CHAPTER 1

# The Secret Life of Noreen Riols

## *Training SOE Agents*

*'The disruption of enemy rail communications, the harassing of German road moves and the continual and increasing strain placed on German security services throughout occupied Europe by the organised forces of Resistance, played a very considerable part in our complete and final victory.'*
General Eisenhower, May 1945

It was on a Monday morning in August 2011, when a black London taxi cab dropped me at the corner of a leafy crescent in Knightsbridge, that I made my first visit to the Special Forces Club as a guest of one of its original members.

The club is as anonymous today as it was when it opened after the Second World War, its address only known to a select few. I press a small bell fixed to the building's outer wall adjacent to a heavy, tan-coloured oak door, and a few seconds later the door clicks open.

'Yes, sir, can I help you?' a young receptionist enquires helpfully.

'My name is Sean Rayment and I'm here to see Noreen Riols,' I respond. A few elderly club members milling around in the lobby immediately turn and look at me, with a mixture of suspicion and interest.

'She is waiting for you through there,' responds the receptionist, pointing at a half-open door through which the morning sun is

starting to shine. As I walk past another office two middle-aged men look up from behind their computer and stare unsmiling as I pass. I feel as though I have just been frisked.

Looking into the room, I see that Noreen Riols is reclining in a slightly worn, red velvet armchair which has the effect of diminishing her delicate frame. She is sipping a cup of breakfast tea while reading a copy of *The Times* and appears perfectly at home in the cosy, peach-coloured drawing room.

'Noreen?' I ask hesitantly as I enter the room.

'Yes?' she replies, looking slightly confused before a smile fills her face. 'You must be Sean. I'm sorry, I was expecting someone older. Please, come in and sit down. Now, would you like a cup of tea?'

After months of research, searching and seemingly endless emails and telephone calls, I have come face to face with Noreen Riols, one of the very few members of the SOE still alive.

As a journalist and former officer in the Parachute Regiment, I have met members of covert intelligence agencies, such as MI5, MI6, the SAS and more obscure organisations such as 14 Intelligence Company, which operated exclusively in Northern Ireland from the 1980s and whose existence was never officially acknowledged by the British government, on numerous occasions. I have always been struck by the physical ordinariness of those who inhabit the covert world. They might be super-fit and have brilliant analytical minds, but from the outside they tend not to stand out from the crowd; they are mostly neither too tall nor too short, fat or thin, handsome or ugly – just ordinary. For those who live their lives in the covert world of espionage and counter-espionage, blending in, being almost invisible within the crowd can be a life-saving quality. And Noreen is no exception. Sipping tea in the Special Forces Club she looked like everyone's favourite granny, with a kind, smiling, gentle face. It was curious, therefore, to think that some 70 years earlier Noreen was one of a select band of SOE personnel who were training agents to conduct assassinations and sabotage across Europe as Britain and its allies fought for their very existence.

Noreen and I shake hands before she adds: 'There aren't very many of us left, you know.' By that she means members of the SOE,

the wartime clandestine force created in July 1940 on the orders of Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, and Hugh Dalton, the Minister for Economic Warfare, with the aim of conducting sabotage, espionage, assassinations and forming resistance movements against the Axis powers in occupied countries.

Noreen was one of the many women employed by the secret organisation during the war. Today, aged 86, she is one of the few surviving members of F Section – the department which dispatched more than 400 agents, including 39 female spies, into France between 1941 and 1945. The methods of infiltration included parachuting, landing by aircraft and using fishing boats and submarines.

The section was one of SOE's most successful and was responsible for creating dozens of underground networks across France. Many of the agents were Britons who were fluent in French and were recruited from a wide range of backgrounds and occupations. Some were already serving in the armed forces, while others were recruited because of their knowledge of France, all united by their loathing of the Nazi ideology and the desire to strike back at a regime which had already enslaved millions of civilians.

But it was a dangerous and demanding occupation, and newly trained agents were warned that they had a 50 per cent chance of surviving the war. Those who were captured faced torture at the hands of the Gestapo followed by almost certain execution.

SOE's primary role was to help organise the French Resistance into a fighting force capable of mounting sabotage, with the primary targets being the rail and telephone networks.

'Isn't it funny that now that there are so few of us left we are in more demand than ever?' Noreen adds before returning to her seat. 'Now tell me, what do you want to know? There are no secrets any more.'

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*Noreen Riols*

Noreen Riols was born into a naval family on the Mediterranean island of Malta. From an early age she had decided that she too wanted to lead an adventurous life which would begin with taking a degree at Oxford. War broke out before she was ready to go to university, but she was already becoming a capable linguist at the Lycée, the French school in South Kensington.

'The plan was this: before the war I had wanted to go to Oxford, take a degree in literature, then I was going to study medicine, then I was going to astound the world with my incredible medical knowledge and then I was going to marry a tall, dark handsome man, who would whisk me off to a thatched cottage in the country, which was suitably staffed and had a pony paddock, and then I was going to have six children, all boys with red hair. I had arranged the whole thing; the only thing I hadn't arranged was the bridegroom,

but that was a detail which could be sorted out later – then the war came.

'The Lycée was evacuated early in the war, but a few girls remained in one class and I was one of those – but I can't remember doing any work at all and I seemed to spend the whole of my life tearing around South Kensington on the back of a Free French airman's motorbike.

'Life in London at that time was pretty dreadful because it was being bombed all the time and people were being killed, as you would expect, but I don't think we, girls of my age, ever realised how much danger we were in.

'I remember being in the Lycée when it was bombed in 1941. The school had been occupied by the Free French Air Force, and one day I heard a plane coming over and I'd just looked out of the window very excitedly when suddenly a French airman leapt on top of me and both of us were flat on the floor. Seconds later the bomb exploded and the window came crashing in. If he hadn't knocked me to the floor I would have been seriously injured or worse. That's why I say I don't think we really had any appreciation of the danger we faced daily. I don't ever remember being frightened – I don't think you do get frightened when you are young.'

'I got my call-up papers when I was 18. The papers said that either you joined the armed forces or you go and work in a munitions factory, but the idea of working in a munitions factory did not appeal to me in the slightest.

'All of my friends knew that we were going to be called up when we reached 18, and I thought I'll follow in my father's footsteps and I'll become a member of the Women's Royal Naval Service, WRNS. I thought the hat was very stylish and I could see myself in the uniform. But when I went to join up I was told that the only vacancies for women in the Royal Navy were for cooks and stewards, and the idea of making stew or suet pudding for the rest of the war was not the Mati Hari image I wanted to give to the waiting world, so I declined.

'My instructions were to report to a Labour Office somewhere in west London and when I was told by the female clerk behind

the counter what my options were I said, "I'm not doing that or that," and frankly this woman wasn't having any of it, she got a bit ratty and said, "Make up your mind – it's this or that, and if you can't make up your mind I'll put you down for a factory."

'Well, you can imagine how I felt, and I started to cause a bit of a fuss and said, "I will not work in a factory," and stamped my feet and so on. At which point a door opened and a slightly irritated man looked out and said: "OK, I'll take over this one." He then proceeded to ask me a lot of questions which had nothing to do with the warship I intended to take charge of.

'He then picked up on my schooling and said, "I see you went to the Lycée. You speak French?" I said yes, and then he started speaking to me in several different languages. He was leaping about from one to another like a demented kangaroo and he seemed quite surprised that I could keep up with him in French, German and Spanish. After the interview he sent me to the Foreign Office, where I was ushered into a windowless room, where again I was questioned by a high-ranking officer. Of course I had no idea what I was being interviewed for at that stage, but looking back I think there was obviously some kind of liaison between the Lycée, the SOE and the Labour Office. At that stage there was a requirement for people who could speak languages to carry out secret work – but it's not the sort of thing you can advertise for.

'After that interview I ended up at 64 Baker Street, the headquarters of SOE, but I had no idea where I was or what the building was for or the work they were doing. It was at Baker Street that I met Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, who was a major then and was in charge of SOE's French section.'

The SOE recruited people from all walks of life, with the primary requirement being a thorough knowledge of the country in which the agent was to operate. Fluency in the native language was vital, especially French for those entering France; thus exiled or escaped members of the armed forces of various occupied countries proved to be a fertile recruiting ground. Agents needed to be both ruthless and diplomatic, callous enough to slit a man's throat or execute an informer, while also able to master the politics of, say,

the French Resistance movement and motivate members of it accordingly. Training was tough and, as we shall see later in the chapter, trainees could be failed at any stage.

While Baker Street was the main headquarters, the organisation's various branches and departments were strewn across London and much of England. Wireless production and research departments were based in Watford, Wembley and Birmingham. The camouflage, make-up and photography sections, Stations XVa, XVb and XVc, were largely based in the Kensington area of west London. Station XVb, a camouflage training base and briefing centre, was located in the Natural History Museum. In addition to the various stations there were over 60 separate training centres across Britain, where agents would be taught a wide variety of field skills, including demolition, sabotage and assassination techniques.

Station XV – The Thatched Barn – was one of the most important establishments within the SOE. It was a two-storey mock-Tudor hotel built in the 1930s in Borehamwood, Hertfordshire, and had been acquired by Billy Butlin, the holiday camp entrepreneur, before being requisitioned by SOE.

The Thatched Barn was the place where agents would be kitted out with clothing and equipment which was appropriate for the country in which they were about to infiltrate. Every item of clothing had to be an exact fit with what was expected for that particular country, or even region. So if the French in Brittany, say, stitched hems in a particular way, then that method needed to be used when fitting clothes for an agent about to be sent to that region. Nothing could be left to chance.

'At the time the headquarters was called the Inter-Allied Research Bureau – well, that meant absolutely nothing to me, as you can imagine. I was hopping from one office to the other. Buck sent me to another office and said this captain is expecting you – and he may have been, but by the time I'd got there he'd forgotten that he was meant to be interviewing me. He looked at me as though I had walked in from outer space and then said, "Nobody, but nobody must know what you do here. That includes brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles." Then an immensely tall man called Eddie

McGuire, an Irish Guards officer, shot into the room making very funny, squeaky sounds. It really was quite a bizarre scene. Then the two of them suddenly stopped talking and ran out of the room and down the corridor. I wondered where I was – I was only just 18 at the time and it felt like I was in a lunatic asylum being run by the Crazy Gang.

'I looked down the corridor and I could see that all the doors were open and people were running around. I learnt later that these two men had just returned from the field and were a bit on edge, and Eddie had been shot in the throat while escaping, which is why he spoke like a ventriloquist's doll.

'There was a FANY* inside the room who seemed to be completely unperturbed by everything that was going on, so I said to her, "Is it always like this here?" and she said, "Oh no, it's usually much worse, but don't worry, you'll get used to it," and I did.

'After that interview, I was in, although I didn't really know *what* I was in. I only knew that I was involved in something secret, because I kept being told not to reveal anything about what went on and not to ask questions. The view then, and it holds true today, is that the less you know, the less you can reveal, and if the worst happens, and the worst was of course a German invasion, then the less you could reveal under interrogation. I didn't know it at the time but everyone who worked for SOE was on the Gestapo's hit list.'

The interview was concluded and Noreen was asked if she could begin work immediately – by which she thought they meant the following morning, but inside the SOE immediately meant immediately. Within the hour she was ensconced inside an office in Montague Mansions, another building taken over by SOE as it grew almost daily, a few streets away from the Baker Street headquarters.

'I was a bit of a runaround at first, until I got to know how things worked. One of my first jobs was to ensure that special coded messages which were broadcast every evening by the BBC

* First Aid Nursing Yeomanry.

at Bush House were in the right place at the right time. That meant taking them down to the "Basement", as it was known somewhat sinisterly, which was run by a sergeant who was a veteran of the First World War. He wasn't a particularly happy person and he seemed to have a cigarette permanently glued to his top lip, but we seemed to get on after a while.

'Probably my most important job at that time was to get all the messages from all the various sections to him by 5pm, so that they could be sent over to the BBC – it was crucial that the messages went out so that the Resistance units could get their instructions.'

Noreen was working alongside living legends of the secret world such as Leo Marks, a cryptographer in charge of agent codes, and Forest Yeo-Thomas, codename the White Rabbit, one of the organisation's most celebrated agents. The two men were great friends, according to Noreen.

'Leo Marks's office was on the ground floor and mine was on the first floor but I saw a lot of him. He was a very nice chap, but his popularity was further increased because his mother was always sending him cakes, biscuits and freshly made sandwiches, which, because he was so nice, he always shared with other people so there was always a bit of a party taking place in his room.

'After a few months I was given better and more interesting jobs, and one of the most interesting was to attend agent debriefing sessions. There was a fairly straightforward routine when an agent came in. First of all they were given a huge cooked breakfast at the airport, after which they were taken to a place called Orchard Court, in Portman Square, close to the SOE headquarters. It could sometimes take months to get an agent back from the field for a debriefing session because of the complexities of living in occupied France. It was about at that stage that I really began to understand the sort of pressures the agents were under.

'It was always fascinating to see them just hours after they had left France. Some would be shaking and chain smoking, and others who had witnessed or suffered much worse experiences were as cool as cucumbers. I think it was awfully easy for a lot of people in England to say at the time, "I'd never talk if I was captured." But

when you are actually over there none of us could tell what our reactions would be, and I suppose a time would come when the human spirit can no longer take any more punishment.

'The debriefing sessions were very relaxed, the agents were never rushed or pushed too hard, but the interviews were very detailed and could last several hours because the agents had so much information.

'A wireless operator for example was under enormous pressure, because he would have only about 15 minutes to send his message, which had to contain a lot of information about sabotage or enemy movements, but other information couldn't be included because it wasn't as crucial as operations.

'The idea of the debriefing sessions was to get into the real detail, such as the need to have a permit to put a bike on a train, or indeed the need for more bikes. The information was often the sort of detail a radio operator wouldn't be able to send because the need wasn't urgent. Every little bit of information helped in the preparation and briefing of agents who were just about to deploy on an operation. All of the agents had to be 100 per cent convincing all of the time, and it might be very small, almost insignificant details such as only being able to have coffee twice a week – that little bit of detail could be really important for a new agent going into an occupied country. Just imagine a new agent being lifted by the police and being asked a simple question like "How many cups of coffee do you drink a week?" The wrong answer could be a death sentence.'

By the middle of 1943 Noreen was a fully-fledged member of the SOE. She would begin work every morning, dressed in civilian clothes, at around 8am and work through until 6pm or later, depending on whether there was some sort of emergency. It became second nature never to talk about her work, and even her own mother was convinced Noreen was a secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. With her almost perfect French, Noreen worked exclusively in F Section, the department which looked after agents in France. SOE now occupied several buildings in central London, all close to the headquarters in Baker Street.

Working in the headquarters were citizens of every country occupied by the Axis powers – but there was, according to Noreen, an unwritten rule, which was that there could be absolutely no contact between people from the different sections for security reasons.

'We were all very aware that the agents' security, their lives in fact, depended on secrecy. One word, one slip of the tongue could result in a disaster. I loved the job, the people were fascinating and there was a real sense of purpose to the work.'

Then, in February 1944, Noreen was asked to go and work at what was known as the secret agents' finishing school at Beaulieu, the country seat of the Barons Montagu of Beaulieu.

By the time Noreen joined the SOE, the secret organisation has grown into a vast network of more than 60 training schools located across Britain, where at any one time hundreds of students were under training. There were also schools in Canada, for the training of US and Canadian agents, as well as in Palestine, at the Ramat David air base in Haifa, and in Singapore.

The training programme began at the 'Preliminary Schools', such as the Special Training School 5 (STS5) at Warnborough Manor, near Guildford in Surrey. The courses generally lasted two to three weeks, and it was here that they assessed the recruit's character and suitability for clandestine operations, without actually revealing what SOE did. (Interestingly, this same technique was adopted by 14 Intelligence Company during the initial selection when recruiting operatives for 'special duties' in Northern Ireland.)

Those potential SOE agents who passed were sent to one of several paramilitary schools, based at, amongst other establishments, the ten shooting lodges of Arisaig House (STS21), a forbidding granite country residence in Inverness-shire, which was requisitioned by the Army in 1941 and where Odette Churchill, one of the heroines of the SOE, was trained.

The locations were chosen for their remoteness and the gruelling terrain. Physical training was one of the key elements of the training, including many marches over the rugged Scottish countryside. For reasons of security, nationalities were kept separate, but virtually all students followed the same courses. Days were long and

sleep was often in short supply, as the instructors piled on the pressure and assessed the recruits' ability to make decisions and think clearly under extreme duress.

The courses lasted for five weeks and included lessons in physical training, silent killing, weapons handling, demolition, field craft, navigation and signals. Weapons training was based on close-quarters combat, with two ex-Shanghai officers, William Fairbairn and Eric Anthony Sykes, teaching unarmed combat and silent killing. The two men gave their name to the FS fighting knife – a small knife used mainly by the Commandos – and the Fairbairn Fighting System, which was also taught to members of the CIA and FBI. The students learnt to master the Colt .45 and .38 and the Sten gun, a weapon regarded by many as being of dubious reliability. The recruits were taught the 'double tap' system of killing, firing two shots at a target, ideally the head, to ensure certain death.

Instructors also made use of the local train network, and trainees were given missions to 'sabotage' the West Highland Line using dummy explosives. Later in their training, the student agents also had to undertake a number of parachute jumps, six for men and five for women, at Ringway airport near Manchester.

Once these stages of training had been successfully mastered, agents moved to Beaulieu in Hampshire, the location of the Group B training school – 'the final stop before they drop', as some wag once observed.

Beaulieu was the perfect training school. It was located within the seclusion of the New Forest and the estate had numerous houses and outbuildings where students could perfect and hone their skills in relative secrecy. The training staff were housed in a central headquarters while the trainees were accommodated in a variety of different houses depending on their country sections.

Those destined for France were expected to know about all things French and adopt various customs, quirks and national idiosyncrasies, likewise for those being dispatched to Denmark, Belgium, Holland or other occupied countries. Each house had its own 'house commandant' whose job was to monitor and occasionally mentor the agents and keep them on the straight and narrow.

The one golden rule was that the trainee agents only ever associated with members of their own house for reasons of security, which meant that the training staff would come to each of the houses to give lectures.

During the course of the war more than 3,000 agents went through Beaulieu, whose vast rambling estate was built around the ruins of Beaulieu Abbey, and whose centrepiece is Palace House, the imposing Gothic grey stone mansion which was still used by members of the Montagu family.

'The gardener's cottage where I lived was really two cottages back to back. When we lived there we were three plus the housekeeper. Whoever was sleeping in the other (smaller) cottage had to go out and in through the front door to go to bed at night. And the winters were cold! "The House in the Woods", where the 25 officers lived – which had been a secret weekend rendezvous for Edward VIII and Mrs S. before he abdicated – was about ten minutes' walk away from the cottage, across the forest.

'In the middle of the estate was our HQ, a rather ugly stockbroker Tudor house called "The Rings", which has since been demolished and replaced with an equally ugly modern bungalow. The students were billeted in various houses away from us. We couldn't see their houses and they couldn't see us. The women were housed in "The House on the Shore", while the French students were mostly housed at "Boarman's" or "The Orchard" or "The Vineyard". The different nationalities were kept strictly apart, for security reasons. As were men and women – no unisex houses.'

The Beaulieu training houses were subdivided into five departments covering areas such as agent technique, clandestine life, personnel security, covert communication, cover story techniques and counter-surveillance. Agents were also taught how to change their appearance by using disguises. One of the instructors at the school, Peter Folis, who had trained as an actor, would often tell his students not to think 'false beards' but instead make small changes to the face such as wearing glasses, and part the hair differently.

'I was a little disappointed to be leaving London, because it was the heart of everything, but Buck said to me, "I want you to go to

Beaulieu," so I just got on with it. I went home, packed my bags, got on a train and that was it. I was at Beaulieu. My new home was a gardener's cottage on the estate and was shared by three of us: a South African FANY and a woman of about 35 who was very distinguished, and we had a splendid housekeeper who looked after us like a mother hen. It was a very gender segregated set-up, but that didn't stop all sorts of secret romances taking place.

'There was another house where 25 instructors were based, and they were mainly ex-agents. At first I didn't really know why I had been sent to Beaulieu, but after a very short time it became clear that I was going to help to instruct the students or agents, and that was a very exciting prospect. The men and women attending the courses were known as "students" while training, "bods" when they were sent on a mission and reached the rank of human being – if they made it back. It was all sort of light-hearted, designed, I suppose, to remove some of the fear.

'Kim Philby* had served as an instructor at Beaulieu for a short time and was very well liked. When I arrived he had already returned to London, but everyone spoke of him as being very charming, pleasant and efficient.

'But Kim was recalled to London; maybe his superiors were already a little suspicious. Another of the trainers was Paul Dehn, who became an art and theatre critic, and there was another one called Jock who was always very nice to me. Socially the set-up was very public school. For example, the instructors changed into service dress or black tie for dinner, so it was a little bit stiff. But Jock was different. He was always dressed in battledress and hobnail boots. The days were long and all of the staff worked seven days a week, but we finished at 1pm on a Sunday. Jock would come to our cottage after lunch and would bang on the door and say, in a very thick Glaswegian accent, "Does anyone want to come for a walk?" There was always a twinkle in his eye. I would often go for a walk with him and he might try and get a bit romantic. One only had to say "Shift it, Jock" – he never insisted. But what I didn't know at

* British double agent who spied for the KGB.

the time was that Jock was a specialist in silent killing. If I had known that at the time I'm not sure I would have had the courage to resist his advances.'

Noreen's main duty at Beaulieu was to help in the training of agents in a role known as a 'decoy'. All agents had to be able to follow targets and conduct close surveillance without being noticed. It was a specialist skill which took time to perfect. During the various exercises the student agents were ordered to follow Noreen and report on her movements, supposedly without being seen. The majority of the exercises took place in either Bournemouth or Southampton, the two large towns closest to Beaulieu.

'On a particular training day, we were given a scenario and told to head to a particular landmark in either Southampton or Bournemouth. I always worked in Bournemouth, and the agents were told, "You will see a girl in a headscarf and a dirty macintosh and a shopping basket, and she'll probably be wandering along in front of the pier at about 3pm: follow her and find out what she is up to." The idea was for them to try and follow me, find out who I met, where I went shopping and whether I had any sort of routine – exactly the sort of thing they might have to do in France. But the trick for them was not to be seen by me, and that was a very difficult skill to master. It was obviously easier for me to spot them than for them to spot me. It was wartime and there were a lot of women about, and most of them had baskets, because as soon as a woman in wartime saw a queue she would join it, because a queue would usually mean fresh food. But there was a shortage of men of a certain age. Most men between the ages of 19 and 40 were serving in the forces, so people looked very strangely at a man who was dressed in civilian clothes who was in his twenties or thirties, and quite often the agents would get abuse hurled at them. People, especially women who might have sons or husbands serving overseas, would walk right up to them and say things like, "It's disgusting, there's a war on and there you are wandering around Bournemouth in the middle of the afternoon – you should be ashamed of yourself."

'At the beginning of their training the agents were a bit ham-fisted. They would often stand very close to me, or if I was looking

in a shop window then they would come and look in the window one shop along, but I wouldn't go, and in the end they would have to move on. And if they stopped to tie a shoelace – which usually wasn't undone – then I would know that I had got my man.

'There was a big department store called Plummers which I would often head straight for. I'd make for the ladies' lingerie department, and of course none of the men would like walking around that particular department. The students would come in following me and it would suddenly dawn on them that they were getting some very odd looks from other women and from the girls at the counters. I used to hold up a few unmentionables just to make them look a little more embarrassed. After that I would saunter up a few steps towards the lift and press the lift button. The target would then do one of two things: either he would get in the lift with me, or he would race up to the floor of the button I had pressed so he could continue following me. If he did that, I would quickly rush out of the lift and run down the stairwell by the side of the lift, and this is where my basket would come in useful, because I would whip off my headscarf and my mackintosh and put them in the basket, so all of a sudden I looked like someone different, and by the time he realised what had happened I had disappeared.

'Once I had gone through the door and was outside, that was it, he had lost me. Even if he realised what had happened, by the time he got outside I was gone. It was tremendous fun and, although in many respects it was a bit of a game, it was also deadly serious. You couldn't have an agent who stuck out like a sore thumb, either because he was just being clumsy or because he was being too suspicious, so the trick was to act as normally as possible and to try and blend in. There were some who were very good. In some cases you would report back and say, "He didn't turn up," and the instructors would say, "Ah, but she did."

'One of the other key skills an agent had to be adept at was using "live" and "dead" letterboxes – the passing of messages. A message might read: "Somebody will be sitting on a bench in the pier gardens about 11pm or 3pm and he's got a message for you," and

you'd have to hope that somebody else, not a person taking part in the exercise, hadn't got on the bench too, because that could be a bit confusing.

'You'd be told that the contact would be reading a newspaper, so you would go and sit down and take out a cigarette – I've never been smoker but I didn't mind puffing away – and he would fold up the paper and put it down and I would pick it up, and that was quite normal because there were very few papers published and it was first come, first served, and everyone wanted to read a paper, so if you saw a paper lying around you always picked it up.

'We would also pass messages in cinemas and tea rooms, which was quite difficult because you had to make sure you found the right person, especially if you were a woman. If you started passing messages to a strange man you could be had up for soliciting, so you had to make sure you were giving the messages to the right person.'

Noreen also had to become proficient at the so-called 'honey trap', a tactic in which female agents use their feminine allure to 'convince' enemy agents to confess or at least admit their activities. It was a demanding task, not least because if Noreen was successful it might mean the end of an agent's career even before it had begun. Curiously, some male agents did give some indication that they were involved in covert activities, often within just an hour or so of meeting Noreen.

'During this stage of the training we would work very closely with the students' conducting officer. He wasn't part of the Beaulieu staff, instead his job was to act as a sort of mother hen to the students, giving them a bit of inspiration when needed but also listening to their troubles and soothing their fears, reassuring them, when needed, that they were up to the task and also explaining the risks of the job. I think that certainly some of the students, as time went on and news came in of field agents who had been captured and killed, would think about their own mortality – that was only natural. There was nothing wrong with agents worrying about being killed; at the very least it demonstrated that they had grasped the reality of what they were about to do.

'Of most concern, however, were agents who might talk or give away what they were up to, either by boasting or through fear or torture, and who might display characteristics which would ultimately compromise their role. The conducting officer would sit in on various exercises and watch the students, and he would pick out anybody he thought might be likely to talk. This wasn't a test which all of them had to pass. He would approach one who he thought might be a bit suspect and say, "Let's go out for a drink, or dinner or something – you've been working hard and deserve a bit of a break." He would often do this to students, so there was nothing that unusual in it.

'Together, the conducting officer and I would act out a couple of different scenarios which we had worked out beforehand, planning down to quite a lot of detail. One was known as the Royal Bath Dinner, named after the hotel where we often worked. I also worked at the Lincoln Hotel, but I preferred the Royal Bath because it had a terrace off the dining room and if there was a full moon shining on to the sea it was very romantic and much easier for me to work.

'The two men would go off and have dinner and I would wander into the dining room out of the blue and the conducting officer would say, "Oh, Noreen, what are you doing in Bournemouth? How lovely to see you." He would explain that I was some old friend of the family or something believable and would then ask me to stay for dinner. And the three of us would chat for a while and then someone would come along and say to the conducting officer, "Sir, there is a phone call for you" or something like that, and he would return and say, "I'm frightfully sorry, I've been called away, but you two stay here and have some fun and if I can I'll come along and join you later." And that's how it began.

'We had another scenario where he would say to one of the agents, "I met a girl today, I used to be at school with her brother, and I've invited her to join us for a drink." And the students never minded. Well, the Brits minded a bit, because they were looking forward to a good old boozy evening and along came this blasted woman who was going to spoil everything. But agents with other

nationalities were very accommodating, they quite liked it because they didn't get the chance to meet many English women, so they were quite pleased.

'I found that the Brits didn't talk much. My job was to try and get them to talk. The Brits were very stuffy and came out with a series of stories without actually saying anything. One told me that he was a representative for a toothpaste company, which was a bit daft because we didn't have any toothpaste, we used to clean our teeth with soot or salt. They pretended they were all sorts of things, but the most obvious excuse they gave was that they were on a very boring course with the War Office. The clever ones would always try and steer the subject of conversation back to me, so that I had to talk about myself or what I did, so I had to be careful too.

'But the foreign agents were different, especially the younger ones. I think they were lonely, they were often far from their families and their culture – it was isolating for them. It must have been very flattering for them to have a young English girl chatting away to them, hanging on their every word. I remember one, a Dane, a beautiful blond Adonis. I managed to get him out on to the terrace – he didn't need a lot of persuading actually, I think he was rather taken with me. I weighed about 18 kilos less then, and didn't have white hair, and I didn't need glasses in those days.

'As we chatted on the terrace, he asked me if we could spend Sunday together. I took a little persuading, just so that he didn't get suspicious, but I knew of course that we couldn't. I became a very accomplished liar, I lied to everyone – my family, my friends – I just lived a lie. But once he said that, I felt a real surge of adrenaline because that was my lead, it was wonderful feeling that I might be on to something. I said, "Yes, I'd love to meet up on Sunday. But what is going to happen afterwards? Am I just the sort of thing you pick up on one day and then off you disappear, or are you going to be around?"

'He looked slightly crestfallen and told me he was going away, so I responded, "Oh, you're going away. Well, where are you going? Could we write? Could we meet again? I don't particularly want to get involved unless we could meet again." This went on for a

while as we chatted over coffee and perhaps a whisky or two. After a while he told me that he would be going back to Denmark, which at the time was still occupied by the Nazis – and the only people who did that sort of work were agents. It was almost like a bit of a confession or perhaps he just wanted to unload some of his concerns. He said, "I won't be able to write, I won't be here, I'm being repatriated back into my country."'

The Danish agent had committed a cardinal sin. Although the trainee spy hadn't actually admitted that he was a member of the SOE, he had provided a clue, and in the world of espionage that is often all that is needed. Had his admission been made in the field he could have jeopardised himself, his team and an entire network, leading to the deaths of hundreds of men and women.

'I felt terrible when he said that, because I knew I was going to have to betray him. That was my job – it was the sort of job you hoped you would never succeed at. It was exciting up until the end, when you felt awful. But the reality was that I was helping to save the agent's life and possibly the lives of many others. It was a horrible job but it had to be done.'

Noreen kept up the pretence all evening, which ended with a gentle kiss on the Dane's cheek. The student spy returned to his quarters while Noreen headed straight to her house to write up her report. Once written, it was submitted that same evening to the debriefing officer, Colonel Woolrych, known to everyone as 'Woolly Bags', an intelligence specialist who had served in the First World War and later went on to become the commandant at Beaulieu.

'Like many people in that world, Woolrych didn't suffer fools gladly, but I found that he had a very compassionate side. All the reports from all the different spy schools were sent to Woolly Bags. He then made an assessment and sent the final report to the head of section. For French students it would have been Buck, and he would have the final say as to whether the student should be sent into the field. But if someone had spoken about their role, that was a very different matter.

'The following morning I was called into an office, and sitting there was the Dane. I stopped in front of him and we both looked

at each other and I think it slowly began to dawn on him what had happened. At first there was a look of confusion and then, when Woolly Bags said, "Do you know this woman?" the look on his face turned to complete hatred. On previous occasions when I had done this, I had found that most of the students took it well, even if it meant that their careers in the SOE were compromised. But the Dane was different.

'He leapt to his feet with this infuriated look on his face and he said, "You bitch!" Well, no woman likes to be called a bitch. I was quite upset. I was then asked to leave the office and the two officers continued with the debriefing.

'Afterwards I was called back into Woolly Bags' office and in his very blunt way he said: "There's no point being upset about it. If he can't resist talking to a pretty face in Denmark he won't last an hour. He more or less told you that he was going to be an agent after dinner and a few drinks. Imagine what you could get out of him if you had a week, or if he was threatened with torture or execution. And remember it's not only his life he's putting in danger, he could bring down an entire network." I did realise that, of course, but Woolly Bags' words were of little comfort to me. The poor chap had gone through six months of very tough training, and Beaulieu was by no means a holiday camp.

'Beaulieu was known as the Finishing School for Spies – it was where everything they had learnt for the last six months was supposed to come together, so that the agents could deploy into the field and hopefully survive and carry out the tasks for which they had been trained. But it was also a very tough place, and if the students weren't up to the task then they could be failed at any moment. Some students were failed on the last day because the instructors could not be sure that they would survive as an agent.

'But Buck could be very generous – and even for those students who talked it didn't always mean the end. Buck used to say, "They've learnt their lesson, they won't do it again." Of course Buck had to be absolutely sure about this, because it was his reputation on the line also. His attitude was that lots of agents made mistakes in training, and it was better to make the mistakes in training rather than

on an actual live mission. But this attitude was always a risk and I'm not sure that the other section heads had such an enlightened approach as Buck.'

Noreen never saw the Danish student again and never discovered whether he actually became a spy.

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The students at Beaulieu were also taught how to pick locks and enter buildings and factories without being heard or seen. The instructors were former spies, but some rehabilitated criminals, often ex-burglars, also served at Beaulieu and they were known as Method of Entry (MOE) men. One of the trainers was Johnny Childs, a lock-picker extraordinaire.

'Johnny was always easy to recognise because he was always driving around in a truck and on the back of this truck was a huge door covered in locks – every conceivable type of lock you could imagine. His job was to teach the students how to pick the locks, so there were locks from every country, French, German, Dutch, Danish. As an agent you might have to enter a building to which you didn't have a key – it might be in an emergency so this was a really vital art. Johnny had learnt his skills from a burglar. The story was that the burglar was serving a long stretch in Pentonville Prison.'

When the war broke out the SOE realised they needed help to enter buildings, and the experts of the trade were burglars. A senior SOE officer approached the authorities and asked for an expert burglar to be released into their care on the condition that he willingly passed on his skills – or so the story goes.

The lessons in 'breaking and entering' took place towards the end of the course when the students were preparing for the final exercise – a 96-hour test which all students had to pass. On one occasion Noreen was sent to accompany one of the students taking part in the exercise whose task was to travel to London and reconnoitre a certain address.

'The student who asked me to accompany him was very dashing, a member of the Parachute Regiment, and very handsome. And so I was delighted to go along. I also thought it would be fun

and a chance to be in London for a few hours. We got the train up to London and went to the address, which was in central London close to Westminster Cathedral. I thought we were just going to look at the building so that he could say he had been there, but he wanted to go up to the fourth floor, which was fine, but when we got to the door he began to pick the lock and then went inside the flat.

'It was a Saturday afternoon, about 4pm, and I had never been so terrified in my life. He looked at me shaking and said, "Don't just stand there dithering, come in." I went in and I thought he was just going to have a quick look and then leave. Not a bit of it. He went into the bedroom and bounced on the bed, went into the bathroom and turned on taps, went through some drawers and cupboards. It was awful, every time we heard the lift I thought Wormwood Scrubs here we come. Then he started fiddling with the curtains, examining the photos on the piano – it probably lasted 10 minutes but it felt as if it was about four days. I was almost fainting by the end of it.

'As part of the compensation for this ordeal he took me to an underground pub in Piccadilly where he managed to revive me. We had a few drinks and then he took me to the theatre. What amazed me, when I thought about it afterwards, was how cool he was, completely unflappable. I was almost rigid with panic and my only thought was to get out, but he was completely comfortable.'

The experience was both fascinating and frightening for Noreen, who now fully realised how agents in the field had to work under conditions of almost unimaginable stress and still be able to think clearly.

There were occasions during the 96-hour exercise when events seemed to become almost tragically real. The agents were now so close to deploying into occupied countries that they no longer regarded themselves as students – the lines between exercise and reality became blurred. One such occasion involved a French SOE member who excelled in sabotage and silent killing in training.

'When he went on his 96, one of the decoys had been ordered by Buck to see if she could get him to talk about what he was

doing. She met him in a bar, a classic scenario, and they spent the whole evening chatting, and the next day they had lunch together and went on a romantic walk together in a forest somewhere. She was chatting to him and becoming more and more romantic and they got into some sort of passionate embrace, at which point he grabbed her by the throat and began to squeeze until this poor girl almost fell into unconsciousness. At that point he released his grip and as the girl gasped for breath he said, "Now go back and tell Buckmaster to be more careful next time."'

Everyone was fully aware of the risks involved with being an agent, although, according to Noreen, the knowledge that death and torture would almost certainly follow capture was not something anyone dwelt upon.

'We weren't told about deaths or executions immediately after they happened – the news sort of filtered down. For example, if a radio op came up on schedule every day and then one day he didn't, Baker Street might suspect that he was wary that the Germans were on to him and he was trying to find a safe house. But if there was still silence after six or seven days you had to accept that he or she had been killed or captured. Everyone was obviously very sad when the news came through, but no one made a fuss. There was never any real outpouring of emotion. I think we mourned privately.

'I always thought the work was particularly dangerous for the radio operators. They were told that they had just a 50 per cent chance of surviving the mission – imagine what that must have been like. They received no extra pay for the work they were undertaking, it would have been the same rate as anyone of equal rank.

'The radio operators must have had nerves of steel – it was the most dangerous job, and they were highly valued and looked after very carefully. If a group lost their radio operator they lost all contact, because he was the only one who knew how to encode and decode messages.

'The golden rule for radio operators was never to transmit for more than 15 minutes, because it took the Germans 20 minutes to get a fix on a location.

'One radio operator told me that he had a horror of transmitting from inside a house, because he had this terrible feeling that the door would one day burst open and the Germans would catch him in the act, so to avoid this he always tried to transmit in the open. He would throw his aerial over a tree and always had two members of the Resistance with him who stood with guns at the ready and would warn him if there were any Germans approaching.'

Noreen also recalled the exploits of one agent called Benny Cowburn who was parachuted into occupied France four times between 1939 and 1941. He was awarded the MC and Bar, the France and Germany Star, the Defence Medal War medal, 1939–45, the Légion d'Honneur and the Croix de Guerre avec Palme.

Cowburn was extremely self-reliant and even used to make his own bombs. His base was a hut in the mountains.

'Benny played a very dangerous game, because he pretended to be friendly with the Germans. He must have had a tremendous confidence in his Resistance group, because they could have shot him for being a traitor. But he became quite friendly with the Germans, and one night, when he had been busy making his bombs, at about 3am, there was a terrible banging on the door. He opened the door and the German soldiers wanted to come in for a drink and a smoke, saying words to the effect of, "What are you doing up at this time of night?" and he said, "Oh, I'm making some bombs to blow up a bridge."

'But the Germans didn't take any notice because they thought he was joking, obviously, and said, "Have you got any beer?" He let them come in and gave them some beer. They asked him if he was going to have one and he said, "No, you have to keep a clear head when you are playing with dynamite," and they all thought he was terribly funny and screamed with laughter. After they had their beer they left. I think Benny was probably the coolest man I knew.'

Noreen harboured a secret ambition to become an agent herself, but two critical facts were against her – she was too young and the war was coming to an end. The youngest female agent was Anne-Marie Walters, who was aged just 21 when she arrived in France, but Noreen was only 20 at the end of the war in Europe.

Walters was recruited into the SOE from the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in July 1943, aged just 20. She was born in Geneva to a French mother and an English father. The family left Switzerland at the outbreak of war, and two years later Walters joined the WAAF. Her SOE codename was Colette and she parachuted into south-west France in January 1944, where she remained until the invasion of Normandy. She survived the war and was decorated by both the British and French governments for her work in occupied France.

'One of my last memories from life at Beaulieu involved a little Cockney corporal called Frank, whose job seemed to be getting us girls out of scrapes. Frank was engaged to a girl called Doris who worked in Woolworths. On VE Day we had a party and I was staggering over to The Rings, our HQ, a rather ugly stockbroker Tudor house in the middle of the estate. I was rather worse for wear because I had danced until dawn and had a few drinks. Suddenly out of a rhododendron bush appeared Frank and he said, "As it's VE Day, could I kiss you?" and I said, "Frank, what about Doris?" and he said, "I'll tell her that it's my last sacrifice for the war effort." Not really very flattering for me.'

As the Allied forces began pushing through France the need for agents to be sent into Europe decreased rapidly, but there was still a need for volunteers for service in the Far East, especially Burma, where Force 136, also part of SOE, were harrying the retreating Japanese.

'We all knew that the war in Europe was coming to an end. By the end of 1944, or even as early as D-Day, there was a certain inevitability about it. But when the end came at Beaulieu it was all a bit sudden. But there was still a war to be fought in Burma and I hoped to be sent there. In fact I was actually on embarkation leave when the atomic bomb was dropped in August 1945.

'By October 1945 Beaulieu had pretty well closed down, and by January 1946 SOE had ceased to exist. MI6 didn't like the organisation, I think they saw SOE as a threat to their existence, and after all both organisations were competing for the same meagre resources. We in SOE all knew that MI6 regarded us as a "load of amateur bandits" – well, we were all amateurs and we were bandits.

SOE was made up of lawyers, accountants, teachers, businessmen, bankers and future housewives. None of us were professional spies, but I think we were pretty good at what we did.'

Noreen had left the SOE in September 1945 and, like all agents and members of the organisation, she was sworn to secrecy. They were ordered to sign the Official Secrets Act and effectively told to keep their collective mouths shut.

After the war she put her language skills to good effect and joined the BBC's French Service, where she remained for five and a half years.

'Occasionally you would come across an agent from F Section, and we would acknowledge each other and perhaps have a quiet word over lunch or a cup of tea in the canteen, where we'd talk about our time in SOE and catch up on news of old friends such as Harry Ree,* Eddie McGuire, George Millar, Odette Churchill, Peter Churchill and Bob Maloubier.

'Then one day Buck turned up and it was a bit like being back on home ground. Some time later my future husband, Jacques, arrived at the BBC. Jacques had served as a captain in the French 1st Army and under Général de Lattre de Tassigny with the 19th battalion of the Chasseurs Alpins, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Bar. We got to know each other and we later married and I moved to France, where I have now lived for 56 years.'

Noreen remains an active member of the Special Forces Club, regularly attending reunions and meetings, where she often hears previously untold stories from her former colleagues of 70 years ago.

* Member of the SOE who started the war as a conscientious objector.