The women agents of the Special Operations Executive F section - wartime realities and post war representations


Abstract

This thesis is an evaluation of the wartime experiences of the female agents of SOE F section and their post war representation through books, films and post-war publicity. The first section looks at selection and training and whether women were treated differently because of their sex, it also shows that the various wartime experiences of the women were different and unique, not fitting into a stock scenario and showing that not all agents who were captured were tortured or executed. The fascination with women agents is addressed and why it is they who have captured the public imagination, not the male agents. The next section provides two case studies, Odette Churchill and Violette Szabo, these two agents were both awarded the George Cross and have become household names. Odette was heavily involved in creating her own post war image and also contributed to that of Violette. The thesis assesses why these two agents have become renowned and how their constructions have influenced public perception of the SOE and caused myths and fictions to become part of the perceived popular wisdom. Odette’s influence is discussed further in chapters that evaluate the role of film in the post war representation of the agents, ‘Odette’ and ‘Carve her name with pride’ are discussed in terms of how agents are represented, what liberties have been taken with the truth and the importance of historical accuracy in a film. The influence of the films ‘Odette’ and ‘Carve her name with pride’ over films made post 1958 and how they have contributed to the inconsistencies and myths that surround the world of SOE and its agents are investigated. An analysis of memorials to the women of SOE F section highlights the difficulties in memorialising such a diverse group of women. Issues that arise include politics, the need to commemorate, the form of the memorial, whether the memorial is site specific and what that means to its impact on visitors, whether the memorial is individual or collective and how a memorial can influence personal responses.

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The Special Operations Executive (SOE) was a British World War II organisation. Following approval, it was officially formed by Minister of Economic Warfare Hugh Dalton on 22 July 1940, to conduct espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance in occupied Europe against the Axis powers, and to aid local resistance movements. It was initially also involved in the formation of the Auxiliary Units, a top secret "stay-behind" resistance organisation which would have been activated in the event of a German occupation. The Special operations Executive was ordered by Winston Churchill to "set Europe ablaze". The Special Operations Executive's (SOE) main task was to link up with resistance movements – primarily the French Resistance – to undermine the Germans in the countries they had occupied. It was part of the War Office and its job was to support irregular operations conducted by personnel in uniform. However, little thought had been given to helping those civilians who not only wanted to fight back at the Germans, but also wanted to help out the British. Once trained, the most common way of getting agents to mainland Europe was by plane. Parachute drops could be made by Whitley and Wellington bombers. However, these were obvious targets from the ground. The shadowy Joint Special Operations Command also falls under SOCOM as a sub-unified command, but often reports directly to higher authorities due to their unique and often sensitive missions. Who is not covered by the term Special Operations? Anyone who does not fall under the SOCOM umbrella. He is also the executive producer of the award-
winning documentary Nomadic Veterans, and the award winning short-narrative Prisoner of War. He is currently working on his third book as well as pursuing a career in film and television. © 2020 The Havok Journal. Like this article? Like us on Facebook! havokjournal@havokmedia.com The Havok Journal welcomes re-posting of our original content as long as it is done in compliance with our Terms of Use. Tweet. Share.