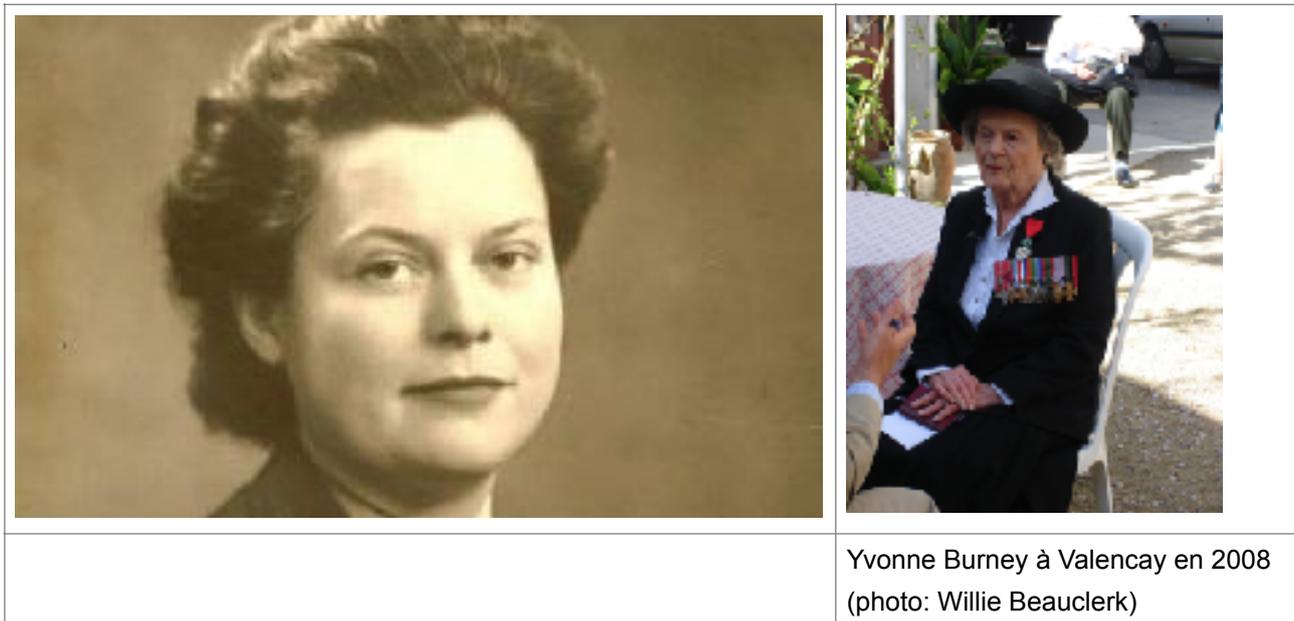


Yvonne Burney, SOE agent and concentration camp survivor.



Yvonne Burney, who has died aged 95, was the youngest female SOE agent to be parachuted into wartime France, where she organised one of the largest daylight air drops of arms to the resistance, before being betrayed, arrested by the Gestapo, and sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp.

She was born Yvonne Jeanne de Vibraye Baseden in Paris on January 20 1922. Her British father, Clifford Baseden, had served as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War, only to crash land not far from the Chateau de Frescines, north-west of Blois. Her mother, Antoinette de Vibraye, was the volunteer ambulance driver who was sent to fetch him from hospital after his wounds had been dressed; she brought him back for dinner to the chateau, where romance blossomed.

Young Yvonne was educated in various European countries until the age of 14, when she arrived in England and attended St Mary's Priory School, Tottenham, until she was 16. When she heard de Gaulle's call to arms on June 22 1940, she volunteered to join the Free French but was rejected by de Gaulle "as mademoiselle was born of an English father". This was a grave disappointment for a girl whose "thoughts and hopes", as she recalled, "were already in my beloved France".

Instead, on September 4 1940, aged 18, she joined the WAAF as a clerk. She was talent-spotted, and in early 1943 she was invited for an interview with Selwyn Jepson, recruiting officer for the French section of SOE. She was told that the work would be top secret, and would be behind enemy lines. Asked if she was game, she replied: "Well, that sounds quite exciting."

Thus she became the youngest of the 39 female agents recruited for SOE F Section, of whom 13 would die on active service. The SOE, which was chronically short both of French-speakers and of wireless operators, selected her to work in the field under the code name "Odette", and sent her to Thame Park in Oxfordshire for further training. She was teamed with a young French nobleman, Marie Joseph Gonzague de Saint-Geniès, who she learnt post-war was a distant cousin, himself code-named "Lucien".

Their orders were to establish a new resistance network around Dôle in eastern France. Yvonne Baseden's first attempt to parachute into France was aborted after her pilot became suspicious about the arrangement of the lights and signals on the ground.

At a second attempt she landed near Gabarret, east of Mont-de-Marsan in south-western France, on the night of March 17/18 1944. There she was met on the ground by George Starr, code-named "Hilaire", leader of the "Wheelwright" network in Gascony. She was taken by bicycle to a farmhouse and, two weeks later, began her journey to Dôle.

There she found that existing resistance networks had been infiltrated and shut down by the Germans. Her first months were spent recruiting and training new operatives, and marshalling airdrops of weapons and stores. She kept in touch with London by wireless from the orphanage at Dôle, which was Lucien's headquarters.

In the run-up to D-Day, when members of the network were involved in making explosive charges and planning targets for sabotage to support the main invasion, she helped Lucien plan Operation Zebra. This took place in broad daylight on June 25 1944, when 432 containers of essential supplies, arms and equipment were dropped from 36 Flying Fortresses near Pierre-de-Bresse, south-west of Dôle, one of the largest operations of its kind during the war.

More than 800 French took part on the ground, while Yvonne Baseden used a short-wave radio to talk to the aircraft. Later she wirelessly London: "Most of big day operations safe but enemy looking all over area." A day later, back at the orphanage, Lucien and his team were celebrating when, following a tip-off by local sympathisers, the Germans arrived.

Yvonne Baseden and several fellow agents were captured, and Lucien was killed. Eventually, after a clumsy interrogation, she was transported to Germany. Stopping at Saarbrücken concentration camp en route, she was aghast to find herself reunited with several other agents, some of whom she had met at SOE headquarters in Baker Street.

Among them was Violette Szabo, alongside whom she had learnt to parachute, and whom she had last seen when Szabo brought her little daughter into the offices of SOE. Also with them, chained to bunks in the gloom, were Lilian Rolfe and Denise Bloch, as well as four French parachutists. "My God," Yvonne Baseden exclaimed, "The whole of Baker Street is here."

From Saarbrücken she was moved to Ravensbrück, where she was subjected to a humiliating routine of strip searches, shaving, numbering, random punishments, and hours of standing to attention during endless roll calls. Weakened by the bitter winter of 1944/45, she contracted tuberculosis. Yet she also found a protector in Mary Lindell, a former escape line organiser and fellow prisoner whom she had first met in prison in Dijon.

Mary Lindell twice managed to have Yvonne Baseden admitted to the camp's hospital, where she was treated by the half-English assistant doctor, Percy Treite. Treite's treatment of his patients was so effective that both Mary Lindell and Yvonne testified on his behalf at the Hamburg War Crimes tribunal after the war: nevertheless he was sentenced to death.

Yvonne Baseden was at Ravensbrück in the New Year of 1945 when Bloch, Rolfe and Szabo were brought back, in pitiful condition, from a punitive work party and executed. Yvonne herself was only saved, she thought, because she had come not from Paris like them but from Dijon, and her paperwork had been lost.

In April, with the Germans close to defeat, Himmler attempted to secure a separate peace in the west, hoping that the German army could fight on the same side as the western allies against the Russians. The Nazi leader floated the idea through Count Folke Bernadotte, a cousin of the King of Sweden, and as a price for his participation Bernadotte demanded permission for a fleet of

Swedish Red Cross buses, the so-called "White Buses", to evacuate the concentration camps in northern Germany.

Mary Lindell managed to secure a place on the White Buses for Yvonne Baseden. Taken to Malmö in Sweden, she spent her first night of freedom on a mattress underneath a dinosaur skeleton in the local museum, which had been turned into a reception centre. After two weeks in quarantine she was flown home in the belly of a Mosquito bomber that had been pressed into service as a BOAC airliner.

Back in England she spent nine months recovering at King Edward VII's Sanatorium in Midhurst. This convalescence was interrupted in June 1945 by a debriefing from Vera Atkins, the senior female officer in SOE's F Section, which was hardly less stressful than Yvonne Baseden's interrogations in German hands.

After the war she married Desmond Bailey and moved to Rhodesia, where her husband worked for the Colonial Service. He died in 1966 and Yvonne remarried, moving with her new husband Anthony Burney to Portugal until 1999, when she returned to London a widow.

In 1946 Yvonne Burney was appointed MBE (military) and awarded a Croix de Guerre with palm. In 1996 she was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur. On her 90th birthday the French armed forces awarded her parachute wings.

She is survived by a son of her first marriage, who became an officer in the Royal Marines.

Yvonne Burney, born January 20 1922, died October 28 2017