



She Landed by Moonlight

Carole Seymour-Jones

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On the night of the 22 September 1943 Pearl Witherington, a twenty-nine-year-old British secretary and agent of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), was parachuted from a Halifax bomber into Occupied France. Like Sebastian Faulks' heroine, Charlotte Gray, Pearl had a dual mission: to fight for her beloved, broken France and to find her lost love. Pearl's lover was a Parisian parfumeur turned soldier, Henri Cornioley, who had been taken prisoner while serving in the French Logistics Corps and subsequently escaped from his German POW camp.

Agent Pearl Witherington's wartime record is unique and heroic. As the only woman agent in the history of SOEs in France to have run a network, she became a fearless and legendary guerrilla leader organising, arming and training 3,800 Resistance fighters. Probably the greatest female organiser of armed maquisards in France, the woman whom her young troops called 'Ma Mère', Pearl lit the fires of Resistance in Central France so that Churchill's famous order to 'set Europe ablaze', which had brought SOE into being, finally came to pass.

Pearl's story takes us from her harsh, impoverished childhood in Paris, to the lonely forests and farmhouses of the Loir-et-Cher where she would become a true 'warrior queen'.

Shortly before Pearl's death in 2008, the Queen presented her with a CBE in Paris. While male agents and Special Force Jedburghs received the DSO or Military Cross, an ungrateful country had forgotten Pearl. She had been offered a civilian decoration in 1945 which she refused, saying 'There was nothing civil about what I did.' But what pleased her most was to receive her Parachute Wings, for which she had waited over 60 years. Two RAF officers travelled to her old people's home and she was finally able to pin the coveted wings on her lapel. Pearl died in February 2008 aged 93.

She Landed by Moonlight Details

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From Reader Review She Landed by Moonlight for online ebook

Caroline says

This is a well researched account of the life of a remarkable woman, Pearl Witherington, who on 22nd September 1943 was parachuted into occupied France as one of the few female agents of the Special Operations Executive (SOE).

It is written in a fluent, readable style and the late Carole Seymour Jones provides the reader with sufficient background details about the internal machinations in Whitehall, the politics of the day and the events leading up to D Day to enable you to understand the difficulties faced by agents like Pearl.

Lisa Bywell says

Heroic stuff. A gripping history of the SOE during the Nazi occupation of France and their crucial role in Operation Overlord.

Lesley Moseley says

I was so interested in this story I got my Library system to buy it. It's a researchers offering. I got so tired of ALL the many people involved , who were introduced to the detriment of the heroine's story.. Gave up, I couldn't keep track of all the people she encountered. The time also jumps forward, backward, further back, well forward, and just when it seems she is REALLY about to discuss her job as a SOE operative, back we go...

KOMET says

"SHE LANDED BY MOONLIGHT" is a fantastic story of a most remarkable woman, Pearl Witherington, an Englishwoman born in Paris of English parents, who carried a deep love and devotion for her adopted country France as great as her love for Britain.

During the Second World War, Witherington managed to spirit herself, her mother, and two of her sisters out of France to Britain following France's capitulation to Nazi Germany in June 1940. Three years later, Witherington joined the Special Operations Executive (SOE), trained as an agent and was parachuted into German-occupied France in September 1943. The book goes on to describe Witherington's achievements in the field over the following year against heavy odds. Indeed, at one point, the Germans had learned of her identity after the leader of the spy network of which she was a part had been captured by the Gestapo in May 1944. As a result, a £1,000,000 bounty was put on Witherington's head. Undeterred, Witherington took on a new code name ('Pauline') and led the SOE Wrestler network in operations against German forces in the Valencay–Issoudun–Châteauroux triangle of central France. The 4,000 marquisards she organized, armed, and trained would play a significant role in tying down thousands of German soldiers after the Allies had landed in Normandy in June 1944.

This is a story that seems too incredible to be true. But it was all too real. Witherington survived the war,

married the man she had long loved (who had also fought with her as a member of the Resistance in 1944), and went on to live a long life.

"SHE LANDED BY MOONLIGHT" also provides an interesting overview of SOE, how it came to be in July 1940, the opposition it faced from Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (i.e., MI-6), its organizational structure, and the contributions made by SOE's F Section (of which Pearl Witherington was a part) in France towards defeating Nazi Germany. I highly recommend it to anyone who wants to learn about a true 'Warrior Queen.'

Mara says

una discreta boiata

Carol Jones says

Like a History textbook

Like a history text book in the first half. Only interested me halfway through when concentrated on Pearl's exploits. Not my cup of tea!

K. A. MacKinnon says

I didn't love the tone of this one - somewhat on the sensational side, particularly after having read Pearl Witherington's own words on the subject - but it was better than some of the others I've read recently.

It did give some information about the particulars of the political infighting between the various British agencies that I haven't read before. Also details about De Gaulle and the RF section and how they fit in. And the specifics of the way in which the German advance northward after D Day was hampered by the Resistance but also by their own personal vendettas against the Resistance. I appreciated this addition to the bigger picture.

Rob Wilkinson says

A great story and an average story teller. And remarkably, the story is about actual events. These were incredible times and the SOE, incredible people. Any European reading today after decades of peacetime must feel a sense of humility.

The book follows a loose, chronological sequence following Pearl through her work before the war at the British Foreign Office, her narrow escape from France with her family to her training and work as a spy. However, Carole covers much more than Pearl's story, for example including the wider SOE operations and their contribution to the eventual Allied victory. There are many levels to the story.

There is a fascinating political backdrop. The SOE was a first-time experiment supported by Churchill but not de Gaulle. As a new operation in the theatre of war, it found itself in competition for resources with the more conventional SIS, now MI6, Bomber Command and the Free French Army. Opposing the SOE was the Gestapo and, in particular, their chief interrogator Hans Josef Kieffer, who operated an effective counter espionage ring of double agents. Stuff of le Carré? Yes, it started here.

Carole Seymour-Jones extolls Pearl, her determination, integrity and courage. At the same time, she paints Buckmaster, the spymaster, as naive and incompetent. Maybe the characters were this black and white, though I doubt it. Carole's simple writing style makes the book easy to read but would benefit from stronger editing: fewer typos, less repetition and more structure.

A key question is was it all worth it? Did the actions of the SOE cause sufficient harm to the German war effort? Carole plays with the question, but doesn't really do it justice. Not surprisingly, it challenges historians who've dedicated their studies to this period. The contrarian in me would like to hear the counter argument that it wasn't worth the human and materiel sacrifice. Again, the book comes across as biased.

Shelby Miles says

Outstanding commemoration of an outstanding woman

In reading this book I found a new hero; a new source of inspiration; a renewed appreciation for people like Pearl and her comrades during such hard times. I can't even begin to comprehend the bravery, the courage and the sacrifices that had to be made in the name of justice and patriotism.

Extremely well put together and researched - I found myself a little confused in the thick of it all with the many names and units to remember! All in all a great spontaneous read!

Llew Sadler says

Absolutely a stunning read

What an inspirational person Pearl was.

The word brave just does not cover her outstanding currag.

I only wish that the young people of today could read this book and try to follow her example.

Genuine tears were in my eyes many times during the read.

I was also taken with anger when I read of the way General DeGaul. Treated those heroic agents, in spite of the fact that England found him a safe place to shelter while the agents were offering up their lives to liberate his country.

Then he lead the procession through Paris as though he had liberated the country himself!!!

I for one will never forget them.

Jeff says

I wanted to like this book because the story is so fascinating. But the writing was too muddled to make it an enjoyable read. Names of people and agencies come fast and furious, and without much in the way of introduction. Some people reappear later in the story and you need to remember who they are while others

are mentioned once and never heard from again. I realize that history is messy and this is not a novel, but it would help to introduce the more important characters with some context so the reader knows that they are ones to be noted for later.

Maxanna Lucas says

The book is so very unevenly written. Sometimes the book was so tedious with details of person and places interrupted with a harrowing story of the bravery of the men and women sent by Britain into France to assist the French in the resistance against the Germans during WWII. The story is so incredible and i did wish that it was told by a more engaging writer.

Wendy says

I loved this book

Abbey says

I really enjoyed this. It seemed very well researched; everything was referenced and the sources seemed to be mostly pretty solid. The story, of course, is totally compelling and fascinating and just... astonishing. The writing was excellent too. I liked that you got a nice overview of SOE operations overall - I always like to have context for the specifics I'm reading about. But you never lost interest, never lost sight of the personal in among the general. Highly recommended.

Tim says

This is my third biography of a female SOE agent operating in Nazi occupied France. Unlike Noor Inayat Khan and Violette Szabo, Pearl Witherington survived the war. She also led an army of 3,000 maquis against the German army, a unique achievement for a woman in WW2.

Of the three biographies, this probably gives the best overview of SOE operations in France. It's marginally better researched than the others.

Pearl was also fighting face to face with the brutal Das Reich division of the Waffen SS, infamous for the Oradour-sur-Glane atrocity when they murdered an entire village of women and children. Like Noor Inayat Khan, Pearl Witherington's achievements deserve a film, rather than the insipid fictional exploits of Charlotte Gray.

Not for the first time Charles de Gaulle comes across as a petulant, vain and egotistical man. Unbelievable that he wanted all British agents thrown out of France immediately after the liberation and refused to give them any credit. Apparently he was embittered by the way Churchill treated him and especially because he wasn't told about D-Day until the last moment. The reason for this was that the French secret service was notoriously full of leaks. In other words, a bona fide justification. The ingratitude shown to Pearl was shocking. As was the refusal of the British government to award her with any kind of military recognition.

She refused the civilian MBE she was offered, saying there was nothing “civil about what I did”.

Another amazing woman.
