

SOE

Admitting that under normal circumstances to “Jaw - Jaw ” is better than to “War - War” there still comes a time when decent men will fight to the death to keep someone from killing their families. That’s why England refused to surrender. Remember Churchill’s famous words: *“We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”*

Churchill understood that this war would be unique and that the soft-shoe approach of their official MI-6 intelligence service would no longer be effective. Consequently he initiated the Special Operations Executive (SOE) which became known as Churchill’s “Secret Army”. This army was so secret that it was sixty years before the story of their heroism could be told. At the end of the war there were 13,000 agents in Europe and Asia. Eisenhower felt that their clandestine efforts shortened the war in Europe by 18 months. Today the only woman left alive of the elite group SOE - F is Noreen Riols. Interestingly, she worships in the same Church in Paris with our son Steve and his family. She has authored ten books. Our autographed copy of *“The Secret Ministry of Ag. And Fish”* arrived in the mail yesterday. I read it at a single sitting, finishing in the early hours of the morning. The title reflects the fact that Noreen’s closest family members were never aware that she was a part of the SOE and assumed she was merely a laborer working in London.

The discipline and training of these courageous volunteers defies description. They became experts in the use of all weapons and explosives. They knew how to pick locks and escape from handcuffs. They could forage off of the land with little or no contact with local citizens. They were trained to endure torture. If captured they had the option of taking a suicide pill that would kill them in two minutes. They trained and equipped literally thousands of locals to resist the Nazis.

The SOE agents traditionally worked in groups of three. The radio operators had the most dangerous assignments with only a 50% chance of survival and a life expectancy in the field of only six weeks. Their coded messages enabled fighters in the resistance to receive airdrops involving tons of necessary materials. One humorous encounter involved a female SOE agent who had her 20 lb. radio in a basket on the back of her bicycle. When forced to stop to let a passing train go by, the Gestapo pulled up beside her and demanded to know what was in the basket. The beautiful young woman smiled and said that of course it contained a radio with which she could contact London. Her beauty and disarming smile convinced that Gestapo that she was no danger. They were wrong!

Another similar story involved a male agent who infiltrated the German army. While he was making bombs in a secluded cabin a German patrol knocked on the door. Quickly hiding what he could of his explosives he opened the door and discovered his beer drinking buddies. They were glad to see him and wondered what he was doing. Again, with a smile on his face, he said that he was making bombs to blow up the railroad. Ha! Again, it was the SOE agent who got the last laugh.

Not all encounters with the Gestapo had a happy ending. Hundreds, if not thousands, of SOE agents were captured, tortured, and executed. One favorite form of execution involved being hanged with piano wire to a meat hook on the wall. It usually took 20 agonizing minutes for the victim to die. On one occasion 12 SOE agents were tortured then executed at the same time. The youngest was 19 and the oldest was 36. SOE agents enduring every form of torture the Nazis could devise.

Let us give thanks for Noreen and other brave souls like her for the freedoms we enjoy!