

She Landed by Moonlight:
The Story of Secret Agent
Pearl Witherington

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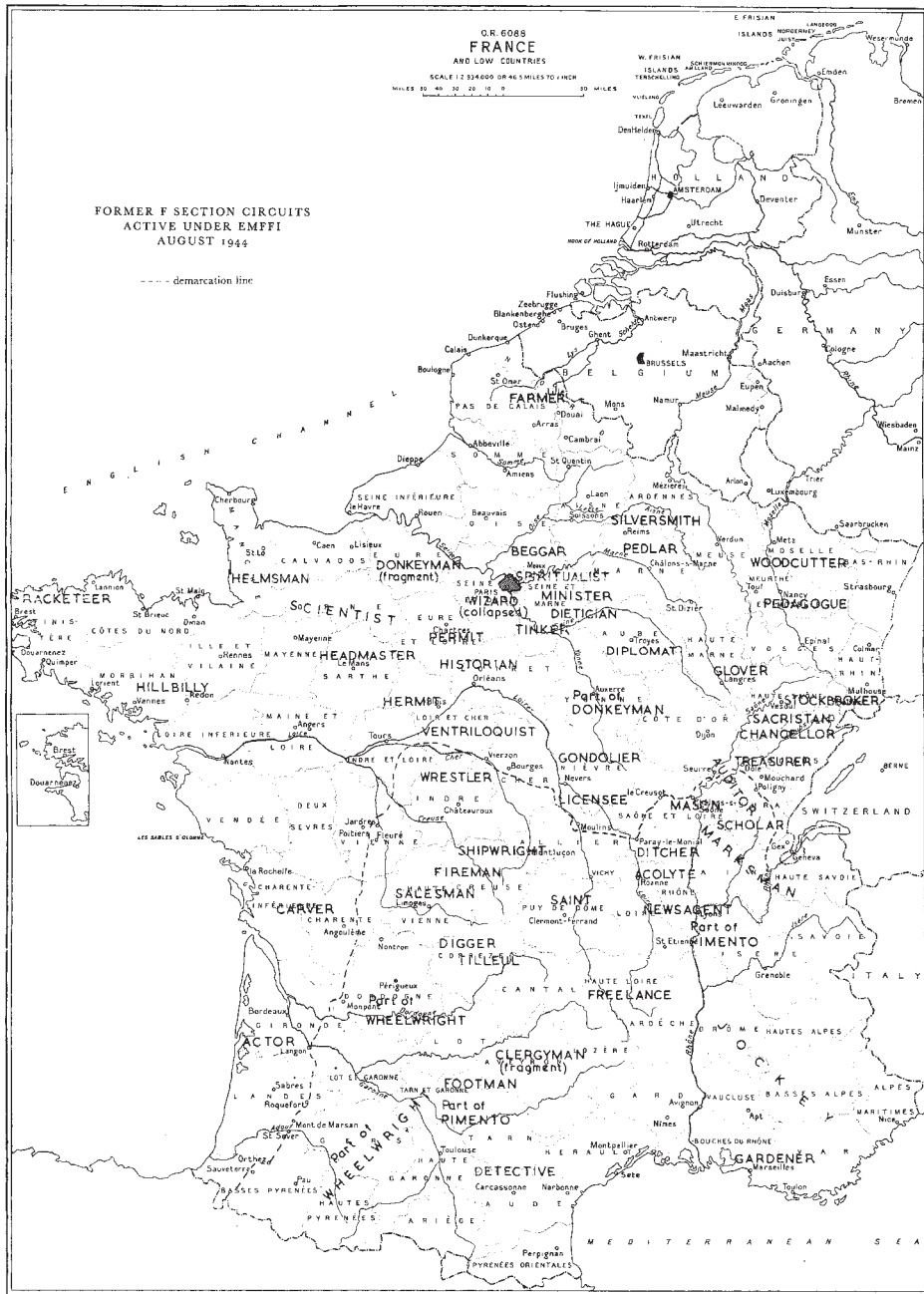


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Map of Former F Circuits

Preface

ONE DAY in May 2012, while following in Pearl's footsteps in France, I hired a car and drove from Châteauroux to Limoges. I took a detour west, to the 'martyr' village of Oradour-sur-Glane. There I walked down the hill in bright sunshine, past the empty, ruined houses into the skeleton of the church in which the women and children of the village were burned alive by the Waffen SS on 10 June 1944.

A shaft of sunlight fell on an altar, and something caught my eye: a pair of calcified clogs, the wooden *sabots* worn by women of the time. They were a mute reminder of their owner, a woman dying, clutching her child to her legs, shielding him in her skirts as the flames crackled around her and the smoke extinguished her breathing.

The image of those clogs stayed with me. They became a symbol of the courage with which Pearl Witherington, a former secretary, faced the terror of the Nazi war machine. '*Avec mes Sabots*,' was her favourite marching song when she was on the road with her *maquisards*, facing the Waffen SS soldiers of the 'Das Reich' division, the same division who had killed the 642 victims of Oradour.

'*Oh, oh, oh, avec mes sabots*,' sang Pearl, as she led her band of Frenchmen into battle. The song she chose, '*Avec mes sabots*,' was also the marching song of Joan of Arc. To Pearl's companions, her lover, Henri Cornioley, Major Clutton of Jedburgh 'Julian', and perhaps to her men, Pearl's visionary leadership in May – September 1944 was reminiscent of Joan's. Pearl never said so. But she fought under the same flag of freedom, the Cross of Lorraine, to rid France, the country she called home, from oppression.

The clogs were crude, wooden footwear, worn by peasant women whose brothers put down their scythes and sickles, left their fields and their cattle to answer Pearl's call to arms in June 1944. It seemed an unequal match: peasants against Nazis. But the men of the Indre, newly armed by Pearl with unfamiliar weapons, Sten guns and rocket launchers, learnt fast. Comrades in arms, the British and the French, and many Commonwealth citizens – Mauritians, Canadians, New Zealanders – took on the Gestapo, the German repression columns and the SS Panzers.

The agents of SOE have, rightly, been called amateurs, brainchild of the greatest 'gentleman amateur' of all, Winston Churchill. The Resistance has been equally maligned, the credit for victory in 1944 solely ascribed to the regular forces. But Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander, said SOE circuits and the *maquis* were worth several divisions. Thanks to them, the Germans lost control of their rear during Overlord, and it was the men and women of the Resistance who liberated France south of the Loire.

This is Pearl's story, but it is also theirs.

Carole Seymour-Jones
March 2013

Note Eisenhower to Major General Gubbins of SOE, 31 May 1945.

I

Into the Field

THE STARS are growing fainter in the night sky as the Halifax bomber approaches the dropping zone. In the belly of the bomber, Secret Agent Pearl Witherington, a.k.a Agent 'Marie', clings to the fuselage, feeling, not for the first time, like Jonah inside the whale. The aircraft banks sharply and she almost loses her balance. They have crossed the Loire and the Cher rivers by the light of the moon, and are circling the landing ground at Les Tailles de Ruines, north-east of Valençay, in central France. The roar of the four engines is deafening, the smell of oil and petrol from the spare cans overpowering. Pearl has lost all feeling in her feet, for it is icy cold and her ankles are tightly bandaged to prevent them breaking on the impact of landing. She crouches beside the exit hole, ready for her parachute drop, and glances at the despatcher who will give her the signal to jump.

Her heart beats furiously. Any moment now he will shout 'Action stations!', the light will turn red, then green, and he will tell her 'Go!' She takes a deep breath. This is the culmination of all her dreams of returning to Occupied France, the fulfilment of hours of training ever since she, a twenty-nine-year-old British secretary, volunteered to join the Special Operations Executive in the spring of that year, 1943.

The black bomber is losing height. The engine note changes as it circles the DZ for the second time. Is something wrong? The pilot and navigator are peering into the darkness, straining for the first sight of the lights of the reception committee below, but there is no dim-but-reassuring-glow from torches lashed to sticks in the landing ground. The pilot has dropped as far as he dares through the cloud,

down to 500 feet, and he comes around for the last time before Pearl hears his voice over the intercom: 'Mission aborted.'

With a sigh, she swallows her disappointment as the bomber turns tail and heads for the Channel.

Had Pearl but known it, on that night of 15 September 1943, the Germans were chasing the Resistance through the woods of Les Tailles de Ruines directly beneath them, and 'Hector', the SOE circuit chief whom she was to join in the field, had been forced to scrub her reception: at the last moment, he had cancelled the order to set out the landing lights. The pilot, likewise, had prioritised Pearl's safety.

Five days later, WAAF Assistant Section Officer Cécile Pearl Witherington was told to prepare herself for her second attempt to drop behind enemy lines. Time and luck were running out. It was the evening of 21 September, the last but one night of the September moon, the twelve-day lunar window which allowed the pilots to navigate by its silvery light. 'It's my last chance,' she said to herself, 'my last chance,' for she knew that if she did not make it that night, there would be no further opportunity until the October moon. From the grounds of Hazells Hall, near RAF Tempsford – a camouflaged aerodrome deep in the Bedfordshire countryside – she gazed imploringly at the waning moon, whose light was fading as fast as the falling leaves of autumn.

The weather had also turned. The fat, yellow harvest moon, which for eleven unbroken nights had enabled Squadron Leader Hugh Verity to deliver secret agents behind enemy lines in his Lysander aeroplane, had vanished. 'This has really been a harvest moon to remember,' the pick-up pilot had said in August, as the secret 'Moon' Squadrons – 138 and 161 – whose base Tempsford was, ferried an unprecedented number of agents in and out of Occupied France. So smooth had been the Tempsford 'taxi run' that King George VI and Queen Elizabeth would visit Tempsford to congratulate the pilots, but for Pearl, as she waited impatiently for her own Tempsford taxi, this was of little consequence. 'Taxi', she now realised, was a misnomer for a flight that was proving so unexpectedly difficult.

For the second time she was to spend her 'last' night on British soil at Hazells Hall, a manor house at Sandy, a few miles west of Tempsford. The hall had been taken into military service as sleeping quarters for senior officers and 'Joes', the agents waiting to go into the field, and was more comfortable than anything the aerodrome could offer – Tempsford itself was a rush job, a collection of Nissen huts quickly built in wartime. Boggy and soggy, its runways were often under water, but it had one redeeming feature: its secret location between the railway line and the Great North Road, where it lay well hidden from the enemy by low hills. So far it had proved undetectable to German military intelligence. 'Find this viper's nest and destroy it,' Hitler had ordered his *Abwehr*, the military counter-espionage organisation, but although at least two German spies were caught in the vicinity and executed, the blacked-out airfield would never be discovered.

The acquisition of Tempsford had, in fact, represented a major victory for Britain's youngest and least popular wartime secret service, the Special Operations Executive (SOE). The 'Baker Street Irregulars', as they were known, since their London offices were in the Sherlock Holmes-territory of 64 Baker Street, specialised in the 'ungentlemanly' warfare of sabotage and subversion, and the new, upstart organisation was deeply distrusted by the Secret Intelligence Service, by the chiefs of the armed forces and, in particular, by the head of Bomber Command, Air Marshal Arthur Harris, who had 'fought to the last ditch' SOE's inopportune requests for a squadron of aircraft for its special operations.

When Harris had rejected Tempsford as unfit for purpose in March 1942, SOE had snatched at this crumb from the rich man's table. By that November, Squadron Leader Verity had taken command of 161 Squadron's flight of six Lysanders for pick-up operations, and there were five Halifaxes as well as two Wellingtons and a Hudson for parachute operations. When Pearl arrived in the autumn of 1943, Tempsford was ready for her.

At Hazells Hall, Pearl is once again getting ready for her first mission as a secret agent. Lily, the stout woman from the French

Section of SOE who has come to dress her, has laid out her clothes on the bed.

‘Well, Pearl, you should know the ropes by now,’ Nancy Fraser-Campbell, her conducting officer, says with a laugh. Nancy is a captain in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), and works closely with the dedicated but gullible Maurice Buckmaster, head of the French Section (‘F’), and his intelligence officer, Vera Atkins. As is customary with departing female agents, Nancy – although it is more usually Vera who takes on the job – has come down to Hazells Hall to inspect Pearl’s costume and to check that it will pass scrutiny in France. Nancy has become a close friend of Pearl’s during the latter’s training, and Pearl finds her presence reassuring.

Lily is insisting that her charge wears woollen underclothes, ignoring Pearl’s objections to the winter-weight vest. ‘You must wear it tonight, duckie,’ says Lily. ‘They all say it is perishing cold in the aircraft – all the ones that come back.’

Pearl slips on the vest obediently. Nancy inspects the manufacturer’s label of the cream blouse for authenticity, and holds it out to Pearl. Next comes a fine lambswool jumper and a tweed suit: Pearl’s ‘civvies’ have to suit her cover story, that she is Geneviève Touzalin, born in Paris on 24 June 1913, a secretary in the *Société Allumettière Française*, a French match company. ‘F’ ensures that a cover story is not too dissimilar to an agent’s real life experience so that it can be more easily memorised, and Pearl’s own birthday is 24 June 1914, while her shorthand and typing are impeccable. Pearl must inhabit her cover story, forget that she is British, remember only her former life in France. SOE’s Jewish refugee tailor, who knows how to cut cloth the Continental way, has made her two tweed suits – one *marron*, a rich chestnut brown, the other grey – both of which she has been told to wear for a few days so that they do not look suspiciously new.

Tonight Pearl is wearing the brown suit, for a particular reason. She then checks Pearl’s pockets for giveaway bus or cinema tickets. Fingers run over old laundry tags and rip them out, or search out an embroidered handkerchief or a tiny bottle of lavender water which might betray its English origin. Pearl heard of a recent

slip-up when an agent was sent into the field with a pair of gloves that had 'Made in England' stitched inside one of the fingers. She has already sacrificed her favourite pink Yardley lipstick, giving it to her little sister, Mimi, who is also in the WAAFs and will probably wear it to the next dance at RAF Mildenhall.

Nancy is offering Pearl a Lancôme lipstick, which one of the pilots has brought back from France. It is called *Le Rouge Baiser* and is bright red: luscious, seductive.

'Oh, I can't, Nancy,' says Pearl. 'You know I hardly wear make-up.'

Nancy, an American-born Scot, is a sophisticated girl who is no stranger to the latest cosmetics, turning heads in the French Section's offices when she wears her kilt with her FANY battledress jacket. She smiles. 'Go on, Pearl. Try it.'

Gingerly, Pearl paints her lips and Nancy pats them dry with a handkerchief. 'There.'

Pearl smiles into the looking glass. Even her teeth have been attended to: F Section's thorough preparation has ensured that she has been sent to a French dentist, who extracted the filling she had been given in London and replaced it with gold.

Pearl frowns. 'I don't like it. I look like a *putain*.' Briskly, she wipes off the lipstick. 'You keep it, Nancy. Give me the skirt.'

The tweed skirt slides easily over Pearl's slim, athletic figure. She is tall, long-legged, straight-backed. Her long fair hair no longer cascades down her shoulders but is twisted and pinned up, ready to tuck under her flying helmet. Her brilliant blue eyes are the most arresting feature in a fresh, oval face which, if not classically beautiful, is attractive and vivacious. Men find her *très jolie, très sympathique*, with her quick smile and sensitivity to other people's feelings – but there are moments when Pearl's large blue eyes can turn as grey and forbidding as the Atlantic in winter. Promoted quickly to personal assistant, the set of her shoulders indicates that she does not suffer fools gladly. For twelve years she has sat behind a manual typewriter, first in Paris, where she was born and grew up, and more recently in the Air Ministry in London. She is tired of pushing paper. Nor is she now in the mood to brook delay. All

through the summer she has been waiting to 'do her bit', as the tide of war turned and the Allies invaded Sicily, and she is hungry for action.

'Operation Wrestler,' reads her mission briefing. 'Christian name in the field: MARIE. You are going to France to work as a courier to an organiser, Hector, who is in control of a circuit in the regions of Tarbes, Châteauroux and Bergerac.'

Pearl glances one last time at her reflection in the mirror, straightens the seams of her beige lisle stockings, and ties the laces of her brown walking shoes in a double knot. It is once again time for her 'last meal' in England.

In the wood-panelled dining room of the hall, she sits down at the mahogany table to eat what she is told is 'an early breakfast'. It is 11 p.m. Stuffed birds gaze down at her from glass cases. She is served a fried egg – a special wartime treat, as the ration is only one egg a week. Although she is not hungry, she eats every last morsel of her toast with Oxford marmalade and drains the last drop of tea from a bone china cup before rising to her feet.

'Pearl,' calls Nancy. 'Your driver is waiting.'

It is nearly midnight when an anonymous Chrysler with blacked-out windows, driven by a young FANY ensign, delivers Pearl to the gates to RAF Tempsford. A sentry steps out, the gates swing silently open and the car proceeds towards the Gibraltar Farm barn.

In the back of the car, Pearl draws aside the blackout curtain and peers out. She can barely see the moon; ragged clouds gust across its face. Rain spatters the windscreen. Trees bend in the wind.

'Rotten weather,' comments Nancy doubtfully.

Pearl bites her lip, but allows no trace of anxiety to betray itself in her expression. She has long ago learnt to keep a poker face, whatever the circumstances.

The ground crew are clustered around the bombers, which sit like dark moths on the tarmac, waiting to take wing. The Chrysler cruises past the runway on which her waiting Halifax is parked, and draws up at Gibraltar Farm barn. The blonde FANY driver opens the door and Pearl steps out into the cold night, then quickly into the warm fug of the barn, thick with cigarette smoke.

The despatcher from the Halifax, Horton, gives her the thumbs up: the jump is on despite the wild blustery night, as the pilots often have to push their luck. Horton stubs out his cigarette and lights one for Pearl. In a minute, he will bandage her ankles and help her into her overalls and parachute harness.

Nancy is handing her two packets, in her role as Pearl's conducting officer. 'This one's for you, and this one's for Hector. Make sure he gets it.'

'Thanks, Nancy.'

'ID card, ration book?'

'I've got it all.'

'Good show, Marie.' Nancy uses Pearl's codename – it is essential that the aircrew remain ignorant of her real identity, in case they are captured and talk under interrogation – as she rummages in her leather briefcase. 'Vera thought you might as well take another forty Gauloises. We've got plenty.'

Pearl snaps open her cheap fibre suitcase and adds the packs of cigarettes, a box of matches and two bars of Chocolat Ménéier. The chocolate has been made in England and impregnated with garlic to make it authentically French, with the same care as the forged ID card and other documents.

'Take this picture of your "parents", too. It might come in handy.'

Pearl takes the blurred snapshot of a formally dressed, middle-aged French couple. 'You're a brick, Nancy.'

'Now, your L-pills. Here we are.' The cyanide pills appear in a pill box on the table, and Pearl picks them up.

'Bite hard on them before swallowing,' remarks an RAF officer casually, studying the met forecast.

'Most people take them with them, Marie,' says Nancy. 'It gives you the option.'

Lethal pills are standard issue for all agents going into the field, allowing them to commit suicide on arrest rather than face torture at the hands of the Gestapo. The SOE rule is that agents must remain silent for the first forty-eight hours after capture in order to allow their contacts time to escape. Pearl has heard that some British agents have had gold signet rings made with a secret

compartment for the L-pill, while at Tangmere Aerodrome in Sussex, the wife of one of the escorting officers is happy to sew the pills into the shirt cuffs of the agents who stay with them the night before they go into the field.

‘You know Vera isn’t keen.’

‘Don’t worry about Vera.’ Nancy wishes for a moment that Vera, the ‘brains’ behind F Section’s Buckmaster, had been able to see Pearl off instead of her.

Nancy, one of the ‘intelligent gentlewomen’ so indispensable to SOE, is particularly concerned for her friend’s safety in September 1943. She is close enough to Buckmaster and Vera to know that the French Section is in crisis, is even now facing a catastrophe. All summer, bad news has been coming over the ticker-tape in Room 52, the SOE signals room, where Buckmaster and Vera spend long hours deciphering the agents’ messages. Nancy doesn’t know the details, but she has heard the rumours that a key agent, Major Francis Suttill, codename ‘Prosper’, was arrested by the Gestapo in June. Buckmaster has been worried enough to send his deputy, Major Nicholas Bodington, to Paris to investigate in mid-July. Was Prosper *brûlé*, and his wireless operator, Gilbert Norman, codename ‘Archambaud’, and his courier, Andrée Borrel, too? If all three are blown, and are being held in the cells of the Gestapo HQ in Paris, does this not spell mortal danger for Pearl?

Prosper’s empire is spread over twelve *départements* and thirty-three landing grounds, and has recently broken all records for drops of arms and explosives, receiving 190 containers in just nine days. Prosper is, says Buckmaster, his ‘lynchpin’. If the Germans have penetrated Prosper’s vast, sprawling circuit, the result will be mass arrests.

Nancy knows that the life expectancy of a special agent in 1943 is short – that of a radio operator was only six weeks in the early days of SOE. When Pearl volunteered for SOE, Vera warned her that only 50 per cent of SOE agents came back.

Pearl knows the odds, and accepts them. She shakes her head at Nancy, giving her back the L-pills in their box. ‘No, thanks, Nancy. I’d rather not.’

As she lights a cigarette, Pearl reflects that she cannot imagine voluntarily ending her life, whatever the circumstances. Not when she has fought so hard to return to her beloved France.

Pearl had pulled every possible string to be accepted as a courier to work with Hector – in reality her old school friend, Maurice Southgate – with whom she had grown up in Paris. It hadn't been easy. It had taken all her determination to steamroller Buckmaster into agreeing to recall Hector's current courier, Jacqueline Nearne, an exceptional agent who had survived a year in the field, and to send Pearl in her stead. Jacqueline, not without reason, had been furious with Pearl.

'She's been at it a whole year,' Pearl had pressed Buckmaster. 'I think you ought to send her back to England.'

'But Jacqueline's doing a splendid job,' protested Buckmaster.

'A year's too long, she needs some leave . . . And you know I really want to be Maurice's courier.'

Buckmaster had paused. 'I don't know . . . Jacqueline won't be keen.' He had looked at Pearl, who had showed no signs of leaving his office, and sighed. 'Oh, very well, then. I'll recall her.'

'She didn't half take me for it,' Pearl later remarked: 'You've pinched my job,' Jacqueline had hissed, when they eventually met in the field. 'I didn't pinch her job, as far as I could make out,' protested Pearl, to anyone who might be listening. 'I couldn't make out what she did, anyway.'

It was a disingenuous reply. Pearl knew full well why she wanted to take Jacqueline's job, and it was connected to a secret she shared with very few people.

'Very intelligent, straightforward, courageous . . . with leadership qualities.' As her training report said, Pearl was deeply patriotic. She loved two countries and longed to take the fight to the Germans. But there was another, more personal reason for the burning fury Pearl felt when she thought about the foreign invaders, a fury which drove her to overcome every obstacle. The German army had separated her from the man she had loved since she was nineteen: her fiancé, Henri Cornioley, a Parisian parfumeur in his family's

flourishing beauty business. The war had divided the couple. She knew that Henri, mobilised into the French army in 1939, had been taken prisoner by the Germans when they overran France in June 1940, and Pearl had not seen him for three and a half years.

Pearl shivers with anticipation. Might Henri have escaped? Could her love be waiting for her on the landing ground? Perhaps she will drop into the arms of the tall, dark Frenchman as she has heard another SOE agent, Odette, had dropped into the arms of her lover, Peter Churchill.

‘Marie!’

Pearl awakes from her reverie. Nancy is holding out a slim white box. ‘Colonel Buckmaster and Vera would like to give you this. A gift from F Section, with their best wishes. Vera was sorry not to be able to escort you tonight, but she had to go to Tangmere.’

Pearl opens the box and slides out the gold powder compact. It is a thing of beauty, shiny and French and the most valuable present anyone has ever given her. She turns it over and reads the inscription on the back: *Fabriqu  en France*.

‘I can’t take this,’ she protests.

‘You can always pawn it.’ Nancy grins and glances at her watch. ‘Right, we should be making a move.’

She has been watching Pearl as she smokes. Her hand is steady. There is no ‘trembling cigarette’, such as Vera had noticed between the shaking fingers of another agent, Noor Inayat Khan, at Tangmere. Or perhaps it was Cicely or Diana? Nancy can’t exactly remember.

‘All set, then? Got your pistol?’

Pearl’s hand goes to her .32 Colt in its holster and nods firmly.

The girl has backbone. Perhaps she will survive. Nancy stifles a sigh, and squeezes Pearl’s hand as she shakes it. ‘Best of luck, Marie.’

Flight Sergeant Cole of 138 Squadron revved the engines and taxied down the runway. As he accelerated, there was an ominous change in the roar of the engines and the aircraft lurched to one side.

‘What’s the matter?’ exclaimed Pearl.

‘Don’t worry, love,’ shouted Horton, the despatcher.

The bomber's wheel had veered off the runway, which had been laid on one of the farm's meadows and was extremely narrow. The pilot returned to the start of the runway and took off on the second attempt.

Shortly afterwards, a storm blew up and the aircraft was forced to land at Ford, a naval airfield near Tangmere. Pearl arrived at the base at 1 a.m., a pretty young woman in civilian clothes, and her presence attracted curious stares. Passing herself off as a journalist who had come in search of a story, she was making her way towards the canteen when she met a tall officer in RAF uniform, who addressed her in French. It was Squadron Leader Philippe Livry-Level, the legendary French aviator who, after serving in World War I in an artillery regiment, had lied about his age to the RAF in order to achieve his ambition of active service in the air. Nearer fifty than forty, he had nevertheless been accepted by 161 Squadron as a navigator, exchanging the dark blue uniform of the Free French for the lighter blue of the RAF. The airman had at once guessed Pearl's real mission, and lent her his room in which to rest. It was freezing cold – *'Froid de canard,'* said Pearl – but she was glad of the privacy.

The next night, 22 September, the ultimate night of the September moon, they took off again despite almost complete cloud cover and only the barest glimmer of moonlight. Flight Sergeant Cole was determined to drop his 'Joe' and make it third time lucky for her. Once more inside the cavernous fuselage of the plane, Pearl felt like a trussed chicken, so tightly had Horton fastened the straps of her parachute over her camouflage jumpsuit. Once again her feet grew numb in the bitter cold. Horton pushed a sleeping bag in her direction, shouting an explanation that the benches on which the crew of seven normally sat had been removed to make room for the fuel tanks necessary for the long journey. The roar of the engines was as deafening as ever.

Behind her, carrier pigeons slept in cardboard boxes complete with their own mini-parachutes. Like Pearl, the birds had work to do, in their case they were carrying messages for MI6 – the Secret Intelligence Service.

The pilot flew high over the clouds, following a circuitous route in order to outwit the enemy. Their first target was Detective One, thirty kilometres south-east of Tours, where they had to drop propaganda leaflets. Suddenly, the aircraft ran into flak from German anti-aircraft batteries and seemed to Pearl to jump out of the sky.

‘What’s happening?’ she asked. ‘Are they shooting at us?’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Horton. ‘It’s always like this.’

The flak crackled around them and the bomber roared upward, out of range. Horton lined up the cylindrical boxes of pigeons beside the exit hole in the rear fuselage and grinned at Pearl, yelling, ‘Reckon they’ll get eaten before they make it back to Blighty.’

As he pushed the packages through the hole and the pigeons spiralled downwards, the throb of the engines lulled Pearl to sleep. Cole flew on over France, navigating by the moon’s faint reflection on the river Loire, passing Blois, where an island in the middle of the river served as a landmark to the pilots of the Moon squadrons, over the silver ribbon of the Loire’s little sister, the Loir, and then the Cher, before dropping through the clouds to his second target, Wrestler/Stationer 12, seventeen kilometres south-south-west of Châteauroux in the *département* of the Indre.

Horton shook Pearl awake once they were over Hector’s circuit, ‘Stationer’, approaching the dropping zone outside the small town of Tendu. It was nearly 2 a.m. Horton clipped Pearl’s parachute to the static line attached to a fixed wire on the rear fuselage, and tapped her on the shoulder. At 850 feet he opened the exit panel. Pearl waited. ‘Action stations!’ Her heart thudded. This time it was for real. The light flashed red. She had heard stories of agents breaking their noses on the opposite lip of the exit hole, or smashing their legs or their backs or dropping into trees, or even onto the roof of a *gendarmerie*.

Below her, pinpricks of light flashed Morse code. Trees and shadowy buildings were coming closer in the moonlight, and she could smell the air of France, a farmyard smell of animals and rich, damp soil. *Le terroir*. The land. She thought of Henri, of stolen kisses, of whispered promises. She was home again in the country of her birth, the only country she had ever known as home.

INTO THE FIELD

The light changed to green. The despatcher raised his hand. 'Go!' Pearl jumped into the darkness. The static lines snatched at her parachute, her rigging lines cleared the tail wheel and, as the canopy filled, her light frame was borne away by gusts of wind into the night.