

Odette Sansom: England's highly decorated spy

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Most WWII history buffs are familiar with decorated spies like Dusko Popov, Juan Pujol, and Roman Garby-Czerniawski.

These three men were amazing spies who helped to play critical roles in deceiving the Germans about the impending D-Day invasion. With codenames like “Tricycle” (Popov), “Garbo” (Pujol), and “Brutus” (Garby-Czerniawski), these secret agents have been a part of the legend of heroic activities by everyday people.

Espionage at large

Each of these three was awarded the Order of the British Empire commendation.

Yet their accolades and some might argue, their efforts, pale in comparison to the efforts of Odette Sansom. Code name “Lisa,” Sansom was awarded not only the Order of the British Empire but also a Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur, France’s highest decoration.

Sansom also earned a George Cross, as well as five other medals. Her tireless commitment to duty and honor helped her survive in a wartime industry known for high fatality rates.

The fascinating twists of her personal history absolutely prepared her for the adventurous and dangerous life as a spy.

Born in Amiens, France, Odette’s father joined an infantry regiment on the Western Front at the onset of World War I. He was promoted to sergeant for his valiant efforts but died a few days before the war ended in 1918 after trying to rescue some of his soldiers.

Raised by a single mother, Odette contracted polio as a small child, which left her bedridden and paralyzed for over a year. Before she was eight, Odette was legally blind.

Her grandparents urged Odette not to give up and encouraged her to focus on joy instead. As a result, she developed an appreciation for classical masterpieces.

At eleven years old, Odette visited an herbalist who prescribed a salve for her eyes, and amazingly – it worked. Within two weeks, her vision started to return, and by the time she was thirteen, completely restored.

Immediately following, Odette contracted rheumatic fever and became paralyzed once again. It took her months to recover, and once healed, her mother moved the family to a small village in Normandy, France.

Adventurous ways

It was in Normandy that Odette spent the remainder of her youth. She spent holidays walking the coast and watching ships navigate the English Channel.

Her time along the shore instilled a deep love of the sea (as well as a fascination with sailors). The day she turned eighteen, Odette married a British sailor named Roy Sansom.

They lived for a few years in Boulogne. Odette gave birth to a daughter before moving to London, where she had two more girls. As the young family grew, the drumbeats of war continued to sound throughout Europe.

In 1939, Roy left to join the British Army, leaving Odette and their three small children. A year later, the Battle of Britain decimated much of London. Odette and her family were evacuated to Red Ball, a small village in Somerset.

“Danger gathers upon our path,” said Churchill. “We cannot afford -- we have no right -- to look back. We must look forward.”

While living in Somerset, she heard a broadcast from the Admiralty asking for pictures of the French coast. Sansom grew up in France, so she gathered what she had and sent them.

However, instead of sending them to the Admiralty, Sansom accidentally sent them to the War Office. It was there that her efforts attracted the attention of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a top-secret organization with a single mission from Churchill, “Set Europe Ablaze.” Churchill’s organization was also known as “Churchill’s Secret Army,” and the “Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare.”



Odette Sansom. (Wikimedia Commons).

Weary of leaving her young children behind, but aware of the fact that women could work more freely as spies, Odette's resolve was challenged.

“My children come first. I mean, I do want to do everything I can for this country, which is my adopted country and the country, which has adopted me. My children are English, and I have a French family, and all my roots are in France. I have two reasons for wanting to help,” she said before making the choice to work with the SOE.

She found lodging for her daughters and arranged for them to spend holidays with relatives. Before receiving basic training, Sansom was interviewed by Maurice Buckmaster, her soon to be boss. Buckmaster wanted to make sure that Sansom had no illusions about the life that awaited her.

“In many ways, it’s a beastly life. It will be physically hard. More than that, it will be mentally exhausting, for you will be living a gigantic lie or a series of lies for months on end,” he told her.

Sansom was clear on the danger that waited for her. Almost one in two F Section (France Section) couriers were arrested and killed. In the face of this danger, Sansom pushed forward, confident that she had something to offer the war effort. SOE circuits had three agents – a circuit leader, a courier, and a radio operator.

Acting as a cell, these three would recruit and work with local French resistance fighters to sabotage German transport and supply depots. The danger was everywhere, from the ever-present German military intelligence to the Gestapo.

They controlled trains, checkpoints, and had eyes and ears in hotels and cafes.

Achilles’ heel

Because all of the SOE operatives knew of one another, a Germany intelligence officer only had to flip one of them to destroy the entire cell.

A secret police officer named Hugo Bleicher did precisely that. Bleicher acted largely alone, arresting over one hundred Allied agents, including Sansom and Czerniawski. On April 16, 1942, Sansom and her commanding officer were arrested.

They were first sent to Fresnes Prison in Paris and then interrogated at Gestapo headquarters.

“How strong the reserves upon which you draw you never realize until you need them. But believe me, they do not fail you,” Sansom said of her capture and interrogation in 1943.

Rather than sticking to the script as they had been trained, Sansom told the Gestapo that she was the leader of the circuit. Repeatedly, she explained that her commanding officer had no real information.

Fourteen times the Gestapo summoned Sansom to their headquarters, and each time the

torture became more intense. No matter the pain, Sansom repeated the same story repeatedly – that she was the leader, and her commanding officer had nothing to offer.

“When I left the Gestapo headquarters that evening, there were no nails on my toes. But I had not talked,” she said of one of the instances following torture.

Even though she was starved and beaten repeatedly, Sansom never said anything. Therefore, the Gestapo sentenced her to death and sent her to Ravensbruck, a concentration camp that housed an underground prison.

She languished in a small cell for three months and eight days. For all but five minutes a day, the cell was completely dark. She suffered from scurvy and dysentery, and her hair and teeth began to fall out. After lapsing into a coma, the infirmary doctor gave her a shot, and she was returned to her cell.

After the Allies freed the camp, Sansom was released. Following the war, she worked with several charitable organizations, hoping to lessen the enduring pain. Odette Sansom died in 1995 at the age of 83.

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