

Revealed: How a heroine member of Churchill's elite SOE spy network was executed in a concentration camp aged 29 after her colleague's heinous betrayal

By James Dunn For Mailonline

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- Diana Rowden, an agent with the Special Operations Executive, worked for allied forces in occupied France
- Helped to destroy Peugeot factory, which was being used to make Nazi tank turrets and aircraft engine parts
- Group caught when Nazis captured allied radio and told them to meet 'Benoit', who was a Nazi double agent
- She was interrogated, moved to jail, then sent to concentration camp, where she was killed by lethal injection

The heinous betrayal of a heroic Second World War woman spy who was executed in a German concentration camp has been revealed in a new book.

Diana Rowden, an agent with the Special Operations Executive (SOE), was dropped into occupied France in June 1943 and worked for the French Resistance.

She and a fellow agent planned the destruction of the Nazi-requisitioned Peugeot factory, where tank turrets and aircraft engine parts were made.

Hunted at every turn by the Gestapo, Rowden worked tirelessly for the Allied war effort, providing the British military with vital intelligence via secret radio messages.



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The heinous betrayal of heroic Second World War spy Diana Rowden, who was executed in a German concentration camp, has been revealed in a new book



© GabrielleMcDonaldRothwell/BNPS



Diana Rowden at the age of 20, with her brothers Maurice, 19, (left) and Cecil, 14. She was betrayed by Henri Dericourt (right), a French air operations man who was a double agent and alerted the Gestapo to their plans



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After being interrogated, she was moved to the the dreaded Natzweiler concentration camp (pictured) where she and three other lady agents were executed on the same night

But she was betrayed by one of her own colleagues in the F Section of the SOE and sent to a concentration camp where she was executed by her captors aged 29.

Henri Dericourt, the air operations man for France, was actually a double agent working for the Gestapo. He helped them infiltrate her undercover group, which led to her capture.

The story of her betrayal is told in depth in *Her Finest Hour, The Heroic Life of Diana Rowden, Wartime Secret Agent*, by war historian Gabrielle McDonald-Rothwell.

Rowden was born in Chelsea in 1915 and in the 1930s worked as a freelance journalist in France. At the outset of war, Rowden stayed in France and signed up for the Red Cross. She helped many people escape from France before the situation got so dangerous for British people that she reluctantly returned to England in mid-1941.

She was determined to help out with the war effort in any way, first signing up for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force then being recruited to the SOE, which needed French-speaking agents on the ground ahead of the impending Allied invasion.



The Gestapo headquarters at Lons-le-Saunier is where Diana was first interrogated by the Gestapo after her capture in a home nearby. She was uncovered after the Nazis captured an allied radio and sent her to meet a double agent

Rowden was given the identity 'Juliette Rondeau' and was flown into France in June 1943. Her key role was as a courier, relaying messages to resistance groups and agents all over the country.

The work was physically demanding and arduous, made all the more difficult by the constant presence of German roadblocks.

Shortly before she was betrayed, she took part in a successful sabotage mission of a Peugeot factory which was a great propaganda coup, making it into the British papers. Her downfall came at the hands of a duplicitous double agent called 'Benoit' and was orchestrated by the German intelligence forces with the assistance of Dericourt.



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The Chateau d'Andelot was an empty castle in the Jura where Diana and other agents would hide out during their undercover operations/surveillance in the Jura region of France



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Robert 'Bob' Maloubier (third from left) was a Frenchman who fled France then trained with Diana to be in the Special Operations Executive. Like Diana he was sent back to his homeland to carry out undercover surveillance/sabotage.



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The 12th century cloisters of Beaulieu in the New Forest, Hampshire, is where the F Section trainees were put through their paces before being sent to France. it was their 'finishing school' before live operation

The British had no idea one of their officers, Frank Pickersgill, had been captured and that his radio was being used for receiving and conveying fake messages to London.

As a result, the Germans knew that an agent was about to be dropped into Clairvaux called Albert Maugenet, a Frenchman who had escaped to England and been trained by the SOE with the code name Benoit.

Dericourt, in charge of F Section's receptions on the ground, had alerted the Gestapo, who watched the plane land.

The agents were followed and Maugenet was immediately arrested. He was interrogated and, under torture, revealed the details of the mission.

After the interrogation, Maugenet, or a German agent, possibly a French collaborator, assumed his identity.

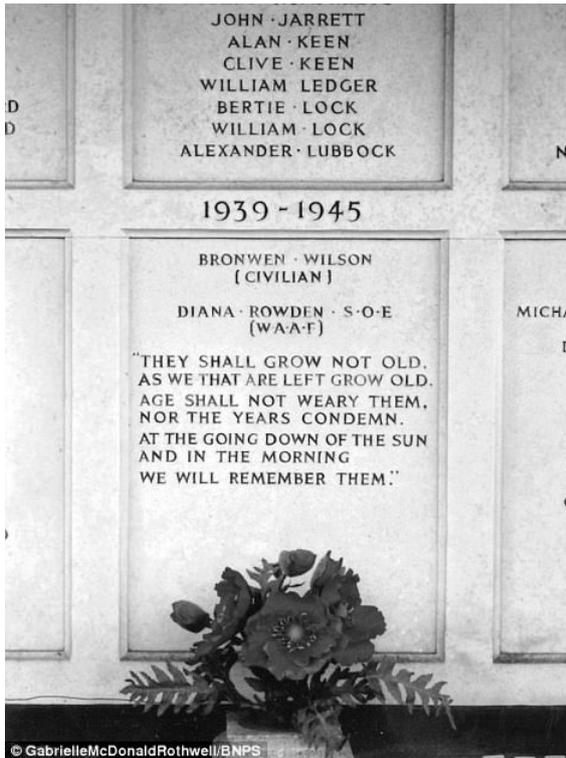
The man put on Maugenet's leather jacket and took his suitcase containing his personal belongings, a large sum of money and his forged identity papers.

On November 16 local resistance leader Raoul Janier-Dubry was in his office at the factory when he saw a car stop outside and a man get out.



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Manor House school in Limpsfield, Surrey, where Diana Rowden went when she was just a girl and living in England



Diana Rowden is commemorated at the Runnymede Royal Air Force Memorial, Surrey (left), and at the Valency Memorial, in France, which commemorates all SOE personnel who lost their lives

The impostor greeted Janier-Dubry then said 'Je suis Benoit' and produced a message, supposedly from London, written in code on cigarette paper and concealed in a matchbox. Janier-Dubry fell for the ruse and introduced the double agent to Rowden. After meeting in the town, Benoit and Rowden walked back to Janier-Dubry's home unaware he had arranged for them to be followed.

The moment of her capture is described as follows: 'Diana and Benoit took the tacot (train) back to Clairvaux.

'Diana walked rapidly, anxious to get back, but for some reason Benoit lagged behind.

'She had no reason to suspect anything was amiss and did not see the man whom she had been with all day, the man whom she had taken to meet other resistants, the man whom she trusted, flashing a torch behind him.

'She would have had no inclination that he was laying a trail for the Germans to follow.

'These men had been lying in wait for them to alight from the tacot and would no doubt have had a prearranged plan with Benoit to follow them.'

Janier-Dubry had gone home separately and was ambushed by SS officers on his doorstep.

He said: 'Raoul was about to enter his own front door when he was pulled up short.

'Why were cars and people surrounding his house? What was a big crowd of Geheime Feldpolizie and SS doing at his place?

'He walked up to the door, perhaps thinking "this cannot be happening".

'All of a sudden with a sickening jar he felt a gun thrust into his back, the metal hitting against one of his ribs.

'Then a voice said quietly in German: "Just walk into the room - very quiet now and slowly".



Yvonne Clerc, who sheltered Diana Rowden in St Amour, Jura, when she was working with the French Resistance



© GabrielleMcDonaldRothwell/BNPS

Number 1 Cornwall Mews (pictured, right), the flat in Knightsbridge owned by Mrs Rowden during the war, where Diana and friends of SOE Party 27Y gathered

'Then the gun was jabbed into his neck as the voice said, "now turn around".

'He was pushed roughly into the kitchen, where he saw members of his family standing against a wall, their faces etched with fear. Germans waved weapons about, shouting.

'Outside more Germans, believed to be Gestapo or SD, had climbed into the house, where Benoit and Diana were covered by German Carabines.

'Suddenly Benoit produced a gun. Shock registered on the faces of the Janier-Dubrys. What was the new agent doing brandishing a gun at them?'

Rowden was taken to a French prison where she was repeatedly interrogated but she never cracked.

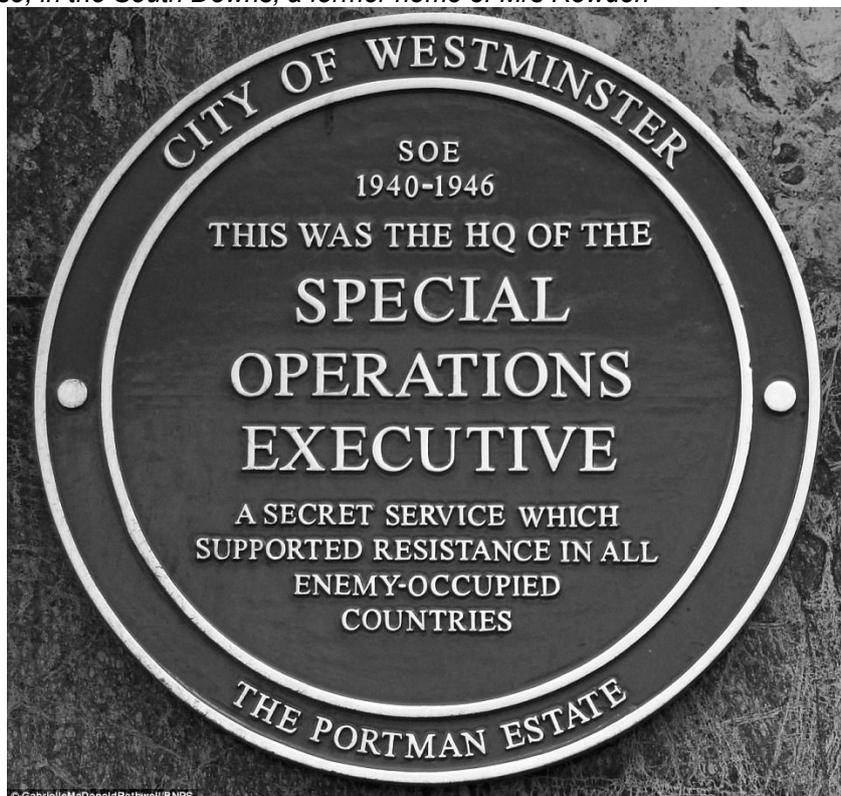


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64 Baker Street, headquarters of the Special Operations Executive from 1940 onwards (left), and Telegraph House, in the South Downs, a former home of Mrs Rowden



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A plaque at 64 Baker Street that tells onlookers of the massive significance of the London building, once among the most important centres of intelligence for allied forces

Her stock answer was: 'Je regrette, but as I have already said, I cannot possibly help you.'

After a few months, she was moved to a prison in Karlsruhe, over the German border, then on to the dreaded Natzweiler concentration camp where she and three other lady agents were executed on the same night.



The story of her betrayal is told in depth in Her Finest Hour, The Heroic Life of Diana Rowden, Wartime Secret Agent, by war historian Gabrielle McDonald-Rothwell

On July 6, 1944, Rowden, Andree Borrel, Vera Leigh and Sonya Olschanesky were given a lethal injection then their bodies were set on fire.

Following the war, Rowden was awarded an MBE and Croix de Guerre in recognition of her courageous work in the most perilous of circumstances.

Mrs McDonald-Rothwell, said: 'I first heard of her from my mother's friend who told me he wondered why there had been so little written about her and we were both intrigued as to why this was so.

'I found out she had been murdered at Natzweiler Concentration Camp and decided in 2005 to visit.

'The story of Diana kept me awake at night and the more I researched her life I just knew I had to write her full biography.

'I must say that I am so proud that I have been given this opportunity to write the story of this amazing woman of the very finest character - her bravery, her spirit stands out more than anyone I have read about.

'Diana's mother summed up her character perfectly when she said Diana crowded more into her 29 years of life than do many people living twice or three times as long.

'She loved life, and every moment was to her an adventure. She was gay, vital, selfless and self-reliant.

'These words say it all. I wish I had met her. She deserves a monument in her name.'

Her Finest Hour, The Heroic Life Of Diana Rowden, Wartime Secret Agent, by Gabrielle McDonald-Rothwell, is published by Amberley books and costs £20.