

AVOIDING DETECTION: Female Agents of the Special Operations Executive

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Until 2018, women in the British military have been barred from serving in combat roles. However, clandestine warfare offered women opportunities they would not have been granted if it were not for the nature of their work. During the Second World War, the Special Operations Executive (SOE) employed women as special agents for the purpose of infiltrating Nazi-occupied regions. This paper uses memoirs, biographies, oral histories, and SOE documents to compare the experiences of two female agents, Pearl Witherington and Eileene “Didi” Nearne, to evince the notion that their dedication to the war effort predominated the perception of their gender held by both themselves and their male colleagues.

After France’s defeat in June of 1940, the success of Nazi forces weighed heavily on the Allies. European leaders were desperate to disrupt the oppressive Nazi regime, and they increasingly sought alternative forms of warfare to achieve this goal. Rather than relying on aerial and naval offensives alone, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill proposed infiltrating Nazi-occupied areas covertly, which could serve to apply economic and psychological pressure from the inside and supplement other offensive operations. Thus Britain, among other European powers, employed irregular warfare in addition to traditional warfare. Britain’s Special Operation Executive (SOE) was created precisely for this purpose. The SOE had sections in various countries throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, but the focus of this research paper is on the largest section, the French Section (F Section).¹

Irregular warfare provided women with opportunities not conventionally granted to them at this time. Women in Britain, as well as much of western Europe, were restricted from serving in military positions on the front lines despite receiving training in hand-to-hand combat and the use of firearms. Irregular warfare offered these women upward mobility that would have otherwise been near impossible. The fact that irregular warfare was conducted by clandestine organizations allowed women the opportunity to take on responsibilities and job assignments not often granted to women during World War II.

Using the experiences of two women that benefited from work in irregular warfare, this paper compares the lives of female SOE agents of the F Section, Pearl Witherington and Eileene “Didi” Nearne. This comparison demonstrates how the use of irregular warfare granted these women the opportunity to serve in roles they were traditionally restricted from serving in at this point in history. Additionally, it addresses the question of the extent to which these women were personally affected by their gender in their experiences as special agents. The evidence used to support these claims relies largely on the memoirs, biographies, and personal accounts of these women to offer a glimpse into their perspectives. Correspondence and personnel files

¹ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 1.

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from the SOE, oral histories, and various other government documents are also utilized to provide context for these women's experiences.

Given the classified nature of the SOE, much of the scholarship before the 1990s and early 2000s, when most of the records were declassified, lacks a complete picture. Published in 1983, *Britain and the European Resistance 1940-1945* by David Stafford was one of the first pieces of scholarship published about the SOE. It provides a foundational background of the SOE, including some of the first documents to be declassified.² Marcel Ruby's book *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*, which was published five years after Stafford's book in 1988, provides a specific look into the F Section using the first-hand accounts of its personnel. Ruby also lends space to the discussion of women's involvement in SOE operations.³

Within the past two decades, more and more scholarship has been published regarding the women in the F Section of the SOE. *The Women Who Lived for Danger* by Marcus Binney was published in 2005 focuses exclusively on the female agents in the F Section. By 2005, many of the documents about the SOE had been declassified, allowing Binney to further explore women's involvement. This book is useful in providing the narrative accounts of ten women involved in the F Section.⁴ In Sarah Helm's 2005 book *A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of WWII*, Helm further explores the involvement of women in the F Section through the life of Vera Atkins, an intelligence officer who worked under Maurice Buckmaster.⁵ In her article "Playing the Daft Lassie with Them': Gender, Captivity and the Special Operations Executive during the Second World War," Juliette Pattinson focuses on the analysis of the gendered experiences of these women special agents while in captivity compared to their male counterparts.⁶ In Elizabeth Kate Vigurs's article "The Women Agents of the Special Operations Executive F Section: Wartime Realities and Post War Representations," Kate provides an analysis of the public's perception of women agents following the war and how they were affected.⁷ Published in 2017, Gordon Thomas and Greg Lewis's book *Shadow Warriors of World II: The Daring Women of the OSS and SOE* compare the experiences of various female Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and SOE agents to detail the contributions made by female undercover agents during World War II.⁸ The present paper contributes to previous scholarship in that it compares two female agents in order to establish the importance these women attached to their own gender during their time working for the SOE. While their gender did indeed affect their experiences as undercover agents, and especially their lives following the war, the dedication these women had toward defeating Nazi powers held more importance, as demonstrated by their personal attitudes toward gender in addition to the support they received from their male colleagues.

Until recent decades, World War II scholarship has largely omitted the discussion of women's involvement in combat roles. Given the gender roles ingrained

² David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945: A Survey of the Special Operations Executive, with Documents*. (United Kingdom: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983).

³ Marcel Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*. (London: Leo Cooper Ltd., 1988).

⁴ Marcus Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger: The Agents of the Special Operations Executive*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2002).

⁵ Sarah Helm, *A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of WWII*. (London: Little, Brown, 2005).

⁶ Juliette Pattinson, "Playing the Daft Lassie with Them': Gender, Captivity and the Special Operations Executive during the Second World War," *European Review of History* 13, no. 2 (2006): 271-92.

⁷ Elizabeth Kate Vigurs, "The Women Agents of the Special Operations Executive F Section: Wartime Realities and Post War Representations." PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2011.

⁸ Gordon Thomas and Greg Lewis, *Shadow Warriors of World War II: The Daring Women of the OSS and SOE*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2016).

in society in the twentieth century, women were often barred from serving in combat roles. In countries such as America, Britain, France, and Germany, serving in combat roles was directly linked to men's obligation to protect the women and children of their country. Most often, women were given jobs as nurses or administrative assistants. Otherwise, they were expected to focus their efforts on the home front through work in military supply factories. While women were commonly restricted to these non-combat roles, historians have reported instances in which they were involved on the frontlines. Perhaps the country that best demonstrates this was the Soviet Union. The women of the Soviet Union felt that their womanhood directly correlated with their service in the military and thus, the protection of their motherland.⁹ In Britain, leaders within the military felt they could utilize the manpower of women, but military organizations feared the potential public backlash that could come from allowing women to serve in the military. Thus, women were confined to mostly auxiliary roles. Members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force were trained in firearms, yet they were forbidden from ever using these skills.¹⁰ However, the SOE was a unique case. It was able to work around these restrictions given the clandestine nature of the organization.

Origins of the Special Operations Executive

The SOE was not the first British military organization designed to conduct clandestine operations behind enemy lines. Prior to the formation of the SOE, such operations were designated to the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), also known as M16. The D Section was responsible for operations the SOE would later take on.¹¹ This section was further divided into two sections: SO-1 and SO-2. While SO-1 was responsible for spreading propaganda, SO-2 was responsible for organizing and executing acts of sabotage. Churchill wished to combine these two sections with the creation of the SOE, though ultimately, SO-1 branched off into its own organization, the Political Warfare Executive.¹² By the summer of 1940, Nazi forces had taken control of much of western Europe. In response, members of the British government considered new strategies for achieving victory.¹³ With the Nazi occupation of France in 1942, Britain's use of infiltration by air and sea proved to be nearly impossible. Churchill as well as other government officials believed the best way to defeat the German forces was by infiltrating Nazi-occupied areas to sabotage Germany's efforts and undermine morale. The plan mainly involved placing economic pressure on the Germans from behind enemy lines.¹⁴ This took the form of sabotage and the destruction of important railways and military supply factories in addition to spreading anti-Nazi propaganda.¹⁵ With this in mind, Churchill gave Hugh Dalton, the Minister of Economic Warfare, the instructions to "set Europe ablaze."¹⁶ It was in this context that, on July 22, 1940, the Special Operations Executive (SOE) was formed. As Maurice Buckmaster, head of the SOE's French Section, said in reference

⁹ D'Ann Campbell, "Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union," *The Journal of Military History*, 57, no. 2 (April 1993), 318.

¹⁰ Campbell, "Women in Combat," 318.

¹¹ Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945*, 19-20.

¹² Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*, Loc 190.

¹³ Ruby, *F Section*, Loc 190.

¹⁴ Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945*, 12.

¹⁵ Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*, Loc 160-165.

¹⁶ Ben Pimlott ed., *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton 1940-1945*, (London: The Trinity Press, 1986), 62.

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to Churchill's statement, "we could interpret that in the way that we thought was most effective."¹⁷

The main office of the SOE was on Baker Street in London,¹⁸ while it used country houses throughout England and Scotland as bases for training its agents.¹⁹ Training included clandestine sabotage by bombing and arson, hand-to-hand combat, parachuting, maintaining alternate identities, spreading propaganda, and skills for relaying intelligence back to British forces.²⁰ After training, the agents were sent to various sections of the SOE depending on their skills and knowledge of the specific locations where each section was located.

Women in the F Section

Maurice Buckmaster became head of the F Section in 1941, and in 1942 he began recruiting women onto the force.²¹ As more and more men were being captured and forced into German labor camps, the SOE became desperate for new recruits.²² At this time, Buckmaster and other leaders of the F Section struggled to find agents that could pass as French citizens. The French section needed people who not only spoke French, but also did so with sufficient fluency so as to not raise suspicion about their true origins.²³ This search was further complicated due to French general Charles de Gaulle's refusal to allow the British military to recruit French men, as he feared France might lose its autonomy during the war. Buckmaster remembers de Gaulle as being "most uncooperative in every way."²⁴ Buckmaster looked to Canadian and British men, but he struggled to find individuals whose French accents did not give away their true origins.²⁵ It was then that the F Section came to the conclusion that it should seek out women to fill these roles.²⁶ Women offered certain advantages, as they were less likely to be suspected as spies. Given the gendered stereotypes at the time, their involvement in the military was underestimated by enemy forces. This made it easier for women to travel and lodge without being detected. In the words of Maurice Buckmaster: "Girls could move more easily in France."²⁷ With this, women became integral to the success of the SOE's mission.

Pearl Witherington and Eileen "Didi" Nearne

Of the F Section agents serving behind enemy lines, 440 were men and 40 were women.²⁸ Many of the women did not have prior military backgrounds. Recruitment to the SOE largely depended on the background of the women, as leadership within the SOE sought out those who could, as Marcus Binney explains in his book *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, "pass themselves off as ordinary citizens and ... move safely through the numerous checkpoints and controls operated by both Germans and Vichy authorities."²⁹ The two main subjects of this paper, Pearl Witherington and

¹⁷ Maurice Buckmaster (Head of F Section, Special Operations Executive in Great Britain, 1941-1945), Oral History recorded by Conrad Wood, 17 October 1986, 21:09.

¹⁸ Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*, Loc 194.

¹⁹ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 14.

²⁰ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 14-16.

²¹ Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*, Loc 344.

²² Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 1.

²³ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 4.

²⁴ Maurice Buckmaster Oral History, 30:15.

²⁵ Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*, 14.

²⁶ Ruby, *F Section*, 14.

²⁷ Maurice Buckmaster Oral History, 23:19.

²⁸ Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*, Loc 4365.

²⁹ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 4.

Eileen Nearne, came from similar French backgrounds that greatly aided them in maintaining their false identities and avoiding capture.

Though both of Witherington's parents were British citizens, they were living in Paris when Pearl was born in 1914. Wallace Witherington, her alcoholic father, deserted the family early on, leaving Pearl's mother to support Pearl and her three sisters on her own. Their mother struggled to make ends meet, so Pearl took on an immense amount of responsibility at a young age. Pearl believes this rough upbringing aided in her preparation as a special agent.³⁰ For a majority of her early life, she lived in France. This gave her a native grasp of conversational French, which would later be beneficial in securing her selection for recruitment to the F Section.³¹ Her family escaped to England after the Nazis occupied Paris in 1940. In England, Witherington's sisters joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), while she herself began work as the personal assistant to the director of Allied Air Forces and Foreign Liaison.³² While working as an assistant, Witherington expressed she could better contribute to the war cause by working behind enemy lines in France than she could by working at a desk in Britain.³³ She was recruited to the SOE in April of 1943.³⁴

Eileen "Didi" Nearne had a similar background to Witherington. She was born in England in 1921 as the youngest of four children. When she was two years old, her family moved to Paris. Unlike Witherington, Nearne entered school at a young age and enjoyed reading leisurely throughout her childhood. Having been introduced to French culture and language at a young age, Nearne easily adjusted to her life in Paris.³⁵ Similar to Witherington, this worked to her advantage later on when being considered for employment in the SOE. After the Nazi occupation of France began, Nearne's family, too, fled Paris. She, along with her three siblings, made their way to England while the rest of her family remained in France.³⁶ While her eldest sibling, Frederick, joined the Royal Air Force (RAF), she was recruited to the SOE in 1942 along with her older sister Jacqueline and older brother Francis.³⁷ She was comparatively young, only 21 at the time of her recruitment.

Even with these similar backgrounds, the differences in Nearne and Witherington personalities and the subsequent experiences they had while in occupied France help illustrate that there is difficulty in crafting a single narrative to describe the female experience in the SOE. Rather, the unique experiences of these women indicate that each woman contributed to the war effort in ways that were not attached to their gender. Their focus was aiding in the liberation of France, which both women considered their home.

Motivations for Joining the SOE

The women who were part of the SOE, as well as those involved in French resistance groups, came from a variety of backgrounds. The unifying factor in their motivation to join the fight against German forces was the duty they felt in serving their country and liberating Europe from Nazi occupation. In her memoir, the French resistance fighter and niece of Charles de Gaulle, Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz, recalls encountering the variety of women involved in the resistance effort. Though they

³⁰ Witherington Cornioley and Larroque, *Codename Pauline*, 8.

³¹ Witherington Cornioley and Larroque, *Code Name Pauline*, 5-9.

³² Witherington and Lorroque, *Code Name Pauline*, 21-26.

³³ Witherington and Lorroque, *Code Name Pauline*, 32.

³⁴ Witherington and Lorroque, *Code Name Pauline*, 34.

³⁵ Susan Ottoway, *A Cool and Lonely Courage: The Untold Story of Sister Spies in Occupied France*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 9-12.

³⁶ Ottoway, *A Cool and Lonely Courage*, 9-12.

³⁷ Ottoway, *A Cool and Lonely Courage*, 34..

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came from a wide range of backgrounds, she asserts that “their common bond was their unanimous refusal to accept the defeat of their country at the hands of the Nazis.”³⁸ As Binney explains of the women of the SOE in his book, “the quality that unites the women who became agents was a steely determination to play an active role in inflicting real damage on the enemy.”³⁹ This point is echoed in the motivations behind Witherington’s and Nearne’s involvement.

In Witherington’s case, she credits her “intense anger against all the injustices”⁴⁰ as her reason for joining the SOE. She felt the French population was being held hostage by the Nazis. To her, “[t]hat is what a hostage is: some poor defenseless person. And that is something I cannot abide.”⁴¹ Additionally, she knew her grasp of French, especially with her Parisian accent, would give her an advantage. This Parisian accent would aid her in establishing a credible alias as a native of France. Therefore, when she was offered a position in the F Section, she eagerly accepted. Nearne’s journey to recruitment began with her desire to involve herself in war work alongside her siblings, and she attributes her decision to join the SOE to her “patriotic feelings.”⁴² She also felt she was fit for employment by the SOE because she “was by nature a solitary person, and that was essential to be able to adapt to that kind of life.”⁴³ Her desire for solitude later caused friction with her superiors, as this negatively affected her overall evaluations; this quality proved advantageous once she was parachuted into France, as her job as a radio operator required a great deal of isolation.

Just like the men of their countries, these women believed it was their duty to use their strengths and abilities to participate in the war effort. Their desire to involve themselves in dangerous war work was not influenced by their gender. They felt compelled to do what they could to fight against the Nazi occupation of France, regardless of the fact that they were women. Neither of these women wanted to remain stagnant and defenseless while the war ravaged their country.

Training

The training of the SOE agents was specialized to prepare them for operating in secrecy behind enemy lines. This included psychological assessments as well as training in paramilitary operations, including handling explosives and knife combat.⁴⁴ Additionally, they were trained in maintaining alternate identities and establishing safe networks, which involved planning safe travel routes and lodging for fellow agents, within Nazi-occupied France.⁴⁵ Those without prior military backgrounds were enrolled in various branches of the military in hopes that, upon capture, they would be labeled as prisoners of war and spared execution.⁴⁶ Women were mostly restricted to two jobs: relaying information between Resistance groups as couriers, and operating radios with wireless telegraphy to transmit messages back to Britain. In a few cases, however, some women were assigned to leadership roles.⁴⁷

After recruitment, Witherington was sent to the English countryside for training. While there, she admitted she struggled learning Morse code. Because of

³⁸ Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonio, trans. by Richard Seaver. *The Dawn of Hope: A Memoir of Ravensbrück*. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998), 63.

³⁹ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 2.

⁴⁰ Witherington Cornioley and Larroque, *Code Name Pauline*, 4.

⁴¹ Witherington and Larroque, *Code Name Pauline*, 4.

⁴² Caroline Gammel, “Eileen Nearne: British spy gave rare interview,” *The Telegraph*, Nov. 10, 2010.

⁴³ Gammel, “Eileen Nearne.”

⁴⁴ Thomas and Lewis, *Shadow Warriors of World War II*, 6.

⁴⁵ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 14-21.

⁴⁶ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 8.

⁴⁷ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 1.

this, she was assigned a job as a courier.⁴⁸ A report inside Witherington's personnel file tracks her evaluations as she progressed through her training. The first few evaluations were positive, describing her as "very intelligent, straightforward, courageous, sensible, and absolutely reliable."⁴⁹ However, her superiors still took note of her weaknesses. Despite her reliability, the report also describes her as having "not the personality to act as a leader, nor is she temperamentally suited to work alone."⁵⁰ This assessment was contradicted by another instructor, who found her to possess the skills to act as a leader, revealing that the first assessment may have been a result of sexist attitudes held by the instructors.⁵¹ Witherington proved herself more than capable in the field, as she was later promoted to Flight Officer and put in control of her own circuit while in France.⁵²

As Binney addresses in *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, "the arrival of beautiful young women was to cause some serious heartache."⁵³ In a report issued in June of 1944, Witherington is described as "unduly attracted by the opposite sex."⁵⁴ At first glance, this would seem unwarranted and could be considered a sexist remark. However, upon further examination, this comment may not have been rooted in sexism, but rather a concern for safety, given that she was romantically involved with a colleague by the name of Henri Cornioley. Such a relationship ran risks behind enemy lines for reasons such as increasing the chances of vital information being found if both agents were captured together as well as exposing their true identities through their displays of affection. However, this explanation does not explain other such negative evaluations in Witherington's personnel file, nor does it excuse the possibility that many of these evaluations were rooted in the sexist beliefs held by Witherington's superiors.

Nearne was originally assigned a job working in the London offices of the SOE as a decoder, but wishing to join her sister in France, she was eventually recruited to the F Section as a radio operator. Unlike Witherington's, Nearne's Finishing Report describes her as "not very intelligent or practical and is lacking in shrewdness and cunning ... In character she is very 'feminine' and immature."⁵⁵ In this context, her superiors paint her gender and youth in a negative light. While the report describes her as "lively and amusing" with "considerable charm and social gifts,"⁵⁶ her superiors ultimately concluded that "[i]t is doubtful whether this student is suitable for employment in any capacity on account of her lack of experience."⁵⁷ Even so, Maurice Buckmaster had the final say for any agents sent into France. Eileen's sister, Jacqueline, had also received a less-than-satisfactory evaluation by her superiors. In both cases, Buckmaster felt these women's skills and ability to blend into French society outweighed the negative evaluations. Therefore, his final decision was to send them into France.⁵⁸

These initial negative assessments give the impression that these women were unfit to work as special agents in occupied France. However, Maurice Buckmaster

⁴⁸ Witherington Cornioley and Larroque, *Codename Pauline*, 35.

⁴⁹ "Cecile Pearl CORNIOLEY née WITHERINGTON, aka Geneviève TOUZALIN, aka MARIE - born 24 June 1914," Personnel File 1939-1946, UK National Archives, HS 9/35, pp. 127.

⁵⁰ Witherington, Personnel File, 127.

⁵¹ Thomas and Lewis, *Shadow Warriors of World War II*, 6.

⁵² Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 199.

⁵³ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 199.

⁵⁴ Witherington Personnel File, 127.

⁵⁵ "Eileen Mary NEARNE, aka Alice WOOD, aka Jacqueline DUTERTE - born 15.03.1921," Personnel File 1939-1946, UK National Archives, HS 9/1089/2, pp. 31.

⁵⁶ Nearne, Personnel File, 31.

⁵⁷ Nearne, Personnel File, 31.

⁵⁸ Ottoway, *A Cool and Lonely Courage*, 46.

noticed the potential these women possessed. In regard to the critics who believed the SOE had made a mistake in using women, Buckmaster expressed that “[t]hese women did an invaluable job and one for which, whatever people may say, they were admirably suited.”⁵⁹ Regardless of the sexism these women faced by some of their instructors, the head of F Section felt their gender had little to do with their qualifications. Buckmaster’s support of these women proves that their contributions to the war effort transcended the limitations attached to their gender during the Second World War.

Gendered Experiences in the Field

The actions of these women while behind enemy lines further proves that gender was hardly a factor in their commitment to their missions as undercover agents. Nearne and Witherington were quite aware their involvement as women in military combat operations was atypical. Additionally, these women knew they could utilize their gender in avoiding detection by the Gestapo. As Julliette Pattinson explains in her article “Playing the Daft Lassie With Them,” “Women’s endeavors not to reveal themselves as clandestine agents while operational were often accomplished through performances of hyper-femininity.”⁶⁰ According to Pattinson, it was not uncommon for the women of the SOE to overplay their femininity, with some agents using their feminine charm to seduce members of the Gestapo in order to avoid detection.⁶¹ Neither Witherington nor Nearne utilized the stereotypes attached to their gender to this degree, though they still employed similar tactics, more so in Nearne’s case, when facing the Gestapo. Thus, the experiences of these women while conducting their missions in occupied France provide a mixed picture. In certain instances, their gender was an impediment to their success while in others, gender proved to be an advantage.

While working as a courier, Witherington was aware of the discrimination she faced as a woman. Even before reaching her destination for her missions in France, she noticed how taboo it was for a woman to be involved in frontline military operations. In one instance, she describes how the men she encountered looked at her as if she were a “strange animal.”⁶² Even so, Witherington seemed unphased by such reactions. In Pattinson’s article, she also mentions that not all female agents in the SOE resorted to hyper-femininity. Using the example of fellow agent Yvonne Baseden, she briefly touches on the fact that she “did not consciously exploit forms of femininity for clandestine purposes as some of the other female agents did.”⁶³ This was also the case for Witherington. Aside from using the gendered occupation of a makeup consultant, she did not use her femininity in the same way as some women in the SOE.⁶⁴ In fact, her gender played a miniscule role in her missions.

After the leader of her circuit, Maurice Southgate, was arrested, Witherington was assigned to take over a third of the original circuit under her control. When offering to train members of the French resistance, referred to as the Maquis, in methods of sabotage, she “discovered that Gaspard from Auvergne [a leader of the French resistance] ... was antiwomen.”⁶⁵ Contrary to the reactions of the Maquis, Witherington claimed she received no backlash from her own men as a result of her

⁵⁹ Maurice Buckmaster, *They Fought Alone: The True Story of SOE's Agents in Wartime France*. (London: Biteback Publishing, 2014) Loc 3382.

⁶⁰ Pattinson, *Playing the Daft Lassie*, 276.

⁶¹ Pattinson, *Playing the Daft Lassie*, 276.

⁶² Witherington Cornioley and Larroque, *Codename Pauline*, 41.

⁶³ Pattinson, *Playing the Daft Lassie*, 278.

⁶⁴ Witherington Cornioley and Larroque, *Codename Pauline*, 58.

⁶⁵ Witherington and Larroque, *Codename Pauline*, 64.

gender. In fact, they lovingly referred to her as “our mother.”⁶⁶ While Marcus Binney describes her promotion as a result of her success in the field, he does not provide the implications of this success.⁶⁷ Though she maintained this absence of sexism from her own men, her mention of the sexism amongst the French men of the resistance demonstrates that while their gender was not at the forefront of these two women’s missions, it was still a factor with which they were compelled to contend. Despite this, she still successfully led her flight and members of the Maquis to hold off occupation by German forces.⁶⁸ Gender discrimination was present in the field, but the overarching goal of sabotaging the advancement of German soldiers outweighed the importance of gender to both Witherington and those under her command.

Conversely, Nearne did employ hyper-feminine tactics in the field. During an interrogation, Nearne attempted to pass as an innocent girl lacking in intelligence with an apathy toward the work she was assigned with the hope that the Gestapo would release her on the grounds that she was not emotionally invested in her resistance work. According to Susan Ottaway, author of a book about Nearne and her sister, Nearne had told the Gestapo that “I was bored at home and wanted to come to Paris to look for work.”⁶⁹ Juliette Pattinson describes this act of “playing the daft lassie” as a contradiction in that “women were undertaking the most gender-destabilizing activities, while seemingly upholding conventional gender norms by feigning vulnerability.”⁷⁰ She seemed to convince the Gestapo of her stupidity, and she was sent to a concentration camp as opposed to being executed, the latter being a fate many of the SOE agents faced. According to Nearne’s own account, she was sent to Ravensbrück to work in a factory until she was sent to Markkleeberg, where she was forced to do hard labor for roughly twelve hours a day. It was there that she successfully escaped with two French girls and hid until Americans began entering the city.⁷¹ Nearne exhibited extreme bravery in escaping from the Germans, an attribute that says more about her overall character than the effect of her gender. This escape proved to be of utmost importance, as she was one of very few to survive captivity, and the information she provided aided SOE officer Vera Atkins in tracking down missing agents in years following the end of the war. The experiences indicate that these women knew when to deploy feminine tactics to their advantage, but, overall, their gender was, at best, loosely connected to their success. The bravery and resilience of these women eclipse any consequences of their gender while serving.

Discrimination in Military Decorations

While positioned in occupied France, the women of the SOE were, for the most part, respected and commended by their male colleagues. However, once the war ended, these women faced prejudice from high-ranking military personnel, which is reflected in the decorations they received for their service. Much of the scholarship surrounding the experiences of the female SOE agents dedicates little space to the discussion of the military awards the women received following the war. However, in their book, *Shadow Warriors of World War II*, Gordon Thomas and Greg Lewis do touch on the fact that “the protocol that governed military decorations was not laid out to recognize their contribution.”⁷² Witherington was initially recommended for the Military Cross. Her award recommendation stated: “Witherington showed outstanding devotion to

⁶⁶ Witherington and Larroque, *Codename Pauline*, 91.

⁶⁷ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 199.

⁶⁸ Buckmaster, *They Fought Alone*, Loc 3267.

⁶⁹ Ottaway, *A Cool and Lonely Courage*, 157

⁷⁰ Pattinson, *Playing the Daft Lassie*, 276.

⁷¹ Nearne Personnel File, 16.

⁷² Thomas and Lewis, *Shadow Warriors of World War II*, 271.

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duty and accomplished a most important task. Her control over the maquis group to which she was attached ... was accomplished through her remarkable personality, her courage, steadfastness and tact.”⁷³ However, despite her recommendation for a military decoration, Witherington was awarded a civilian Member of the British Empire (MBE). Thus, the impact of her work and her contribution to the success of Allied forces in France were greatly overshadowed by the fact that she was a woman.

This discrimination becomes more apparent when comparing Witherington’s experiences to that of a male special agent of the SOE, Francis Cammaerts. According to his personnel file, his leadership qualities became apparent during training. His Paramilitary Report described him as “well above average in all subjects” and “highly intelligent, very keen and completely reliable.”⁷⁴ Cammaerts was assigned a leadership position after training, partaking in similar responsibilities as Witherington had when she was a Flight Officer. Like Nearne, he was eventually captured and interrogated, but he managed to escape, with the help of a female agent. After the war ended, Cammaerts was awarded four military decorations from three different countries: Distinguished Service Order (Britain), Legion d’honneur (France), Croix de Guerre (France), and Medal of Freedom (America). His award recommendation commended his “outstanding leadership and organizing ability.”⁷⁵ The vocabulary used in his award recommendation is similar to what was used to describe Witherington’s valiant efforts as a respected leader, yet Cammaerts received much more recognition for his work. This difference can be traced back to the traditional views of women held by the public as well as opinions of high-ranking military officials. It was easier for Cammaerts to be granted a leadership position, while Witherington, as a woman, had to prove herself worthy.

Witherington went as far as refusing to accept her MBE on the grounds that it carried a civilian classification. In a letter to Vera Atkins, who worked under Buckmaster, she demurred, “I do consider it most unjust to be given a civilian decoration. Our training, which we did with the men, was purely military, and as women we were expected to replace them.”⁷⁶ Her mention of women’s replacement of the men in the field is an indication that she knew the civilian classification was on the basis of her gender. In addition to women being officially restricted from receiving military decorations, their participation in irregular warfare complicated the issue, as the line between civilian and military classifications were blurred. However, Witherington became a Flight Officer for her own circuit and, therefore, deserved more than simply an MBE. Witherington’s opinion was that “the rules had to be changed. The type of mission carried out by all the women sent to France was unprecedented in British war history.”⁷⁷ Thomas and Lewis assert that the men who recruited these women, including Pearl Witherington, “never planned for them to be ‘civil.’”⁷⁸ They further this stance in expressing that “[t]hey were soldiers, taking the fight to the enemy where he least expected it.”⁷⁹ Eventually, she was awarded a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) and a Légion d’honneur from France. Not every woman in the SOE received the honors they deserved, but the case of Witherington shows how the opinions of women’s involvement in the military began to shift because of their contributions to the war effort.

⁷³ Witherington Personnel File, 152.

⁷⁴ “Francis Charles Albert CAMMAERTS aka Charles Robert LAURENT aka ROGER aka JOCKEY,” 1939-1946, UK National Archives, HS 9/258/5, 205.

⁷⁵ Cammaerts, Personnel File, 130.

⁷⁶ Witherington Personnel File, 155.

⁷⁷ Witherington Cornioley and Larroque, *Code Name Pauline*, 109-110.

⁷⁸ Thomas and Lewis, *Shadow Warriors of World War II*, 271.

⁷⁹ Thomas and Lewis, *Shadow Warriors*, 271.

Nearne was also awarded a civilian MBE as well as a French Croix de Guerre avec Palme bronze medal. Her award recommendation attributed her success in maintaining consistent contact with British forces for five months to “her cool efficiency, perseverance, and willingness to undergo any risk in order to carry out her work.”⁸⁰ While Nearne no doubt faced her fair share of obstacles while behind enemy lines, her willingness to partake in such a dangerous job as well as her bravery in escaping a concentration camp earned her two awards for her duty. There is no evidence of Nearne objecting to the awards she received. She may have chosen not to contest the decision to give her a civilian classification since, after the war, she was more concerned with avoiding the public light than receiving public recognition.

In analyzing the distribution of awards for women special agents when compared to their male counterparts, the traditional values of the time period become apparent. While both Nearne and Witherington exhibited a tremendous amount of bravery and perseverance, the roles expected of women at the time prevented them from immediately receiving the praise they deserved. While these women experienced little discrimination from the men with whom they worked alongside, they still faced the constraints of social and institutional gender discrimination. However, Witherington’s insistence and eventual success in receiving a military decoration signals, by the mid-twentieth century, women’s involvement in military operations was becoming more widely accepted, though there are still some remnants of this lingering gender discrimination in modern society.

Postwar Lives

Many of the women involved in SOE operations became the subjects of media misrepresentation following the war. The media shared many exaggerated stories which romanticized the horrors of working behind enemy lines while failing to address the situations in which these women succeeded and excelled in their missions while avoiding detection. As Elizabeth Kate Vigurs explains, “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.”⁸¹ Witherington’s memoir notes that she “became very distrustful of such endeavors after an author wrote a book that fictionalized her wartime work to make it seem more dramatic than it had been.”⁸² Like most of the women involved with the SOE, Witherington rarely talked about her life in occupied France in its entirety until the late 1990s and 2000s. This was due in part to her personal reluctance in sharing her story. However, a majority of the SOE’s documents were not declassified until this same period, so she was unable to speak about the details of her experience until this point. She passed away in 2008 after completing a memoir of her experiences.⁸³ Though she resented the romanticization of her time in Nazi-occupied France, such exaggerations did not alter her own perception of the real contributions she made to the war effort nor the realities of her time behind enemy lines.

After Nearne returned home from France, she pursued a more private life than Witherington. Aside from a few brief interviews, Nearne chose to avoid the public light. While her fearlessness and determination led to her survival, her time in captivity left a lasting impact on her psychological well-being. Even when speaking

⁸⁰ Nearne Personnel File, 15.

⁸¹ Vigurs, “The Women Agents of the Special Operations Executive F Section,” 107.

⁸² Witherington Cornioley and Larroque, *Codename Pauline*, Location 87.

⁸³ Witherington and Larroque, *Codename Pauline*, 87.

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with her biographer Susan Ottoway, she requested that her real name remain a secret. It was not until her death in 2010 that the public became fully aware of her involvement with the SOE.⁸⁴ Nearne's transition into a quiet life following the war signifies she was not interested in contributing to the public's discourse surrounding women's involvement in the military. Further, this supports the idea that her gender was of little concern to her while working as an undercover agent. Nearne did what was necessary to combat the Nazi occupation of her home country.

Conclusion

The SOE was officially dismantled in 1946, though the operations of irregular warfare continued under the SIS. The experiences of these women while conducting their missions with the SOE provide evidence that while they faced obstacles due to their gender, their personalities, and more importantly, their actions proved that they were more than capable of participating in military work. The contributions these women made to the war effort transcended the long-standing gender divide that existed, and in some ways, still does exist. The use of irregular warfare was not only advantageous in terms of the use nontraditional strategies to weaken the influence Nazi forces throughout Europe; it also proved advantageous in the expansion of roles of women in World War II. It was not until 2018 that British women were officially free to serve in every type of combat role, but women's involvement in combat roles in the SOE predate the essential role women now play in the military. While there was initial shock by the public upon the discovery of women involved in the SOE, the acceptance of their contribution found confirmation in their later military decorations, as well as in the popular media that sensationalized their stories. The involvement of both Witherington and Nearne in the clandestine operations of the SOE reflected the fact that gender had little influence on the amount of pride and obligation to duty that many Europeans felt while being threatened with domination by Hitler and his Nazi army. When faced with this threat, the bravery and determination of the women of the F Section of the SOE proved that their contributions to their missions were instrumental to the organization's success.

⁸⁴ Ottoway, *A Cool and Lonely Courage*, 8.

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