

# Women: Special Operations Executive

## *Question for Short Debate*

8.21 pm

*Asked By* **Baroness Crawley**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to recognise the contribution made by women put on active service by the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War.

**Baroness Garden of Frognal:** My Lords, might I remind your Lordships that this is a timed debate? When the clock says three, you have completed your three minutes and should give way to the next speaker so that all those on the speakers list have the opportunity to contribute.

**6 Jun 2011 : Column 90**

8.21 pm

**Baroness Crawley:** My Lords, I thank all noble Lords taking part in tonight's debate, especially for their patience. Their knowledge and experience will indeed enhance our proceedings. I am sure we would wish to remember our dear colleague Baroness Park who, were she with us today, would surely have taken part. I open my remarks by congratulating the Government on the recent announcement that the UK is to donate £2 million to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation. As the years pass, ever fewer of those who saw active service in the Second World War are still with us and, today, so much public attention is understandably focused on immediate conflicts. It is precisely for this reason that those of us who have the privilege to be in Parliament in this era should find the time to reflect on the effort mounted by so many, all those years ago, to rid Europe of fascism and especially to liberate France.

In this Question for Short Debate, I am revisiting the history of the women of the Special Operations Executive F Section, while acknowledging the tremendous debt that we owe to all members of the SOE. I am asking out loud whether the Government agree that not enough has been done to commemorate them formally. The women concerned were recruited to serve in occupied France. They acted variously as couriers, wireless operators and saboteurs. They found places for planes to land, bringing more agents and supplies. They established safe houses and worked with resistance movements to disrupt the occupation and clear the path for the allied advance.

Those women did these things, given wartime pressures, after a very brief period of training. Apparently, they had each been told when recruited that there was only a 50 per cent chance of personal survival-yet, to their eternal credit, off they went. Some had been born in France, some in Britain, a couple in Ireland and some still further afield. Some were Jewish, some convent-educated, one Muslim. Some were already mothers, some just out of their teens; some shop assistants, some journalists, some wives; some were rather poor. In France, they often had to travel hundreds of miles by bike and train, protected only by forged papers, and as they went about their frequently exhausting work they were under constant danger of arrest by the Gestapo. Some were even exposed to betrayal by double agents and turncoats.

The story of what happened to some of those women is often unreadable and, in 21st-century Britain, is perhaps too easily under-remembered. A number were captured in France, horribly

brutalised and sent to camps in Germany. There, the torment was often sustained over weeks and months on starvation diets, the women crammed in unsanitary and overcrowded huts with disease rampant. Four of them were killed in Natzweiler by being injected—scarcely credible as it is—with disinfectant. A number, once worked and beaten to a standstill, were shot and hanged at Dachau and Ravensbrück.

From the list of those who survive, the House will perhaps recall the case of Eileen Nearne, whose death in lonely poverty in Torquay only last year provoked so much controversy. Over the post-war years, a number

## **6 Jun 2011 : Column 91**

of initiatives have taken place publically to remember and honour these women. There have been plays, movies and TV programmes. There have been a number of biographies of specific individuals. There has been the occasional small mural and a number of memorials around the country. Most recently, we see the bust of Violette Szabo, her head facing this very House, on the Albert Embankment.

At this point, I will mention those who, over the years and up to the present day, work to keep alive the memory of these outstandingly brave women. In this respect, I mention Shrabni Basu and the Noor Inayat Khan Memorial Trust, currently raising funds to build a statue to her in Gordon Square in London. I mention the Violette Szabo Museum in Herefordshire, run by Miss Rosemary Rigby, who I had the pleasure of meeting recently. I also mention the efforts mounted by Madame Szabo's daughter Tania, who has commemorated her mother in a wonderful book and website. More generally, we know, of course, of the work done every day by the Royal British Legion and other bodies, such as the Allied Special Forces Association. Plenty of people care very deeply about this.

These days, however, the preponderance of effort from the relevant organisations is directed at preserving existing memorials relating to the Second World War rather than creating new ones. However understandable this might be, we just cannot let the mist of oblivion creep over the memory of these women. It would be wonderful if there could indeed be a special new memorial to them. I ask how the Minister feels about that point and how it might be organised.

However, all memorials need not just be pieces of metal or stone. We need to remind our artists of these achievements and sacrifices. We need to prompt those who name new streets and halls of residence and blocks of flats. We have a tradition of celebratory and memorial stamps that could be revisited. We need to bring this story into schools and into the curriculum. We need to encourage English Heritage and other bodies to allow plaques to appear on the houses where these women once lived.

The women to whom I refer are Cecily Lefort, Diana Rowden, Eliane Plewman, Yvette Corneau, Yolande Beekman, Pearl Witherington, Elizabeth Reynolds, Anne-Marie Walters, Madeleine Damerment, Denise Bloch, Eileen Nearne, Yvonne Baseden, Patricia O'Sullivan, Yvonne Fontaine, Lilian Rolfe, Violette Szabo, Muriel Byck, Odette Wilen, Nancy Wake, Phyllis Latour, Marguerite Knight, Madeleine Lavigne, Sonya Butt, Ginette Jullian, Christine Granville, Gillian Gerson, Virginia Hall, Yvonne Rudellat, Blanche Charlet, Andrée Borrel, Lise de Baissac, Mary Herbert, Odette Sansom, Marie-Thérèse Le Chêne, Sonia Olschanezky, Jacqueline Nearne, Francine Agazarian, Julienne Aisner, Vera Leigh, Noor Inayat Khan and Vera Atkins. Even, and especially, *Hansard* can be a memorial, too.

**Noble Lords:** Hear, hear.

**Baroness Crawley:** Many of the women of whom I speak tonight went on to live lives of ordinary toil, making a living, raising a family, paying their taxes, watching the television. They got on with

things as

## 6 Jun 2011 : Column 92

best they could, just as they did what needed to be done in the 1940s. I can only guess how heavily their wartime experiences weighed on them and their families. Their greatest memorial is, of course, a free Europe: a Europe that was liberated to build peace and prosperity over the decades to come.

However, it has to be our insistence that, as new generations appear, this story does not become a sad sepia snapshot of a fast-fading time, but a story retold, refreshed and respected anew.

This House and the Government of the day carry a clear debt of honour: a duty of care to perpetuate the memory of our SOE women.

To live now for so long in a Europe purged of fascism, where millions have a reasonable chance of living their lives without enduring prejudice and brutality, where minorities can hope to be free, where political ideas compete inside democratic institutions and are not imposed by thuggery, must have seemed like an exotic fantasy in those early days of the 1940s. As the women of whom we speak today knew better than most, none of this comes cheap. My granddaughter's granddaughter should be able to know and see this story—this wonder of sacrifice, determination and achievement—in a century still to come. That is why I put down this Question tonight.

8.31 pm

**Baroness Trumpington:** My Lords, many congratulations to the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley. When I think back a few years and remember the difficulties faced by those who wished to commemorate, through a form of medal such as I am wearing this evening, work done at Bletchley Park, I am not surprised that nothing appears to have happened to honour those incredible women, who in many ways gave their lives for this country. It is absolutely shaming. After all, we at Bletchley Park never risked our lives or were in danger of losing our lives, unlike those who served in the SOE. I am told that some received some recognition—posthumously, quite often—but others nothing.

Three or four years ago the Imperial War Museum staged an exhibition of all the various categories of work done by women from 1939 to 1946. We were split into groups, with a leader in each group. I well remember my noble friend Lady Sharples, who had served in the Royal Air Force, leading a WAAF group that included the tiny figure of Diana Barnato, a leading debutante in 1938 who flew Spitfires and Hurricanes. Her Majesty the Queen opened the exhibition and was delighted to come face to face with a lorry of the same type and vintage as the one on which Princess Elizabeth learnt to change a wheel and everything else that was relevant. Not only that, she was faced with the original group of women who had been her fellow learners.

I had the very great honour to be in charge of the small group of surviving SOE ladies, including one who was known as the White Mouse because she was so good at hiding and escaping. She was more than 90 and in a wheelchair. She carried on a spirited conversation with the Duke of Kent until suddenly, to everyone's surprise, she looked at him and said, "And who are you?". The whole event was a tremendous privilege. My only hope is that this short debate will

## 6 Jun 2011 : Column 93

awaken the consciences of those in charge and result in a small, much delayed tribute being presented to the few survivors forthwith.

Perhaps the Stafford Hotel, off St James's Street, also deserves a medal. The Stafford, I am told, became the unofficial meeting place for SOE people on leave. I know that one incredibly brave

woman stayed on for more than two years after the war had finished. Every night she drank her two gin and tonics and ate her dinner. She never asked for or was given a bill. That was how that small hotel honoured our heroes. It is a pity that those in charge never saw fit to do the same. Is it too late to put right this wrong?

8.34 pm

**Baroness Randerson:** I thank the noble Baroness for giving us this opportunity to pay tribute to these truly extraordinary women. Churchill referred to the SOE as "ungentlemanly warfare". The fact that its work was shrouded in mystery, combined with the fact that General de Gaulle was absolutely determined not to recognise its significance, led the Government at that time almost to ignore the amazing work that it did. The noble Baroness rightly says how important it is that we should recognise these women. Three of them were awarded the George Cross and others were made MBEs or were the subject of memorials, but there has been no consistent approach to remembering them and recognising what they did. That should be done in their memory, for the sake of their families and for our sake as a nation, because we should not forget them.

As has been pointed out, what is so outstanding about those women is that many of them may not necessarily have considered themselves British or felt patriotic towards Britain. Precisely because they were chosen primarily for their language skills, they came from very mixed international backgrounds. For example, Noor Inayat Khan, an Indian Muslim, had an American mother and had lived primarily in Russia and France. Christine Granville was of Polish descent. Vera Atkins, a Romanian Jew, had lived in France. Many of them exhibited great bravery and physical endurance just to get to Britain in the first place to train for the SOE. Denise Bloch walked across the Pyrenees to escape to London to undertake SOE training. Nancy Wake also escaped from France, leaving behind her husband, who was captured and killed. She then parachuted back into France as a special agent. We should remember that the life expectancy of these women was on average six weeks, as when they were captured they were treated as spies, not prisoners of war.

Finally, we should think about their courage. There is a sort of courage that can be forced on you. For example, if you are suddenly taken hostage, you can show great fortitude. You can show great courage when faced with big events. When you go into battle as a soldier, you can gear up your courage for that event, but these women had to live a lie and show that courage day in, day out and for every hour of every day, unaware of whom they could rely on.

8.37 pm

**Baroness Dean of Thornton-le-Fylde:** My Lords, I, too, thank my noble friend Lady Crawley for introducing the debate, the content of her speech and the way in

**6 Jun 2011 : Column 94**

which she put it across, for which we are all indebted to her. The way that she listed the names of those wonderful women was a tribute in itself.

The debate stimulates fresh awareness of ordinary women who carried out extraordinary deeds. If they had been asked beforehand whether they would make a significant mark on the war or British life, they would probably have said, "Me, I don't think so". However, one reads of a young woman, Yolande Unternahrer, who became a member of the SOE and was imprisoned after having been married for only six months. Men said that these women would break when under torture but they did not, and we know what can happen to women when held in captivity, but not to men. Yolande drew and wrote poetry on toilet paper in her own blood and somehow managed to do embroidery while in prison. These were quite extraordinary women who in the prime of their lives went off knowing that it was highly unlikely that they would come back.

I very much welcome this debate. A number of memorials have been erected around the country but we need a memorial to all the women in the SOE, not just those who have been recognised posthumously. I felt great shame that Eileen Nearne was found alone, with no family, and that the local authority in Torquay had to bury her. What an indictment that is on a nation that owes so much to such a small number.

It is always a pleasure to take part in a debate with the noble Baroness, Lady Trumpington. She was absolutely spot on, as usual, in saying that it is late but not too late. This is one of those issues that would receive much support from all across the House, not just to make us feel better, but to pay a debt that has been for too long outstanding.

**8.40 pm**

**Lord Patten:** It is indeed never too late until it is too late. These women were quintessential volunteers who were not just put on active service. That makes their bravery all the more extraordinary and all the more deserving of such enduring recognition that our nation can give before time passes the last of them by.

I have, via a splendid late member of my family by marriage, knowledge of the self-effacing style of someone who, while not in the SOE ranks, served at Bletchley Park. More accurately, because of that discretion, I have next to no knowledge of what she did. She cited until her dying day that life-saving reason, official secrets-the doctrine to which the wartime of both sexes cleaved so honourably in a pre-Wikileaks age. She may well have sat next to my noble friend Lady Trumpington, but, if so, she went to her grave keeping that secret-and quite right too.

Such discretion was all the more vital for those in the SOE-whether they were skilful controllers such as Vera Atkins CBE, masterful asset that she was, or those who she dispatched, such as the 26 women who came back from France and the 13 women who, alas, were left behind. They operated sometimes with 13-pound radios and dragged trailing antennae behind them as they moved through the countryside at night.

**6 Jun 2011 : Column 95**

If it is right, as it has so belatedly been judged to be, to recognise the totally male heroism of Bomber Command, then by the exact same token, as the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, said in her magnificent speech, such recognition should be accorded to these women. It is never too late until it is too late. Do not let us leave it until it really is too late.

**8.42 pm**

**Baroness Brinton:** My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, for instigating this important debate. I hope that the many forms of remembrance will be recognised. There has been much mention of Noor Inayat Khan, who died aged 30 at Dachau. A memorial is at last being sculpted, which will be put in Gordon Square in London. In today's sometimes tense multi-faith world, I find it incredibly moving that a young Muslim woman gave her life when protecting and saving Jewish refugees from the Holocaust. Her George Cross and Croix de Guerre are testament to her bravery and her ultimate sacrifice.

However, she is one of a few of the 39 women SOE agents, of whom 13 died, to be thus recognised. Many of their male counterparts received honours. Indeed, many of the male SOE agents were treated much better by the German authorities because, allegedly, women were not covered by the Geneva Convention. It is interesting also that there are differences in views on the

treatment of women by our own military. I found Sarah Helm's book *A Life in Secrets* interesting on this matter. She said that the problem was that the statutes of the British Army, Navy and Royal Air Force barred women from armed combat and that there was therefore no legal authority for women to engage in guerrilla warfare. I suspect that that has clouded the memorials to them thereafter. Perhaps that is why some women received CBEs rather than military honours.

Pearl Witherington was a case in point. Initially a courier in the Stationer circuit, running between the Loire and the Pyrenees, she later ran the Wrestler circuit in the Toulouse area, leading thousands of Resistance fighters. She was not just part of them or just a courier, but she led them. She was so hated by the Germans that there was a price of 1 million francs on her head. Last week, I visited the Musée de la Resistance in Cahors. The work of the SOE agents, including Pearl's work, is held up alongside that of the French Resistance fighters. Comparison with the French may be difficult because the war was on their soil. However, they recognised the work of women. The key message was universally reinforced throughout the museum. The service of these women was of the highest order and was undoubtedly military. I have also seen the brief displays in Arisaig and Beaulieu where SOE agents, men and women, were trained. There is barely a mention of women.

It is clear that the outstanding, dangerous and sometimes deadly service of those women needs to be recognised at the highest level. I ask the Minister to consider re-evaluating the medals awarded to those women, both alive and posthumously, to ensure that they reflect the highest military contribution possible.

#### **6 Jun 2011 : Column 96**

We also need to ensure that there is a permanent archive and major display in place that is well promoted and seen as a centre for the SOE women, because otherwise we will forget. In Cahors, at the small regional museum, every sheet on the displays about the women has these words:

"Our refrain to our youth.

Now ... When a grandmother talks to you of the Resistance in Le LotWatch her eyesIf she shares her story and she tells you that she is always 20Listen to her Kiss her for us ... those who do not forget".

It is time that Britain remembered all the brave women of the SOE and that we put in place mechanisms so that we do not forget.

**8.46 pm**

**Lord Bew:** My Lords, I add my congratulations to the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, on securing the debate tonight and give my strong support for the sentiments expressed in her speech.

An interesting thing about our intelligence services is the way in which they have been more open to the employment of women than other departments of the government machine. It is striking that, during the war, the report by Sir Neville Bland was clearly designed to encourage employment by women in the SIS. Indeed, before the end of the war, the director of production at the SIS said that it was now accepted policy that women should be employed in those appointments for which their qualifications and experience suited them. That was long before such views were widespread in other parts of Whitehall. My colleague at Queen's University, Belfast, Professor Keith Jeffery, author of the recently published, magisterial volume on MI6, tells me that he believes that there is a seepage of those relatively progressive attitudes from SOE. The great historian of SOE, the great wartime practitioner of those arts, Michael Foot, has confirmed to me, for example, that Colonel Gubbins, later Major-General Sir Colin Gubbins, head of SOE, had no problem with the employment of women. You could not say of Gubbins that he necessarily had the concept of being an equal

opportunities employer at the heart of his being or considered himself a feminist, but necessity is the mother of invention and, in 1942, the necessity was pressing to find new recruits, hence the foundation of F Section, referred to by the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the women of SOE, partly because of the good book by Sarah Helm on Vera Atkins, which has already been mentioned and, undoubtedly, the public dismay following the sad circumstances surrounding the death in Torquay of Eileen Nearne. We can all recall that embarrassing newspaper headline "Forgotten World War II spy tortured by the Nazis, died penniless after her British pension was halted without explanation". In 1946, Eileen Nearne was declared 100 per cent disabled by a special pensions tribunal as a result of exhaustion and neurosis, but over the next several years, her pension was whittled away and she seems to have received little help with the anguish which was the inevitable legacy of her experience of World War II.

**6 Jun 2011 : Column 97**

Those are things that make us very uncomfortable. It is clear to me that the issues raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, tonight are important. I very much hope that the Minister will respond as warmly as possible to the sentiments uttered by the noble Baroness.

**8.49 pm**

**Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe:** My Lords, I, too, thank my noble friend for initiating this debate. I add my support to the growing band of voices urging greater recognition for the female agents of the Special Operations Executive. That small number of extraordinary young women gave everything at an extraordinary time in our island history. Besides their bravery, their language skills and ability to pass unremarked in enemy-occupied countries, many female SOE agents also had in common their extreme youth. Many were in their early 20s when they volunteered to carry out SOE's work of reconnaissance and sabotage behind enemy lines. Their youth and their bravery have echoes today. I think of my god-daughter, whose ship, HMS "Liverpool", was engaged in a fierce gun battle earlier last month, six miles off the coast of Gadaffi-held territory in Libya. Thankfully, the attack was quashed with no casualties or damage to the ship.

Further afield, of course, Britain has women serving alongside men in Afghanistan and Iraq, risking their lives in the service of their country. We do not take for granted their willingness to do a difficult and dangerous job on our behalf, and we must not forget those who did so during previous conflicts.

The contributions of some SOE female agents-notably Violette Szabo and Odette Sansom-were recognised posthumously with the George Cross. Their stories, inevitably romanticised, became widely known through films and books in the decades immediately after the war. Of those women who survived the war, many maintained a long silence about what they did, as is borne out by the case of Eileen Nearne, already referred to, whose service in occupied France was known only on her death. As time goes on, more stories are revealed and deserve wider recognition among younger generations.

Like other noble Lords, I think of women such as Noor Inayat Khan, the first female SOE agent to be airdropped into occupied France. She sent back vital information from Paris for three months-far longer than the expected lifespan-but was eventually captured, tortured and executed in 1944 aged just 29. While she, too, received a posthumous George Cross and memorials exist to her in Paris and Dachau, there is no dedicated memorial to her in England, her adopted country. Campaigners

are hoping to raise sufficient funds to unveil a statue to her in Gordon Square in London, near her childhood home. A public commemoration of the contribution to this country's history by a young Asian Muslim woman would be a tremendously positive signal at the current time and I hope that the Government will give some public support to this campaign.

At a time when women in the Armed Forces were restricted to a non-combatant role in warfare, the women of the SOE trained and served alongside men,

### **6 Jun 2011 : Column 98**

risking their lives, often on a daily basis. Greater recognition is long overdue for their unique contribution.

**8.52 pm**

**The Earl of Selborne:** I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, for initiating this debate. My grandfather, Lord Selborne, succeeded Dr Hugh Dalton in February 1942 as Minister of Economic Warfare and, as such, he had ministerial charge of the SOE for three years. In fact, near the end of his life he revealed that about three-quarters or four-fifths of his time was spent on the SOE, for the Ministry of Economic Warfare was of course a convenient name to disguise what was going on.

I had the great privilege of speaking at the unveiling of the SOE Memorial on the Albert Embankment on 4 October 2009. I suppose that I was really speaking for my grandfather and all those who had had such respect for, and first-hand knowledge of, SOE agents. I pay tribute to the trustees of the Public Memorials Appeal who raised the money for that monument—the first for all SOE agents—to be placed here in London. I also pay tribute to their foresight in having a female agent, Violette Szabo, represent all agents on it. That memorial faces us here at the Palace of Westminster and it could not be in a more suitable location. We have already heard that Violette Szabo was one of those posthumously awarded the George Cross and the Croix de Guerre.

The SOE's activities were not universally welcomed by other armed forces. Air Chief Marshal Portal described the agents as assassins, and the Secret Intelligence Service, the SIS, now known as MI6, viewed the SOE with great suspicion. I can quite imagine that the SOE did indeed confuse issues so far as MI6 and the Foreign Office were concerned. My grandfather spent a lot of his time defending his colleagues in the SOE from being undermined by other branches of government. Churchill could always be relied on for robust support but at the end of the war the SOE was unceremoniously wound up. The new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was no supporter, nor indeed was Anthony Eden, but Lord Selborne and Sir Colin Gubbins, the last executive director of the SOE, and many others felt that the astonishing bravery of the SOE agents and the very great contribution that the organisation had made to winning the war both in Europe and the Far East had not been adequately recognised. Certainly, the agents would not reveal their role to their own families and they were certainly not going to talk about their achievements. Therefore, this short debate could play a very important role in redressing this long historical grievance.

**8.55 pm**

**Lord West of Spithead:** My Lords, I join the thanks to my noble friend Lady Crawley for this opportunity to recognise the very brave women in the Special Operations Executive. I have a particular interest as I am a trustee of the Imperial War Museum and the author of a study in the late 1980s into whether women ought to be employed in Royal Navy ships, which led to them taking up such employment in the early 1990s. During that study, one of the issues often raised with

### **6 Jun 2011 : Column 99**



me-many points were raised with me to the effect that it should not happen-was the ability of women to cope with conditions of combat. It is interesting that the SOE had addressed those issues more than 50 years before. Initially, there was a great deal of opposition to their being employed, as some noble Lords have said, but authorisation to use them came finally from Churchill himself, according to Selwyn Jepson, who was the recruiting officer for the French section of SOE. Interestingly, after the war, Jepson recalled:

"In my view, women were very much better than men for the work. Women ... have a far greater capacity for cool and lonely courage than men"-

something to which I think the noble Baroness, Lady Randerson, referred. That was an interesting reflection.

Of course, most of us have heard of Violette Szabo, Odette Sansom, and Noor Inayat Khan-probably less of her. They were all George Cross winners, and two of them were killed. Feature films were made of two of them, as has been said. The noble Baroness, Lady Trumpington, touched on Nancy Wake. How many have heard of her-the White Mouse? She led a band of 7,000 French Resistance maquisards in the Auvergne, and that was just before and during the liberation of France. She killed an SS man with her bare hands-a horrifying thought-and now she lives in the Star and Garter home in Richmond. It is quite incredible.

Of course, we must not forget that 67 years ago tonight more than 1 million men were fighting on the beaches of Normandy, in the air over Normandy and in some 5,500 Royal Navy ships-sadly nowadays we have rather fewer-off the coast of Normandy, but women were doing so in France. I mention one who was touched on by the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton: Pearl Witherington. She ran the Wrestler network, as was said, fielding about 1,500 men. The Germans put 1 million francs on her head, and during that crucial D-day period it was estimated that her network killed 1,000 Germans and took 1,800 prisoners. It is quite remarkable and almost unheard of. She was recommended for a Military Cross, but because she was a woman she could not have one. I am glad to say that that has now changed.

The murder of 13 such women in Germany, even though they were members of the FANY-the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry-and the Women's Royal Air Force, which should have protected them, was an appalling crime. I end with a verse from a poem that put words in the mouth of Violette Szabo by a man called Leo Marks, who was a cipher officer, which I think encapsulates these women:

"The life that I have all that I have  
And the life that I have yours".

I believe that we owe these very brave and formidable women recognition. It is not too late, but it is over to you.

**6 Jun 2011 : Column 100**

**8.58 pm**

**Viscount Slim:** My Lords, I thank the House for allowing me to talk briefly in the gap.

As a past president of the Special Forces Club, which was formed by the SOE, I speak of the feeling among those who survived and who live on that there should be an SOE memorial. It was built for that reason. Those of us from Special Forces who have served since World War 2 and joined the club consider it our job to perpetuate the name of the SOE. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, for raising this subject. It is right that we name certain brave and very gallant women, but

the feeling inside the SOE was that they thought of themselves as a family and they liked to be talked of as a whole. One must remember that there were many women in the SOE helping in training, signalling, communications, administration and preparing agents to go about their jobs.

The club helps in two ways. We have a very fine historical committee. Its task is to research the history, stories, tactics and everything that the SOE did. We work closely with the Imperial War Museum and raised money for certain things in the museum such as the Special Forces section. Another trust, funded by the great generosity of Sir Paul Getty, has the purpose of helping with the history of the SOE-of course, women come into this-alerting the youth of Britain not to forget what their forebears did, and getting in young students who are keen on history and want to write and learn, and who will continue to perpetuate the name of the SOE.

On our historical committee, no one has given us more help than the great author, Michael Foot, who is a member of the club by virtue of his wartime service in Special Operations. There is a memorial, but perhaps the Government should think about whether they, too, should do something.

**9.01 pm**

**Baroness Royall of Blaisdon:** My Lords, I, too, thank my noble friend Lady Crawley for her excellent speech and for securing this debate to celebrate the courage and tenacity of the 39 exceptional women who were members of the Special Operations Executive. It is right this evening not only that we remember these women but that we enable our children and our children's children to honour them in future years.

By the end of the war, there were 460,000 women in the military and more than 6.5 million doing civilian work. Without their contribution, we would not have won the war and secured our cherished freedom. I pay tribute to all these women, including the noble Baroness, Lady Trumpington. For me, the ones who stand out and who are in danger of being forgotten are the 39 women of the SOE. Many men did not believe that women should serve behind enemy lines, and recruiters were often sceptical in their assessments. However, these seemingly ordinary women, from many walks of life, were extraordinary. They left parents, lovers, husbands and even children to fight the tyranny of fascism alongside the Resistance in France. They were feminine and fearless, brave and beautiful, and we owe them a debt of honour.

**6 Jun 2011 : Column 101**

This evening, my thoughts turn also to another intrepid woman, my late friend-because she was my friend-Lady Park of Monmouth, who trained operatives for the SOE. At her memorial service, we learnt that her personal gun had been crafted by the SOE armourer. As the noble Viscount, Lord Slim, said, many women helped prepare the valiant men and women of the SOE family for their work in many countries.

It is difficult to imagine the contrast between the normal lives of the SOE women and their existence in France. One-third of the women were either tortured or killed after capture, but in life all maintained their dignity and none ever betrayed anything of substance. One of the most amazing women was codenamed Madeleine. She was shot at Dachau concentration camp after months of torture and attempts to escape. She revealed nothing to her interrogators, and her last act was to shout, "Liberté". This would have been an act of astonishing courage for any man or woman.

Madeleine's real name was Noor Inayat Khan, of whom we have heard much this evening. She was the daughter of an Indian Sufi preacher and an American woman. She was born in Moscow and educated in Paris, where she became a writer. Apart from carrying the British passport of an

imperial subject, she had no innate loyalty to the country for which she died. She was immensely brave and the first female wireless operator to be sent into France. We know that she did a fantastic job on the ground with the Resistance, and for several weeks she was the SOE's only radio contact in or near Paris. However, tragically, she was betrayed, aged 30, by the jealous girlfriend of a comrade.

I agree with Shrabani Basu, who researched Noor's history and wrote:

"I feel it is very important that what she did should not be allowed to fade from memory, particularly living in the times that we do. Here was a young Muslim woman who gave her life for this country and for the fight against those who wanted to destroy the Jewish race. She was an icon for the bond that exists between Britain and India but also between people who fought for what they believed to be right".

I very much hope that the planned memorial for Noor will be raised later this year, the first one in London to an Indian woman. It would help to ensure that at the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember the extraordinary women of the Special Operations Executive.

**9.05 pm**

**Baroness Verma:** My Lords, this has been an exceptional debate. Noble Lords' contributions have shown why this House is so hugely respected across the globe. I, too, join all noble Lords in paying tribute to our friend the late Baroness Park of Monmouth. She was a fabulous woman. It was only when I came to this House that I learnt of the huge work that she had done during those very difficult years during World War 2.

The Special Operations Executive employed or controlled just over 13,000 people during the Second World War, about 3,200 of whom were women, and it operated in several countries. France was its largest theatre of operations. It had five sections there-including an escape section and a section working with Polish immigrants-involving 1,000 British, French and Polish

**6 Jun 2011 : Column 102**

agents in the field. F Section, which operated under exclusive British control, sent out, as mentioned, 39 female agents, of whom 13 gave their lives.

I know that I might repeat some of the excellent points made today, but I really do think that they are worth repeating. Not all of the women who fought were British, as has been poignantly brought out today. Some, for example, came from New Zealand, France, the USA and Poland. Noor Inayat Khan was born in Moscow, her father came from an Indian princely family famous for fighting against the British, and her mother was American. As noble Lords have said, however, this was not about where you came from; it was about fighting evil and protecting people.

France was by no means the only country where female agents operated. Women distinguished themselves in the Low Countries, Yugoslavia and Italy. Besides "official" SOE agents, tens of thousands of women worked in SOE-sponsored networks throughout Europe, for example keeping safe houses for people fleeing Nazi oppression or helping escaping RAF air crews.

Many women in Britain undertook key work to liberate the world from Nazi oppression, from those who organised agents' missions-as the noble Viscount, Lord Slim, mentioned-or who trained agents, to those who belonged to organisations that remained unknown for many years. It was an honour to hear my noble friend Lady Trumpington speak in this debate tonight. I am sure that noble Lords will want to pay tribute to her vital service at Bletchley Park, whose code breakers gave the allies a huge advantage by decoding enemy radio messages. I also recommend that noble Lords visit

YouTube, where they can see and hear my noble friend Lady Trumpington giving an interview. She truly is a member of the 21st century.

All of us present will have been moved by recalling the heroism of the women of many nationalities and backgrounds who volunteered to face danger, torture and death in their determination to play their part in the fight of ordinary people of all ages against one of the worst and cruellest tyrants in history.

Women agents have been rightly honoured and commemorated. As mentioned, the highest decorations were given to several of these women. However, they were not the only ones to be given high public recognition. Noble Lords may well applaud Pearl Witherington, who-as my noble friend Lady Trumpington pointed out-commanded a unit of 3,000 men and refused the MBE (civil section) on the grounds that she,

"had done nothing remotely civil".

She was later awarded the military MBE.

These women have also been commemorated in ways that made them literally household names-in films, books, television programmes and official histories. The greatest authority on all aspects of SOE's work is Professor MRD Foot, who I believe is taking a close interest in this debate, and who has written so eloquently on the heroism of many women in SOE in France, Holland and beyond.

Others have more recently been added to this very public roll of honour, such as Eileen Nearne, who was decorated with the MBE and the Croix de Guerre. She recalled her deeds in a television programme in 1997,

### **6 Jun 2011 : Column 103**

and her death in September 2010 gave rise to much wider public recognition, including a funeral with full military honours.

There are many official and unofficial memorials. The Franco-British memorial at Valençay to the 104 agents of SOE's F Section killed in France was inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 1991. Britain contributed 30 per cent towards its cost, including a grant from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Pearl Witherington was one of the two moving spirits who inspired the memorial in Valençay. This memorial remains a focal point for remembrance to this day. On 6 May this year, there were special celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the first agent dropped in Valençay in the presence of the Princess Royal and Sir Peter Westmacott, the British ambassador to France.

In Whitehall stands the memorial to women of World War Two. The noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, who was instrumental in its establishment, made sure that SOE women were invited to its unveiling by Her Majesty the Queen in July 2005. In Westminster Abbey is a memorial plaque for members of all nationalities of the SOE, which was unveiled in 1996 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. A recent memorial was erected on the Albert Embankment in 2009, organised by a registered charity, which my noble friend Lord Selborne mentioned. It features the bust of Violette Szabo and honours SOE agents, specifically those who went to France and Norway. It was unveiled by the Duke of Wellington, with a speech by my noble friend Lord Selborne and a wreath-laying by the Norwegian ambassador. We can also welcome the memorial that is being planned for Noor Inayat Khan in Gordon Square near to where she used to live. Noor used to play in Gordon Square in her childhood and later, as a talented scholar, she would walk to the British Museum and its library. She was the first female wireless operator of F Section sent to France. After being arrested, she was shot in 1944.

F Section's agents are still among us today. We can pay tribute to Nancy Wake and Yvonne Burney, who live in London; to Sonya d'Artois, in Canada; and to Odette de Strugo, in Buenos Aires. They encapsulate the broad international participation in the struggle for freedom directed from London. The Government and this House will wish to pay tribute to the bravery and sacrifice of SOE agents such as these sent overseas during the Second World War and to whom we are for ever indebted. Ever since the end of the war, when the deeds of the women of SOE first became publicly known, their heroism has been rightly honoured. It is far from clear that they themselves wanted to be singled out for different treatment. Many, like Pearl Witherington, wished to be recognised by the nation as combatants on the same basis as men.

SOE agents have rightly been recognised in a proper and dignified fashion, and debates such as this allow the Government further to put their gratitude on record, but official recognition is not the final word. In the course of this debate, the courage and selflessness of the women of the SOE have been movingly recalled, with interesting suggestions for further honouring and perpetuating their memory today. The noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, is right that local authorities, for example,

#### **6 Jun 2011 : Column 104**

and a range of interested bodies, both public and private, may well wish to continue to give special commemoration to individuals or events with which they have special links, most obviously to honour people who were born or who lived close by. Local authorities have named buildings in housing estates after SOE heroines and put up blue plaques. Not far from this House a plaque on 64 Baker Street commemorates the headquarters of the Special Operations Executive.

It is interesting to see how the example set by these courageous women over 60 years ago still resonates today and inspires new initiatives. For example, last September the former Olympic gymnast Suzanne Dando led a charity trek in the Pyrenees with young people on behalf of the Royal British Legion, following, literally, in the footsteps of SOE agent Nancy Wake along the escape route on which she and thousands of civilians and servicemen walked to freedom. One of the women taking part recalled:

"To walk Le Chemin de la Liberté is to experience ... at least some of the dangers and hardships faced by those men and women who used this high mountain escape route during the war".

Events like this are testament to the fact that the deeds of the women of the SOE are not just recorded in books or inscribed on memorials but are kept alive and still inspire the actions of young women today. The memory of these brave women has been, and is, rightly honoured and kept prominent in the national memory. As we have heard in this debate, there are many ways to keep that memory fresh and many of the most powerful come from spontaneous initiatives. The Government applaud all initiatives of this kind.

Your Lordships' House and I are indebted to the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, for raising this debate. Her speech, so eloquently and passionately delivered, of course rightly raises the question of what to do next. The brave men and women who laid down enormous sacrifices for our liberties must always be remembered and recognised. Through this most world-changing period of our history, the role of many must be a reminder to us all and to generations to come that we owe a great deal to the bravery and sacrifice of those before us.

In the final two minutes, I will attempt to respond to some of the points raised. The noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, talked about commemorative stamps. I have been informed by my officials that anyone can put forward suggestions for commemorative stamps to the Royal Mail and that MPs and Peers often make such an approach, which is much better than a state-sponsored event. My noble friend Lady Randerson referred to de Gaulle being ungrateful. That may have been so but that was rectified with the memorial at Valençay, which was unveiled in May 1991. The noble Baroness, Lady

Brinton, talked about re-evaluating the medals awarded. I do not have an answer to that, and I am not sure of the policy or protocol, but I undertake to write to her.

The noble Viscount, Lord Slim, spoke about the Special Forces Club keeping the memory and knowledge of the SOE alive and well, which is absolutely right, but that does not mean we should leave it just to that club. It is incumbent on us all, wherever we can, to

**6 Jun 2011 : Column 105**

raise the issues and to ensure, as the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, said, that generations coming forward are informed of the important work undertaken by those brave men and women during that most awful, dark time of our history.

The noble Baroness, Lady Dean, spoke about the neglect of Eileen Nearne. I am advised that she cherished her anonymity. She received much support from the Special Forces Club and in 1997 spoke about her life in a television interview. As my noble friend Lady Trumpington said, often it was about women keeping the oath and not speaking about the work that they undertook during that time. They took it so seriously that many of them preferred to take what they did to the grave rather than tell everyone about the work that they undertook.

I thank all noble Lords, particularly the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, for raising this debate. I hope that it will be read widely in order to ensure that the memories of these fantastic women always live on.

*9.18 pm*

*Sitting suspended.*