



The awful fate of betrayed volunteer who operated behind enemy lines in France

Dressed in her Women's Auxiliary Air Force uniform, Diana Rowden looks like any other young female who had volunteered to help Britain's war effort.

But behind the photograph lies an extraordinary tale of heroism and tragedy. Rowden was a secret agent dropped behind enemy lines in France, and her story has been revealed in full for the first time.

A new book details Rowden's vital work with the French Resistance as a member of the Special Operations Executive. It also lays bare her fate.

The book, *Her Finest Hour*, by historian Gabrielle McDonald-Rothwell

Betrayed by her own side, she was executed by the Nazis shortly after D-Day, aged just 29.

This week, for the first time, Rowden's family met a descendant of the French family that sheltered her before her capture.

Poppy Lloyd, who bears a striking resemblance to her distant cousin, said: "The family knew a little of what Diana did, and that she had died tragically. But I guess in those days people didn't really talk about painful things.

"She looks terribly vulnerable in the pictures but she was so courageous. We are all incredibly proud and humbled to hear her story."

Born into a well-to-do family in Chelsea in 1915, Rowden spent her childhood living in the South of France. After a spell at a Surrey boarding school she moved to Paris and studied at the Sorbonne.

When war broke out, she joined the Red Cross, first as a volunteer nurse and later as an ambulance driver. In 1941, she returned to England and joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

Her bilingual skills saw her recruited by the SOE and she was sent for training, where instructors noted that she was "very fit, very good in field craft and excellent with guns".

In 1933 she was sent to France, codenamed 'Paulette'. She worked as a courier in the Jura region, relaying messages between agents and a wireless operator.

With another British agent, John Young, she lived undercover in the village of Clairvaux-le-lacs under the care of the Janier-Dubry family, who owned the local sawmill.

But five months after her arrival, she was betrayed. A new member of the SOE named Andre Maugenet was sent to Clairvaux, codenamed Benoit.

But the Germans had been tipped off about his arrival by Henri Dericourt, an SOE officer later suspected of being a double agent. Maugenet was captured and interrogated.

Diana Rowden

When 'Benoit' arrived in the village - historians do not know if it was really Maugenet, persuaded to double-cross his comrades, or a German agent or French collaborator - he did not give the correct codeword, but was accepted nevertheless.

Her Finest Hour

Gabrielle McDonald-Rothwell

He led the Gestapo to the mill and Rowden was caught, taken for interrogation by the SS in Paris before being transferred to civilian prison.

On July 5 1944 she was transferred along with three other female agents – Andree Borrell, Vera Leigh and Sonya Olschanezky - to Natzweiler concentration camp. They were the only women there.

Floris Bakels, a Dutch prisoner who kept diaries of his time in Natzweiler, wrote of their arrival: “Four summery girls with lovely long hair and gently swaying skirts, some with bare arms, all with bare legs. They looked around. They seemed like angels from heaven.”

But that same night, the women were fetched from their cells and told they were being inoculated against typhus. In fact, they were given lethal injections before their bodies were thrown into a furnace.

According to witnesses who later testified at a war crimes trial, at least one of the women was conscious when she was pushed into the oven.



Crematorium at Natzweiler concentration camp

Rowden was posthumously awarded an MBE and the Croix de Guerre. But her story has remained little known while that of other women – including Noor Inayat Khan, who was sent into France on the same day as Rowden and later perished at Dachau – has been publicly acknowledged.

Maurice Buckmaster, head of the French section of SOE, once remarked: “The stories of some of Diana’s contemporaries have, to a large extent, eclipsed her magnificent record.”

Pascal Juif, a grandson of the Janier-Dubry family, travelled from his home in France to attend the London launch of the book, *Her Finest Hour*, by historian Gabrielle McDonald-Rothwell.

“It was emotional. It was the first occasion for us to meet and I am very happy that the two families are now unified,” he said. “I regularly heard about this story from my grandmother and the people involved at the time. And I wondered about Diana – she had the opportunity to live a peaceful life in England and perhaps create a family; how could such a lady decide to leave all that for such dark days in France? To take such risks? .

“And I hope it gives Diana’s relatives comfort to know that she was not alone. In those few months she became a member of our family.”