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WWII'S MOST HIGHLY DECORATED SPY



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P R E F A C E

“Be regular and orderly in your life,” Flaubert had said, “that you may be violent and original in your work.” Such is the prescription for spies. Odette Sansom didn’t drink, smoke, or swear, and to the casual observer she was quite ordinary, perhaps even boring. Yet she was a trained killer. She feared neither danger nor dagger, interrogation nor torture. She didn’t think twice about confronting German generals or commandants, and often placed principle before prudence.

Like her colleagues in the Special Operations Executive, she signed up for the war knowing that arrest (and execution) was a very real possibility—almost one in two for F Section couriers. But what her grandfather had told her as a child was set in stone: she was to do her duty when the time came.

And so she did.

WHEN I FINISHED WRITING *Into the Lion’s Mouth* in 2015, I was a bit saddened because I was certain I’d never find a more thrilling story than Dusko Popov’s. In my opinion, he was World War II’s greatest spy, and perhaps the greatest spy in history. After all, he had more actual sub-agents (eight), was involved in more operations (ten), and accomplished more (Pearl Harbor warning, MIDAS,

D-Day deception, Yugoslav escape line, discovery of German agent CICERO, and the Monty ruse of Operation Copperhead) than any other agent.

Yet I had to find material for another book.

For months on end I scoured the UK National Archives and my World War II resources and came up empty. I looked closely at other British double agents of the war to see if there was enough material for a book. GARBO (Juan Pujol) was out because several books had already been written about him. I considered double agent BRUTUS (Roman Garby-Czerniawski), organizer of the INTERALLIÉ circuit, as he was a compelling figure and at one point had a circuit of a hundred agents. For months I dug into his story, which led me to German secret police sergeant Hugo Bleicher. I was fascinated by Hugo's penetration of INTERALLIÉ, and how he single-handedly destroyed it. When I read Hugo's memoir, *Colonel Henri's Story*, I noticed that he detailed penetration of another circuit, one involving an Allied spy named "Lise."

The more I read, the more excited I became. *This could be it*, I thought.

I followed my normal research procedure: order everything on the subject written in English, starting with the primary sources. In this case, that meant reading Jerrard Tickell's authorized biography, *Odette* (1949); Peter Churchill's three-volume memoirs—*Of Their Own Choice* (1952), *Duel of Wits* (1953), and *The Spirit in the Cage* (1954); Hugo Bleicher's *Colonel Henri's Story* (1954); Maurice Buckmaster's *They Fought Alone* (1958); all of the SOE files on Odette, Peter, and Hugo in the UK National Archives; and Odette's personal interviews with the Imperial War Museum in 1986.

I was not disappointed. This story, I realized, had more chills and thrills than even Popov's adventure, and was perfect for my nonfiction thriller style. But there was a bonus: a love story. It was almost too good to be true.

How is it possible that almost no one knows of this woman? I asked myself. After all, there had been a movie about her in 1950, *Odette*, which had been released to great fanfare in England and the U.S.

As I continued to dig, I found another shocking fact: Odette was not only the most highly decorated woman of World War II, she was the most highly decorated *spy*—male or female.

I had to tell her story.

Fortunately, because I had so much material from primary sources, I could re-create each scene from the eyewitness account of one of the principal players, and often from accounts of two or three. With the exception of about four lines, every quotation of dialogue in the book is verbatim from primary sources. In Odette's SOE files in the UK National Archives, for example, she often recites to her debriefing officer exactly what was said at the time. In the lines of exception, I rendered into a quote what was recorded in narrative for ease of reading.

So, in case you are wondering, every line of this book is true, and you can check the notes if you wish to review the source material. In many scenes, of course, I construed emotions (i.e., “Marsac stirred,” “Odette shivered,” “Peter paused”) simply from knowing details of what occurred, and applying the natural reactions anyone would have.

My hope is that you find this work violent and original.

Larry Loftis
August 6, 2018

PROLOGUE

Shortly after ten the mist began to dissipate, leaving them partially exposed.

If it didn't come soon, someone might notice the four mounds that had not been there two hours ago. It was bitterly cold—in the low teens—but Odette remained still, shivering in her wool skirt.

Finally, they heard it. Everyone hustled into position and watched as Peter flashed the code.

Nothing back. Peter flashed again. Still nothing. The plane passed directly overhead at eight hundred feet and then vanished.

Peter scooted across the field and crept up beside her.

"I simply don't understand it," he said behind clouded breath. "He must have seen the signal."

Something wasn't right, Odette knew. It was mission feel, to be sure—the fox catching a scent it remembered as danger: men loitering around the buildings that afternoon . . . no airport activity . . . the plane ignoring their signal. The eerie mist didn't help, either.

Peter told her to stay low and crept to the end of the L formation. "Keep an eye on those buildings," he told Jacques. "I have a feeling we're in for an unwelcome interruption from that quarter."

Moving up the line, he ducked down beside Paul. "There's someone coming!" he whispered. "Lie flat on the ground."

Across the field, Odette could see the danger: two figures—

guards?—emerging from the direction of the control tower. They were headed directly toward Peter and Paul.

Ten yards.

Approaching the two mounds.

Five yards.

Odette gaped, pupils wide. Were the guards going to *step* on them?

The two figures kept walking, apparently just in front of Peter and Paul. When they were out of sight, Peter came back.

“I thought they were going to walk slap into you,” Odette said. “I can’t think how they missed you.”

Peter cast his gaze across the field and hangars. “The plane ought to be back at any moment. If there’s any danger from those buildings I shall wave my torch sideways and Jacques will come over to you and you’re both to beat it over the bridge. Paul and I will make a separate retreat; better to be in two groups.”

“Listen!” Odette uttered. The plane was returning. If it recognized Peter’s code with the countersign, they’d turn on their lights to illuminate the landing field. If it didn’t, it was German.

Peter moved back to position and Odette kept her eyes peeled. All was silent around the buildings as the drone of the aircraft grew louder.

A flash swept suddenly over the horizon and Odette froze. It was not Peter’s.

It was a trap!

Some three hundred yards away—directly in line with the aircraft’s flight—an Aldis lamp was flashing Morse to the tower. Barrack lights snapped on and someone shouted: “Put out those lights, you imbeciles! Wait for the plane to land and we’ll grab them all.”

Odette saw Peter’s flashlight wave and then watched as he and Paul began racing across the field. The aircraft followed them, diving down on their heads at just six feet and then rising and disappearing.

Odette turned to take off, but she could hear the plane returning. Would it let loose its guns, dropping Peter and Paul like pins?

Just then, Jacques ran up.

“You make for the right,” Odette called out, “and I’ll meet you on the back road to Périgueux.”

The Germans would expect the saboteurs to head for the only cover, but separating the posse might add confusion. Jacques tore off and Odette started to run when she heard a terrifying sound.

Turning back she saw him: an unleashed German Shepherd sniffing the area she had just left. The dog caught her scent, barked again, and was off.

Odette sprinted for the trees, adrenaline raging, but the ground was uneven and she fell. He was closing the gap, she knew. She scrambled up and dashed on.

Behind her she could hear him, the barking closer.

He would be on her in seconds.

She broke through the tree line and pushed ahead, stumbling in the darkness. It couldn’t be much farther.

There was a crash as the dog lunged into the thicket where she had crossed.

Faster! Faster! She had to keep moving.

The Shepherd closed, growling and thrashing through the underbrush.

It was the only way.

She plunged in.