

Captain Ruth Keble's War

Special Operation Executive (S.O.E.)

When war broke out Ruth was 17 and living with her mother and two younger brothers in Farnborough. Her father, Captain Thomas Keble, was a regular army officer who served with the Buffs (East Kent Regiment) and worked in intelligence. He died in 1934 whilst a staff officer in the Punjab. Ruth last saw him when she was ten and his death had a profound impact on her. When war broke out she set herself the objective of reaching his rank and to also work in intelligence.

Too young to join-up, Ruth undertook a six month secretarial course and after basic training with the ATS she found herself on the General Staff (Intelligence) of Aldershot Command, working alongside the territorial ATS clerical staff who were all experienced PAs to London dignitaries and businessmen. This group merged with Eastern Command in February 1941 under General Montgomery as South East Command, tasked with the defence of the coast from invasion from a splendid private house in Reigate. As an NCO she was the only person not an officer allowed in the inner sanctum of intelligence gathering on German invasion plans, which excitingly later turned towards the potential to invade France.

Told she would have to secure her commission to be allowed on the air photo-recognition course like the others, she put forward her name and was trained at Windsor, concluding in December 1942, upon which she was expected to return to Monty's team. However, her heart sank with her orders to proceed to the experimental artillery station at Shoeburyness, Essex. Here she spent a frustrating year, desperate to return to her beloved Intelligence work.



Ruth (L) escorting the Princess Royal on a visit to the Experimental Establishment, Shoeburyness

1. Interview for SOE

“My one ambition was to get away from Shoeburyness, back somewhere, almost anywhere where the real war was happening. I applied for every conceivable course and posting, including the military police for heaven's sake, but God was kind and for whatever reason, none of these alternatives came to anything until an odd sounding job was circulated involving a good knowledge of French, map reading and administration. I wrote off and the next thing I knew was that I had to report for an interview at the War Office, some morning early in December of 1943.

I arrived there to find a room full of FANYs (Field Army Nursing Yeomanry, an anachronism remaining from the First World War when they had all been top drawer Deb types, and I don't think they were even paid) all jawing away in a lordly manner. They were quite a few years older than me, and somehow seemed to all apparently know each other. Then I caught sight of another young ATS officer and went across to join her. We agreed there was no point in our being there, but it made a pleasant day's break from routine and eventually we went off to the Lyons Corner House off Trafalgar Square and had lunch together, imitating the other candidates.

The only interview I remember was the main one conducted by a major and Lieutenant Colonel, who fired what seemed to be irrelevant and unrelated questions at me, and at some point switched into French. The only question I remember being asked was the date on which Aldershot Command moved to Reigate and became South East Command (I had been part of that move some three years before). It was shot at me out of the blue and I heard myself saying “19th February 1941”, without hesitation. I'm sure they didn't really know the date, but were just testing my reactions “under fire”. They gave absolutely nothing away and my new friend Nancy Robertson had the same sort of experience. We had expected nothing, had no idea what the job was anyway, so we wished each other a happy Christmas and went back to our respective barracks.

But, you guessed it, a couple of weeks later I heard that I had been posted to the War Office and was told to report there early in January and there, arriving with me, was Nancy Robertson. We had been taken on by SOE as Map Officers for their War Room, the information centre of all resistance activities concerned with the Second Front or allied invasion of Europe. A couple of years later, turning out dead files after the war was over, I came across the sheets of paper used for interviews. Two pages of names with brief details of each candidate. Around my name was a large red chinagraph ring with “1” in it, around Nancy's a similar ring with “2”. By that time, of course, I recognised the distinctive handwriting of Bill Ram, the lieutenant colonel who had interviewed us and under whom I was to serve until the war in Northwest Europe was over and the War Room dismantled. He was a solicitor with Slaughter and May in civilian life, and to my immense surprise after we moved to Wadhurst I discovered he was a good friend of Brigadier Matthews, our neighbour. Sadly he was killed in a car accident on the M1 while being driven north by his chauffeur before I had a chance to meet him again.

2. First impressions of subterfuge

Bill was an unusual man, short and slight with a hooked nose and horn rimmed glasses. He had a shock of greying hair and walked with a stoop. He used to bury himself in an enormous leather-covered wing-backed chair and watch your reactions to what he was saying rather like a bird of prey. On that first day, he had me into his office to explain the nature of the work being done, all completely unknown to the outside world of course, not even guessed at by me, even in the course of my other intelligence work. He warned me that there was nothing romantic about their activities, and then waving a hand at the large wall map behind him, proceeded to outline operations then in progress that would have done justice to the writer of the Prisoner of Zenda or an earlier John le Carre novel. Needless to say, I was completely hooked and could not believe my good fortune.

The sense of being caught up in a spy story had started earlier, though. I had reported as ordered to the War Office, room XYZ, or whatever, only to be given a small piece of paper with an address in Baker Street on it, and the number of the bus which would take me there. I reported to the uniformed messenger in the entrance to this address, only to be sent to another building. Here I was expected and taken by another uniformed messenger right to Bill Ram's outer office and handed over - no question of wandering around on your own, in case you were not who you said you were, and were up to no good. The reason for all this was that, to the outside world, I had been posted to the War Office, and so I had to be seen to go there.

We were all furnished with a cover story to describe the fictitious job we were doing, depending on the person you were talking to, these being official contacts. Everyone else knew only too well that service people were not allowed to talk about their work, "careless talk, costs, lives" was the slogan. So the War Office was an adequate umbrella for family and friends. Depending which telephone line they rang you on you had to wear the hat of; someone working in ISRB (the Inter Services Research Bureau, which was very woolly indeed and seemed to concern itself with maps mainly, but did not really exist), or in some aspect of military training, the magic letters of which I no longer remember, or a branch the War Office which seemed to occupy itself with liaison with the services of other nations which had escaped to Britain. Mercifully, there were not that many outside calls to deal with. But I certainly remember having to waffle along one of these lines from time to time!

On one more alarming occasion, I had to meet a representative of the Belgian forces, connected with medals, I think. As he could not possibly be allowed to come to Baker Street I had to book our one and only room at the War Office for a certain hour, remembering to take a supply of papers and pens etc. to make the desk seem like my own, then to look busy and receive the Belgian officer, hoping hard all the while that I would not do something to give the game away. Fortunately, he was as uptight as I was about the whole thing and could not wait to get the business over with and get out! I did have the sense not to grab my hat and rush out after him to get back to Baker Street, in case he was waiting at the door for his transport and wondered what on earth I was up to.

3. Creating the War Room for F Section

But to return to the War Room. The building the Northwest European side of SOE occupied was called Norgeby House and was the peacetime carpet store Druces. The building opposite (and I simply cannot remember if it was called St. Michael's or not) was the head offices in peacetime of Marks & Spencers. All the top brass with SOE worked over there, and early on the organisation had taken over adjoining smaller buildings and flats for its various clandestine goings on.

The War Room was on the first floor, built over an old fashioned chemist shop (more of which later). This meant that we were exposed on all three sides and had a highly vulnerable flat roof. I remember that during our early days there we wore our tin hats during the worst raids in case this flimsy roof fell on top of us, but this did not last long and we soon forgot to bother.

Our first job was to put up a large scale map of France on our one long wall. For this we were supplied with a complete set of Michelin roadmaps with the centre strip of France duplicated, as the only way to get the whole country on the wall was to divide it in the middle, allowing a glimpse of Belgian at the top, then repeating the middle section at the bottom of the second half of the wall showing the Mediterranean at the bottom. It was ridiculously difficult to join all the maps up correctly and then to cover the whole thing with huge sheets of perspex. Not just to protect them, but because we had to be able to write up to date information on them in different colours according to the legend. This was done with chinagraph pencils, which had a wax base to them rather like crayons, but they were miserable things, always breaking or refusing to write because the perspex had become greasy or damp, naturally at a time when there was a bit of a panic on.

Ending that last sentence with a preposition reminds me that from day one, the two British men officers on the War Room staff decided that none of us would ever desecrate the English language by finishing sentences in this ungrammatical way, nor were we ever to split an infinitive. This was good fun and kept us all on our toes. I believe Churchill was really responsible for this somewhat pedantic way of speaking.

We were a team of eight. Nancy and I joined two other ATS officers who came from other intelligence work (Virginia Grant Lawson, the American wife of Sir Peter Grant Lawson, an officer in the Blues and a well known amateur rider in peacetime, and Phyllis Court, who soon left and was replaced by Hon Mary Parnell), two British captain's (Antony Irby and Noel Crossthwaite) and two American OSS officers (Office of Strategic Services, their equivalent of SOE), Mooney Harding and Jay Carleton. Apart from Anthony, none of us knew the first thing about how SOE worked and so we embarked on a familiarisation course, being sent in pairs for a couple of days each to various departments the two French sections (one under control of the Free French "RF Section" and the other organised British, "F Section").

4. Visits to understand the workings of SOE

My most treasured memory of F section is being taken into a small office where the section's finance officer, a short balding and extremely lame man, was walking purposefully up and down

all over quantities of French banknotes of high denomination, “ageing” them. When he felt they were sufficiently used-looking, he collected them into bundles of 10 of each denomination and drove a pin through the corner, then took it out again. He explained that all French banknotes are pinned together in this way and that for an agent to be found passing a French note without the customary hallmarks in the corner, would immediately cause suspicion.

There was also an office devoted to concocting and keeping track of the messages that the BBC broadcast on its European service each day. All the agents had been given one or more individual short messages before they went to the field, which only they knew and could interpret. For example, “*Rene attend Tonton Jules*”, “*Helene embrace sa fille*” could well have alerted a resistance organiser that the promised container of supplies will be dropped that night, or that the railway junction the organiser had been ordered to blow up could now go ahead. All organisers in the field had a special message for D Day, so they would all swing into action with whatever specific sabotage or paramilitary operation they had been preparing. The simple messages read out over the BBC, which meant nothing to me of course, always gave me a thrill, thinking of the excitement it conveyed to the resistance groups over there.

One visit we undertook was to the Natural History Museum, which had been requisitioned by SOE and was devoted to the construction of objects which looked perfectly ordinary but which in fact housed explosives, wireless sets, wireless transmitting schedules, and money to keep the resistance group going. I remember most vividly the realistic camel pads, in which explosives could be placed by trained saboteurs to go off when German vehicles drove over them in the desert areas. Similarly, there were cowpats for rural France, mock tree trunks to lie casually in the forests, providing vital hiding places for rifles and hollow logs for wireless sets, and many others.

The man in charge was extremely proud of his wares. He was a dapper Jewish businessman who approached his challenging job with great thoroughness, and made a point of keeping himself as up to date as possible, with the styles and accessories to be found in the countries the agents concerned were being dropped into. He provided briefcases with false bases in which the agent could keep his funds, his coded papers or other vital data, always remembering that these had to be kept to a minimum in case of arrest. He had shoes with hollow heels, ladies handbags with completely invisible pockets, wireless transmitting schedules, and codes printed onto pure silk handkerchiefs, which can be folded and tucked into the most minute places.

Probably the most heartstopping place we visited was the signal station at a country house in the middle of nowhere. Here we found maybe a dozen men of the Royal Corps of Signals sitting around the walls of what must once have been a cow byre, writing down on signal forms a continuous stream of Morse coming in over their headsets in groups of five letters. To stand in the middle of this farm building in the safety of the English countryside, listening to the steady drone of dots and dashes being received from occupied Europe, sent by ordinary people risking their lives and those of their colleagues as they crouched in barns, attics, shop storerooms, anywhere they believe to be safe, transmitting their messages in the code and at the time agreed before they left London.

One of the many fascinating things we learned was that the men receiving the messages got to know the touch of the transmitter and could tell almost infallibly if they were being required to send under duress or if some enemy agent were using their code and schedule.

A few days later, we all went down to another country house in Hertfordshire, I recall, where our agents were trained in the use of Rebecca and Eureka equipment. The Eureka receiving set, about the size of a shoebox, was used by the agents to reveal to the incoming RAF aircraft where the reception committee was waiting. This was invariably in a distant field belonging to some friendly farmer with plenty of cover in the way of hedges and trees, where the members of the committee could hide whilst awaiting the arrival of the plane, which was fitted with a transmitter Rebecca. Their bleeps only responded to each other. I remember we hid in a deep hedge that dark night while the plane approached and with a woosh flew smack over us, dropping an imaginary load of supplies right on target. Of course, nowadays this would be such old hat as to be pathetic, given all the electronic hardware available. But in 1944, I can assure you it was magic!

There were one or two other Stations, as they were called, that we visited but apart from one where a gorgeous French vicomte was training with various others, who thought we were all going to be dropped in to France soon (and we could not tell them how wrong they were as to as no communication between two groups was allowed), I have no remaining memories. I kept an eye on the said gorgeous vicomte through the various situation reports and messages from the field that came through the war room and was devastated when the house in Dole he used was surrounded by the Germans and he was shot trying to escape. Someone had given his whereabouts away.

5. Working on garbled signals from the field

The messages which were the lifeblood of SOE all came into the signal station I mentioned and were then passed to the appropriate section for decoding and circulation. These messages then came into Baker Street in their incomprehensible groups of five letter "words". They were received as BXAYZ CDERT PWUNK IVGJT FQPED, say, from a French Section wireless operator, where upon the person in that department would decode it and circulate it as 2 CNTRS ARMS RECD SOME DAMAGED. Usually the messages would be much longer and sometimes contain personal news for onward transmission where possible.

The short example I have given was obviously accurately transmitted, perfectly received and decoded without difficulty. There were all too few of those. Sometimes the sender would be under stress, in a hurry or merely careless and then the hapless decoders had to try to make some sense out of the jumbled group of five letters in front of them. Having always enjoyed crosswords and word games generally, I would spend hours on night duty if there were a lull, trying to rearrange the letters to make some meaning of what one knew must be pretty important information, or it would not have been sent in the first place. Oh, the excitement when one found something which could be worth passing on to the All Knowing section!

The messages in capitals on pale blue paper, often with bits missing or unreadable, would pile up in a wire tray on our desk. It was our job to read them all and display the information on our master map or on the various charts and smaller maps that were developed as the weeks went by. Moody Harding was particularly good at devising ways of conveying such useful information as the total quantities of arms held at various strategic places in France, the targets of the different sabotage groups, the strength of men under our organisers' orders, and so on. Some of these were thought to be of sufficient importance to be reproduced and sent to such luminaries as Churchill, Eisenhower and Montgomery. I am proud to say that I was the one asked to do this, because my writing was reasonably small and neat I imagine. And this aspect of my work is referred to in my Certificate of Merit, awarded to me by Eisenhower.

6. Prepping agent files for Jedburgh teams

One of the contributions to D-Day planning made by SOE was the provision of 14 liaison teams, known as Jedburghs. The teams consisted of three men, an American, a British and a Frenchman. One was trained to organise the Resistance, one to instruct in the use of explosives and firearms, the third to act as Wireless Operator to the group. They were to be dropped into areas vital to the invasion's success, make contact with the local Resistance leaders and keep them in touch with the military situation and what they could best do to help in an ever changing state of battle.

I really do not know how effective they were in the event, but I was directly involved in organising a pretty complicated card index system for each team to take to the field. As it was going to be dropped by parachute the container had to be suitably robust, and the metal box that was supplied weighed a small ton. The system was called Kardex. This box contained cards relating to every possible resistance leader, his code name, his brief, his CV, so that he could be asked on the spot a short searching question about his place of birth, school or career, to which only the genuine agent would be able to give the correct answer.

These cards cross referenced to others involved and the whole enterprise was an absolute nightmare. The only way we could think of getting all of those teams equipped with identical sets of cards was for me to be given 14 men and women who filled in the blank cards at my dictation. The scope for misspellings, misunderstandings and general mayhem was infinite. I went quietly mad and composed a little poem which I remember to this day:

I'm Keble the Kardex Kween,
I've sets from one to 14,
So if you're in a hole,
About Jedburgh or Pole,
A chap from RF,
Or some odd Maquis chef,
Just give me a ring:

I'll explain the whole thing.
I'm Keeble the Kardex Kween.

The one good thing that came with this interlude was that some of the young American officers were so grateful to me for all the trouble I was taking over their Kardex that they invited me out to dinner, and I can well remember a delicious meal at the *Ecu de France* and another at the *Etoile*! Conversation was heavy going, but the food was well worth it.

7. Visits to the War Room & establishing a second version for the Free French

As I explained, there were four women and four men in our team and we had to man the War Room around the clock, with one of each sex on duty. The focal point of our day was the 10am conference when all the relevant top brass came, probably Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, head of Dutch Resistance, and Prince Axel of Denmark were our two most exciting, but they were one-offs. It is the arrogant General Koenig, deputy to De Gaulle, who remains most vividly in my memories of that time, thumping our table and shouting "*J'insiste!*" about something he clearly felt keenly.

The ATS officer on duty had to stand by our splendid map and as each Section head reported news or activities from any of his operators, we had to point out exactly where it was happening. It was nerve-racking and I cannot pretend that I always got it spot on. One had, in effect, to memorise the whole of the map of France and it has always amazed me how quickly I forgot where all those places were, or are, the moment the country was liberated! How we worked it out I no longer remember, but it was perfectly alright until D-Day itself when we immediately had to provide a War Room accessible to the Free French.

Security at Baker Street was always paramount and no way could we have these Frenchmen wandering around our building, which housed the secrets of very many other countries apart from France. It somehow fell to the women to set up this brand new War Room in the new Etats Majeurs des Forces Françaises de l'Interieure (E.M.F.F.I.), in a splendid house in Bryanston Square, within reasonably easy walking distance of dear Baker Street. We had to completely duplicate all the information we had on our enormous Michelin war map, having been through the ghastly chore of getting it up on the wall at all, and of course keeping it up to date as we worked, an out of date war map being as much use as yesterday's newspapers. I suppose the men were manning the master map at Baker Street, all I know is that we four worked past the point of exhaustion and when we were given a 24 hour pass to recover, we all did something out of character and rather dramatic. I managed to get home to Tunbridge Wells where I burst into inconsolable tears and collapsed into bed, unable to tell anyone why. Jeannie fell off her bike asleep on our way home to Cavendish Square and caused something of an incident. Mary slept-in the clock plus one, or 25 hours, before surfacing and Nancy's reaction simply eludes me for the moment, but I expect we shall remember it eventually.

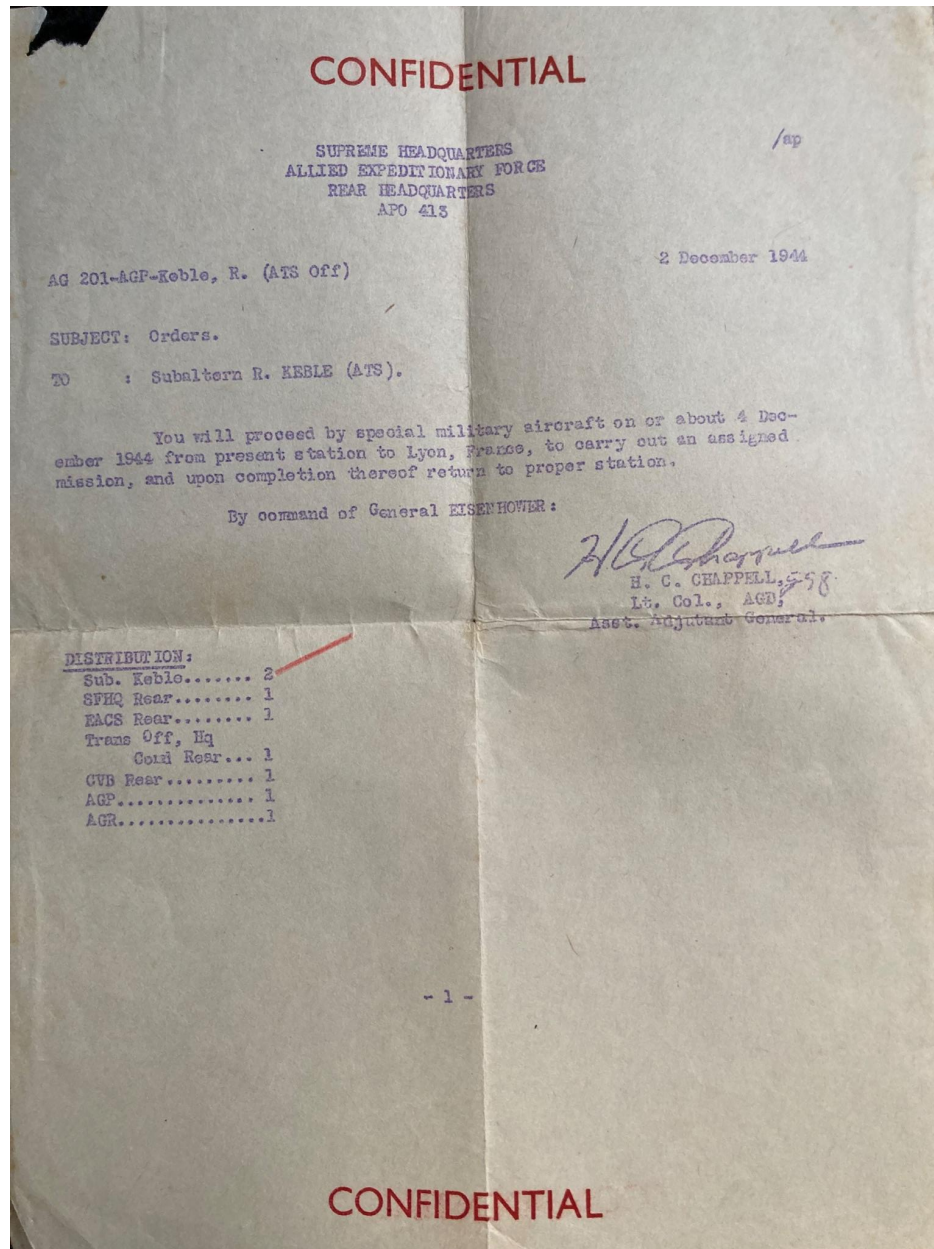
Reading a book about the Maquis and EMFFI written by one of the F agents at the end of the war we were amused to see ourselves described as IGs or "Intelligent Gentlewomen"! I was

very impressed at our first few War Room conferences after the invasion, by the presence of one of our liaison officers from SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force), there to give firsthand information on Resistance activities. The one I remember most vividly was a young, rather burly Scot, who was still wearing the colourful tartan kilt he had apparently worn throughout his visit to France. On reflection, I'm surprised he was allowed!

8. Ordered to the Vercors - Court of Inquiry (Longe & Hausemann)

Once Paris was liberated on 25th of August 1944, and the campaign settled down to the hard slog of clearing the German army out of Northwest Europe and finally defeating Hitler, the role of the War Room changed. I imagined we still kept our maps up to date, but our real purpose had been to portray the establishment of the Allied Second Front in Europe, and the ways in which the Resistance was assisting in this and, by the autumn, our usefulness had largely been completed. It was about this time that information began to filter back about the two British officers of a three man team (the third a French wireless operator) who had been dropped into the resistance areas in the Vercors, to receive the massive airdrop of arms and supplies to the Maquis there and organise paramilitary operations in what was believed to be terrain that could be controlled by the Allies. It was reported that they had escaped to Switzerland, abandoning their post. The two officers, Major Desmond Longe, and Captain John Hausemann, strongly denied the implications of this. They had made their way over the mountains into Switzerland, but only after their position had become untenable and to avoid capture by the Germans.

The director of SOE ordered a court of inquiry to be set up, consisting of two senior officers (I think) and a clerk to take down the evidence. To my delight, Colonel Ram asked if I would do this, as I combined the necessary qualifications of commissioned rank, good French and shorthand. The inquiry seemed to go on for several weeks, and I filled a stack of notebooks. Finally the point was reached when evidence was needed from the French Commandant of the area and the civilian organiser of resistance concerned at the time. They of course could not be asked to attend, apart from anything else it was a crucial time for the French, sorting out the newly liberated territory. So I volunteered to go and take the evidence in person. This was agreed and a list of detailed questions drawn up for the two men to answer and sign with witnesses etc.



Ruth's order from Gen Eisenhower's HQ to proceed to Lyon

I was twenty-two and frankly, scared stiff, never having flown before. My transport by air (likely a Dakota) was arranged and I set off very early one morning in December 1944 for Lyons. The little aircraft with only a handful of passengers set off for Paris from Northolt. It was bitterly cold, there were no seats as such, but a metal shelf with indentations along one side of the draughty plane and of course no food or hot drinks. We had to change planes in Paris and I fondly imagined that I would be able to find something in the airport building. I was devastated when I realised the plane had parked right out in the mid-field somewhere and we were not going anywhere near the airport. At this point, Sir Galahad appeared in the form of that dapper little

Jewish businessman I had described to you in the Natural History Museum, who offered me a tiny Hovis sandwich from his pocket that I suppose a thoughtful wife had despatched him with. Unlike me to be so ill prepared for a trip, but food supplies had simply not occurred to me and my gratitude to my kindly acquaintance was very genuine. I naturally talked to him about his work and how impressed I had been and he insisted on showing me when we got to Lyon, some of his most recent wares. I gathered he had come out to check on various items on the spot.

9. Lyon & the Vercors

We were met by military transport when we got to Lyon and I plucked up the courage to ask if we could possibly stop to buy some bread, as I really was pretty desperate, and the weather was icy, which made it worse. It was nearly dark I remember, but the chap kindly drew up at a boulangerie and emerged with a handful of grissini, a grey breadstick that normally one would refuse, but I was very grateful. I mention that they were grey because you may not know that during the war, the flour was not refined, and presumably all grain was literally grist to the mill so the so called National loaf in England was grey, and so it was all French bread.

Driving through the streets of Lyon to the hotel requisitioned by the allies as an officer's mess, I was scared again at what I was doing on a one man mission (no reassuring companions) and the mood of the city seemed ugly - we passed two squares where demonstrations were in progress and Communist slogans were in evidence.

But the requisition hotel proved a haven. The Americans were in charge of catering and while I cannot remember what I ate that first starving evening I can well remember the typically American breakfast next morning, with piping hot waffles, bacon and maple syrup, orange juice and plenty of hot coffee. My first experience of this particular menu, although my mother had brought us up in our early days on pancakes and maple syrup for breakfast, but never with bacon too. Fortified by this and taking my courage in both hands. I set off to find the military headquarters of the Commandant of Lyon, one Colonel Francois Huet. *(Huet had been in charge of the French Resistance on the Vercors plateau.)*

SOE had advised him of my coming and of the reason for my visit, but it simply referred to me as Lieutenant Keble. It had never dawned on the French authorities that I would be a woman and it took a moment or two to sort things out! Colonel Huet was one of those aesthetic-looking Frenchmen, tall, thin, pale, correct and humourless, but he answered all my questions and then invited me to lunch in their mess. This was in another requisitioned hotel in the town and it appeared that all the French officers of the area were assembled there. As we approach the dining room, Colonel Huet stood aside for me to enter and the entire company rose to a clatter of chairs and boots! For one ghastly moment I thought they were standing up for me, a woman, but mercifully sanity intervened and I realised they were actually at attention for their Commandant!

What a contrast between this mess and the Anglo-American one I was in. The French are so traditional in their serving of meals and so we began with hors d'oeuvres, a few slices of

beetroot and a piece of grey bread. The main course was a slice of coarse tinned meat, served with some potato. I doubt there was anything to follow and coffee would have been the ground acorn variety. I think there was a glass of red wine. Surely there must have been a glass of wine! Nowhere was there any heating, certainly not before 4pm. Life was very hard in Europe at that time, as it had been for many years. The friendly officers around me asked me what I was doing in Lyon and when I said that I heard so much about the Vercors Plateau recently I only wished I could see it for myself. Never dreaming I would be taken up on this, they countered with the suggestion that a visit could be arranged. Before I knew what was happening, Colonel Huet's permission had been given, his driver was to take me up there that very afternoon, staying the night in an auberge, and being shown all the landmarks I knew so well from the inquiry. I was first taken to Grenoble to obtain the evidence required from my other witness, which seemed to be on the way to the snow covered mountains.

10. Visiting the recently liberated Vercors plateau

As we approached the foothills, a soldier opened fire on the car, or rather fired a warning shot across our bows. Naturally we stopped. I wound down the window beside me and pushed my shoulder with its epaulette in the soldier's direction. What good I thought this would do I have no idea, but it was my reflex action, somehow believing my British uniform would reassure the Frenchman who might have been thinking we were some remnant of the retreating German army. Time stood still and then with a bored gesture he waved us on.

I shall never forget the Vercors, and when I realise that the Val d'Isere is a fashionable ski resort - and probably all the other places I stopped to look at - it means nothing to me. I shall always see the place where so many courageous French people made a stand against an absolutely ruthless and by now desperate enemy. I no longer remember how many of them were killed in their attempt to gain control of the plateau. I only know that the area was devastated and the villagers who remained were in mourning. We arrived at the auberge at nightfall and the Madame showed me an old fashioned room under the eaves with a large feather bed. She had no supper to serve me as such, but produced a steaming bowl of vegetable soup and some bread, which did very well. As I was enjoying this, the driver pointed out a youth to me who had just come in. He was very thin and frail looking, which I understood full well when I was told the Germans had shot him, had not been sure if they had killed him, and in a rare act of mercy for them, given him the *coup de grace* by putting a bullet through his jaw. He had lain there until he was sure all the Germans had gone and then dragged himself home.

With the mountain air and the strain of the day, I was soon ready for bed. Madame gave me a piping hot earthenware "bouillotte" and I carefully moved the large chest of drawers across the door, which had no lock, as it had started to get rather rowdy in the bar below and this seemed a wise precaution! From time to time throughout the night there would be raucous laughter and feet pounding up the stairs, outside my room, but nothing more, thank heavens. Next morning, I asked the driver what had been going on, and he explained that there had been a wedding in the village and the bridal couple was staying in the Auberge. It seemed it was a local custom. Perhaps it happened everywhere and I was too innocent to know these things, that the happy

pair were given no peace to rest and enjoy their wedding night but were continually interrupted by the rest of the party. I wish I had known this before I went to bed, I might not have spent such an alarming night!

11. An extraordinary return to Paris via Resistance homes

Back in Lyon, my mission completed, I applied for the air passage back to London. To my surprise I discovered that the next plane (the service was probably twice a week or something like that) was fully booked and with my low priority, I will not likely be able to get away for some days. There was nothing for it but to wait, so I explored the city looking at some of the hastily mounted exhibitions or photographs of atrocities so recently committed in the region and called on my friend from the Natural History Museum, to see what he was up to. The next day, I was having a meal in the mess when an RF officer I had once seen at Baker Street sat opposite me and asked what I was doing. When I explained my predicament, he offered me a lift in his car to Paris. He was Major Anthony Thackthwaite, one of the RF British officers they had recruited to drop into France and organise resistance in the South East. He was back in France winding up some of the unfinished business, calling on people with news of their loved ones, returning to them such personal possessions in London, sorry, returning to them such personal possessions as London had saved for them, paying debts as appropriate and generally making contact with people who had helped him when he was working undercover earlier in the year. He was probably about 40, short, tubby, spoke absolutely fluent French. Like so many of the British he had worked in France before the war and knew and loved it and the people well, and would have faded into the background of whatever milieu he found himself in.

He was travelling in a minute box on wheels of a car, a Citroen I think, with a driver and a French woman agent who had worked as a courier for the Resistance in Paris most of the war and had been Squadron Leader Yeo's secretary while he was in the field. She was quite the plainest of redheads, with her hair scraped back and an ill-fitting khaki uniform she had recently been thrust into called Jeanne, but she was a very special person and I feel privileged to have met her. Her boss, Tommy Yeo, known in the field as the White Rabbit, had been arrested and sent to a concentration camp, but there had been no news of him since and she was convinced he would come through all right. But the war was not yet over and the concentration camps were still in German held territory. His exploits have been recorded in a book, a film and on television. He was probably the best known British agent so we had. I will always treasure the few minutes he sat by my desk in Baker Street after he'd been liberated from Buchenwald, having survived against all the odds by swapping places with another prisoner and being suspended by a meat hook through his jaw - the details elude me now. He sat there chatting, showing me the cigarette case given to him by Colonel Passy (the code name of one of the leading French Resistance organisers, if not the leading one, his name taken from the metro station he was standing at the time he was required to give it), duly inscribed with a suitable message. Knowing him, I suppose he carried it under the Germans' noses throughout. He had come to call on my Colonel, not Ram by this time as events and he had moved on, but Hugh Saunders, who kept him waiting as Hardy Amies wished to see him too. Hardy, who had spent an agreeable chair-born war as Head of the Belgian Section, could not wait to get back to his

highly successful couturier business. My desk then was in the outer office, and that was how, when Yeo was asked to wait, I offered him a chair.

But, to return to Lyon. That afternoon we set off but before leaving Thackers had to call at some little bistro in a side street to see the proprietor. The moment we walked in, the shutters went up, the "ouvert" sign was reversed to "ferme", and bottles were dug out of heaven knows where that had been hidden from the Germans all these years. He was clearly loved by all who knew him, and they simply could not do enough to show their appreciation of all he had done during his time with them. And so it went on, a royal progress through the country roads of the region, calling on old resistance friends. We arrived at one rural restaurant in the middle of one afternoon, when clearly there was nothing much they felt they could offer him. Quite undaunted, the whole family set to preparing a feast from scratch. When finally the young daughter of the house proudly carried in an enormous cherry tart straight from the oven, Thackers made a desperate grab at his webbing belt and managed to undo it before it exploded. Whatever delicacy Madame produced to tempt us as a starter I regrettably no longer remember, but I do remember his, "C'est deja pad mal!", to indicate to her that if this was the standard she was setting, no one need fear!

The night before we arrived in Paris we stayed, memorably, at the Hotel de la Poste in Avallon. Harry and I went back there in the summer of 1989 but the room prices were so astronomical that we stayed elsewhere. But we explored the outside, peered into the dining room windows and walked around the old coach yard. It really had not changed, not even the little red lampshades on each table, and the old world chintz curtains at windows. I had never stayed in such a place before, it was pure Dornford Yates to me then, and it made a deep impression.

Back in Paris, I reported to the Hotel Cecil, which SOE had requisition for its offices, and was shown a telegram from Bill Ram saying, "Anyone seen Keble?" I suppose I really had disappeared for several days, but it was the most sensible thing to do to accept the lift, and I would not have missed it for the world. Once again, no heating, there never was, but somehow Paris seemed even colder and 4pm a long time to wait. In the office I found myself in there were a couple of picture postcards on the walls. I took them down to look at them. They were addressed to some German, and that was somehow spooky, to realise how recently they had occupied the city, that no one had got around taking down their decorations!

12. Trips to SOE agents in Brussels & Copenhagen & de-mob

I'm very hazy about what happened next. There were exercises relating to the liberation of Norway, concern for Denmark, sections closing down as their usefulness came to an end but their history had to be written by our department. I was no good at this at all, and one day after Hugh Saunders had struck through just about everything I had written - although he always said "eggcellent Ruth" as he did it - I ventured to say that it was pretty pointless my doing these drafts, but he was quite amazed. "But Ruth, until I disagree with what you have said, I do not know what I think about it." My history writing continued.

About this time I got my captaincy and my privately declared goal had been achieved- to be a G.O.III(1). It made no difference whatsoever, except for the better pay for which I was most grateful, but a chapter closed.

The flat I've been renting in Courtfield Gardens was reclaimed by its owner and I was looking for somewhere else to live. Ginny Grant Lawson very kindly invited me to be her paying guest in Cavendish Square. Peter had been posted with his regimen to Brussels and she thought she would like some company. The £3 a week I paid her cannot have made any difference to their income, certainly. They kept up peacetime standards and changed for dinner every night. I think it must have been a great trial for them, one way and another. Goodness knows I didn't mean to be, but I was so green and must have put my foot into a lot of situations. They were so very grand "by right" as it were and I found it hard to keep up with their friends' conversations and that kind of thing.

By the winter of 1945 I was involved in the liquidation of the Belgian section and had to go to Brussels. Again the cold: I encountered my first electric blanket, a tiny one, someone who thoughtfully put in my bed. The bed was so damp steam rose when it was switched on. People were very kind and hospitable and I was entertained in Belgian agents' houses and shown around by their wives. One whole visit to see an agent was completely marred by my desperate need to spend a penny. By the time we got there I was practically incoherent and I fear all the places of interest pointed out to me along the way were quite wasted. So much easier for men, with every field a "penny house".

In December I discovered SOE needed an officer courier to take some top secret equipment to Denmark. Always on the lookout for a trip abroad, and realising that if I could get to Denmark there was a good chance of crossing over to Sweden and spending the Christmas holidays with my uncle Chris Ravndal and his family, I leapt at the chance. In 1944 Chris had been posted to Stockholm as US Charge d'Affaires and had been flown in by Mosquito in the bomb-bay. He'd been joined by my aunt Alberta and cousin Inga during 1945, who had been flown in from Scotland and in slightly (but not much) more comfort.

I had seen Alberta and Inga on their way through London to Scotland and had tea with them at their hotel in Mayfair. None of us will ever forget the look on the waitresses face as Alberta told her nonchalantly that she would like some lemon with her tea. No one in England had seen a lemon since the first weeks of the war. The poor woman was aghast.

Everything was arranged and I set off with my precious equipment for Copenhagen. All I had been told was that, at the customs bench, a man would introduce himself as Joseph. I was to hand the case to him. It seemed an eternity before anybody approached me and I was scared stiff for what I would do with the case if no one appeared, as it was not to be opened by customs at any price. But all was well and a rather short and unattractive sort of man announced himself and relieved me of my burden. He took me to my hotel, the Weber as I recall, and as I was also carrying Nescafe and cigarettes for him in my luggage, sent by the Danish section in London, he escorted me up the stairs when - to my dismay - the man on duty at reception called out that I

might not entertain men in my bedroom. The thought that anyone could imagine for one split second that I would be seen dead with such an odd little man, except in the cause of strict business, appalled me.

The dining room of the Hotel Weber is engraved forever on my mind because it was there that I saw for the first time in my life butter being served in slices to cover your bread like a piece of cheese. I sat in that hotel dining room and gazed at this phenomenon, quite unable to believe what I saw: An arrangement of slices of pumpernickel bread on a plate with an equal number of slices of pure Danish unsalted butter. You have to remember, we had been at war for six years and butter is always one of the first commodities to be rationed. What little butter we had you scraped on and scraped off again. Nectar and ambrosia.

An important figure in Danish resistance was a delightful old Harrovian called Per Federspiel and it was his charming wife who took me in hand, had me to stay a night at their house in the country, showed me around Copenhagen and generally made me welcome. He was in the cabinet at the time and he showed me their Parliament buildings. He was so determined to do all he could to help anyone from SOE was touching. He himself had had some very tough experiences as a prisoner of the Germans because of his resistance activities and everyone in Denmark had suffered greatly from shortages of every kind and a very active Gestapo.

After a few days in Denmark it was time to catch the night train and ferry to Stockholm. I had to be in civilian clothes there, so I had taken some things to change into on the train. (Having written that sentence, I realise that I can no longer imagine why I had to arrive in civilian clothes, but it was all part of the adventure.) It was great fun being with the Chris Ravndals and everything was so different from the wartime Europe I knew. One of Chris's duties as Charge d'Affaires was to invite all the American families on his staff with their children to tea on Christmas Day. Their flat was really quite small and the whole prospect quite appalled Alberta and Inga, they both went to bed with flu or migraine, it doesn't really matter which.

I was completely captivated by the excitement and otherness of Stockholm and decided I would try to get a job there after I was demobilised. Back in London, after continuing to write the history of SOE, this great event took place in May 1946. I simply went to a depot in North London, signed some papers, was handed a book of clothing coupons and I walked out a free woman. I can still feel that awful "gone" sensation in the pit of my stomach - for all that I was looking to leave a way of life that had become a chore, with all my friends dispersed, it was the only life I'd known since I grew-up and I had no milieu to return to.



Ruth's Certificate of Merit, signed by Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander (and later post-war US President)

Ruth later secured a position with Scandinavian Airways Services in their communications team and lived several years in Stockholm before moving to work for the United Nations Human Resources team in New York. She decided to leave the UN in 1950 and take a trip to Montevideo, where her uncle Chris Ravndal was then US Ambassador to Uruguay. It was there that she met Harry Willis, who was working for the Bank of South America, and within a matter of a few short months they were married, siring five children after moving back to the UK and settling in Tunbridge Wells. She went on to found and run the highly regarded Fryerning Finishing School in Wadhurst (E Sussex), later transformed into a Secretarial College in Tunbridge Wells, serving girls from over 80 countries.

Notes from her son, Paddy Willis
paddywillis5@gmail.com