

## LES FANYs : Who are they?

FIRST AID NURSING YEOMANRY



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### FANY and SOE – 1940-1945

The *Special Operations Executive* (SOE) was formed from the three existing intelligence organisations in July 1940 on Winston Churchill's orders to 'set Europe ablaze'. The purpose was to organise active resistance to the Germans by any means possible, legal or illegal, gentlemanly or otherwise. SOE was divided into various Sections – the most famous being F Section, which took care of operations in France. Others were in Norway, Greece, the Balkans, etc.

One major contribution by the FANY to the work of the SOE was in Communications, in both Signals and Cipher departments, where they received intensive training on Morse code. Many FANYs were posted to Grendon Underwood listening station, waiting to receive messages from the agents, because wireless was the most valuable link between the FANY operators based in the UK and the agents on the ground.

Another major contribution was the FANY agents in the field: they worked mainly in France. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine women sent into France were FANYs. Women could move around much more freely, because, since over 1.6 million French men had been deported by the Germans into forced labour, male Resistance fighters were dangerously conspicuous. The FANY had to have perfect knowledge of France, very good (though not necessarily perfect) French, and few family ties.



Odette Sansom and Tania Szabó at the FANY memorial 1947



Commandant MacLellan and FANY ATS staff with Princess Elizabeth 1945

They undertook their initial training at Wanborough Manor, near Guildford, followed by para-military training in the Arisaig area of NW Scotland (silent killing, weapon handling, fieldcraft, and sabotage); and did parachute jumps at Ringway aerodrome. After Ringway, Wireless Operators went to Thame Park in Oxfordshire for a 6 week course. Wireless sets were carried around in their cases, made to look like ordinary leather suitcases.

At Beaulieu, known as the finishing school for secret agents, they learned the arts of espionage, including complex encoding and message sending.

The Conducting Officers for the agents were also FANYs – they took part in the training, and reported on agents' strengths and weaknesses. They were also the one to give the agent a small token of humanity before their departure into the field, such as a compact, lipstick or perfume – and, of course, their deadly cyanide pill.

Of the thirty-nine women sent into France, 13 were captured and murdered by the Gestapo.

Some of the most famous ones include:

**Noor Inayat Khan**, who was originally WAAF, was part of the ill-fated Prosper network which operated around Paris. Noor was eventually the only SOE wireless operator in Paris. She was arrested and under torture said nothing, and twice tried to escape, but was sent to Dachau, where she was shot in September 1944.

**Odette Sansom**, (later Churchill, later Hallows) was arrested after seven months, and brutally tortured (with a red hot poker on her back, and her toenails pulled out), but somehow she managed to convince the Gestapo she was married to Peter Churchill, another agent with whom she had been arrested, and that he was closely related to Winston Churchill. She was sent to Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, where she was kept in solitary confinement in a room next to the furnaces, and with the heating turned on full blast throughout the summer to try and break her. She survived pneumonia and the war and lived to become one of our most venerated veterans.

**Violette Szabó**, was one of best shots in the Corps and one of the fiercest characters in SOE, and was captured after a major shoot-out, only being taken when she ran out of ammunition. She was shot at Ravensbrueck in January 1945.

**Lise de Baissac**, was part of the Scientist network near Poitou and would cycle around the countryside looking for fields suitable for drop zones, with her radio hidden in pieces up her skirt and in her bra.

**Nancy Wake**, was the most highly decorated woman of the Second World War, known to the Gestapo as the White Mouse – she undertook a bicycle ride several hundred miles to the Pyrenees from Auvergne to get a single radio part back to her Maquis unit, where she single-handedly commanded some 1,500 men.

Violette Szabó, Odette (Churchill) Hallows and Noor Inayat Khan were all awarded the George Cross, Violette and Noor posthumously.

All those FANYs who lost their lives are commemorated on the FANYs' own memorial at the FANY church, St Paul's Knightsbridge.