

The Story Of Vera Leigh- SOE



SOE - Special Operation Executive.

Also called "Churchills Secret Army"!

Once in a while there are extraordinary men and women who can, by their selflessness move history into the future This is the TRUE story of one of them.

Foxhill Wanborough & Colonel Hall Walker



Col. Hall Walker was the first Baron Wavertree known as "The Lucky Owner". He was very rich and owned his own Brewery and Silver works. He bought Foxhill Farm in the late 1880's when it consisted of 146 acres six houses and the Shepherds Rest Inn. He encouraged Hiram Eugene Leigh, a famous horse trainer to move from America to Foxhill. He brought many American Jockeys with him including a coloured jockey who was a great favourite with the punters called "Zip" Chambers. He might have been our first coloured jockey.



Trainer. Hiram E Leigh who preferred to be known as "Gene", made his money on portable stalls that could be moved from track to track. He chased the big money races from America to France and Ireland, and was a great favourite in England at the Leeds racetracks. This is where he adopted Vera.



Foxhill Stables



Foxhill was a very special place for racehorses with stables at Russley near Bishopstone, Lambourn and Badbury.

All the stable owners contributed to pay landowners for the rights to maintain gallops over their land.

The gallops were ploughed up about 30 years ago, when the ploughman found a haul of ammunition left over by the Home Guard! He told me that the gallops went from Popplechurch by the Motorway bridge over the downs to Chieveley.



Foxhill's Royal Patronage



Frequent visitors to Foxhill stables were King Edward and Lillie Langtree.

They both kept horses in the area and met at Foxhill Stables for their assignations, where the King seemed to have his own apartments. Lillie's husband was tired of being the cuckold and told her to sell her horses or he would cite the King as co-respondent.

The King had just scraped out of a similar court case so told Lillie she would have to go and he had to make do with his 17 other mistresses! It is alleged that he had several children in the area by the servants that worked at Foxhill. The name of the Stables was then known as King Edward's Stud!



Just before the war, Gene took his family to live in France At Laffite racetrack near Paris. By this time Vera grew to be a fine Horsewoman and she started a fashion house with friends. She was said to be an exceptional business woman. Gene died in 1937. His estate was settled in England.

The Adventure Begins- The Pat Line!

The Pat Line was an ancient route over the Pyrenees long, named after Pat O'Leary who utilised the route previously used by many creeds and religious refugees. The route was primarily for removing downed pilots to enable them to rejoin the war effort. It had small places along it which earlier refugees had made home and were useful for the travellers to rest. They were also places which took children for safety. The Pat line was about 62 miles of hard trek. It is now a memorial route which is open in July for guided tours. The Pat line was compromised several times because repatriated young men had a good story to tell!! Its most famous escapee was Airey Neave, who had been a downed pilot who was the first to escape from Colditz and later worked for M.I.9. Pat O'Leary was in Natzweiler and recognised Vera when she was brought into the camp. We have no idea how Vera was involved with the Line, But she was arrested by the Spanish police in December 1942. Albert Geurisse was imprisoned at Netzweiler at the same time that Vera arrived. He was able to state that Vera Leigh was indeed there.



**Pat O'Leary alias
Albert Geurisse
(a Belgian)**

Vera's War- the early days...



When I grow up I am going to be a Lady Jockey

Vera Leigh born Ira Eugenie Glass in 1903 Leeds but "abandoned" as a baby "Adopted" by Gene Leigh who already had a baby girl, Viola born 1901. Her early life was similar to Velvet Brown in the film National Velvet. Family locates to Lafitte in Paris, Vera is then involved with removing people in danger from the Nazi Government, by the Pat Line.



Marlene Dietrich



Eric Remarque

Other ladies were helping people to escape Nazi Germany – Marlene Dietrich alias Lilly Marlene the German Forces sweetheart managed to acquire a visa for him to America by using her fame beauty and money. He was called a traitor by Hitler for writing

"Alls Quiet on the Western Front" which had portrayed the WW1 German soldiers in poor circumstances - similar to our own men. His books were burnt but his reprints had an accolade to Marlene in them.

His sister could not be removed quickly enough and the Germans shot her in revenge. Vera Atkins also managed to remove her brother from Germany, and scientists from Poland. The film 'Libertie! A call to spy' was based on her SOE life, released in 2019.

Ensign Vera Leigh Joins Churchill's Secret Army

When the escape route to England was compromised, longer routes had to be found. Vera was helping people get to Spain, where she was arrested and imprisoned in the Mirando del Elbro internment camp. Here she was rescued by the British Government and sent back to England. She applied to Join the Field Ambulance Nursing Yeomanry (Fany's). She was then approached by Intelligence instead who asked her to join the Special Operations Executive as a courier, because she could speak French perfectly. This would entail carrying explosives, spare parts for radios and messages between the resistance, other agents and local intelligence to pass on to the Wireless Operators to send back to HQ in London and then pass replies back again. She was advised to give up the relationship she had with her fiancé, which she did. She was then sent for Guerilla Training. With the men. Vera's code name was Suzanne Chavanne, she was sent to work in Paris, where she travelled between there and the Ardennes (a four hour train ride way). She worked for the Donkeyman and the Inventor network. She set herself up as a milliner so that she could carry parts around in the hatboxes. She accidentally moved near to Sergeant Bleicher of the Abwehr (French police under German control) and came under his notice. He didn't take her very seriously though and thought she was playing at Spies. However when the organisation was betrayed. He had to round her up with the others. She was sent to Karlsruhe Prison. There were other SOE agents there already. However, the girls were together working in the kitchens. As long as they were together, they felt safe.



83 Baker Street, London



Vera Atkins Enemy Alien or Heroine or BOTH?



Ian Flemming based Miss Money Penny on Vera Atkins In his Bond Books!



Vera Atkins born in Romania as Vera Maria Rosenberg on 16th June 1918. She spent her childhood in British Boarding schools. She rose through the ranks to become Section Head of SOE 'F' Section and was responsible for recruitment, training and supervising the agents.

Before the war she helped evacuate Polish enigma code breakers. She had been originally recruited as a fact finder in Europe so that Winston Churchill would have intelligence of the rising threat of Nazi Germany. When Vera was to go to Germany she was reticent to do so as she was an enemy alien and should have been incarcerated.

She pleaded for Nationalization and was given a passport with *both* names on it. But after some help by important people she was given British status. She did a terrific job, except for not picking up signals from radio transmission warning that the radios had been compromised. This was a word spelled incorrectly three times. This meant the radio and its operator was in German hands. They just received a reprimand for their spelling!! This error was to cost many lives. Another agent Sonya Oischanesky, parents was not told by Vera that Sonya had died. They didn't find out until the 1950's.. Four other SOE agents just disappeared.

Henri Dericourt – Spy or Traitor?



Henri Dericourt was recruited by Boddington, of the SOE and was Vera's superior officer. He also flew the girls to France in his lysander airplane.

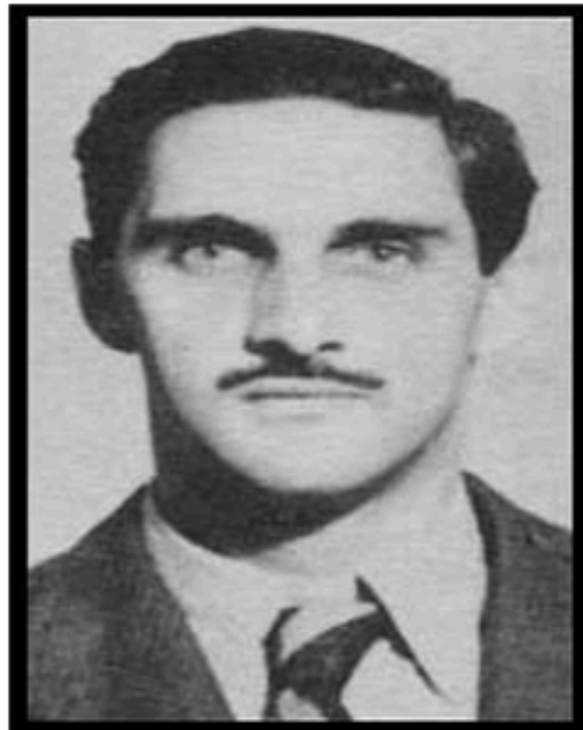
Vera reported back to London that she thought he was double agent but in fact he was a **triple** agent!

He was tried as a spy responsible for the downfall of the Prosper Network which led to others crumbling. He never outlived his reputation.

BODDINGTON gave evidence that he had been acting under orders.

It is said that Derricourt crashed while taking gold and passengers – neither he nor the gold were ever seen again.

Danger afoot for W/T operator



Jack Agazarian

Jack was a W/T operator in Paris as the couriers and other operatives were caught, Jack's workload was increased many times needing him to broadcast much longer than he should and therefore putting himself in danger.

Both he and Vera expressed a worry that Henry Derricourt was a double agent. Boddington was sent to France to liaise with a notable German and pass files over, to prove he was really a double agent but he made Jack Agazarian go in his place and Jack was arrested, tortured and hanged, at Flossinberg in March 1945 cursing Boddington all the way to the gallows

His wife, Francine, was also a SOE agent but she survived the war.

Eight SOE were Girls chained together for days in the back of a truck and sent to Concentration Camps the four of the left to Dachau and the girls on the right to Natzweiler Camps. The girls at Dachau were beaten to a pulp and shot in the neck on 12th September 1944 and the girls to the right were killed by lethal injection, 6th July 1944 and seems to have been treated with a respect of sorts.



Madelaine
Damerment



Elaine
Plewman



Diane
Rowden



Andree
Borrell



Noor un Nisa
Inayat Kahn



Yolande
Beekman



Sonya
Olschanezky



Vera
Leigh

Ladies of the SOE – Friends to the end



VERA LEIGH

Born in 1903, at Leeds, moved to Paris with family, started a fashion house with friends. She worked with the resistance on the Pat Line, then arrested by Spanish police. Rescued by British intelligence, persuaded to join the SOE she was arrested and sent to Natzweiler Concentration camp where



SONYA OISCHANESKY

Born Chemitz Germany, 1923 after her dream of being a dancer were crushed, Sonia worked for the French resistance arrested sent to a concentration camp, mother managed to acquire war work document and she was released. After release she went to work for the SOE Prosper network but after betrayal she was arrested again in January 1944 and joined 7 other ladies in Fresnes prison. She was Relocated



DIANNA ROWDEN

Born London 1915 died Natzweiler 1944 aged 29, helped escapees until 1941. Diane was a flying officer in 1943 who was invited to join the SOE and was sent to Air Intelligence to train with other SOE agents first mission was on 18 June 1943, Was involved in the blowing up of the Peugeot factory as it made parts for planes and tanks



ANDREE BORRELL

Born France 1919 worked for the French Resistance and joined the Spanish War. Took a very active roll in sabotage, she was very strong and with an athletic build. She was betrayed with all the other SOE agents F Section and from Fresenes prison she was sent to Natzweiler Consentration camp where she died on 6th June 1944 aged 24.

The Trials

Not for persons of a delicate disposition..

Vera Atkins did her best to bring those responsible for the murders to trial and justice.

Natzweiler was one of 40,000 killing spots in Europe and including Alderney in the Channel Isles.

The SOE agents were arrested under the "Night Fog ." order which meant that no records would be kept regarding their incarcerations and eventual end. This meant that there would be no paper trail. So it was very imperative that Vera Atkins manage to reveal the truth from the Camp staff and their prisoners. Franz Berg the crematorium keeper, eventually received five years imprisonment. The court didn't know how to deal with the murderers of the SOE agents as they were not covered by the Nuremburg Code being saboteurs and spies. The agents expected to be treated as soldiers. Therefore the perpetrators had very lenient sentences. The Statement as told by Franz Berg the Crematorium keeper follows:



Andre Borrell



Dianna Rowden



Vera Atkins



Vera Leigh



Sonya Olschanezky

Statement taken by Vera Atkins from Franz Berg

I am a waiter living in Mannheim. During my life as far as I can remember, I have had 18 sentences of imprisonment. I cannot remember what they were all for but I remember 2 cases of theft, several for obstructing the police and of causing bodily injury and in the last sentence of two years from 1932 – 1934 was by his time the Nazi Government had come to power.

I was not released but retained in custody as a habitual criminal. I was transferred to a camp at Straubing and thence in 1937 to Naterweigan where I spent two and a half years. At the end of November or beginning of December I was sent to Natzweiler where I was employed in the quarry until February 1943 when I was transferred to the crematorium which had just been built.

This oven was heated by oil. Ucha Peter Straub was in charge of the crematorium. He counted the bodies and filled in the death certificates and so on. Uscha Jehle worked under him the other assistant with me was called Messenger who after about 4 weeks, died. He was succeeded by Karl Rauch in June and didn't return to the crematorium .

In October 1943 a new crematorium had been built in the camp. And the oven was moved there and rebuilt for coke firing instead of oil in November 1942. Karl Reuth was sent to the camp at Lonwys and was succeeded by George Fuhrman who had been selected by Commandant Kramer. In July 1944 Fuhrman contracted an infection of his arm from one of the bodies which was cut up in the mortuary.

He was replaced by August Ziegler and a gypsy called Mettbach. The first crematorium was outside of the camp and used to work on Wednesdays and Saturdays but when the new crematorium was built it worked three times a week.

In June 1944 I remember having been told by an Unterchar Fuhrman the SS medical orderly that four jewesses had been given injections by the SS medical orderly of the SS camp hospital. Peter Straub was present as he was at all the executions that took place at Netzeiler.

The next morning in the course of my duties, I had to clear the ashes from the oven, I found on top of some coffins a cardboard box with some empty glass ampules about two and a half centimetres long labelled Evipen. The next women to be killed by injection as opposed to gassing (I can remember 80 women were gassed at the same time. Straub and Nittack took part in this undertaking. The women, two were French and two were English were brought to the camp then the crematorium building in the afternoon of July about 3.30 am by Nittack and Ustuf Otto (who had been the adjutant at Dachau).

They were carrying suitcases and coats over their arms and one had a travelling rug placed in the same cell. But about 6pm they were placed in separate cells. Peter Straub told me about 8pm on the day that the women had arrived to have the crematorium oven heated to maximum by 9.30 and I was still stoking the fire when Peter Straub came in followed by both the SS doctors of the camp with Haupt Jensen from Auschwitz the former SS doctor of the camp who was wearing civilian clothes. The doctor, in uniform chased me out of the furnace. I went to my room and pretended to be asleep.

George Fuhmann and Alex a Russian from Leningrad, the Commandant looked inside our room to see if we were asleep. I pretended to be asleep. There was a fanlight above the door from which it was possible to see the corridor outside. Fuhrman occupied the highest bunk and was able to look through without standing up. He whispered to me that they were bringing a woman along the corridor. We heard voices in the next room.

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Fuhrman whispered that he could see people dragging something along the corridor but it was below his field of vision through the fanlight. At the same time as the body was brought past we heard the sound of heavy breathing and low groaning combined.

The next two women were seen by Fuhrmann and again we heard the insensible groans as the women were dragged away. The fourth woman however, resisted in the corridor and I heard her say "Pourquoi"? A man's voice replied "Pour Typhus". Peter Straub and the SS medical orderly stayed behind for half an hour and after they were gone, Fuhrmann Alex and I opened the oven door and saw that there were four blackened bodies within.

Franz Berg

It is now thought that Franz Berg was not quite telling the truth, because he acquired some very bad scratch marks down his face from one of the women whom he says woke up as he was placing her in the oven.

Incarceration And The End



Himmler and Hess

A Nazi partnership from Hell .Hess designed the Camps and Himmler decided who lived and died in them.

Picture left: Himmler examines a model of Dachau designed by Hess



Fresno Prison nine SOE girls were held here in 1943 Vera was here for a year.



Natzweiler
Concentration Camp



The four berth cremation oven
at Natzweiler

Pierpont Exacts Justice?



Albert Pierpont

CALOX Protects the Natural Beauty of your teeth
WORLD'S LARGEST EVENING NET SALE
The Evening News NO. 25,175 LONDON, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1946 ONE PENNY
LATE EXTRA
Yeast-Vite

TWELVE EVIL MEN TO HANG

*Goering and von Ribbentrop for the Gallows
Hess Jailed For Life—Three Are Acquitted*

Twelve of the 22 men of Nuremberg were condemned to death by hanging this afternoon. Three were acquitted and the remainder were sentenced to imprisonment for terms ranging from ten years to life. If no appeals within four days succeed the executions are expected to be carried out at Nuremberg. The Russian judge dissented from the acquittals and the fact that Hess is not to die.

Here are the sentences passed, with details of the counts on which they were found guilty. The counts are set out below in Column Four.

Sentenced to Death by Hanging

GOERING, Hermann Wilhelm, 52, Luftwaffe chief and Hitler's chief lieutenant. All counts.

RIBBENTROP, Joachim, 50, Hitler's Foreign Minister and former London Ambassador. All counts.

KEITEL, Wilhelm, 60, former chief of the German High Command. All counts.

ROSENBERG, Alfred, 38, author of the Nazi Bernstein-volk creed; former chief of the administration of the occupied countries in the East. All counts.

JODL, Alfred, 50, former Nazi Chief of Staff. All counts.

Sentenced to Imprisonment

HESS, Rudolf, 52, Hitler's former deputy, who flew to Britain on the eve of the attack on Russia, to try to persuade Britain to make peace. Counts 1 and 2.

FUNK, Walter, 50, the man who succeeded Schacht as head of the Reichsbank, and who organized the financing of Hitler's war. Counts 2, 3 and 4.

RAEDER, Erich, 59, chief of Hitler's navy in 1940. Counts 1, 2 and 3.

SCHIRACH, Baldur von, 30, Hitler Youth leader. Count 4.

SPEED, Albert, 40, Hitler's armaments minister.

STRICKER, Julius, 61, the 2nd-bomber No. 1, man who organized the pogroms and persecutions. Count 4.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH....

HIGH-LIGHTS FROM JUDGES' FINAL WORDS

Von R. Behind Attack On Jews

HESSES are some of the high lights from what the judges said of the guilty and the innocent—here:

RIBBENTROP: He played an important part in Hitler's policy of racial persecution. The court pronounced his sentence for abetting National Socialism.

HESS: Hitler's closest confidant, the light of Germany. He organized the attack on Russia, the first of the Jewish pogroms. The court pronounced his sentence for abetting National Socialism.

GOERING: He played an important part in Hitler's policy of racial persecution. The court pronounced his sentence for abetting National Socialism.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH....

SOVIET JUDGE PROTESTS

25,000 NEEDED FOR INSURANCE

Albert Pierpont, (left) Britain's most famous executioner, was to hang the 12 convicted war criminals. Goebbels died the night before from a cyanide pill, Hess was already a prisoner in Scotland. There were speculations that a look alike had been tried in his place. He gave the prisoners' bodies more respect than they gave their victims. The Russians complained of too lenient sentences, so did the French who retried the ones that got away.

Memorial



Valencey Memorial

Designed by Elizabeth Lucas Harrison. It was built in time for the 50th anniversary of the Allied Invasion. It celebrates the clandestine co-operation between the SOE and the Resistance. It is half black and white to signify their clandestine work and the shining belief in the Allied Triumph.



National Memorial Arboretum Staffordshire.

Vera Atkins made sure her girls would not be forgotten at the National Arboretum. The Star of David is the mark of the creator and the evergreen Christmas tree signifies life after death.



With Sir Robert Knox's Compliments, 18th September, 1946.

G.C.C. 366
SECRET

My dear Brown,

We are about to obtain approval for a King's Commendation for brave conduct for Ensign Vera Leigh, deceased, and also for a Frenchwoman who was a member of the F.A.N.Y., Mlle. Andree Borrel, deceased.

Before gazetting the award to Ensign Leigh and informing the French Government of the King's Commendation granted to Mlle. Borrel, we shall be very glad if you will inform us whether Mentions in Despatches or King's Commendations are being or have been granted to

Section Officer D.H. Raden (or Rowden),
W.A.A.F. 4193;

Acting Section Officer M. Inayat-Khan,
W.A.A.F. 990.

These four were executed in the ovens at Natzweiler.

As the matter received some publicity, you will agree that it will be as well that there should be as short a time as possible between the announcements.

Yours sincerely,

(signed) R.U.R. KNOX

William Brown,
K.C.B., K.C.M.G., G.B.E.

THIS IS A COPY
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ACT 1958

Vera is awarded the
King' Commendation
For Bravery and was
Gazzetted soon
afterwards

If it hadn't been for Vera's
half brother Victor Clarke,
we may never have know all
the details of Vera's Life as
a courier. He persistently
kept on to the Home Office
until something was
revealed. Victor himself had
an award for Bravery in the
RAF.

And Vera's wages show that
her life of Spies was worth
£590 7s 11d.

The Triumph

When the Girls of the SOE signed up with Churchill's Army they knew that they had the same working life as a Bomb disposal officer or a pilot which was estimated at six weeks.

As you have read through this presentation you would have gathered that some of the girls had some sort of Jewish link.

As such the bravery of these girls is now intensified because they were prepared to go into the lions' den, knowing what was happening to their fellows all over Europe.

The Triumph they started was carried on by the X-troop commandoes who spearheaded the invasion and cleared the way for the Allies. Their story follows:

3 Troop 10 Commando Unit

The Inglorious Bastards



Before attack



After the attack



Churchill wanted a crack team to spearhead the invasion and clear the guns on the top of the escarpment. This new platoon were called by him the "X Men" They called themselves "The Inglorious Bastards". They were all Jewish volunteers trained in Wales especially for the job of destroying the big guns.

They were given fold up bicycles to ride to hasten their trip to the top of the escarpment. They had to throw rope ladders down to the troops on the beach then ride around the machine gun placements to dismantle them and report the exact position of the guns so that they could be then be blown up. The Guns in the emplacements were busy blowing up shipping. All the while 20 of their troop died under gun fire.

The Triumph- Longues-sur-mer battery

The Germans mistake:

When the Fire control post was taken out, the whole battery was blind as they couldn't see over the edge of the cliff!

Neither could they see the Allied troops climbing up towards them.

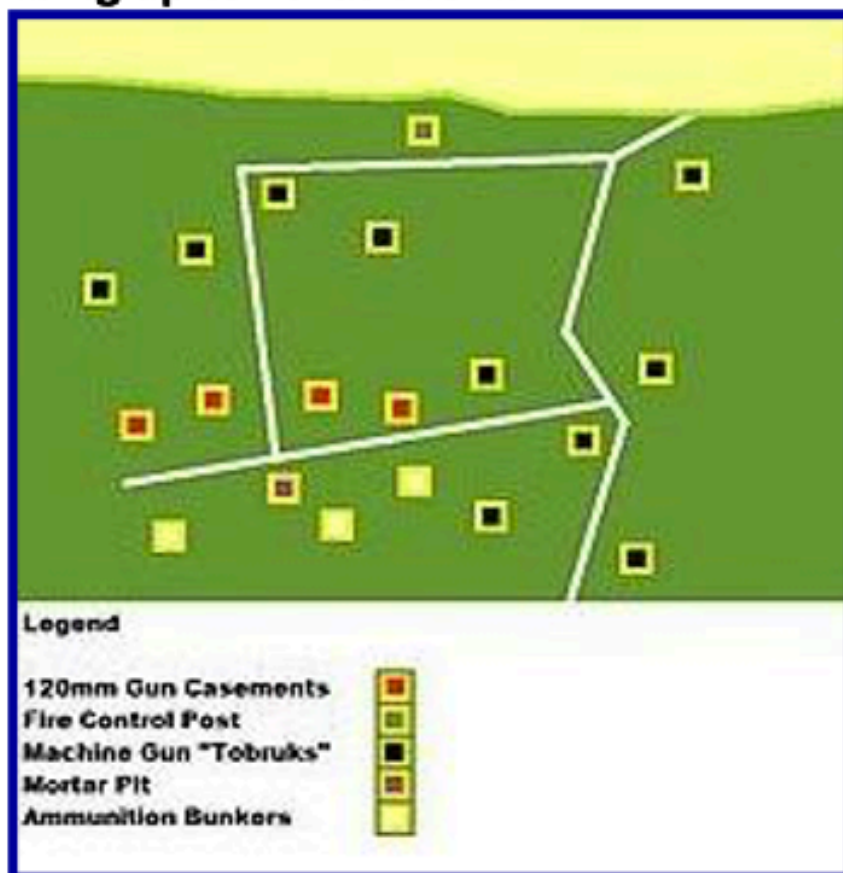


Photo show troops attacked. This is how it is today. This was part of 'The Atlantic Wall'.

The commandos had to take out Nine machine gun posts to Have clear access to the gun Emplacements. When these were Destroyed, access for the invading allies was a bit safer.

The Allied Landings



Allied Approach to the beach



The X-men and their bicycles

The SOE agents had been sabotaging railway lines and stock and causing mayhem to keep the Germans occupied and their attention away from invasion. 'F' Section had to their credit (in the clandestine period) destroyed: 3 locomotives, 2 trains derailed, 4 aeroplanes attacked and 1 fuel dump, Bridges, 1 turntable or signal box. Forging documents. And various others, ingenious misdeeds.

THEIR NAME LIVETH
FOR EVERMORE

