

Odette and the Special Operations Executive

Among the countless examples of wartime heroes and heroines, there were none braver than the secret agents of the Special Operations Executive. Formed in 1940 to encourage resistance in occupied countries, SOE sent several thousand men and women to carry out sabotage and support the Allied effort behind enemy lines. Many of their names have now faded from public memory, but a few have endured over the decades,



serving to represent their extraordinary courage. Of these, the women agents sent to France have always attracted a particular fascination, due in part to the horrific fates they suffered (thirteen of the fifty sent did not return, most being executed in concentration camps). All of them deserve to be remembered, but only one of them ever became famous enough to be recognised by her first name alone - Odette.

Like many of her comrades, there was nothing obvious in Odette Brailly's pre-war life to suggest her suitability as an undercover agent. However, two particular qualities forged in her childhood would prove to be invaluable. The first was a capacity to endure physical hardship: her early years were overshadowed by serious illnesses, one of which left her blind for nearly two years, and another which left her bedridden for months. The second was a strong sense of moral and patriotic obligation, symbolised by the death of her father at Verdun, just a few weeks before the armistice in 1918. During one of the family's weekly visits to his grave, Odette was told by her grandfather, 'In twenty years there will be another war ... and you will have to do your duty as your father did.' Later in life, these formative experiences, combined with a staunch Catholic faith, would give her the strength to survive conditions that are barely imaginable.

Despite these events, or perhaps because of them, she grew up an irrepressibly impetuous and often headstrong girl, whose strength of character could not be tamed by the sisters of her local convent school at Amiens. In 1926, at the age of fourteen, she moved to Boulogne with her mother, where she later met an English hotelier, Roy Sansom. They married in 1931 and had their first child, Françoise, the year after, before moving to London where they had two more daughters, Lili in 1934, and Marianne in 1936. When war was declared in 1939, Roy joined the army and Odette and the children later moved to the safety of Red Ball, a tiny hamlet in rural Somerset. Life was relatively peaceful in this sheltered backwater, but the fall of France and news of the occupation by German forces in 1940 was increasingly difficult to bear for Mrs Sansom, who like many of her compatriots felt unable to do anything to help liberate their homeland, or defend their adopted country.

It was not until the spring of 1942 that she found a way to change all that, albeit accidentally. Following a successful commando raid on a radar station near Le Havre, a BBC appeal on behalf of the Admiralty asked listeners to send in any old postcards or photographs of the French coastline taken before the war, as a source of intelligence for future operations. Having already donated her prized coffee pot to be melted down for the war effort, Odette thought nothing of posting off a few snapshots from her time in Boulogne, adding that a note to say that she was French by birth and knew the area well. She addressed her letter to the War Office by mistake, a simple slip which would change the course of her life.

Her background was interesting enough to attract the attention of Selwyn Jepson, the recruiting officer for SOE's French Section, who invited her to an interview at the former Hotel Victoria on Northumberland Avenue. Shown into a dingy room furnished with a single table and two chairs, Jepson began to question Odette about her feelings towards the Germans, and it didn't take long for her to convince him of her patriotism, or confirm his suspicions that she would risk her life for France if asked. Without mentioning SOE, he explained that native French speakers like her could do much more for

the war effort than act as translators, but she would firstly have to seriously consider the welfare of her three children. If she chose to volunteer, she must understand that this work was highly dangerous - the chances of returning home could be as little as 50/50. Although convinced that she would fail the training, she decided that her duty to both Britain and France had to come before everything: reluctantly leaving her daughters in the care of a convent school, she called Jepson to give her answer.

Odette was one of the first women accepted by SOE, the decision to recruit female agents having only just been taken. Their great advantage was to be able to operate in the midst of the enemy without arousing the same suspicion as men, making them ideal couriers, passing messages between the members of their network or 'circuit'. Their disadvantage was that the Geneva Convention did not recognise women as combatants, which meant they could be shot as spies. There was no simple solution to this problem, but to provide some 'cover' many women agents of the French Section wore the uniform of the FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry), a voluntary corps which supplied SOE with its drivers, cipher clerks, telephonists and administrators. As members of the FANY, they could more easily disguise their status as secret agents, and avoid awkward questions from family and friends about the extraordinary dangers they would soon be facing.

All prospective agents would be expected to pass several stages of training, including gruelling commando courses in the Scottish Highlands, parachute training, and the 'finishing school' at the Beaulieu estate in Hampshire, where students would learn how to operate in an occupied country. In the space of just a few months students had to learn how to shoot, kill silently using knives and garottes, pick locks, jump from moving vehicles, blow up railway lines and bridges, send coded messages by wireless, arrange parachute drops and many other skills. No concessions were made to the women on these courses, even those as petite and fragile looking as Odette: they would be expected to attain the same standard of training as the men, and their instructors were no less demanding.

Her reports from Beaulieu could almost have been written by her convent school teachers, describing her as enthusiastic and able but also 'impulsive and hasty in her judgments...excitable and temperamental' and concluded that 'her main weakness is a complete unwillingness to admit that she could ever be wrong.' For the head of the French Section, Major Maurice Buckmaster, this was not as damning as it might appear – a number of students who later proved themselves invaluable 'in the field' also received less than glowing reports, and he allowed preparations for Odette's mission to continue.

In a requisitioned flat at Orchard Court, a luxury block of flats on Portman Square in central London, Buckmaster's staff took Odette through her briefing and final instructions. Her objective would be to contact a resistance group in south-eastern France, then move north to Auxerre and establish a safe house for agents passing through the area. Her cover story, loosely based on her real life, would be that of Madame Odette Metayer, a widow living in St Raphaël, and she would also adopt the secret codenames of 'Lise' and 'S.23'. Aside from memorising her cover story, everything she wore and carried had to appear to be of French origin, including her fake identity documents, and even the banknotes she carried had to be artificially aged to appear genuine. With her head crammed with seemingly endless passwords, addresses and contacts, she was at last ready to go, but at the last minute the RAF decided it wasn't. Trouble with her aircraft at Bristol, then with reception committees in France, meant that Odette eventually had to take a ship bound for Gibraltar and then endure an uncomfortable journey with five other agents, crossing the Mediterranean in a fishing boat, landing on a secluded beach near Cassis on the night of 2/3 November 1942.

Although Odette's departure problems in England had been nerve-racking enough, all her carefully arranged plans in London would soon be in tatters. As planned, she made contact with 'Raoul', whose real name was Captain Peter Churchill, a charismatic former ice hockey international and consular official who was head of 'Spindle', an SOE circuit supporting a French network named 'Carte'. However the quixotic head of Carte, an artist named André Girard living at nearby

Antibes, flatly refused to help Odette reach Auxerre, leaving her stranded on the Riviera. With no clear idea of what to do next, Churchill asked whether she would run an errand for him instead.

Rather than sitting around waiting for something to happen, she set off immediately, travelling to Marseille to deliver some money and collect a suitcase: she managed both successfully, although she was forced to hide overnight in a brothel for German soldiers. She reported back on her completed mission the next day, and after some perfunctory congratulations was asked to carry out another assignment, though this time there was a problem – it would involve riding a bicycle, something she'd never done, but which her stubborn pride prevented her from admitting. It wasn't long before her first fall but she was determined not to give up, and despite bloodied knees and torn stockings she eventually delivered her message.

At this time Odette was not the only stray agent in Cannes; in fact it was awash with them. Churchill had already recruited one of them for his own uses: a humourless Jewish Egyptian wireless operator named Adolphe Rabinovitch and codenamed 'Arnaud' had begun transmitting messages to London for him and Carte. Odette's initial efforts had convinced Churchill that a good female courier would be another useful asset, and he obtained Buckmaster's consent to cancel her Auxerre mission and keep her working for him. Although morally repulsed by the exclusive black market restaurants and remaining traces of the good life on the Cote d'Azur, she had no objections to joining Spindle: at least she now had something useful to do.

On 11 November the Germans invaded the 'unoccupied' or Vichy zone of southern France, which soon increased tensions within the Carte network. As the Gestapo extended its reach along the Riviera, a power struggle developed between Girard and his chief of staff, Henri Frager, which left Churchill's Spindle circuit in a delicate situation. To resolve it, it was agreed that Girard should fly back to London to discuss the future of the network.

At the end of November Girard and several French generals travelled to a secret landing field near Aix-en-Provence, but on arrival Churchill quickly realised that a large ditch ran across it, rendering it useless.

Then a second rendezvous at Arles failed due to the reception committee missing the aircraft. By January the Carte network had descended into near chaos, and Odette, Churchill and Frager narrowly escaped capture after a German ambush after yet another failed pick-up operation near Périgueux in the Dordogne. To make matters worse a recent lack of security in Cannes had led to a series of Gestapo raids, resulting in the rounding up members of Carte and other local networks. Aware of the presence of British officers in the area, they were now hot on the heels of Spindle, and it would only be a matter of time before they were hunted down.

Churchill decided to move his team immediately to the relative safety of St Jorioz, a village in the Haute-Savoie close to the Swiss and Italian borders; Frager and those loyal to him followed, setting up nearby. Both Churchill and Odette were taken in by the couple running the Hotel de la Poste, Jean and Simone Cottet, while Arnaud took his wireless set to Faverges, a village about ten miles away. Having established themselves in the Alps, Churchill was finally able to fly back to London with Frager in March, while Odette and Arnaud were left to hold the fort.

Odette was relieved to be away from the Riviera, but she now faced a new and much more insidious threat, this time from a member of German military intelligence. Within hours of Churchill's departure to London, Sergeant Hugo Bleicher of the *Abwehr* had captured an agent of Frager's named André Marsac in Paris, and soon convinced him that he secretly wanted to escape to London to work for the Allies. Marsac trusted Bleicher enough to give away the name of an associate, Roger Bardet, who agreed to help arrange an aircraft to England. Bleicher was amazed at his own success, and decided to continue pushing his luck: posing as the anti-German 'Colonel Henri', he was given a guided tour of St Jorioz, including a visit to the Hotel de la Poste for lunch, where he was able to glimpse Odette for the first time.

Having been told Bleicher's story about wanting to defect to the British, Odette would not believe a word, and also suspected that Bardet might relay anything she said back to Bleicher. Anxious that a newly arrived British agent, codenamed 'Roger', was now in great

danger, he was quickly sent on his way to Cannes (this was Francis Cammaerts, who would soon build a new resistance circuit on the Riviera to overtake Carte). However, without further orders, all Odette and Arnaud could do now was to wait for news of Churchill, and move out immediately on his return.

The BBC message to confirm Raoul's flight to France was broadcast the following day, and they hurriedly clambered up the Semnoz to light the bonfires that would guide the RAF bomber to the drop zone. Churchill parachuted to them safely, but disaster was only hours away. Odette had believed that Bleicher would not arrive in St Jorioz until after 18 April, the date given to Bardet for the aircraft pick-up, but he suddenly made the decision to make his move early. Although she knew that staying put was very risky, Odette persuaded Churchill to return to the Hotel de la Poste; the following evening there was a knock at the door and Odette was asked to come downstairs to see 'a strange man'. As she walked to the reception, she was greeted by the sight of Bleicher waiting for her, accompanied by several Italians and a Gestapo officer.

Bleicher unsuccessfully attempted to charm Odette, blaming her capture on her credulous French comrades, but this gentlemanly approach didn't stop a gun being shoved in her back, forcing her back upstairs to lead them to Churchill, who had just fallen asleep. There was no chance of escape, but Bleicher agreed to place them both in Italian custody at Annecy barracks nearby, temporarily delaying their interrogation.

After a week's respite they were at last taken by train to Paris, and through the gates of Fresnes prison, a grim, forbidding series of blocks filled with a miscellany of French resisters and dissidents, SOE agents and common criminals. Strict orders were given for Odette and Churchill to be kept in solitary confinement, but they were introduced to their new cells by one visitor eager to see them – Colonel Henri. He wasted no time in attempting to get Odette to talk, but his offers of fine wine and nights at the opera in return for cooperation would not sway her. Realising she would not be persuaded, he reluctantly left her to the less sophisticated methods of the Gestapo.

After two weeks spent getting used to the meagre rations and grinding monotony of Fresnes, Odette was led into a black maria and transferred across Paris, passing the Arc de Triomphe and along the grand Avenue Foch to the headquarters of the *Sicherheitsdienst*, the counter-intelligence service of the SS. Led up the marble staircase and into an office on the fourth floor, her two new interrogators quickly introduced their simpler approach to questioning: when she refused to give away the locations of Arnaud and Roger, one restrained her arms while the other applied a red hot poker to her back. Disappointed by their lack of success, they then stopped for a few minutes to think about what else they could try. While Parisian women walked up and down the avenue enjoying the warm spring weather, the two men finally decided that they should try pulling out Odette's toenails. Bolstered by the thoughts of what her father had sacrificed for his country, she asked for the rosary in her handbag. They snatched it away, but she still would not give them any information.

Over the following months Odette and Churchill were kept at Fresnes, sometimes being summoned to see Bleicher again, or to Avenue Foch for more questioning. Although there seemed little hope for either of them, Odette had been able to convince her gaolers that not only was she Mrs Churchill, but also that her husband was a relation of the British prime minister (a rumour started by Marsac after his arrest). This only gained her slightly better treatment for now, but would later save her life.

By October 1943, the effects of torture and the deprivations of Fresnes were beginning to take a serious toll on Odette's health. Still only able to walk on her heels, she had developed a large swelling on her neck and was also suffering from stomach problems. No treatment was forthcoming, but she was at least moved to a communal cell, and allowed to spend some time in the sewing room (the dolls she made are still on display at the Imperial War Museum). In the new year the decision was taken for Churchill – now mistakenly believed by the Germans to be a very important prisoner – to be moved to Berlin, but the fate of Odette continued to hang in the balance. Having already

been condemned to death some months earlier, every morning still brought with it the possibility of execution.

In May 1944, after more than a year of imprisonment, she was unexpectedly taken to Avenue Foch to join a group of seven other women: Andrée Borrel, Diana Rowden, Madeleine Damerment, Yolande Beekman, Sonya Olschanezky, Vera Leigh and Eliane Plewman were all SOE agents, captured from various circuits over the previous year. Packed aboard a train at Gare de l'Est, they were unsuspecting victims of 'Night and Fog', the Nazi policy to erase all trace of all enemies of the Reich by deporting them to camps in Germany and Poland. They arrived together at Karlsruhe prison near western German border, but in early July Odette's new comrades suddenly disappeared, and a week later she was moved on to Frankfurt. By September all the members of her former group would be dead: Borrel, Rowden, Olschanezky and Leigh were deported to Natzweiler concentration camp where they were given lethal injections before being cremated, while Damerment, Beekman and Plewman were shot at Dachau.

Following several hellish days locked in a cage with two other women, Odette then endured further squalor and Gestapo brutality at Halles, before arriving at the women's concentration camp at Ravensbrück on 26 July. Having been informed that Mrs Churchill was amongst the new intake, the camp commandant, Fritz Suhren, had her thrown into a completely dark cell in the bunker on a starvation diet. Following the Allied landings in southern France in August, the SS imposed even worse conditions, on the grounds that she'd helped the invasion by sending details of a plan of the naval base at Marseille to London (the result of one of her courier jobs in Cannes). All food was withdrawn and the heating was turned up in her cell; she resorted to soaking her sleeping bag in water to avoid the suffocating effects. Having already retreated into semi-delirium to escape her surroundings, a week of this new regime left her on the edge of death. Found unconscious by the wardress one morning, the camp doctor reported that she would not survive more than a few weeks in her current conditions, but she was returned to her cell all the same.

In December Suhren made his usual monthly visit, after which he immediately ordered Odette to be moved to a normal cell upstairs: with Germany's defeat edging ever nearer, he needed to ensure that his special prisoner was kept alive. Now unable to walk unaided, she had lost most of her hair and the swelling on her neck was enormous, though she remained as assertive and stubborn as ever, and refused the offer of surgery to alleviate it. The return of basic privileges and some medical treatment was welcome, but Odette soon made the terrible realisation that her new cell was located just six yards from the crematoria, from where the screams of the dying soon nearly sent her mad. In January three more of her French Section comrades - Denise Bloch, Violette Szabó and Lilian Rolfe - would be held in the bunker and executed within earshot.

Somehow her stoicism withstood another four months of this torture before the Allies got near enough to trigger her evacuation, requiring a fourteen-hour journey to the camp at Neustadt, where conditions were indescribable. On the afternoon of 1 May, Suhren, who had escorted her from Ravensbrück, suddenly told her to get in his black Mercedes and drove out of the camp. Now expecting to be shot in the nearby woods, she could not believe it when he explained that he was handing her over to the Americans, in an attempt to lessen his inevitable sentence. For once he was true to his word, and when they reached the Allied lines, Odette personally accepted his surrender. Partly due to the evidence she later gave at the Nuremberg trials, he would eventually be sentenced to death by a French military court in 1950.

She arrived back in London on 8 May. Upon her return, she found that Churchill had also survived, having passed through the camps of Sachsenhausen, Flossenbürg and Dachau, though Arnaud had been executed in 1944, having parachuted into the waiting arms of the Gestapo on his second mission. Lieutenant Colonel Francis Cammaerts, the agent sent away to Cannes just before her arrest, went on to create 'Jockey', one of F Section's most effective circuits, which played a major role in supporting Allied advances through south-eastern France in 1944.

Still very weak and unable to walk properly, Odette required months of intensive medical rehabilitation to even partially restore her health. Apart from countless injections and treatment for her injured feet, she had been left severely traumatised by her ordeals; unsurprisingly, her doctor reported that she was being treated for nervous tension more than a year after her return. SOE believed that Odette deserved proper recognition for her 'almost unexampled courage, endurance and devotion to duty', and was awarded the MBE in 1945, followed by the George Cross the following year. She was the first woman ever to be given the GC, the highest non-military decoration for gallantry (two other women agents, Violette Szabó and Noor Inayat Khan, were awarded the George Cross posthumously). Whilst proud of it, she always maintained that it should be regarded as an acknowledgement of all SOE's female agents who fought for the liberation of France.

Following a divorce from her first marriage, her relationship with Peter Churchill was rekindled and they married in 1947. This 'wedding of spies' attracted considerable media attention, which escalated with the success of Jerrard Tickell's biography in 1949, and Herbert Wilcox's film the following year, starring Anna Neagle. French actress Michèle Morgan and Ingrid Bergman had both turned down the lead role, the latter feeling that the story would be too harrowing to attract public interest; however, Odette and Wilcox (Neagle's husband) became convinced that Neagle was the right woman for the part, and eventually persuaded her to do it. Odette and Churchill would accompany the cast during most of the filming, and revisited many of the real life locations, including 84 Avenue Foch where Odette was tortured. According to Neagle and Wilcox, it was one of the two occasions when they saw Odette give way to her emotions, breaking down in tears - the other was when they shot the interrogation scene later in the studio. The charity premiere was held at the Plaza Theatre in London on 6 June 1950, and received the rare honour of being attended by the King and Queen. By the standards of its time, Wilcox's depiction of nazi brutality was unusually stark, and the end of the film was followed by several minutes of stunned silence in the audience, followed by continuous applause until the lights went up.

Although Odette had assisted with the project, she was keen to divert public attention from her own heroic exploits, commenting in the foreword to Tickell's book, 'My comrades, who did far more and suffered more profoundly, are not here to speak. Because of this I speak for them'. After her divorce from Churchill in 1955, she was married for the third and final time to Geoffrey Hallows, another member of SOE who had served in France with the 'Jedburgh' teams.

Odette continued to take an active role in public life: she supported events for charities such as Oxfam and St Dunstan's, sat on the committee for the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association, became vice-president of the FANY in 1967 and later president of 282 (East Ham) Air Cadet Squadron. Despite her popularity, she was also keen to remain unremarkable, as her entry for Who's Who attests, her occupation being listed as 'housewife' and her interests as 'reading, travelling, cooking, trying to learn patience.' She was not admired by all, though. M.R.D. Foot's official history, *SOE in France*, first published in 1966, suggested that she and Churchill had lived in luxury on SOE's funds, and that the episode involving the Gestapo's removal of her toenails was more likely a figment of her troubled imagination. These provocative comments sparked parliamentary debates and an outcry from Odette's supporters, and though she was content to agree a settlement out of court, Churchill's subsequent libel action resulted in substantial damages and a full apology from the author, with agreement for the offending passages to be removed. Having remarried in 1956, Churchill had returned to the French Riviera, working as an estate agent near Cannes until his death in 1972.

Nearly half a century after her deportation, a frail Odette returned to Ravensbrück to unveil a memorial to the women of the French Section who were executed there during her captivity. She died at her home in Surrey in March 1995, at the age of 82. Every year she had laid a wreath beneath the FANY memorial at St Paul's Church, Knightsbridge, to which was attached a small bunch of violets, in remembrance of her SOE comrades who failed to return. A plaque to her memory has been added since, and the tradition of leaving violets has continued.

Sources:

1. Lynette Beardwood, 'Hallowes, Odette Marie Céline (1912–1995)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, online edn, May 2008.
2. SOE Files, National Archives, Kew.
3. Jerrard Tickell, *Odette*, *Headline Review*, 2007.
4. Herbert Wilcox, *Twenty-Five Thousand Sunsets. The Autobiography of Herbert Wilcox*, The Bodley Head, 1967.
5. Anna Neagle, *There's Always Tomorrow*, WH Allen, 1974.

© Nigel Perrin 2009-10

www.nigelperrin.com