outset. A reception committee awaits a drop and are surprised when they receive an agent as well as containers. Susan Traherne greets the agent by holding him at gun point. They converse briefly in French at which point she says: 'your French is not good.'

Susan is very security conscious. This is emphasised when she says: 'I'd rather not look at you. It's an element of risk which we really needn't take. In my experience it is best, it really is best if you always obey the rules.' Susan continues to establish her upper hand and begins to reel off a list of things that the parachutist may have been taught in England that are now out of date or simply wrong:

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7 Meryl Streep as Susan Traherne,  
8 David Hare, *Plenty*, 1978.  
9 *Plenty*, dir. by Fred Schepisi, 1980.
Susan: ‘Cafes are bad meeting places, much less safe than they seem. Do not go near Bourges, it’s very bad for us. Do not carry anything in toothpaste tubes, it’s become the first place they look. Do not laugh too much, an Englishman’s laugh, it just does not sound the same. Are they still teaching you to broadcast from a lavatory?’

Lazar: Yes

Susan: Well do not. And do not hide your receiver in the cistern, the whole dodge is badly out of date. The Gestapo have been crashing into lavatories for a full two months…and that’s it really. The rest you know or will learn.’

These opening scenes also serve to show SOE to be less than perfect, Susan is telling Lazar that nearly everything he has been taught is out of date, his French is poor, and that he has failed to arrive where he was expected and therefore will hold up his mission. Other films about SOE do not do this, the authority of SOE is not questioned as an organisation and its methods are not analysed nor debated amongst agents.

Susan’s facade disintegrates after a near miss with a German convoy: ‘I’m sorry I’m so frightened…I’m not an agent, I’m just a courier, I carry messages between certain circuits…I came tonight, it’s my first drop, there is literally no one else, I cannot tell you the mess in Poitiers’. She goes on to tell him that her network leader has just been transported to Buchenwald and then she really breaks down: ‘I do not want to die, I do not want to die like that.’ In this scene Susan turns from a security conscious and precise agent who has taken the upper hand with Lazar and who follows the rules to an emotional wreck, incredibly lonely and scared for her life. This is unlike any other characterisations of an SOE agent on film.

This scene demonstrates a dramatic contrast with the portrayals of female SOE agents in films such as Odette and Carve her name with pride, in which the audience is never given a reason to believe that Violette and Odette suffered from nerves, never showing a side of themselves that is less than heroic, they do everything with stoicism and a brave face. In contrast Susan Traherne’s emotions oscillate between brave and confident one moment, to frightened and fragile the next.
Susan’s unstable emotions are further exploited when she takes Lazar back to her flat. She makes him a cup of tea, and then they make love. The sex scene is basic and raw, the two remain fully clothed and it becomes apparent that this is an outlet for Susan to vent her frustration with her situation. She has been lonely and frightened, and uses Lazar to take her mind off things and to give her physical relief. This scene may be compared to a similar scene in *Wish me Luck*, (a television programme from the late 1980s). Matty is a young woman about to be infiltrated into France she picks up a soldier at the cinema and takes him home. When they have finished making love the soldier says: ‘if you were a bloke I’d say you were about to go on active service.’

*Plenty* portrays SOE in the context of someone’s life, the film is not just about Susan’s time as an agent, nor about showing what SOE did or weighing its successes against its failures. It is a look at a character’s life taking SOE as one part of it, and is the only film studied in this chapter to do this. The others in this study focus entirely on the characters as agents from their recruitment into SOE to their repatriation or death. The character of Susan is more naturalistic and easier to relate to than those that Odette or Violette. The reason for this is that the films were aimed at a different type of audience and that styles were changing in the world of cinema and theatre.

The two films made in the 1950s were about telling a whole story, the story of national heroines who gave their all and the films served to give them public recognition; by contrast *Plenty* was a political statement on Britain’s post-war politics and the end of the empire as such is a fascinating screenplay that can be viewed on several levels, its contribution to SOE cinema being only one.
Wish me Luck was a serialised production by London Weekend Television about the SOE and it ran for three successful series between 1988 and 1990. It was the joint creation of Lavinia Warner and Jill Hyem who had previously produced and written the BBC women prisoner of war series Tenko shown from 1981 to 1984. The first series follows the recruitment, training and field work of female characters Liz Grainger and Matty Firman. It also shows the impact of their work on their family lives and in Liz’s case a failing marriage. The series also portrays the role of the office in London through the eyes of characters Colonel Cadagan and Faith Ashley (based upon Buckmaster and Vera Atkins respectively). In the second series the storyline is more complex and introduces the new characters of Vivienne Ashton and Emily Whitbread. Themes of betrayal and infiltration are dominant. The third series is set in Le Crest (in reality the Vercors plateau) and follows the fate of ‘the outfit’ and the Maquis, as promised back-ups from England fail to arrive, leaving the characters almost defenceless against a German attack.

Wish me Luck was thoroughly researched and its technical advisor was Yvonne Cormeau (former SOE F section agent). The series used real locations and had exceptionally strong actors (notably Kate Buffery as Liz and Suzanne Hamilton as Matty) portraying characters that had their basis in real agents and their experiences. The characters were

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10 Suzanne Hamilton and Kate Buffery as Matty Firman and Liz Grainger.
an: ‘amalgam of various agents, Matty was like Violette, though Liz was modelled on several different people’.\textsuperscript{11}

The programme was given a prime time slot of early Sunday evening which, according to a columnist for The Guardian, had seen a: ‘sudden glut of glossy drama: Poirot, Jeeves and Wooster, The Charmer, The Darling Buds of May...but while those shows...were all fairly formulaic, Wish Me Luck, a female-led Second World War Resistance adventure...was genuinely groundbreaking’.\textsuperscript{12}

The time slot is important in that it highlights the programme’s target audience. Kate Buffery said that: ‘it was aimed at family viewing, it was on at about 6.30/7.00pm on a Sunday night, so I think it was aimed at families, 12,13,14 year olds [at a time] before teenagers go out and escape their parents! And for their parents too...’\textsuperscript{13} Because the programme was aimed at a family audience: ‘it was not an extraordinary and complicated drama, at the same time there was enough substance in it for adults to watch it... it captured peoples imagination and [I got fan mail] particularly from girls who were of school age.’\textsuperscript{14} As a television series Wish me Luck had advantages over the films; being broadcast directly into people’s homes on a Sunday night and each episode finishing with a cliff hanger that made the audience return the next week to see what had happened to their heroines.\textsuperscript{15}

Unlike Odette or Carve her name with pride which was aimed at a market of women who were returning to the home after years of war work, Wish me Luck was aiming to be all encompassing family viewing – introducing a new audience to the world of SOE (known as ‘The outfit’) and providing them with female role models. It was about the women agents and operations staff, their relationships with one another, with male staff and agents, and with their families, children and husbands and also with the French Resistance and Nazis. The characters needed to be easy to relate to and realistic. The programme has since been dubbed ‘Band of Sisters’ because it is predominantly about women and their experiences.\textsuperscript{16}

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\textsuperscript{11} Interview with Jill Hyem, London, 19\textsuperscript{th} November 2008. \\
\textsuperscript{12} The Guardian, 4\textsuperscript{th} June 2010. \\
\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Kate Buffery, London, 26\textsuperscript{th} June 2008. \\
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{15} At the age of twelve I was one of those viewers, Wish me Luck introducing me to the SOE and Resistance capturing my imagination and becoming the inspiration for this thesis. \\
\textsuperscript{16} www.filmsintuition.com.
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Even the title implied that it had a ‘Band of Sisters’ kind of feel to it. At the outset Jill Hyem wanted the programme to be called ‘The Outfit’ but this was not deemed suitable by the ITV producer Nick Elliot. Instead it was named *Wish me Luck* after the Gracie Fields song from *Shipyard Sally* in which it was sung to sailors departing for war. It is particularly appropriate that this was chosen as this programme shows a reversal in roles, for example Liz going to war while her estranged husband is given an office job in the army. The link is taken no further and the theme music for the programme is an instrumental version of Kurt Weill’s ‘J’attends un Navire’.

Another declared aim of the programme was to:

> ‘do what we had done with great success in *Tenko* which was really base it all absolutely on diaries and things that we had read and then make fictional characters who had a journey to make and changed a lot because of that... [we] did not want too much action, we wanted it to be about the women, how they made decisions, the effects it had on relationships and I think to a large extent that’s what we did.’

This was achieved very successfully in the first series in relation to the two main characters: Liz Grainger and Matty Firman, because there is: ‘longer to develop characters on TV than on film.’ After the opening scene showing Liz’s interrogation training she is seen listening to a radio appeal for photos of France and is knitting socks for soldiers (remarkably similar to Odette) whilst living in her mother’s very large country house with her daughter while her estranged husband is working overseas. She is interviewed for ‘The outfit.’ Liz is upper class and her character is a very complex, in terms of her personal dilemmas: being chosen to do the training, her failing marriage, her relationship with fellow male agent Kit, her friendship with Claudine, and leaving her young daughter at home. The audience sees her character change as she makes each decision and gets further involved with her work. In contrast to other female characters who leave their children behind Liz demonstrates a raw human aspect. In *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* the women are effectively elevated, evoking that: ‘it is terrible

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18 Ibid.
19 The term SOE is never used.
to leave the little girls behind but it is done for the greater good'. By contrast Liz's character belies the sense of turmoil in this, her fears are realised when her daughter becomes withdrawn and distant.

The change in Liz's character is most evident in a scene where she is walking in the countryside with her daughter and estranged husband. They see a sick rabbit and Liz kills it with a rock. Kate Buffery said that: 'if she (Liz) can not kill a rabbit how the hell is she going to be able to kill at all.'20 Liz's husband Lawrence (who is unaware that she is an agent) is shocked: 'my Liz could not do a thing like that'. By the end of the last episode of series two Liz's character has developed to such an extent that she shoots Vivienne, an agent who has broken all the rules and who jeopardises everyone's lives as the Germans approach because she will not leave her dead daughter. Liz shoots her at point blank range as she has to get to the hastily departing Lysander to avoid her own capture.

The atmosphere and tension in the relationship between Liz and Lawrence was reinforced by the true relationship between the actors. My interview with Kate Buffery revealed she: 'knew the guy who played Lawrence, we had had a very uncomfortable badly ending affair, and director asked me if I minded him playing the part as he had said that at the audition, and I said no, because its meant to be uncomfortable between us anyway, no acting required!'21

Odette's influence can clearly be seen on the character of Liz who is also a mother and is in a failing marriage. She is recruited in the same way as Odette and sends her daughter to boarding school. However, the character of Liz goes further to explore the implications of each of her decision, which does not occur in Odette. For example the audience see Liz with her husband and the effect that her war work has on her marriage. The audience see the change in her daughter and how she would rather spend time with her grandmother and they see her, quite blatantly, embark on an extra marital affair. These themes are all present in Odette but for reasons of time restraint or as part of the construction they are not fulfilled and exploited in the same way.

20 Interview with Kate Buffery, London, 26th June 2008.
21 Ibid
Liz’s motive is explicitly revealed from the outset as the audience discover that her brother, who was in the RAF, is dead and that Liz wishes she could do something ‘brave’ to avenge his death. She also gazes at the peaceful English countryside saying: ‘look at it, you’d (sic) hardly believe there was a war on,’ implying that the peace of the English countryside is worth fighting for. The audience also discover that Liz spent her summers in France and has friends there, thus has she an affiliation with the French and possibly a desire to rid it of its occupiers.

Matty’s character is based loosely on Violette Szabo. She comes from the East End of London and works in a munitions factory. The fact that her mother is French and she speaks French fluently brings her to the attention of the outfit. She has a fiery temper and tendency to swear, muttering: ‘oh Sod!’ as she ladders her tights at interview. She is an earthy, base character who initially fails her training due her lack of security but is eventually sent into the field because of a desperate need for wireless operators. As she is a socialite she hates being alone and is unsuited for the work, and embarks on a sexual relationship with colleague Colin.

Matty’s past is revealed in the early scenes in which she bribes her grandfather to stay in so she can go dancing. He is to care for her mother who is still traumatised by hers and Matty’s escape from France: hiding in a coal cellar, while the rest of their family were killed or captured (it is unclear which). The fact that Matty is bi-lingual is shown by the fact her mother only converses with her in French, and her working class background is immediately established as she is shown walking through the bombed streets of the East End.

Matty shows bravery and quick wittedness when she is brought in by the Gestapo for questioning, she dresses a wound that General Stuckler has sustained (as her cover story is that of a nurse) and flirts to get herself out of answering difficult questions. Later, when she realises they know she is a wireless operator she dyes her hair to try and disguise herself. Matty’s character is likeable and believable, even in extraordinary situations such as this.

The difference in the portrayals of the women in Wish me Luck compared with the 1950s films is that no attempt is made to make the women self-righteous, they make mistakes,
have affairs, dye their hair and break the rules and yet the audience engage with them in a way that no other film manages. This could be because the audience have far longer to get to know the characters, series one having eight episodes of 50 minutes each and there is plenty of time for character developments, relationships and plots, as opposed to the usual 90 minutes to two-hour films which are forced to develop the plot in a shorter time frame.

Due to the length of screen time available, *Wish me Luck* was well researched which made the plots and characters viable. The writer, Jill Hyem did: ‘heaps and heaps of reading’ but: ‘Yvonne Cormeau was my real source, I could ask her all the kinds of questions that you could not usually ask, like what did you do when you got your period, just to know that they were real people.’ The effect of having a real agent on the set, and one who had not become involved in any sort of post-war publicity and therefore had no agenda was enlightening and many of the details (both large and small) were accurate: the training sequences were realistic, real Lysander’s were used to carry agents and realistic locations were found in England and France. Jill Hyem also said: ‘Our main intention was to make it as real as possible, as close to a documentary as possible, Lavinia had a documentary background, so we wanted to take all that on board.’ This concept has an interesting resonance with *Odette*, which, as previously discussed was filmed in black and white and with a documentary feel, while not actually being a documentary. Historical accuracy and an air of authenticity were very important to the producers of the series. In the latter series Mark Seaman, then SOE historian at the Imperial War Museum was technical advisor.

This air of authenticity affected many of the scenes of the back room operations of ‘The Outfit’; their offices at Baker Street, their role in ensuring agents were ready to be sent to France and their efforts to remain current with wireless messages and update reports. The main characters are clearly based on Buckmaster and Vera Atkins, but Jill Hyem said she was disappointed with the casting: ‘he was supposed to be a cosmopolitan character based on people we’d heard about and Jane Asher was very anxious to look good and I would have liked somebody who occasionally after working 24 hours could look liked a tired PA.’ The acting in these scenes is often contrived and wooden which jars with the

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23 Ibid.
excellent acting and atmosphere created by the other characters, letting it down and
tainting the air of realism.

There were other elements that made Wish me Luck unrealistic and contrived. One
reviewer writes that:

‘Although one of the strongest aspects of...Wish Me Luck is its impressive
authenticity, something tells me that in the midst of a Gestapo jail break where
Nazi torturers abound, one wouldn't naturally find themselves in the mood to
declare their love for another in quite possibly the most unromantic setting
imaginable. Yet, despite the laughable loveless love scene with the sight of
swastikas instead of candles and the sound of Germans barking orders instead of
mood music, Wish Me Luck is another pulse-pounding, brilliantly executed British
production.’

In comparison to Odette and Carve her name with pride, Wish me Luck shows a fresh
approach. The characters are very human with faults and flaws as well as positive
attributes; Matty is bad-tempered and fails her training, Liz is fastidious but in an unhappy
marriage, Faith (Jane Asher) is married to her job and Claudine (Liz's friend and host)
turns out to be a double agent. ‘The outfit’ is portrayed as an organisation that has faults
too, not everything going according to plan and things going wrong.

It is my opinion that Wish me Luck Series One is the best representation of SOE that has
been made for screen: it is historically accurate, has depth of character and an air of
authenticity that is not matched by any of the other films. The series shows the formative
influence of the Odette and Violette Szabo experiences even though the treatment is
inevitably reflects contemporary styles and interests. Even the characters have some
similarities with the heroines of the 1950s films in that they show a plucky young mother
seeking revenge, a bored housewife, a working-class woman etc. Unfortunately the last
two series verge on the fantastical and are unrealistic in their plot, but still maintain a high
standard.

Unfortunately these high standards were not maintained with *Charlotte Gray*, the 1999 novel by Sebastian Faulks, made into a film in 2003 (making it nearly 50 years since a British film with a female SOE protagonist was made). The reasons for this are unclear: the interest in SOE appeared to be at its height in the 1950s and 1960s when the films, books and official histories were released. Despite having all the ingredients of a huge box office success; star studded cast, lyrical score, beautiful locations and attention to detail - critics were not convinced with either the film or subject matter of *Charlotte Gray*.

Gillian Armstrong and Blanchett are reteamed here ...but even their combined talents are unable to infuse sufficient life to raise a pulse: “‘From this moment on Charlotte Gray is dead,’” utters her superior as Gray assumes her new identity. Sadly they could be talking of the film and: ‘…this “woman-in-jeopardy” movie feels more like “woman-in-apathy” Stunning imagery aside, this isn’t the crowd-pleaser many had hoped for.’

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25 Cate Blanchett as Charlotte Gray.
26 [http://www.tiscali.co.uk/entertainment/film/reviews/charlotte_gray.html](http://www.tiscali.co.uk/entertainment/film/reviews/charlotte_gray.html).
The plot of the film (and book) lack plausibility: motives, actions in the field and involvement with Jews all provide drama rather than realism, thus overriding the need for accuracy.\textsuperscript{28} The use of dramatic licence over historical accuracy is most keenly demonstrated in the subplot involving two Jewish boys: ‘Charlotte's involvement with the Resistance is arbitrary. She tags along, but does not do much. The real drama concerns two Jewish kids, whose parents have been taken away.’\textsuperscript{29}

The role of the SOE courier was always clear, and agents were advised to adopt a low profile and not to put themselves or others in unnecessary danger.\textsuperscript{30} It seems unlikely that an agent would become involved in the hazardous activity of caring for and hiding of Jewish boys. It was certainly not part of the SOE operational brief. But, by caring for these children Charlotte demonstrates a human and maternal facet to her nature, one that a modern cinema audience would perhaps empathise with and understand. Unlike Odette and Violette, Charlotte does not leave children behind to undertake her work as an agent, but to compensate for this she does discover a love for children and maternal instinct when faced with the prospect of caring for and protecting the two Jewish boys.

Add to these personal emotions the overarching theme of the Holocaust and the plight of the Jews and Charlotte’s character assumes another dimension. She is not just a secret agent, but someone who is prepared to risk everything to help those in need. Although this part of the plot is dramatic and exciting the outcome is that Charlotte is not just risking her own life but those of the Maquis and the main operation, thus destroying any of the credibility left in the plot. \textit{Charlotte Gray} is a film that allows dramatic licence to override historical fact, resulting in an unrepresentative image of life as an SOE agent.

\textsuperscript{28} When speaking to the historical advisor on this film, Mark Seaman, he informed me that he had told the production company that if Charlotte was be parachuted into France the aircraft would need to be a Hudson, the company had however already booked the plane they were to use and it was a Dakota, so his advice was ignored.

\textsuperscript{29} http://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/reviews.

\textsuperscript{30} NA, \textit{SOE syllabus}, Lectures on Communication A18-20, pp.113-129.
It may be that these themes are introduced to replace the ‘stock’ themes of interrogation, torture and camps prevalent in *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride*. The issue of the Holocaust replaces one set of disturbing images and connotations with another, while still maintaining the fact that the Nazis are the enemy and responsible for inhumane actions. Although Charlotte is not the centre of these atrocities she is involved with them which in turn engages the viewer’s emotions and empathy.

The character of Charlotte Gray is complex and there are many motives and forces that seem to drive her; a love of France, to find her boyfriend Peter and her desire to show bravery. However, her character is rather stiff and impenetrable, and there are very few times in the film where the façade is let down and the audience catch a glimpse of her as an emotional being. Critics of the film also found Blanchett’s characterisation of Charlotte difficult to engage with: ‘as the eponymous Charlotte, she looks a million dollars (unsuitably so for wartime), but she's also dour, tight-lipped and frequently on the verge of tears’\(^{31}\) and: ‘So muted are her true thoughts and feelings that Charlotte Gray becomes a difficult film to engage with.’\(^{32}\)

The term ‘Special Operations Executive’ is not used in *Charlotte Gray* but it is clear from her recruitment, training and intended work that this is the world she has entered. The organisation is referred to as ‘The operation’ in a similar way to *Wish me Luck* using the term ‘The outfit’. In some ways this gives scope for dramatic licence and fiction, but it is so clearly based on SOE that it is slightly misleading to call it anything else.

*Charlotte Gray* is based on a work of fiction and as such does not promote the real work and skills that the actual SOE women possessed. It has a tendency to portray a rather pathetic view of the women and undermines the real reasons and motives for the women becoming SOE agents. Charlotte becomes an agent to find her boyfriend who was shot down over France. Instead of exploring the real motives of agents and allowing fact to provide the drama, the authors portray the characters in a manner that is overindulgent and romantic.

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Charlotte Gray compares with Odette and Carve her name with pride in that as books/films the authors/directors do not allow the women to be realistic, instead they are built up to become icons of motherhood and innocence, representing all that is good about women and all that England stood to lose if a Nazi invasion succeeded. The portrayals of Odette, Violette and the fictional Charlotte are as childlike characters that do not attract the reader’s sympathy not admiration.  

The style in which the former two films are directed, and the way in which the women are characterised typifies early post-war attitudes - Odette and Violette are depicted as victims of the Nazi regime and the horrors they faced are made all the more dramatic and courageous because they were female. With Charlotte Gray the book and film are products of the late twentieth century, and the heroine is purely fictional. Many of the events that affect her are unlikely to have been experienced by an SOE agent. Her motive is over-emotional, her agent skills are minimal and the sequences are nothing short of melodrama.

The character of Charlotte Gray displays none of the characteristics or qualities of an SOE agent and cannot be regarded as a good representation. One of the possible qualities of this film is that modern views are not imposed on a historical context, and that it is a genuine attempt to represent women as they were more usually seen in the 1940s.

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33 This is all the more surprising considering the time lapse between the dates when these novels were written and films released. Odette was published in 1949 (film 1950), Carve her name with pride was published in 1956 (film 1958) and Charlotte Gray was published in 1999 (film 2003).
The same may be said for the women agents represented in *Female Agents* released in 2008 which was released as a film first, then succeeded by the book of the film.\(^{35}\) It claims to be based on fact from the outset and sets itself up as being a work of historical integrity and accuracy. The prologue states that: ‘In 1940 Winston Churchill created a new kind of secret service. The Special Operations Executive better known as SOE. One section was responsible for overseeing operations in France. In 1941 a new head was appointed, Colonel Maurice Buckmaster. In 1944 the SOE’s ‘French section’ was dedicated, at a heavy human cost to ensuring the success of D-Day.’\(^{36}\) The film claims to be based on the SOE and events that occurred during the run up to D-day. The opening title sequence utilises original photographs of women in wartime service and reiterates the impression that the film is founded in reality.

The implication of the opening sequence is that this is a film based on fact. This is misleading. The film is not based on real events or even real people. The agent’s motives are unlikely, they were coerced to join, the few hours training they receive is unrealistic. The constant reference to Buckmaster by both agents and the Gestapo is implausible.

The film’s director John Paul Salome said that: ‘people are aware that this is just a film, it is entertainment but we did not want just to make it up or give an account of things for the sake of it. I tried to scrupulously to find out what really happened or what really could have happened.’\(^{37}\) Salome’s statement, that the film is entertainment and based in

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\(^{34}\) Cinema Poster for *Female Agents*, dir. by Jean Paul Salome, 2008.  
\(^{35}\) *Female Agents*, dir. by Jean Paul Salome, 2008.  
\(^{36}\) Prologue to *Female Agents*.  
\(^{37}\) Jean Paul Salome, [Director of Female Agents], *Making of Female Agents*.  
historical evidence and reality, is contradicted by the preface to the book of the film: ‘The names of their leaders mentioned in this book are authentic. Although sometimes inspired by real persons, the other characters are fictitious. This is a novel.’ If this type of disclaimer had been put at the beginning there would be no need for an examination of the film. The scholar could accept it as a good yarn and simply: ‘the Dirty Dozen in petticoats’ and not a realistic portrayal of the SOE F section. However, a former Resistance member Denise Varney said: ‘the film had come at a time when those generations watching it who did not know the war can no longer differentiate between the reality of our commitment and these ridiculous women portrayed in the film’. Those that watch this film may not know anything about D-Day or the SOE and assume that this is based in reality because these claims are made at the beginning and end.

The director claims that the characters are: ‘inspired by’ but not based on real agents, in particular the main character Louise who is based on Lise Villameur (nee De Baissac). This is most evident in the film’s epilogue: ‘In 1949 Louise returned to France and married an architect, she was awarded the Croix de Guerre and Légion d’Honneur. She died in 2004 at the age of 98, childless’. This last passage is reminiscent of Lise’s obituary and therefore implies that the character of Louise in the film is supposed to be Lise. The audience are therefore being asked to assume what they are seeing is true and is based on a real SOE agent. This is not the case and the implication is a disservice to Lise as this review from The Observer highlights:

‘The real-life story of Lise de Baissac and her Second World War Special Ops comrades is thrilling, impressive stuff. Sadly, this is not that story. Instead, we have a fanciful babes-at-war action pic in which Winston Churchill rounds up a crack team of fabulously good-looking young women to rescue D-Day from disaster while paying special attention to their hair and make-up. Director Jean-Paul Salome declared that the hardest part was ‘making it as realistic as possible

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40 Sunday Telegraph, 8th March 2008.
41 The film’s director, Jean-Paul Salomé, said he first thought about making the film after reading her obituary in a British newspaper in 2004.
42 ‘Lise Villameur, who has died aged 98....was appointed MBE in 1945 and was in addition made a Chevalier de la légion d’Honneur and awarded the Croix de Guerre avec palme....Her husband predeceased her, There were no children’. The Daily Telegraph, Thursday April 1, 2004.
while providing plenty of glamour’, an endeavour in which he is only 50 per cent successful.  

One of the most interesting themes of *Female Agents* is torture. The film, in contrast to *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride*, was made in an era when the realisation of scenes depicting physical violence for the camera was more acceptable both to the censors and the modern audience.  

Because the confessions of Gaelle (one of the agents who was captured) and the information she gives under duress influences the plot, more than one agent is tortured. The torture scenes are therefore interspersed throughout the entire film rather than just being in one section. The first time an SOE agent is seen being maltreated it is Pierre, Louise’s brother. He is in a torture room which contrasts greatly from the room in *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride*. The wall paper is peeling and covered in graffiti. Various instruments are scattered around the room: chains, a filthy bath, a female and a male guard sit on chairs at desks and type while the torture is carried out.

Great attention to detail has been made in the constructing of this set, the historian on the film mentioning that: ‘the main thing was to avoid any anachronisms. i.e. if you are going to do a torture scene in a bath tub the water would never be clear, because the victims would vomit and there are outpourings so the water would never be clear.’  

As such the bathtub is full of dirty water and there are smears of blood and vomit alongside the side of it. That such care was taken with the smaller details but the larger ones were neglected invalidates the claims of historical accuracy for the film.

The first time the audience see Pierre in this environment he is unconscious and hanging from chains with his hands cuffed behind his back, before a bucket of water is thrown over him and as he regains consciousness he is questioned. When he refuses to answer the questions he is beaten again and then he is forced into the baignoire. In contrast to *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* the torture is carried out by a uniformed Gestapo officer who is also the man the agents have been attempting to assassinate, Heindrich.

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43 Mark Kermode, *The Observer*, 5\textsuperscript{th} October 2008.
44 Demonstrated by the cinema going audience’ acceptance of films such as the ‘Saw’ series and Quentin Tarantino films such as *Kill Bill*, *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* which employ torture scenes.
45 Wiekinka, Historian on the film *Female Agents (Making of Female Agents)*.
46 A bath tub filled with water.
This has the effect of making the pain inflicted on the agents more vindictive as he has a personal motive, asking Pierre: ‘why have you tried to kill me twice?’

Although this initial torture scene features a male agent it is important to this discussion for several reasons. *Female Agents* depicts the torture of several agents male and female and is the only film about SOE F section that does so. Pierre’s relationship to Louise becomes important as the bargaining tool with which he buys her life with his own. By showing the torture methods used on Pierre the audience can determine that women did not get special dispensation by dint of being female. The scene where Louise is forced into the baignoire and beaten shows that they received the same treatment.

As Pattinson demonstrates, the three real SOE agents who survived the camps all underwent some form of maltreatment. Odette was maltreated at Ravensbrück, Yvonne Baseden was threatened with rape and had her toes trampled and Eileen Nearne was forced into the baignoire. Also, primary sources from captured resisters verify this. Genevieve De Gaulle said: ‘I can affirm that women were treated the same as men. We were not favoured. If the Gestapo wanted some information, beatings, immersion in cold water, whatever they could imagine, was used on men or women, women or men’47 and the Comtesse de Lorne d’Alincour smuggled a letter out of Fresnes prison which stated: ‘the Gestapo told me; you’re acting like a soldier; silent; you’ll be treated as such, not like a woman.’48

The lack of distinction in torture between men and women is evident throughout the rest of the torture scenes in *Female Agents*. However, the characters are humiliated in ways that are sex specific - Gaelle is stripped down to her underwear in front of Pierre and the guards, she tries to cover her breasts and she also wets herself. She is then forced into a chair and has a finger nail removed; she screams and cries in pain and then gives them the information they require. This scene contrasts in several ways with Odette and Carve *her name with pride* as the physical torture is portrayed and Gaelle’s pain is not as muted or contained as Violette’s or Odette’s and her fear is visually realised through her wetting herself and her tears. Also Gaelle’s state of undress is far more explicit. This could be viewed as gratuitous since it is unnecessary and adds only to the already stark realism of

the scene and highlighting the degradation Gaelle suffers. This is all the more potent because she is depicted as the good, Catholic girl who would not bring her lethal pill with her.

Gaelle’s revelation of vital information, leading to the possible arrest of all of her colleagues, directly contradicts the tone of the 1950s films when the heroines repeated: ‘I have nothing to say’ or: ‘I will tell you nothing.’ This was later recognised in the citations stating that: ‘...Mrs Sansom however refused to speak’ and Violette: ‘...never by word or deed gave away any of her acquaintances, or told the enemy anything of value.’ Gaelle’s selfish motives are demonstrated later in the film. When Heindrich tries to find out the back-up plan she asks: ‘what’s in it for me.’ Pierre is aware of her selfishness and that she is a danger to the others still ‘in the field’, and while they are chained together he tries to kill her by kicking her in the stomach and then suffocating her. He is unsuccessful but the scene again highlights that being a woman does not attract any different treatment.

Due to the fact Gaelle caves in under interrogation Louise also gets arrested. The first time she is seen in the torture room she is chained up near Gaelle who is begging her help and forgiveness and Louise gives her a lethal pill and nods her forgiveness. As she picks up the pill the audience see her bloody, mutilated finger, a physical sign of torture that is not used in either *Odette* or *Carve her name with pride*. Gaelle is then removed by guards and the next time the audience sees her she is in a cell, and in a scene that is interspersed with Louise’s torture, Gaelle kills herself.

In this scene Louise is in her under-slip and sitting in a chair, Pierre is brought in and is hit in the face when he refuses to answer Heindrich’s question. Louise is forced into the baignoire twice and then beaten up but this is not the main focus of the scene, merely serving as backdrop to Pierre and Heindrich’s conversation. The audience does not see clearly what is happening to Louise. This action is in the background and slightly out of focus making it seem much more sinister and threatening and they hear her cries and groans as the two men come to an agreement. This resembles the scenes in *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* in that it is what is not said or realised in this scene that has an impact. The audience knows that Louise is pregnant, (but her brother is unaware) and the

49 The London Gazette, 16th August 1946.
50 Minney, *Carve her name with pride*, p.188.
blows to her stomach indicate that she will probably miscarry. The fact that the audience do not see the beating close up leaves the intimate details to their imagination, with far greater effect than realising every movement.

The passage of over 50 years which separates these films clearly demonstrates the change in censorship and broadening of public perception of what is acceptable for viewing on screen. From the film noir depiction of Odette’s interrogation to the expressionist questioning and more explicit torture of Violette, through to the graphic nudity, degradation and violence in Female Agents, these torture scenes are disturbing and memorable in their realisation of the unthinkable and form a major part of the films in which they feature.

Female Agents also make reference to the concentration camps, but in contrast to Odette and Carve her name with pride does not depict them. This seems a strange decision given the protracted torture scenes, but, the film’s protagonist Louise is not the victim and for this reason it may not have been shown. Instead, after her return to England Louise sees Buckmaster and tells him: ‘I rely on you to bring her [Jeanne] home personally.’

Sometime later Buckmaster visits Louise at the hospital where she works, shows her some pictures taken at the Russian liberation of Ravensbrück and asks if she recognises any of the victims. Eventually she comes across a photo of Jeanne - she is dead, her head at an awkward angle, a noose around her neck, her breast burned and her face scarred.

This scene is powerful in that it uses realistic (possibly original) images and yet does not try to recreate the horror of a real camp. The audience is aware of the horrors through what they have already seen and heard earlier in the film and the death of Jeanne did not need to be visually realised to have a profound impact on the viewer. The impact is heightened by Louise’s accusatory stare at Buckmaster.

The drama as represented by Female Agents is an exciting, attractive and fast moving film but attention to detail such as clothing, weapons, locations and paraphernalia are all

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52 Jeanne caused a major distraction at the railway station in Paris so Louise could assassinate Heindrich and was arrested as a consequence.
easy to achieve with accuracy. The storyline, which claims to have its basis in reality, has no basis in fact. This reduces the film to a ‘good thriller’ but ‘bad history.’

This chapter has shown the development of the female SOE character in films since *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride*. These characters have changed over time and since the first two films there were no more biopic representations of SOE characters, they have all been fictional. Even so, the public have become better aware of the true nature of agents activities, and these films can be considered a truer representation than through the original biopics.

*Wish me Luck* succeeded because there was more inclination to question the stories, to conduct original research and to question the integrity of what was being portrayed. As the subject matter was fictional there were no feelings to hurt or potential lawsuits, constructions to uphold or events to accurately reconstruct. The directors had much more free rein, yet chose to conduct meticulous research ensuring that every detail was historically accurate and true to the integrity subject. Another element that ensured its success was that characters had time to develop and the plot could be thorough and unrushed. The programme had more screen minutes to fill than a film and the audience needed to be kept engaged and willing to watch again the following week.

The films that lacked realistic character and historical integrity added to the myths and inconsistencies surrounding SOE. Due to the claim made at the beginning of the film, viewers of *Female Agents* may believe that SOE was largely responsible for D-day and that their agents assassinated Germans in broad-daylight. Those who watch *Charlotte Gray* may think that agents rescued Jews and went into the field to prove themselves and to rescue their boyfriends. Films such as these have added to the misrepresentation and unrealistic portrayal of SOE, and have served to skew the public’s perception of what life as SOE agent was like and what their roles were.

This chapter shows that the films that took *Odette* and *Carve her name with pride* as their starting point and used the formula they initiated, were made as a result of an increased interest in clandestine operations and the Second World War. It may also be argued that these films became part of a wider general interest in spies and espionage and as such

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Foot, *SOE in France*, p.453.
lost their specific wartime focus. They adapted to suit the change in the public’s interest, especially with the perceived increase in spying due to the Cold War and the question over whether the character or events were real or fictitious was of little consequence. These films have served to create an indelible image in the public’s mind that calls into question what SOE was and what its women agents were like.
Chapter seven
A discussion of the memorials to the SOE F section.

This chapter discusses issues surrounding memorials to the SOE F section and particularly those to women. It addresses politics, the need to commemorate, the form of the memorial, whether the memorial is site specific and what that means to its impact on visitors; whether the memorial is individual or collective and how a memorial can influence personal responses.

Traditionally, public memorials and monuments have been commissioned and erected to serve a variety of functions: the celebration of a victory, the marking of a significant occasion, honouring the war dead or to act as: ‘heroic, self aggrandising figurative icons.’¹ The main focus within this chapter will be the memorials erected after the Second World War to the SOE F section, specifically the women agents. To put these memorials into a wider context both academically and in relation to other memorials it is useful to examine not only the history of the war memorial as an entity, but also the issues surrounding the memorial. These include location, artistic form, their raison d'être, public response to a memorial and the influence of wording, sculpture or location on an observer’s emotional reaction.

This chapter compares a sample of SOE memorials: the FANY memorial at St Paul’s Church, Knightsbridge; Albert Embankment; RAF Tempsford and St Paul’s Church Tempsford; RAF Tangmere; Valençay; Beaulieu Abbey and at the former concentration camps of Ravensbrück and Natzweiler-Struthof Struthof. These memorials have been researched and selected because they each represent different types and forms of war memorial from plaque to sculpture. Some of the memorials utilise symbolism; some are site specific; some are individual while others are collective. Some were publicly funded while others are privately commissioned and financed and as such they all differ in their origins and concept.

¹ David Libeskind, Trauma in Image and Remembrance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) p. 64. i.e Heroes Square in Budapest ie Victory column in Berlin/ Trafalgar Square, Jubilee Bridge – Queen Elizabeth II Silver jubilee, the Cenotaph at Whitehall.
These memorials will be compared with others which have similar backgrounds, locations, art forms and contested histories such as Holocaust memorials. This is because when studying the women of SOE F section, there is an almost automatic involvement with overlapping Holocaust studies. Accounts of prisons, camps and executions form a substantial part of several agents’ profiles and the material in their files, in addition to much of the reading matter available. One of the reasons for choosing to juxtapose memorials dedicated to SOE F section with Holocaust memorials is that, during my extensive research into the SOE F section memorials and subsequent visits to many of the memorials, I have been unable to avoid Holocaust memorials on the same site. Most former Nazi concentration camp sites have memorials to all of their victims, thus including SOE agents at Ravensbrück, Natzweiler-Struthof-Struthof and Sachsenhausen (to name those I have visited). In addition there are deportation memorials scattered across France and memorials to the SOE trained agents in the Czech Republic. Some SOE agents were Nazi political prisoners and became part of the concentration camp system and therefore the Holocaust. The term ‘political prisoners’ encompasses political ‘Nacht und Nebel’ prisoners as well as those targeted because of their race, religion or beliefs such as Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah’s witnesses and homosexuals.

Whilst on ‘Insite’ 2009 I became aware of the multi-faceted nature of many memorials and the reasons for their existence.² It seems prudent that as a continuation of that study, SOE F section and Holocaust memorials should be examined using the same criteria. Also, much of the research carried out by scholars into Holocaust memorials and collective memory is pertinent to a discussion of memorials to SOE F section.

As with all memorials, those dedicated to the war, the Holocaust or SOE will be affected by politics and issues of national memory. For example, the memorial at Auschwitz: ‘for more than 40 years exhibited a museological, pedagogical, and commemorative orientation that,

² InSite was an immersive professional development programme for teachers, museum and other education professionals. It was part of the Big Lottery funded ‘Their Past Your Future’ project which was run by the Imperial War Museum from 2004-2010. The programme aimed to bring together people from diverse backgrounds to increase their subject knowledge of post-1945 European history. Its historical focus was the legacy of the Second World War, the ways in which this legacy influenced the Cold War and memorialising of conflict in the 20th century. Participants took part in two overseas trips, to Germany and the Czech Republic and to Budapest. During these visits a variety of museums and historic sites were visited including the village and memorial centre at Lidice, the Stasi HQ and Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, the Party Rally Grounds at Nuremberg, the Forum of Contemporary History in Leipzig and the House of Terror and the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Budapest. As well as the overseas component, there were preparatory and follow-up workshops in London.
to varying degrees, simplified the camp’s history, valourised certain types of deportees and their experiences over those of others, and introduced culturally and ideologically bound memorial narratives grounded in post-war Polish society and politics. The way in which the camp had been permitted to interpret and portray its history had been dictated by the state, which, in the immediate post-war period was communist and therefore had its own ideals to uphold, and individuals to hero worship.

National politics, both British and French, also affected the SOE F section memorials. SOE was a secret organisation and agents were bound by the Official Secrets Act. This may be the reason why the FANY memorial unveiled in 1948 named the women who had been under its umbrella organisation but does not mention SOE, although by now agents’ stories and the lists of the missing were becoming common knowledge. Politics also played a part in the construction of the memorial at Valençay in France, where rivalry between Communist and non-Communist partisans was prevalent during the war and remained so in the post-war years. Discussions about where the memorial to SOE F section should be, who should fund it, organise its construction and be responsible for its maintenance were widespread. Added to the mix was the discomfort of a nation which had collaborated on a large scale with the Nazis, both by allowing the Occupation and by being complicit in the round ups of the Jews and The Final Solution. This is highlighted by the fact that only recently was the need for memorials to:

‘cater also for the sectional memory of groups previously excluded from collective acts of remembrance, occluded or marginalised by official ambivalence and indifference’ recognised. Thus, for example ‘the French government’s belated acknowledgement in 1993 of the French state’s complicity in the wartime persecution of the Jews removed the obstacle to the creation of an official memorial to the victims of the infamous ‘rafle du vel d’Hiv’ in July 1942…’

A further similarity between SOE and Holocaust memorials (but not unique to them) is the tendency to pick out and memorialise certain individuals. In terms of the Holocaust plaques to particularly heroic or tragic figures adorn the walls at Sachsenhausen,

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Ravensbrück and Natzweiler-Struthof Struthof, and their stories are also told in the camp museums and exhibitions. Part of the reason for this is that it is easier for the individual observer to relate the experience of another individual and their suffering than it is to attempt to empathise with a large group of people.

The problems surrounding the memorialisation of such enormous and catastrophic physical events such as the Holocaust, the Second World War or even later events such as the Vietnam War or the World Trade Centre, all of which resulted in heavy loss of human life, cannot be underestimated. Some memorials seek to represent the event by use of metaphor for example ‘The memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe’ in Berlin (taken at face value without visiting the subterranean museum) memorialises the murder of some 6 million people. However, as this is hard to visualise or come to terms with, some memorials physically realise the number of dead through symbolism and recent projects in both the USA and West Yorkshire have attempted to visualise the number of dead by displaying six million paper clips and buttons respectively to visually represent Holocaust victims. The enormity of the numbers involved in these events press against the use of conventional memorials, and symbolism and sculpture become more widely utilised.

SOE memorials are different precisely and contrastingly because the numbers are so small. The total number of F section women sent from Britain was 39. Several SOE memorials are dedicated to individual female agents and (as has been discussed throughout this thesis) certain individuals have been picked out and celebrated above others, Odette and Violette being the main examples, both having individual memorials in addition to being included in the larger memorials such as that at Valençay thus complicating the issue further.

The pervasiveness of SOE memorials is also worthy of consideration. The locations where these agents are commemorated are varied: training schools, homes, airfields, places of operation in France and concentration camps. Each site’s approach is unique,
some using plaques, others sculpture to commemorate a small but disparate group of people.

Before dealing in greater depth with the complexities and issues surrounding SOE memorials it is necessary to look at the origins and roots of the war memorial itself. It is believed that the first war memorials were: ‘the ancient practice by which individual warriors deposited stones to make up a cairn before going into battle and removed a single stone afterwards, leaving a memorial to those who did not return’, with the first war epitaph being for the dead of the Battle of Thermopylae between Sparta and the Persian Empire in 480 BC.\(^8\) Over the centuries many nations and cultures developed their own ways of remembering and celebrating their war dead, and forms that are familiar to us today such as the obelisk or column were used in Ancient Egypt and Rome as a means of commemorating a battle or victory.

In terms of 20th century commemoration the need to grieve, mourn and remember those who had suffered and died was generated by the First World War’s mechanised killing, trenches, stalemates, 9.7 million dead and 21 million wounded along with the fact that that the majority of soldiers that were lost were conscripts and therefore essentially civilians in uniform. This outpouring of grief took several forms which are still visible and pertinent in the early 21st century. Plaques, cenotaphs and monuments were placed in countless villages, towns and cities, both in the UK and across Europe ranging from an obelisk on a village green, to simple countryside graveyards, to the massive Menin Gate. The aim of these memorials was to help a generation that had lost thousands of men to come to terms with their grief and give physical recognition to their loss. They also provided a grave stone for those who had no known grave since: ‘in the absence of tombstones... the monument can function as a substitute site for mourning and remembrance,’ a place where relatives could visit, grieve and perform the rites of mourning.\(^9\)

After the First World War a formalised act of remembrance was instigated by King George V, and became a ritual now performed every Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday across Britain incorporating such customs as the sounding of the Last Post and Reveille, the reading of the inscription on the Menin Gate, the laying of poppy wreaths, the wearing

\(^8\) Kidd, *Memory and Memorials*, p.4.
of poppies and the two minutes silence. These traditions and monuments have become steeped into society and: ‘just as the long shadow of the Great War determined subsequent military, political, and societal responses to the Second World War, it also established commemorative practises and modes of remembrance in Britain and France notably, but elsewhere too, in which the war dead of 1939-45 were more or less easily assumed.’

It was in the aftermath of the First World War that the desire to break free from the constraints of the traditional [physical] war memorial became prevalent. The monuments designed and erected prior to and for the most part in honour of the First World War were archaic and formalised. They fulfilled certain criteria such as using stock phrases including ‘lest we forget,’ ‘we shall remember them’ and ‘to our glorious dead’. They took certain shapes: obelisks, plinths and crosses inlaid with swords; which were significant because they were established forms with which people were already familiar. Many of these memorials utilised imagery of angels, mythological heroes, the goddess Victory or soldiers themselves and bore lists of the dead, battles and dates.

Some saw this type of memorial as outdated and inappropriate and: ‘both artists and some governments shared a general distaste for the ways the monument seemed formally to recapitulate the archaic values of a past world now discredited by the slaughter of war’. A new generation of cubists and expressionists in particular, rejected traditional mimetic and heroic evocations of events, contending that any such remembrance would elevate and mythologise them. In their view: ‘yet another classically proportioned Prometheus would have falsely glorified and thereby redeemed the horrible suffering they were called upon to mourn.’

Whereas previously the: ‘traditional aim of war memorials has been to valourise the suffering in such a way as to justify, even redeem, it historically. [But] for these artists such monuments would have been tantamount to betraying not only their experience of

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10 After the Second World War the act of remembrance also incorporated a reading of the words from the Kohima epitaph. Also, under the Queens Regulations a soldier in the British Army may be required to attend church twice a year, one of those occasions usually being Remembrance Sunday.

11 Kidd, Memory and Memorials, p.4.

12 Ibid.

the Great War, but also their new reasons for art’s existence after the war, to challenge the world realities, not affirm them.\textsuperscript{14} ‘As true to the artist’s inner vision as such work may have been [however] neither public nor state seemed ready to abide public memorials built of foundations of doubt instead of valour’ and for the most part memorials erected in the wake of the Great War and to honour it fulfilled the traditional principles.\textsuperscript{15} For the most part, imagery did not reflect the horrors of war, instead brave soldiers in smart uniforms with bayonets fixed were depicted and not the dead and dying in shell holes – the imagery and wording highlighting the brave and righteous side of war, not the horrifying and deadly aspect of it.\textsuperscript{16} The memorials served to glorify the war, not question it.

Only a few veered away from the accepted norm including Wilhelm Lehmbruck’s sculptures of the \textit{Fallen man} and \textit{Seated youth} of 1917. The former depicts a naked human form on his hands and knees, the top of his head is touching the ground, he looks downtrodden or prostrate in grief. He certainly does not resemble the accepted image of a hero or soldier. In the former sculpture the figure is sitting, his arms across his knees,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Young, \textit{Memory and the end of the monument}, p.61.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Such as in Bradford or the Royal Artillery memorial in London and as depicted in the Scottish National War Memorial in Edinburgh castle, opened 14\textsuperscript{th} July 1927.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Royal Artillery Memorial, Hyde Park Corner, London.
\end{itemize}
his head bowed and shoulders hunched. Maybe he is contemplating or grieving, but again he does not fit with the accepted image of a wartime hero.

This so called ‘pathetic hero’ was not what was traditionally expected from a war memorial as it represented human weakness and frailty and as such it was: ‘condemned by emerging totalitarian regimes in Germany and Russia as defeatist for seeming to embody all that was worth forgetting – not remembering in the war’.18

The imagery utilised by Lehmbruck is similar to that employed by artists who have designed Holocaust memorials at sites such as Ravensbrück,21 Grosse Hamburger Strasse22 and Sachsenhausen.23 At the latter site (which is in former East Germany) the above argument is also prevalent. The most recent memorial which was designed and installed after the fall of the Soviet regime and the reunification of Germany depicts emaciated bodies holding up a fallen figure, and although it is larger than life it shows weakness and frailty. This monument has a similar ethos to Lehmbruck’s work which the totalitarian regimes disliked and so it only came into existence after the fall of communism in Germany. It provides a stark contrast to the monument that was erected immediately after the liberation of the camp by the Russian Army which is in the Soviet (anti-pathetic) style depicting strong, muscular bodies (even on the figure representing a camp survivor), sharp angles and larger than life figures. It would seem that this monument was erected not so much as to remember the victims of the Holocaust but to celebrate the strength of the Red Army and the Communist Russian liberators. Is it then the case that the former

18 Young, Memory and the end of the monument, p.64.
21 Former Nazi Concentration camp, Fürstenburg.
22 Memorial to deported Jews, Berlin.
23 Former Nazi Concentration camp, Sachsenhausen.
Memorials raise issues of memory and forgetting. Andreas Huyssen, the Villard Professor of German and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, argues that erecting memorials is the only way to ensure that we remember: ‘how, after all can we guarantee the survival of memory if our culture does not provide memorial spaces that can help construct and nurture some collective memory’ whereas Mumford states that: ‘stone gives a false sense of continuity, a deceptive assurance of life.’

One argument suggests that objects stand in for memory and in the end lead to forgetting, Huyssen expresses concern at the use of memorials as a way of remembering, suggesting that ‘the promise of permanence a monument in stone will suggest it is always built on quicksand, some monuments are joyously toppled at times of social upheaval, others preserve memory in its most ossified form, either as myth or cliché. Yet others stand simply as figures of forgetting, their meaning and original purpose eroded by the passage of time.’ He implies that while memorials look as though they will be

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24 Young, Memory and the end of the monument, p.64.
25 Young, Memory and the end of the monument, p.64.
26 Huyssen, The Art of memory, p.16.
permanent, their message may be short lived as those commissioners, designers and intended audiences fade and change over time and the memorial’s message and reason for being are forgotten, or worse become a myth or fable of the past. Conversely, it may be argued that a gravestone is not only a memorial that is of value to its own generation as a form of catharsis, but also an historical artefact to future generations.

Memorials seem to be the method by which 20th and 21st century mankind has chosen to commemorate significant events and places. The trend in post Second World War commemoration eventually moved away from traditional, monolithic structures, to more artistically influenced designs. This was because commemoration was not only for conventional soldiers who had died but civilians, victims of the Holocaust and concentration camps, victims of the Occupation and resisters as well as servicemen, prisoners of war and home defence.30

Initially in most towns: ‘communities chose not to build new monuments but to modify existing First World War memorials in urban sites or on village squares with supplementary plaques, turning them into memorials commemorating victims of both wars’.31 The way of memorialising was based on tradition developed during the First World War. In France plaques or small monuments were dedicated to resisters in their villages or where they fell. In Britain one of the first memorials featuring the names of female SOE agents was the FANY memorial at St Paul’s Church, Wilton Place, Knightsbridge, which was unveiled in May 1948 and which is a traditional plaque. As a result of the Second World War: ‘the generic function of historical monuments as focal points of collective identity and as carriers of historical tradition’ which had ‘been largely consistent over time’ began to change and new forms of memorials developed thus influencing traditional methods of remembrance in terms of physical monuments and sculpture.32

A monument that attempts to represent a collective identity, (in this case women who served in the Second World War) by employing new styles and trends, whilst not using individual images is the Whitehall national monument to the women of World War Two. It

30 More recently there have been memorials to Women at war at Whitehall and Animals at war at Hyde Park, London.
32 Ibid.
is a 22 foot bronze sculpture that attempts to encapsulate women's war work by a display of clothing hung on pegs.

The monument was unveiled by HM The Queen on 9th July 2005 to mark the 60th anniversary of the end of war. In her speech, the Rt. Hon. Baroness Boothroyd of Sandwell OM, who had raised funds for the memorial, said that: ‘It has taken us 60 years to honour the women of the Second World War. But there can be no finer site for our memorial than here in Whitehall, close to the Cenotaph and the heart of our democracy’ highlighting the fact that the place had been very deliberately chosen as a site of national prominence and pride and also noting the fact that this is the first national memorial to women. In addition to mentioning that: ‘over seven million women were mobilised’ she also made reference to the women of SOE: ‘Women agents who operated behind enemy lines showed a special kind of courage. Many died from brutal treatment rather than betray their comrades. They were few in number but their names live on’ and added that: ‘this monument is dedicated to all the women who served our country and the cause of freedom, in uniform and on the Home Front’.

The overall purpose of this monument is debatable as it is specifically for women and yet there exists no separate memorial for men. It can be argued the Cenotaph, which encapsulates all those who were involved in the war(s), is sufficient memorialisation. It can also be argued that: ‘the patriarchal constructs of society automatically value male contributions to the war effort over those of women, warranting a specific memorial to female efforts’. By having a separate memorial to women in war, society is running the risk of memorial saturation, not only are women commemorated but animals, individuals, and children. It is becoming the case that: ‘there are so many statues in central London that Westminster council has banned more unless they meet strict criteria.’ By having so many memorials they lose their impact and as discussed above become vectors of forgetting rather than remembering.

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33 Rt Hon Baroness Boothroyd of Sandwell OM speech on www.fany.org.uk.
34 Ibid.
35 www.wikipedia.co.uk.
36 The Times, 10th February 2008.
The Whitehall National monument: ‘is not by its nature purely a military memorial. It depicts the uniforms of women in the forces alongside the working clothes of those who worked in the factories, the hospitals, the emergency services and the farms’ and is therefore all encompassing, commemorating all women who undertook ‘war work’. The clothing hanging on pegs demonstrates that their war work was a passing phase, and the women no longer had use for their uniforms after the war. The sculpture is easily accessible and the message is clear.

As an art form, sculpture enables people to engage and interact with a physical representation of an event so that no other explanation is needed. This is particularly pertinent as it does not involve any specific language and is therefore comprehensive to all who view it. For example the sculpture of three figures at Sachsenhausen (two frail men carrying a corpse) is so literal that viewers are able to establish for themselves what has happened here without resorting to interpretation panels or explanations. This seems to be the reason why sculpture is used at many memorial sites, notably at Ravensbrück concentration camp: at the entrance of the Memorial site there is a striking sculpture of three bowed and skeletal women; one with a small child in the folds of her skirt, another bearing the weight of a stretcher upon which is the body of a child and the other with her arm raised, shielding her face in grief. This sculpture is known as the ‘Müttergruppe’ and is said to represent the stages of mourning.

38 Rt Hon Baroness Boothroyd of Sandwell OM speech on www.fany.org.uk.
39 Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance based on the Kübler-Ross model.
Also near the entrance of the camp are sculptures which represent the different types of prisoner within the camp. This is evident from the prominence of yellow, pink or red triangles upon their bodies denoting them as Jewish, homosexual or political. These forms are amongst: ‘such idiosyncrasies as negative representations, mostly of empty spaces in place of traditional human forms, and invisible or disappearing forms,’ they are haunting figures, human in shape and give the appearance of being weathered, decomposed or incomplete with disproportionate faces and hollowed eyes. These sculptures resemble remnants of humans, thus evoking feelings of discomfort and uneasiness in the observer.

40 Müttergruppe, Photograph by author on 6th February 2009.
41 Carrier, Holocaust Monuments, p.21.
42 Ghostly figures, Photograph by author on 6th February 2009.
On the edge of a lake which separates Fürstenberg and Ravensbrück, stands the sculpture known as ‘The Burdened woman.’ The sculpture stands on a tall plinth overlooking the water thus combining old and new types of memorial. The piece, which depicts an upright defiant woman holding the body of her fallen female comrade in her arms, has religious connotations and resembles the type of sculpture that may be found in a church i.e. that of an apostle removing the body of Jesus from the cross – an image of death and despair on the one hand, and redemption and hope on the other. Conversely the figure is also an accusatory figure showing the horror of what has happened in the camp to the world and more specifically to the residents of Fürstenburg directly across the lake who will see the figure everyday while going about their normal business (as they would have during the concentration camps existence). The figure is strong, tall, accusatory and defiant with a resolute look upon her face. Her fallen comrade is thin, her breasts sagging and head lolling, her arm hangs to one side and her legs are lifeless as the woman carrying her takes her weight; and consequently the metaphoric weight of the thousands of dead buried in the rose covered mass grave behind her and the ashes of victims in the lake in front of her.

43 Burdened woman Photograph by author on 6th February 2009.
One type of memorial which is very popular for both individual and collective remembrance is the rose garden. Collective memorial rose gardens include the one at Ravensbrück beneath which lies a mass grave, and the one at Lidice with thousands of varieties of roses and piped classical music. The traditional use of a flower to remember the dead is a method with which many people can relate; poppies are worn on Remembrance Day, poppy wreaths are laid at cenotaphs, flowers are laid at the site of an accident or atrocity and wreaths are laid or carried at funerals of loved ones. A flower may symbolise new life and hope, and can act as a living, lasting memorial.

There is also a rose garden at RAF Tangmere to remember individuals who have recently passed away or those who died during the war itself. Amongst those commemorated there are Hugh Verity and Peter Churchill. One such rose is dedicated to Noor Inayat Khan; beneath it is a plaque which gives, in surprising detail, an overview of her work with SOE:

![Plaque in RAF Tangmere Rose Garden, 15th May 2010.](image)

This memorial is in a minority as it has a small, expressive verse written on it in addition to plain facts, it is an outlet for emotion and sentiment. It is not clear who planted this rose or why, and as it is in a garden with many other memorials it does not stand out, but it is a poignant and understated memorial to an individual in a place that has special significance to the SOE.

Another form of memorial that harks back to a more conventional type of remembrance is that of the plaque. Traditionally these may be found on walls in churches and at various
locations across sites such as former concentration camps, city walls and ghettos. Plaques have a tendency to utilise formulaic and archaic language, for example ‘lest we forget’ and ‘to the glorious dead’. They also tend to present bare facts and rarely use provocative or dramatic language.

There are several plaques in memory of SOE and its associates; these include the Ravensbrück ‘Wall of Nations’, Beaulieu Abbey and Gibraltar Farm at RAF Tempsford all of which are site specific monuments. At Ravensbrück there is the ‘Wall of Nations’: mounted upon on a 20 foot wall in large metallic letters are the names of countries which had their nationals incarcerated in the camp. Included on this wall is Great Britain and beneath the lettering is a memorial to the women of SOE F section.

![SOE F section memorial, Photograph by author on 6th February 2009.](image)

In comparison with the other sculptures and memorials at the Ravensbrück memorial site this plaque is one is the simplest and most conventional. It lists the four women who died at Ravensbrück and their method of execution; Lilian Rolfe, Denise Bloch, Violette Szabo all shot early 1945 and Cecily Lefort who was gassed in February 1945. The plaque also lists their honours. The inscription above reads:

‘In memory of members of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) F section whose lives were taken here’.

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45 SOE F section memorial, Photograph by author on 6th February 2009.
The memorial does not list the names of Odette Churchill, Eileen Nearne or Yvonne Baseden who survived incarceration at Ravensbrück, and resembles a traditional plaque to the dead such as those found on cenotaphs or church walls. The memorial gives the bare facts and is neutral, enabling the observer to process this information in their own way. Depending on the observer’s prior knowledge their response may be emotional, rational, indifferent or neutral.46

The simplicity of this memorial does not actively bias the observer’s reaction one way or another. Whereas the sculptures discussed show emaciated bodies and de-humanised forms that encourage the observer to think and react in a certain way, for example feelings of disgust, pity and anger may arise. Whereas the SOE F section memorial is similar to the method of remembrance used in churches or on cenotaphs; names and dates that have meaning to some and are merely statistics to others. Perhaps this may be seen as emphasising the difference between those who died as a result of their own actions such as joining the SOE, and those who did not, such as the victims of the Holocaust.

This plaque is also of interest because it is the only plaque on the Wall of Nations that singles out individuals for remembrance. The reason for this could be that Britain was not under Nazi rule, unlike the other countries listed including: Greece, France, Germany and Denmark, and therefore British citizens in camps were relatively few. They were also unusual being mainly members of clandestine organisations such as SOE or SIS or involved in covert activities such as escape lines (as in the case of Mary Lindell).47

On 27th April 1969, Major-General Sir Colin Gubbins unveiled a plaque at Beaulieu Abbey in the New Forest. The site had been used as the ‘finishing school for agents’ and is where trainee SOE agents underwent the final stages of their training (discussed in detail in Chapter one). The plaque reads:

46 An observer who is well versed in the history surrounding these executions or who knows something of the individuals and their backgrounds will bring their own intellectual weight, understanding and emotions to the memorial and will therefore engage with it differently than someone who does not know anything and who merely sees names and dates.

47 There were 38 British prisoners listed as being at Ravensbrück. They were arrested for different reasons; some are listed as ‘night and fog’-prisoners, others as BV “Berufsverbrecher” (a category created by the Nazis which can be translated as professional criminals) or for sabotage at work. From a correspondence with Janna Lölke (volunteer) at Ravensbrück memorial Site 25th October 2010.
‘Remember before God those men and women of the European Resistance Movement who were secretly trained in Beaulieu to fight their lonely battle against Hitler’s Germany, and who, before entering Nazi Occupied territory here found some measure of the peace for which they fought.’

The memorial is simple, it does not directly mention the SOE at all, it does not name agents or instructors nor does it dramatise their deeds, instead the wording is poetic and prosaic which simply details what was done at Beaulieu during the war. The plaque is in a cloister in a relatively secluded part of the abbey, it is peaceful and un-crowded, thus providing an atmosphere conducive to remembrance.

The memorial is visually unostentatious, it is clean cut and does not utilise imagery or sculpture to affect the observer’s emotions. However, it may be argued that the tone created by the choice of words on the plaque would arouse more of an emotional response than if it simply listed trainee agents and said that this was the site of an SOE training school. The plaque has been carefully written, designed and placed so as to be subtle and yet powerful in its connotations.

The former base of RAF Tempsford/Gibraltar farm consists of a small museum and a large barn which was used to check agent’s equipment and clothing, and to issue parachutes prior to infiltration into enemy occupied territory during SOE’s operational years. Inside there is a plaque and several poppy wreaths dedicated to the various

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48 Beaulieu Memorial, taken by author August 2005.
sections of the Resistance. No single names are picked out and it is notable that this plaque is to: ‘men and women’ of ‘every nationality’ who served in: ‘France, Norway, Holland and other countries’ not just agents sent into France which is a common misconception. The SOE is not directly named; the plaque states these men and women flew to the: ‘forces of the Resistance’ but without explicitly naming who sent them. The design of the plaque is understated, it is a simple wooden board and the majority of the wording is factual rather than emotive, only using the words ‘brave’ and ‘dangerous’ for impact.

Another plaque is located in Tempsford village church. It is a granite memorial, bearing RAF insignia and making use of standard war memorial phrases such as ‘In Thanksgiving’ and ‘In remembrance of those who gave their lives for freedom’ typically found on church memorials and cenotaphs. The other phrases used are reminiscent of the plaque at Gibraltar farm, such as: ‘the Resistance workers who were flown to enemy Occupied Europe’ with no specific mention of SOE. The plaque is neutral, relying on the observer’s own knowledge to bring any additional meaning to the bare wording.

49 This may be because RAF Tempsford was not only used by SOE to infiltrate agents; it was also used by the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and Office of Strategic Services (OSS)* It may also be argued that the parachutists sent to assassinate Reinhard Heydrich as part of Operation Anthropoid in Prague were not strictly speaking SOE agents, nor were the Poles who were trained in the UK and flown out from RAF Tempsford. Although both the Poles and Czechs were trained, housed and equipped by SOE and transported by the Special Duties squadrons, they were still under the orders of their Governments in exile. * Rod Bailey’s ‘Forgotten voices of secret war’ – an interview with John Charrot, whose Halifax was shot up by flak and the agents being badly wounded, one losing an ear. John was sure they were SOE but it has since been discovered that they were SIS.

50 Memorial at Gibraltar farm, RAF Tempsford taken by author July 2006.
In terms of influencing the observer’s reactions the plaque itself is factual, giving dates and places not names and reasons. However, it is in a church setting which by its very nature is a quiet place for contemplation and remembrance, as well as religious acts. The location itself therefore may have some influence over the way in which observers interact with the plaque and react to it. As the church is not open very often, it is therefore likely that a visitor to this memorial will have some prior knowledge as to what RAF Tempsford was and the role it played during the war and therefore deliberately gone to see it. This prior knowledge is bound to be an influence on the observer’s reaction to the memorial. Another influence may be the other SOE/RAF paraphernalia around the church which adds to the overall tone and theme of remembrance in this particular building.

A memorial which combines both sculpture and plaques is located in Valençay in the heart of the Loire valley in France. The memorial is dedicated to the members of SOE F section who lost their lives, the roll of honour listing 91 men and 13 women. The unveiling by HM The Queen Mother and the French Secretary of State for Veteran Affairs on 6th May 1991 was the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the despatch of SOE F section’s first agent to France. (Georges Bégué was dropped on 5/6th May 1941).

The monument was originally called ‘Spirit of partnership’ by its designer Elizabeth Lucas Harrison and the central disc in the memorial represents the moon: ‘which brought together SOE and the Resistance in all forms of clandestine operations, but especially the landing or parachuting of agents and stores.’ There are also two columns in contrasting black and white slate. The black is said to represent night: ‘and the essential secrecy of

51 Memorial in St Peter’s Church, Tempsford taken by author July 2006.
52 http://herve.larroque.free.fr/sgbindex.htm#inspiration.
Resistance operations\textsuperscript{53} and white for the: ‘shining spirit of Resistance’\textsuperscript{54} as well as the partnership between SOE and the local Resistance: ‘Three floodlights at the base of the monument recall the L-shaped flare path laid out by “reception committees” to enable Lysander and Hudson aircraft of 161 Squadron, Royal Air Force to touch down by night on improvised landing strips’.\textsuperscript{55}

The memorial also forms the shape of a cross, replicating a more traditional type of war memorial (such as the typical Commonwealth war graves cross with a sword inlaid into it) as well as inducing the religious connotations usually associated with loss of life in conflict and the war dead. The Valençay memorial is the first SOE memorial to reflect the modern trend for sculpture, interpretation and clarity. In this respect it is very similar to the Holocaust memorials discussed throughout and incorporates all of the elements that make it a striking and comprehensible monument to the men and women of F section.

Behind the monument there are several boards, one of which explains why the memorial is here and to whom it is dedicated (see photograph above and appendix 1) the other is a roll of honour which lists the men and women from SOE F section who died in combat or

\textsuperscript{53} http://herve.larroque.free.fr/sgbindex.htm#inspiration.
\textsuperscript{54} Valençay Memorial.
\textsuperscript{55} Valençay Memorial.
\textsuperscript{56} Valençay memorial photograph taken by author, May 2003.
It does not single out agents for acts of valour or distinguished work. Each agent receives the same amount of space on the board and is listed alphabetically by name and rank, their decorations not being shown.

For example: SLT Plewman ES or CNE Rabinovitch A.

This gives all of the agents listed an equal standing, they all lost their lives fighting for the liberation, be it in a camp, during a battle or of natural causes (such as Muriel Byck who is recorded as dying of Meningitis). They receive equal recognition which seems to be an appropriate and apt way to remember the lost agents of SOE F section. This is similar to the Book of Remembrance at Ravensbrück which names all the prisoners including Szabo, Violette Reine Elizabeth [born] Bushell; Bloch, Denise and Rolfe, Lilian Verna.

In addition to embracing contemporary artistic forms and methods of remembrance, most war monuments are likely to reflect the political climate in which they were built and to attempt to capture the current public mood and expectations: ‘Both a monument and its significance are constructed in particular times and places, contingent to the political, historical and aesthetic realities of the moment.’ As such it will bear the marks of that political agenda, national memory and ideals either through its art form, location, choice of words or use of materials. For example the Soviet War memorial built in Berlin in 1949: ‘used slabs of red slate from Hitler’s chancellery, the Russians recycled the stone that had formed the core of Hitler’s world and created a memorial that was designed to make the victor feel proud and the vanquished pathetic. This is stone deployed as a propaganda

57 Valençay memorial – ‘ a la memoire des agents du SOE section F tues au combat au morts en deportation’. [to the memory of the agents of SOE F section, killed in combat, died in captivity].
58 Book of remembrance, photograph by author on 6th February 2009.
59 Young, Memory and the end of the monument, p.62.
tool intended to rub and keep rubbing the German noses in their own defeat.60 This use of materials and the location of the memorial near the Reichstag served to underline the Russian defeat of the Germans in Berlin and their continuing hold over the city. Subsequently it served as a political tool reserving a foothold for the Russians in what was to be (Free) West Berlin.

According to Anthony Gormley: ‘site is the beginning of engagement’ and the location of the monument is critical as it can influence the observer in terms of emotional response and empathy.61 The atmosphere surrounding the monument can be enhanced by its location due to the connotations of the site and the acquired knowledge of the observer.

The memorial may be site specific i.e. on the site of the event it is commemorating. For example: where someone fell in battle, a concentration camp, the site of execution, capture or deportation. Such sites include the SOE F section memorials at Ravensbrück, Natzweiler-Struthof Struthof, Beaulieu, and RAF Tempsford.62

The reasons for site specific memorials are many; to engage the visitor with a sense of history, to preserve the site for future generations, to allow the site to come to terms with its own past and to reconcile itself with the atrocities that happened there as well as to fulfil political agendas of memory and remembrance. Some scholars would argue that this type of site is the one most likely to have a profound effect upon the visitor as it is these sites that are open platforms for emotional reactions. Here one: ‘can show the scars that are still hidden – but they are scars not bleeding wounds due to the passage of time.’63 Libeskind believes that: ‘when one actually enters the space of that trauma...the trauma cannot be interpreted simply. That is the difference between talking about the problem and being in it. In a literary context, one can interpret trauma, one can give it a connotation, and one can cope with it in different linguistic settings. But no interpretation can eliminate the materiality, opacity, and thickness of the experience of walking, looking, touching and feeling where one is.’64

60 Matt Frei, Berlin, BBC 1 December 2009.
62 Holocaust monuments at former camps, stumbling stones across the cities of Europe, statues at sites of deportations and round ups and railway stations.
63 Mirosław Balka, Politics of Memory conference, IWM, 9th June 2010.
64 Libeskind, Trauma in Image and Remembrance, p.45.
By simply being at the site of the event, the observer engages all of their senses and is able to accept more readily the story that is being conveyed by the memorial or memorial site. They are more susceptible to the atmosphere around them and more likely to engage with their surroundings and empathise with the memories being commemorated.

An example of such a site is Ravensbrück concentration camp which is now a memorial site with two permanent and several temporary exhibitions, at various points around the site there being plaques, sculptures and memorials to those who were prisoners there. The Ravensbrück memorial site’s edict is to combine its: ‘commemorative function with historical-political education and research. The memorial is therefore simultaneously a site of remembrance and mourning as well as a site of collection, preservation and research - an active site for learning as well as a location in which to reflect on the past.'

According to Henry Moore (who organised the competition for a memorial at Auschwitz) the best memorial is the camp itself, but contrary to Moore’s belief that there should be no artistic representation, Ravensbrück is home to sculptures and plaques. These commemorate former inmates, as well as interpreting what is left of the buildings to ensure that the site’s past is not forgotten.

Ravensbrück has several sculptures and memorials to the women of SOE F section as well as several sites across the camp that are of significance to the women of SOE F section who were incarcerated and executed there. Among them is the alley where some scholars believe prisoners were shot and the prison block (where Odette Churchill was kept in solitary confinement). No other probable site has been identified, so it is likely to be the location where Lilian, Denise and Violette were executed. There is no specific SOE F section memorial there but there is a plaque in front of it to all victims and flowers are laid by visitors.

The prison block houses an exhibition about the treatment of prisoners in the Zellenbau. The exhibition is factual, making use of original objects as well as multi-media techniques to disseminate information including computers, audio and photographic displays. The material is presented in a matter of fact way and no attempt is made to manipulate the

65 The first commemorative ceremonies were held there in the aftermath of the war and in 1959 the National Memorial Ravensbrück was founded.
67 Calvocoressi, Politics of memory conference.
feelings of visitors. The prison corridor itself is presented as it would have been, and there are reconstructions of the cells as used for various punishments from solitary confinement to light and heat deprivation.

No mention is made of specific prisoners who spent time in these cells, but from documentary evidence, it is clear that Odette Churchill was kept in one of these cells during her solitary confinement.\textsuperscript{68} The upstairs cells have been donated to various countries or ethnic groups who had representatives within the camp to develop their own memorials.

Because these memorials and buildings are not only site specific but also intrinsically woven into the stories of the SOE agents held there, the rational reaction of the observer may be influenced by actually being on the site where inmates were maltreated, where people were executed and their bodies are buried. All of these could contribute to the atmosphere of the site itself which some may find overwhelming, thus affecting the emotions and senses in a way that such a memorial elsewhere might not. Another example of this is at the concentration camp Natzweiler-Struthof-Struthof in the Alsace region of France (part of Germany until 1945) where most of the local people know of the camp and the SOE F section women and much local tourism is based around Resistance trails, museums and monument.\textsuperscript{69}

Although Natzweiler-Struthof Struthof was primarily a camp for male political prisoners in July 1944 four women of the SOE F section, Vera Leigh, Diane Rowden, Andrée Borell and Sonya Olschanesky were executed by means of a lethal injection and then immediately cremated. The camp is a large site with many memorials including a huge concrete spiral to the camps victims, a graveyard to resisters as well as memorials throughout the camp dedicated to the other concentration camps. There is also an ash pit by which there are several more personal memorials to individuals or groups of people executed at the camp.

The main memorial to the women is in the camp crematorium and is on the wall close to the oven and is a simple and unbiased plaque which, when translated from the French

\textsuperscript{68} IWM Sound archive, London, Odette Sansom, 9478 (31\textsuperscript{st} October 1986).

\textsuperscript{69} The area was annexed by Nazi Germany in the Second World War but reverted to France in 1944-45 and has remained part of it since.
reads: ‘To the memory of the four women parachutists, British and French executed at the camp.’ Beneath the plaque (in April 2010) were three poppy wreaths from the FANY, Commandos and Special Forces Club.

The plaque is so simple that it does not mention the SOE, the date or method of death or anything at all about the women such as their date of birth or marital status. To an uneducated onlooker this plaque would mean very little at all, and indeed many people did simply walk past it without paying much due attention, as to them it was another list of names amongst thousands and seemed in no way remarkable. They were unaware that the other rooms in the crematorium were where the four women were injected with phenol and that the oven they walked past was the one that they were cremated in. The story that one of the women was still conscious when she was cremated is left untold. The oven itself got a much bigger emotional reaction, as it was a tangible piece of history with which people could engage.

Conversely, the execution of the four SOE agents seems to play an important part in the camp’s history and memory as it is listed in various museum publications, and on the website. Even a part of the camp museum itself is dedicated to them. Perhaps this is seen as being a more modern and accessible approach to remembrance. Four large photos of the women dominate the room, and items relating to them are on display: an SOE battle casualty note, a coding exercise, an office document noting cause of death and French document relating the work of Sonia Olschanesky. These photos and

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70 SOE plaque, Natzweiler-Struthof Struthof camp, taken by Alison Gagg, 28th April 2010.
artefacts certainly assist in interpreting the women’s story and allow the visitor to learn more about them, their work and their execution. The display is bright, large and accessible and draws the visitor’s attention. It certainly supports the argument that the plaque as a memorial may be viewed as dated and that new, more engaging ways of commemorating tend to be more successful in terms of interaction and information.

To view a museum as a memorial in itself was certainly the original aim of the Imperial War Museum. Conway’s suggestion that a memorial in the heart of the Great War Museum would be a far more popular means of commemoration than: ‘any pile of sculpture’ supports this. In 1917 Conway discussed the concept in a letter to The Times going so far as to assert that the museum idea: ‘must then sink perforce into a secondary place and the scheme becomes a memorial living and real.’ To some extent the Imperial War Museum is a memorial, for it tells the stories of real men and women and houses artefacts both personal such as letters, diaries and small objects as well as larger objects and because of this the public remember them and their sacrifices. This is the same as the concept at Natzweiler-Struthof and other museums where the SOE women are mentioned and therefore remembered such as the Violette Szabo Museum, RAF Tangmere, Bletchley Park, IWM North, Royal Signals Museum, Carpetbaggers Museum, Beaulieu Park.

The Museum at Ravensbrück is housed in the former Camp Commandant’s house which acts as a memorial. There is a room dedicated to former inmates of the camp and one of the women singled out is Yvonne Baseden who was at Ravensbrück between September

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71 Museum display at Natzweiler-Struthof Struthof, 28th April 2010.
4th 1944 and the summer of 1945. An interpretation panel is dedicated to Yvonne and has a timeline, photographs, newspaper articles and her wireless set. On a desk nearby is a file full of newspaper articles about Yvonne written after the war. There is also a wall of photographs of former inmates and amongst them is a photograph of Yvonne. This gives observers and visitors to the site an opportunity to discover about a lesser known SOE F section agent and also goes someway to dispelling the myth that all SOE agents who entered the camps died in them.

An SOE memorial that highlights the work of an individual in a different way and in doing so skews history and the individual’s importance within SOE is the bust of Violette Szabo by the artist Karen Newman. It was funded by the ‘Public memorial fund’ headed by Ivan Saxton and unveiled in late 2009 at London’s Albert Embankment, on a patch of grass between Lambeth Palace and the River Thames. The unveiling of the bust, the official function of which is to serve: ‘as a memorial to the SOE’ was held on Sunday 4th October

73 Photographs by author on 6th February 2009 in the former Camp Commandant’s house.
2009. The event was featured: ‘all afternoon’ on the BBC news channel and attracted much media attention.  

The bust provides a lifelike portrayal of Violette Szabo and is based on photographs and descriptions of her and seems from a distance to be an individual memorial to Violette herself rather than a collective memorial. The piece had been conceived as a national memorial, not just to SOE F section, but to the Norwegian agents at Telemark and to the French Resistance. At the ceremony Lord Selborne, whose grandfather took over from Hugh Dalton as minister for economic warfare in 1942, explained that the contribution of the SOE agents had largely been overlooked once the service was disbanded and that his: ‘grandfather would have been pleased to know that the SOE agents finally have a monument of their own here in London.’

He also went on to state that ‘SOE agents had largely been overlooked once the service was disbanded.’ This is, however, not the case. As demonstrated by this chapter there are numerous monuments erected across the UK and Europe dedicated to the SOE that

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74 Martyn Cox, SOE blog, 4th Oct 2009.
75 http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/4133.
77 Ibid.
were installed prior to 4th October 2009, the date the bust was unveiled.\textsuperscript{78} In addition, there are numerous books on the activities of the SOE from France to Malaysia, several TV documentaries such as \textit{The Real Charlotte Grays};\textsuperscript{79} numerous re-showings of films including \textit{Carve her Name with pride}\textsuperscript{80} and \textit{Heroes of Telemark};\textsuperscript{81} museum exhibitions such as that at the Royal Armouries in November 2008;\textsuperscript{82} as well as a permanent exhibition at the Imperial War Museum London; and countless newspaper articles about the agents and their work and even themed weekends.\textsuperscript{83}

The statement referring to ‘SOE agents’ finally having their own monument, re-introduces the dilemma of the image of one woman representing so many other aspects of the secret war. Upon the plinth on which the bust stands are plaques to: The Maquis French Resistance Fighters, the SOE, Violette Szabo, and the Heroes of Telemark. It seems inappropriate to use the face of one agent, courageous and beautiful though she was, to represent an organisation that at its height had 13,000 employees, 5,000 of whom were active agents across the entire world.\textsuperscript{84} The face of Violette Szabo is unfortunately overused (she herself has several memorials across London alone)\textsuperscript{85} and using it here runs the risk of observers assuming it is a tribute to her alone before they get close enough to read the numerous plaques around the plinth.\textsuperscript{86}

A part of one the plaques to the side of the plinth is just to Violette, this makes the whole memorial seem incompatible with the notion of equal remembrance but is somewhat justified by the fact it is her image used and that needs some sort of explanation. It also implies that she deserves to be singled out as remarkable, and while she did sacrifice her life and do brave work in the field, many others did the same who are not singled out or represented here.

\textsuperscript{78} Memorials in London include Westminster Abbey, Natural History Museum, St Paul’s church Knightsbridge, Stockwell.  
\textsuperscript{79} First shown on 4th October 2004 on Channel Four television.  
\textsuperscript{80} Gilbert, \textit{Carve her name with pride}.  
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Heroes of Telemark}, dir. by Anthony Mann, 1965.  
\textsuperscript{82} A remembrance and celebration of \textit{Carve her name with pride} and the SOE, 28th November 2008, Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds.  
\textsuperscript{83} Secret War exhibition, IWM, London, \textit{Daily Express} article on Odette Hallowes, 10th October 2009 and war weekend at Audley End, August bank holiday 2009.  
\textsuperscript{84} Roderick Bailey, Lecture at Royal Hospital Chelsea, 13th October 2009.  
\textsuperscript{85} Stockwell memorial, blue plaque and Stockwell plaque naming her.  
\textsuperscript{86} When an acquaintance who is a member of the Violette Szabo society heard about the monument being unveiled he wrote to me and said ‘our Violette’ was finally getting some recognition.
This is echoed by an SOE agent and one of the main protagonists in the Valençay memorial, Pearl Witherington who said at interview: ‘I’m only a tiny weenie dot in all this. It’s only the important things that people hear...but I did not help the whole of France, there were 104 victims who were killed during the war, on the memorial at Valençay, it just shows you.’

She was aware that there were many agents, all of whom worked and fought and some of whom suffered and died during the war. She felt that all the lost should receive equal recognition, because whatever they did, they did not do it alone. Pearl passed away on 24th February 2008 before the Albert embankment memorial was unveiled.

The remembrance of such disparate groups as the French Resistance, SOE and Telemark raid on this memorial was the cause of many debates throughout the months leading up to its unveiling. The Special Forces Club declined to endorse the project on the grounds that it was wrong to use the image of one agent to acknowledge the work of many. Some of those remembered were completely unrelated to the work of Violette and indeed F section: for example, the Norwegian agents at Telemark and to some extent the Maquis. The Special Forces Club offered to talk to the organisation responsible for the memorial to initiate a working relationship, but their invitation was ignored and therefore they had no official role or input to this memorial.

Although, there is a risk of having too many disparate memorials it would still have been preferable to have the various entities above remembered separately. If they had to be together on a memorial then one that does them all justice would have been appropriate and not one using the image of an individual who is already included on the SOE plaque when it states:

87 Interview with Pearl Cornioley, St Aignan, France, May 2003.
86 The Special Forces Club was founded in 1946 by members of the SOE and to act as a home for them in London.
89 The Public Memorials Appeal was founded as a registered charity in 2002 by Ivan Saxton, the objective of the charity being to raise funds by organising appeals in order to commission and erect memorials of people of historical importance in their field of endeavour.
‘This monument is in honour
of all the courageous SOE agents:
those who did survive and those who did
not survive their perilous missions.
Their services were beyond the call of duty.
In the pages of history.
Their names are Carved with Pride’

This final line recalls the book and the film of Violette’s life and work in SOE and thus brings her to the fore of the observers mind. It also possibly elicits emotional responses that may not only relate to the memorial but to images from the book and film thus encouraging a reaction that is not founded on the memorial itself but rather to what it implies.

This memorial thrusts Violette Szabo into the limelight, because it uses her image and wording that evoke memories of her (be they real or constructed) and in doing so reiterates the argument that individual agents are remembered above and beyond others, who also served with SOE. Although it has been argued that Violette symbolises the others this memorial presents a biased construction of SOE and a distorted representation of the women agents.

At the time of writing plans for two further SOE memorials are being discussed, with the first being dedicated to Noor Inayat Khan. In an article in the Hindustan Times on 24th June 2010 it was stated that there is a proposal: ‘for a memorial here [UK] for Noor Inayat Khan....Valerie Vaz, the newly elected Labour MP, tabled an early day motion in Parliament calling for the House to recognise the “extraordinary bravery” of Noor who was awarded the George Cross. She wanted the House to back a campaign to have Noor’s bust installed in Gordon Square, near the house where she lived’. If it goes ahead it will be the first memorial for an Asian woman (thereby assuming a political agenda) in Britain and the only memorial to Noor in the UK. It seems that the memorial will take the form of a bust, but in contrast to the one of Violette Szabo on the South Albert Embankment will be an individual memorial and site specific.

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90 SOE Memorial, Albert Bank, London.
91 Article in Hindustan Times, 24th June 2010.
92 There is a plaque in her honour at Dachau Concentration camp.
The Allied Special Forces Trust has released plans for a Vera Atkins memorial and Natzweiler-Struthof tree at the National Arboretum, Staffordshire. The tree was grown from a seed found in a fir cone at Natzweiler-Struthof and is dedicated to Vera Atkins, as well as SOE agents Andrée Borrel, Vera Leigh, Sonya Olschanesky and Diana Rowden who were executed at Natzweiler-Struthof. The tree is symbolic of life coming out of the camp, and hope. The memorial is surrounded by a seat in the shape of a Star of David, an unusual choice for women who were not overtly Jewish or persecuted for their beliefs. Mike Colton from the Allied Special Forces Association said that: ‘the Star of David design is not necessarily totally allied to the Jewish faith, Vera was a Romanian Jew whose family owned vast acres of woodland. They were all displaced and had to flee to England to avoid being killed. All their land and trees were confiscated. There are many interpretations of the overlapping triangles that form the star but we thought it would be most suitable in the Grove.’

The seat will be a: ‘mixture of oak and stainless steel [to] represent the resolve of the women of SOE, and especially Vera, in steadfastly maintaining contact with the families of those sent on operations in enemy territory and actually going to find out what happened to those who did not come back. ‘The six triangles within the star will also be of stainless steel and have various badges cut into them such as the cross of Lorraine, SOE, FANY, WAAF, Royal Signals, a Morse code message and our logo.’ The memorial is going to be crammed with symbolism, every aspect of which has been thought out to have some meaning, which may or may not be conveyed to the observer.

This chapter’s discussion has raised the question of monuments as an aid to ensure remembrance or perhaps some deeper message. Traditionally the main purpose of the memorial is as a place of remembrance. Choosing to remember the past opens up a unique opportunity to attempt to learn from history’s mistakes and the hope never to repeat them. For ‘in frozen memory the past is nothing but the past,’ unless something is done, visually or pedagogically to prompt us to remember the past, it will remain just that – a dead part of history, condemned to books and texts, with which only those with a particular interest will engage.

93 Letter from Mike Colton, 8th July 2010.
94 Ibid.
95 Huyssen, The Art of memory, p.17.
A monument is also a physical entity that the observer can choose either to look upon at as a piece of public art, or to interact with and to look within themselves for memories and remembrances. The observer can only bring to the monument what they already know and an openness to learn from the memorial whilst there, their reaction to this being as much a part of the act of remembrance as the physical memorial itself.

‘Although there is more to respectful remembrance than the formation of empathy and the transposed engagement with another, an effective approach to historical trauma must always keep these desires in play against the limits of representation and the unknowability [sic] of “what happened”96 The form the monument takes is also vitally important to how it is received. There are a vast range of styles and types – from the very detailed figurative (like many First World War memorials of soldiers which are very detailed in their portrayal of equipment and uniforms) to the very abstract, ‘ghost figures’ at Ravensbrück and Natzweiler-Struthof. All types of memorial generate very distinctive reactions: pride, sorrow, pity, horror. A grave stone can give a very strong emotional pull, and a large group (as in a war grave) can over-multiply that and generate a reaction which is almost unbearable. In contrast, the type of memorial which arguably generates the least reaction, as it were, is a simple plaque. Any reaction is generated only by the words, this is not to imply that it cannot be moving (as discussed above) but it may contrast greatly with the reaction someone would have to seeing a more modern, figurative memorial (such as in Sachsenhausen).

Many SOE memorials are simple plaques and as such may be compared to gravestones: to those who do not know the person they are relatively meaningless, nothing more than a name, whose anonymity unfortunately grows with time. Any reaction to a plaque or gravestone relies solely on the viewer’s existing knowledge, or the fact that they have specifically visited a particular site to see the plaque, as with my own visit to Natzweiler-Struthof.

In contrast to a plaque, a figurative sculpture is more likely to elicit a reaction from the viewer who can react to it on the face of what they see not what they read. However, there are almost no figurative SOE memorials. The Albert Embankment memorial is the most ‘modern’ but is still ‘old fashioned’ using a bust showing what a person looked like,

96 Young, Memory and the end of the monument, p.62.
not what she did. As a sculpture it does nothing to interpret or inform the viewer and relies on various plaques around the stand to do so. This is in contrast to other memorials dedicated to women such as the Vietnam Women’s Memorial in Washington which shows nurses in action or the Women at War memorial in Whitehall which depicts ‘action’ by different uniforms that have been hung up.

When SOE memorials were first erected the Second World War was barely over (the first was erected in 1948 at St Paul’s Church in Knightsbridge), but already the stories of the agents were becoming known through citations for decorations, and subsequently newspaper articles, books and films. It seems understandable that the early SOE memorials are simple and sparing with their facts, but the later plaque at Natzweiler-Struthof is also sparse (this was erected on 22nd June 1975). It could be argued that their purpose is to record not to remind or warn (such as in Holocaust memorials) or that they are location specific and serve to commemorate where their existence is understood. My travelling companion to Natzweiler-Struthof and other Holocaust sites felt that: ‘as an outsider, there is a sort of exclusivity in the SOE memorials because I cannot really extract enough information from them to know what they are about, or to form my own reaction to them.’

Perhaps this is only part of the way in which mankind remembers, a catalyst that then develops into a wider way of remembering: ‘The great opportunity of the [Holocaust] monument today lies in its inter-textuality as but one part of our memorial culture. As the traditional boundaries of the museum, the monument and the historiography have become

99 Correspondence with Alison Gagg.
more fluid, the monument itself has lost much of its nature of permanence and fixity. The criteria for its success could therefore be the ways it allows for a crossing of boundaries towards other discourses [of the Holocaust], the way it pushes us towards reading other texts, other stories...¹⁰⁰ By doing this we are avoiding the risk of: ‘ossifying the past’ which has been a criticism of all memorials, including those dedicated to the Holocaust.¹⁰¹

There is perhaps a risk of memorial pollution - that there are too many (as evidenced by the Westminster council’s moratorium) and they are as Libeskind implied, useless in a: ‘post historic world.’¹⁰² Alternatively the monument could continue to evolve and develop along with artistic, political even technical trends such as e-memorials or temporary memorials such as the giant ellipsis in Warsaw or the London poster campaign George Crosses at Kings Cross which would seem more likely. With the public tendency to enjoy and interact with monuments and sculptures such as in the sculpture park in Budapest or the National Arboretum in Staffordshire, the future of the monument as a type of remembrance seems more assured.

Although it has been argued that memorials are: ‘ossified’, ‘identity nurturing’, ‘nationalistic’,¹⁰³ and outdated, they still form part of our psyche and are useful tools in helping the public fulfil their desire to commemorate and remember an event or loss. However, unless this is done with some degree of historical accuracy the memorials may lead to mis-remembering and therefore give a skewed and unrealistic interpretation of the past. For example the memorial on Albert Embankment elevates Violette Szabo’s role within the SOE to a level greater than it was and the use of her face to encompass the whole of SOE is misleading and unrepresentative of the organisation and its place in history. This is risky because memorials form powerful images in our minds. Again, for example: ‘the widely broadcast pictures of New York fire-fighters defiantly raising the stars and stripes over the still smoking ruins of the twin towers of 12th September 2001 recalled the Second World War memorial to the dead of Iwo Jima, a historical template adopted independently by other broadcast media elsewhere, thereby confirming that certain

¹⁰⁰ Huyssen, The Art of memory, p.15.
¹⁰¹ Huyssen, The Art of memory, p.15.
¹⁰² Libeskind, Trauma in Image and Remembrance, p.43.
¹⁰³ Huyssen, The Art of memory p.15.
commemorative tropes are strong and enduring, conditioned by tradition as well as socially and increasingly visually mediated.\textsuperscript{104}

The public need for a physical monument or memorial also became apparent in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Centre as: ‘... the response of so many of the survivors and victims’ families in posting literally thousands of photographs in the devastated streets around the world trade centre, thereby creating an impromptu combination of informal missing persons list and temporary wayside shrine, tapped into earlier modes of commemoration which would have been familiar in some British towns and cities in the early months of the First World War.’\textsuperscript{107}

This chapter has shown that public memorials will always be a way of remembering. They will develop along with contemporary artistic movements, political policies and the public’s needs, but they form such an intrinsic part of modern society’s way of remembering that they will long outlive those who built them.

\textsuperscript{104} Kidd, \textit{Memory and Memorials}, p.4.
\textsuperscript{105} http://iwo-jima-memorial.visit-washington-dc.com.
\textsuperscript{107} Kidd, \textit{Memory and Memorials}, p.4.
Conclusion

This thesis has used a wide variety of archives, interviews, press clippings and books to provide a balanced account of the women of SOE F section’s experiences during the war years. It has also provided discussion on their post-war construction and representations, and explained how the perception of SOE has been influenced by television, books and films. The memorials to the women of F section show how they are remembered in a more traditional sense and how the form and location of the memorial is relevant to the onlooker.

The selection of SOE agents, while having a set of pre-requisites and attributes, did not follow a set pattern and the women agents selected came from different walks of life and social backgrounds. Their training ensured that they were all prepared for life in Occupied France, although some agents only trained for a few weeks, while other had several months. The surviving training reports for the women show varying degrees of skill but seem to have been largely protocol. Buckmaster overruled the instructors on several occasions if he felt that an agent who had received a poor report should go into the field.

In terms of training the women seem to have been treated the same as the men. They showed skill in areas where they might have been expected to struggle such as knife work, silent killing and shooting. Throughout their training they wore battledress and although some leeway was granted owing to physical difference in terms of weight of weapon they proved that they could do just as well as the men and were given the opportunity to prove this in the field.

Once in the field their experiences and successes were varied. Some of the women were sent straight back home, others excelled and sent huge numbers of messages that enabled parachute drops, sabotage and agent infiltration. For some their work in the field was monotonous, others had more unusual and unplanned experiences - pregnancies, illnesses and taking over command of a Maquis being amongst them.
Those who were arrested had very different experiences, some claiming to have been tortured, and while evidence to support this (in some cases) is sparse it does appear that those agents who said they were British were treated relatively well, whereas those who maintained they were French such as Eileen Nearne were treated far more brutally. For some their prison experiences involved mild discomfort, whereas other cases were more extreme involving being kept in solitary confinement or in chains.

The post-war representation of these agents shows that while the initial interest in their work was most prevalent in the immediate post-war years, only those who had pushed for their publicity or had received high decorations such as the G.C. became engrained in public consciousness. Those that benefited most from this were Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo. Their wartime experiences are remarkably similar until the point where Odette is released and Violette is executed and their post-war construction is also similar; biographies and films about both agents ensuring they became part of popular British folklore for many years after the war ended.

Odette Churchill’s post-war construction showed her as an ordinary woman who did and saw extraordinary things. Her work in the field was rather straightforward, a courier to Peter Churchill, she delivered and received documents and took messages. Yet her claims to betrayal and torture were sensational and at worst spurious. The sources do not back up her claims but, perhaps, more important is what the public believed, and due to the publicity she got in the national press they believed her claims, and supported her when anyone such as De Malval, Dame Irene Ward and Foot questioned her integrity. While she claimed that her publicity was really for her fallen comrades she achieved high public acclaim and became a household name.

Violette Szabo also became part of the British post-war folklore. Because she did not survive, her story is intriguing and many of the sources do not tell one coherent story. A construction of her story was put together in the book and subsequent film Carve her name with pride and it was mainly through this medium the majority of the public became familiar with her story. The story was not necessarily an attempt to seek the truth but to excite and revolt the reader. Because sources were so scant Carve her name with pride became accepted as the truth, but it left questions which could only have been answered if she had survived.
Violette’s story has also influenced the public into believing that this type of experience was common to all the SOE F section female agents. Her image and story are used repeatedly when discussing female agents of SOE F section and she has come to represent both the SOE and its female agents on a number of occasions such as her bust on the Albert Embankment, the George Cross at Kings Cross poster and the 2008 conference at the British Film Institute and the Royal Armouries, Leeds. The book and the film Carve her name with pride and her decoration with a George Cross ensured that Violette Szabo would become a household name, but also that the fictions that surround her would continue to evolve in the post-war years and beyond.

The influence of the films Odette and Carve her name with pride is huge, yet the public remain unaware that many of the events portrayed in the films are fabricated, unsubstantiated or just not true. Carve her name with pride was influenced by some of the same technical advisors (Odette and Buckmaster) as Odette, who were able to construct an image of SOE F section that suited them and their post-war needs. They did not want to publicise the mistakes, the needless deaths and the betrayals, so they made a film that would reiterate the messages in Odette and develop a public perception that informed the SOE mythology and perceived wisdom for generations to come.

Films with female SOE F section protagonists changed the role of women in war films during the 1950s, from subsidiary roles to heroines, who not only saw active war service but who suffered hitherto unimagined hardships which the public found enthralling and captivating. The films pandered to and in some cases unleashed the public passion for both the Second World War and the world of ‘Cloak and Dagger’. The public did not care whether what they were seeing on screen was embellished or even fantasy, it made a wonderful story and created heroines for post-war Britain that could be revered and admired and who became icons of the triumph over evil.

The development of the female SOE character in films since Odette and Carve her name with pride has changed over time and since then there were no further biopic representations of SOE character, they have all been fictional. Nevertheless the writers and directors have had better access to the facts, such as the agents themselves, oral archives and official SOE files. Thus despite being fictional, some of these characters
have been more realistic in their depiction of a female SOE agent than those that were originally based in reality, and this is especially the case in Plenty and Wish me Luck.

Another way that women agents have been remembered is through memorials. The majority of SOE memorials dedicated to or including the women of F section seem to be traditional in their forms and exclusive in the information that they offer. Only those with prior knowledge of the person or situation being commemorated are likely to get anything from them. The exception is the SOE memorial on Albert embankment, which is a bust of a Violette Szabo surrounded by panels detailing various activities of SOE and Resistance groups. The use of Violette Szabo’s image supports the argument that she dominates the common perception of not only SOE F section, but SOE as a whole. This memorial reiterates the common misconception about SOE and perpetuates the surrounding fictions that all agents were captured, maltreated and executed.

The thesis has highlighted a paradox in that these women were chosen to work behind enemy lines because they had some specific qualities that were helpful to their roles as couriers and wireless operators. They undertook the same training as the men and were regarded as being as functional as the men once in the field. However, the representations of SOE after the war and the memorials are heavily skewed towards the women’s experiences (and especially towards the issue of torture in both books and films).

The public fascination with them is because they are women, and in some cases mothers, and it is this fact that has gripped the imagination of the public, press, journalists and historians. It is the secrecy, vulnerability and clandestine nature of it all that heightens public interest and they are not necessarily interested in the truth. This raises the issue of where will SOE studies go from here? Will the fictions and constructions continue to be perpetuated, or now that the archives are more freely available will the public become more interested in an objective version of these women’s experiences and can there be one? The public perception of the women of SOE F section has been dominated by constructions and fictions for the last 65 years and it is my hope that this thesis has, in some part at least, revealed the inconsistencies in these constructions and challenged the perceptions of the women agents of SOE F section.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title/Role</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearl Witherington</td>
<td>MBE (SOE F section agent)</td>
<td>Grand Hotel St Aignan, France</td>
<td>2nd and 3rd June 2003.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Large</td>
<td>(Lysander pilot)</td>
<td>Greenacre, Hythe, Kent</td>
<td>22nd May 2003.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virginia McKenna OBE</td>
<td>(Actress in Carve her name with pride)</td>
<td>Gamekeepers Cottage, Surrey</td>
<td>February 2003, and August 2003.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Buckmaster</td>
<td>(Son of Maurice Buckmaster)</td>
<td>Special Forces Club, London</td>
<td>17th November 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette Pitt</td>
<td>(daughter of SOE F section agent Yvonne Cormeau)</td>
<td>Surrey</td>
<td>7th August 2006.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Buffery</td>
<td>(Actress, played Liz Grainger in ‘Wish me luck’)</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>26th June 2008.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill Hyem</td>
<td>(Writer of ‘Wish me luck’)</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>18th November 2008.</td>
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