



# Ungentlemanly Warfare The Women of the SOE



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## Abstract

Ungentlemanly Warfare is about unearthing the stories of women spies in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) active during WWII. While these agents were very influential in WWII, their stories are often swept under the rug and they have received very little recognition for their efforts. With the research we are engaged in, we are creating a database on these women spies, their backgrounds, and accomplishments. These details show that these women were powerful forces that knew their capabilities and that they were able to aid Europe during these challenging times. These women not only fought fascism but also had to combat the patriarchy while out in the field. These spies' drive to survive often came from the reminder of what they were fighting for. They found power in keeping their true identities a secret from the Gestapo because in doing so, they were fighting against tyranny and cruelty. These women spies were so passionate about the freedom of their country that they endured unimaginable torture and fear to maintain the SOE and lead to the ultimate destruction of the Nazis. It is now our responsibility to bring their stories to light.

## Challenges

The records detailing their exploits have largely been lost to time, as women's contributions were already overlooked due to poor record-keeping of the SOE and a large fire that destroyed many of the organization's records in 1946. Additionally, many of the women's records were destroyed by the Nazis through their Nacht Und Nebel (Night and Fog) campaign which was intended to make these women disappear. Due to this, it takes dedication and patience to be able to find the thorough information we are looking for.

## Results

Virginia Hall was an American agent who served as a wireless operator, recruiter, organizer, and leader while in France. Hall's most notable achievements include organizing a jailbreak that freed 12 imprisoned agents and becoming the first woman agent to take residence in France. She served alongside her prosthetic leg, Cuthbert, which she had nicknamed. During her time in France, Hall had never been arrested and had only been interrogated casually, a huge feat for the time. She received the Croix de Guerre, was made an honorary member of the MBE, and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (the only one awarded to a civilian woman in World War II).



Virginia Hall



Odette Sansom

Odette Sansom was a woman of courage and charisma. In order to fight in WWII, she made the difficult decision to place her children in a convent school to go work for the SOE as a courier. When she was captured by the Nazis, she faced starvation, isolation. She was taken to the Gestapo headquarters 14 times during her imprisonment, where they brutally interrogated her by burning her back and even ripping out her toenails. At the end of the war, she was awarded the United Kingdom's second-highest award, the George Cross, as well as awarded the Order of the British Empire, and The highest French award is the Legion of Honour.

Pearl Witherington was born in France in 1914. When she first began her work in the SOE, Witherington served as a courier for the Stationer network. However, when the leader of the circuit was taken by the German Gestapo, Witherington stepped up and created a new network, which she named Wrestler. During her time in this new circuit, Witherington teamed with a sister network and caused over 800 railway interruptions by cutting the line between Bordeaux and Paris. Witherington was nominated for a civil MBE. However, she declined, claiming there was "nothing civil about what I did." Instead, she later accepted a military MBE along with a Legion of Honour.



Pearl Witherington

## Conclusion

Analyzing the few existing texts written about the SOE or women spies of the SOE for gender bias has illuminated the inherent bias that government officials, historians, and scholars alike have towards these women and has skewed the telling of their stories. Sexist attitudes towards these women during WWII and by contemporary scholars have aided in silencing their stories and diminishing their accomplishments. Violette Szabo and Yvonne Cormeau left children behind to fight for their country while Virginia Hall, Nancy Wake, and Phyllis Latour left their home countries behind to fight for Britain and freedom. These women made many sacrifices, sometimes beyond those that male spies were called on to make, which makes their bravery in participating in the war even more commendable.

## Methods

Our methodology includes copious research and reading, analyzing texts for gender bias, as well as searching through historical archives to find information on these women. The books we analyzed were always written by accredited historians, such as MRD Foot, Kate Vigurs, and Mark Seaman.

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