

Braver than any man: Revealed for the first time, the awe-inspiring courage of two British sisters who waged a one-family war on the Nazis - and were left with emotional scars that never healed - Eileen 'Didi' Nearne

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Hunched over a wireless set, alone in a safe house in a Parisian suburb on a rainy morning in July 1944, Didi Nearne tapped out a Morse Code message. It contained urgent information from the leader of her Resistance network to intelligence chiefs back in London.

A month earlier, Allied armies had landed in Normandy and the battle for France was raging fiercely. Agents of SOE – the Special Operations Executive – played a vital role sabotaging German communications and relaying information about troop movements and weapons back to Britain.

Furious, the Germans redoubled their efforts to catch SOE agents. Their radio-detecting vans combed the streets, seeking out signals that would lead them to the wireless operators laboriously tapping out their messages.

The average SOE wireless operator in Occupied France lasted for just six weeks before being arrested. Didi, 21, had survived for five months, making an astonishing 105 transmissions. If caught, she faced imprisonment, perhaps torture and execution. Four female SOE agents had been put to death in a concentration camp by lethal injection that month. They were cremated, but evidence emerged later that some of them were still alive when they went into the ovens.



Brave: Eileen 'Didi' Nearne operated as an undercover agent called 'Rose' in Occupied France and was caught and tortured by the Nazis.

Didi knew the risks. 'There were Gestapo in plain clothes everywhere. I always looked at my reflection in the shop windows to see if I was being followed,' she recalled later.

But she had to send this latest message. It was only as she finished tapping it out that she became aware of shouting outside.

Peering through the rain-misted window, she was horrified to see several cars parked in the street below and Germans pouring from them. They had tracked down the wireless signal.

Didi knew she had only minutes. Hastily, she took the wireless set apart and hid the pieces in a cupboard. She hid her pistol, too. She snatched up her codes and the paper on which she had encrypted the message, shoved them into the kitchen stove and set light to them, poking them until just ashes were left. Only then did she think of saving herself.

It was too late. There was a loud banging on the door. Taking a deep breath, Didi opened it and found a gun pointing directly at her. The man holding it began shouting at her in German, while other men started searching the house. Displaying extraordinary nerve, Didi shouted back indignantly, denying any knowledge of a wireless set. But the search team soon uncovered it.

Didi was handcuffed, bundled into a car and driven through the Paris streets to an address that made every SOE agent shudder with fear: 11 Rue des Saussaies – Gestapo headquarters. This was where agents were interrogated, often tortured and then sent to concentration camps. Or executed.

The questioning began. What was she doing with a wireless set? Didi had her answer ready: she was a simple French girl and had been sending coded messages for her boss, a businessman. She had no idea what they were about.

The Gestapo men were puzzled. Could this seemingly stupid girl really be an innocent dupe of a Resistance agent? Or was she a brilliant actress?

Eileen Nearne – known as Didi – was, in fact, one of the bravest secret agents of World War II. When caught, she showed exceptional courage, withstanding torture and incarceration in concentration camps.

But Didi was a modest woman who seldom spoke about her wartime exploits. Her latter years were solitary and reclusive. When she died, aged 89 in 2010 at home in Torquay, her body lay undiscovered for several days. Among her belongings, police found several medals, including a Croix de Guerre, and other clues to a secret wartime life.

It transpired that the eccentric old lady who fed stray cats had once been one of the most successful agents of SOE, as had her sister, Jacqueline, who had died many years before.



Heroine: Didi's sister Jacqueline also served as an SOE agent during World War II but returned to Britain exhausted in 1944

Now the story of these two astonishingly courageous women is revealed in a new book by the author Susan Ottaway, who was among the few people in whom Didi confided details of her incredible, inspiring story.

Didi was born in London in 1923 to Jack Nearne, a doctor-turned-chemist, and Mariquita, a French-Spanish aristocrat, who already had three children, Francis, Jacqueline and Frederick.

When Didi was two, the family moved to France, eventually settling in Nice where the girls attended a convent school. In 1940, the German army marched into France and the family's well-to-do life was turned upside down. The pro-German Vichy authorities forced the family to leave Nice – as British citizens, they were not allowed to live near the coast – they moved to a village near Grenoble. Frederick, keen to fight the Nazis, soon left for Britain to join the RAF.

Two years later, Jacqueline decided to follow her brother and join the war effort. Didi insisted on going, too, and the two girls made the perilous journey via Spain and Portugal, arriving in London in May 1942.

At first they were rejected for war work. But their applications, mentioning their fluent French, reached the desk of Captain Selwyn Jepson, the recruiting officer for F section – the French section – of SOE.

Jepson believed women were suited to undercover work because they had 'a far greater capacity for cool and lonely courage than men'.

But did these two unworldly convent girls have the nerve and ability to become SOE operatives in enemy territory, carrying out Churchill's command to 'set Europe ablaze'?

It seemed unlikely at first. Jepson judged that, at 21, Didi was too young to be an agent. He put her to work as a wireless operator in England.

Jacqueline was sent for SOE training, but her instructors were unimpressed. 'Mentally slow and not very intelligent,' they sneered. 'She could not be recommended.' However, Maurice Buckmaster, the head of SOE's French section, overruled them. 'One of the best,' he wrote on her file. She was also, he noted, a beauty, with her dark hair and eyes, slim figure and air of Parisian chic.



Sacrifice: Neither Jacqueline, left, or Didi married or had children when they returned to Britain

In January 1943, Jacqueline – codename Designer – and her network chief, Maurice Southgate, parachuted into Occupied France. Before leaving, she had made Buckmaster promise that Didi would never be sent on a mission to France.

Jacqueline became the courier for a large network of resistance groups, delivering messages and weapons across France and organising sabotage operations, including blowing up a Luftwaffe aircraft engine factory, setting fire to 27 new trucks bound for Germany, damaging railway lines and stealing 30,000 litres of German petrol.

Whenever Southgate was away, Jacqueline took charge of the network, with 600 men under her command.

It was risky work. Often she had to stay in hotels, and once a plainclothes policeman banged on her door, searching for members of her network. Jacqueline appeared to be so drowsy and confused that the man apologised and left.

He returned a few hours later, but by then Jacqueline had fled.

She was one of SOE's most successful agents, but after nearly a year-and-a-half of constant operations she was exhausted. In April 1944, despite her protests, Southgate sent her back to Britain.

Arriving in London, she learned that Didi had pestered Buckmaster into sending her to France as a wireless operator two months earlier.

Jacqueline was horrified. Surely her naive little sister could not survive in such a solitary, dangerous role?

Didi's SOE selectors would have agreed. 'Not very intelligent or practical, lacking in shrewdness and cunning . . . inaccurate and scatterbrained . . . immature,' they concluded.

But once again Buckmaster overruled them. Didi, he observed, was a highly convincing liar and performed brilliantly under interrogation.

She was given a false identity – Jacqueline du Tertre, a dizzy shop girl – and the codename Rose. She found a safe house in a suburb of Paris from where to transmit her messages. The first time she set out, carrying the cumbersome 18kg wireless, a German soldier on the train asked what was in her suitcase.



Memories: Eileen 'Didi' Nearne (second from right) joins fellow ex-prisoner Odette Hallows (right) at an unveiling of a plaque at Ravensbruck concentration camp



'Just a gramophone,' she replied, praying that he would not ask to see it. She got off at the next stop and walked the rest of the way. She was kept busy transmitting messages for her network chief about double agents, German communications, the distribution of weapons for the Resistance and the launch sites of V1 rockets aimed at Britain.

After D-Day, Didi noticed more Germans and more sinister detection vans combing the streets near her safe house. She found a new location, but decided to send one more, urgent message from the old one. It proved to be her last.

On the morning of July 22, 1944, she was caught – and so began her horrific ordeal at the hands of the Gestapo.

Didi was terrified but determined that they would not extract the truth from her. At first, one man questioned her gently while the other shouted vile abuse.

'You are a spy, you lying, dirty b***h,' he yelled, hitting her face so hard that she nearly fell off her chair. Boldly she yelled back, insisting that she had no idea what they were talking about. Eventually, she was hauled to her feet and marched down a corridor to another room. Inside was a bath filled with water. Didi knew that she was about to face the dreaded 'baignoire' – the Nazi version of waterboarding.

Her interrogators held her arms tightly and questioned her about her wireless broadcasts. She refused to answer. Without warning, they plunged her into the bath, holding her head under the icy water.

She began to choke and struggle for breath as her mouth and nose filled with water. Suddenly she was pulled up, coughing and spluttering. They began shouting at her again. Who was she working for? Where was she sending her messages?

Didi remained defiantly silent.

Again she was thrust into the water, a hand holding her head under. Just at the point she felt her lungs would burst, she was pulled out, gasping.



Harrowing tale: Jacqueline Nearne spoke about her experiences on a television programme Distant Guns: With the French Resistance

A third time she was held under so long that she felt sure she would die. She began to feel calm and her body went limp. Abruptly, her torturers pulled her out, thumping her on the back. Didi spewed out water, then took deep, rasping breaths.

She was utterly exhausted, but quietly triumphant. They had got nothing from her.

Buckmaster had been right. She was a brilliant actress. Others had cracked under torture, revealing codes and the names of fellow agents. Not Didi. She withstood it all: she had won.

'We are going to give you the benefit of the doubt,' one of the Gestapo men announced. But then he added cruelly: 'We are sending you to a concentration camp.'

On August 15, just ten days before the Allies liberated Paris, Didi was put on a train crammed with hundreds of other prisoners in cattle trucks, jolting across France and into Germany for day after day.

Once, the prisoners were made to disembark at a station. Seeing some trees in the distance, Didi seized her chance and started running towards them. But a guard raised his gun, threatening to shoot her. Reluctantly she turned back.

Eventually, the train arrived in Ravensbruck concentration camp, where the Nazis followed a policy of 'extermination through work'.

Those too weak to work were sent to the gas chambers. Others were selected for horrific medical experiments. Sadistic female guards delighted in beating and whipping prisoners to death.

The relentless physical toil and lack of food took its toll, but Didi was sustained by her strong religious faith and unwavering belief that she would survive.

At Ravensbruck, she became friends with three other SOE agents, including Violette Szabo, later immortalised in the film *Carve Her Name With Pride*.

While Didi stuck to her story that she was a simple French girl, the other agents had admitted to being British. In February 1945, the guards executed the three British girls by shooting them in the back of the neck.

Didi was moved to another camp and put to work making parts for Messerschmitt aircraft. When she refused to work, her head was shaved and she was threatened with execution.

By April 1945, she was in another camp near Leipzig. Emaciated, with dysentery and a hacking cough, it seemed unlikely she could survive much longer.

With the Allies advancing through Germany, the guards decided to move the prisoners to another camp. As the column began to march off in the darkness, Didi and two other women made a break for some nearby trees.

They were free – but deep in enemy territory. For days they stumbled through the countryside, weak and starving. Once, some German soldiers stopped them, but they let them go. After several days they found a church and begged the priest for help. He took them in and they had their first proper meal and wash in many months.

When U.S. troops arrived in Leipzig, Didi and her friends gave themselves up to them. But the Americans suspected Didi of being a Nazi spy and locked her up with female Nazi prisoners.

It was to be another three weeks before British intelligence officers learned of her whereabouts and rescued her.



Lonely end: Didi was dubbed 'Eleanor Rigby' after she died alone in 2010, but when her story leaked out, the church in Torquay was packed

When Didi arrived back in Britain, Jacqueline was appalled at her emaciated, confused state. The long months of incarceration, seeing her friends weaken and dying beside her, had left her deeply scarred.

In 1946, suffering acute anxiety and depression, Didi was admitted to a psychological clinic, where she received electroconvulsive therapy.

Slowly she recovered, but the once vivacious, exuberant girl was now wary and reserved.

Jacqueline and Didi were recognised by the SOE as outstanding agents whose achievements had helped defeat the Germans. Yet neither was given the George Cross, unlike some other female agents who had spent less time in the field.

Neither sister married or had children, though Didi doted on her niece, Odile, the daughter of her brother Frederick.

Both women had sacrificed their youth, and their chance of motherhood, to fight the Nazis.

After Jacqueline died from cancer in 1982, Didi became more isolated and eccentric. In 1993, she bravely returned to Ravensbruck to unveil a plaque to those who had died there. But she remained reluctant to talk about her war experiences.

After her death, neighbours were astonished to learn of her heroic past. Hundreds of people turned out for Didi's funeral in Torquay to honour the modest heroine who had lived among them. It was a fitting tribute to the sisters whose sacrifice and courage remain an inspiration to this day.

Sisters, Secrets And Sacrifice by Susan Ottaway is published by HarperElement for £6.99. To order a copy (p&p free), call 0844 472 4157.