

Lives Lived:

Pearl Cornioley: Wartime secret agent

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The Independent (UK)
28 February 2008



Pearl Cornioley spent a year in occupied France as a secret agent of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE). Dropped in by parachute in 1943, she worked as a courier until, after D-Day, it fell to her to organise 1,500 Resistance fighters in operations against the Germans.

Born Cécile Pearl Witherington in Paris in 1914, she was the eldest daughter of English parents who had settled in France two years before. Her childhood was hard; her father, an alcoholic of expensive tastes and unstable means, died in 1930. Thereafter she had to work to support her mother and three sisters.

In May 1940, when Germany invaded France, Witherington was employed at the British Embassy as a typist to the air attaché. France soon fell and the diplomats departed. She and her mother and sisters stayed on. In December, as internment threatened, they judged it wise to leave and set out to escape to England. After three months in Marseilles and three more in Lisbon, they finally reached the UK via Gibraltar, arriving on Bastille Day 1941. That they made it at all owed much to Witherington's energy, composure and drive. The same qualities then saw her force her way into the SOE.

In 1942, frustrated with a PA's job at the Air Ministry in London, she began asking around for an opportunity to return to France to fight. She recalled

after the war: "Deep down inside me I'm a very shy person but I've always had a lot of responsibilities ever since I was quite small. So I thought, 'Well, this is something I feel I can do' . . . And anyway I didn't like the Germans. Never did. I'm a baby of the 1914-18 war."

Interviews followed, including one with Maurice Buckmaster, the head of SOE's French section. "He wrote of it, 'When I was interviewed by Pearl Witherington . . .' That's exactly what happened. He didn't interview me, I wanted to know where I was going."

Once accepted, she was trained. Surviving assessment reports bear witness to how deeply and consistently she impressed her instructors. "Cool, resourceful and extremely determined," reads one. "Very capable, completely brave." Only Morse Code caused her problems and she was relieved to learn that she was not to be a radio operator.

On the night of 22-23 September 1943, she parachuted into France, near Châteauroux, to work as a courier for Squadron Leader Maurice Southgate's "Stationer" circuit, an SOE network active from the Loire down to the foothills of the Pyrenees. Southgate, an Englishman brought up and educated in Paris, was an old school-friend.

A courier's job was to carry and deliver secret messages round the region. "It was terribly, terribly, terribly tiring," she remembered. "It was mostly travelling by night. We never wrote and we never phoned, any messages were taken from A to B, and the territory we were working in was really very big." Sometimes arms and explosives took the place of messages.

It was dangerous work, too. German checkpoints had to be negotiated; cover stories had to be sound. According to her own false papers, she was a sales representative for a cosmetics manufacturer. To reinforce the cover, she carried a case of beauty products.

On one delicate occasion it was the Resistance themselves she had to convince. Sent to collect money from a man she did not know, and with no agreed password in place, she found her contact so suspicious initially of her identity that it seemed he might have her shot. "I really got a fright then. It would have been pretty awful to be done in by the Resistance. But you see how careful you had to be?"

On 1 May 1944, Southgate walked into a Gestapo trap in Montluçon and was arrested: he was to be one of only a handful of captured agents to survive Buchenwald concentration camp. And with its leader captured, "Stationer", on London's orders, was divided in two and Witherington's role changed.

Taking charge of a new circuit, "Wrestler", she began to organise and arm 1,500 Resistance fighters in the northern half of the Indre. She arranged weapons drops, distributed explosives, and helped decide and plan the group's tasks. From time to time she also escorted teams setting out to attack German targets. Roads and the Toulouse-Paris railway line were of particular importance, especially when D-Day came and SOE's circuits were instructed to harass and delay German reinforcements en route to Normandy.

Losses inflicted on the Germans in her region were considerable. One report put the dead at more than a thousand. So effective, indeed, was "Wrestler" that the Germans apparently put a price on Witherington's head of one million francs. But the Resistance also suffered. During one 14-hour battle, on 11 June, when the Germans attacked her headquarters, casualties among her force were especially high and Witherington herself escaped only narrowly, being forced to hide motionless in a cornfield. German soldiers knew she was in there and occasionally fired into it. Hours passed before they gave up and moved off.



During her time with "Stationer", Witherington had been joined by a young Frenchman, Henri Cornioley, to whom she had been engaged before the war. Captured while fighting in the French army in 1940, he had escaped from a German prison camp and thrown himself into Resistance work. When the fighting in France was finished they went to London where they were married, in October 1944, in Kensington Register Office. In 1945, the new Mrs Cornioley was appointed a military MBE for her wartime work.

With the war over, the couple settled in France. Henri worked as a pharmaceutical chemist, and Pearl became a secretary, working for many years for the Paris branch of the World Bank. In later life she was prominent in securing support and raising funds for the impressive SOE memorial in the town of Valençay, which had been the hub of early SOE activity in France. Inaugurated in 1991, the memorial commemorates 91 men and 13 women, all agents of SOE's French section, who lost their lives during the war.

In 2004, Pearl Cornioley was appointed CBE, receiving the insignia from the Queen during a state visit to France. Two years later, to her surprise and delight, she also received, from a senior RAF parachute instructor, a set of Parachute Wings in recognition of her wartime training jumps and night-time drop into occupied France.

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- Barnett, R. - 1 Can Para
- Barwise MM, Ken - CAFA
- Fordy, C. - 1 Can Para
- Friesen, George - CAFA
- Halayko, Ed - CAFA
- Kraft, David - 1 Can Para
- Larose, Roland - CAFA
- Macumber, Ron - CAFA
- McNeil, Bob - CAFA
- Park, Alfred - 1 Can Para
- Rowley, Roger - CAFA
- Stammers, Art - 1 Can Para
- Voth-Doan, Samuel - 1 Can Para
- Wilson, Ian Corbett - 1 Can Para
- Winter, Peter - CAFA