



Setting France Ablaze: The SOE in France During WWII

Peter Jacobs

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During the summer of 1940, as Britain was fighting alone for its survival, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, instructed the newly formed and clandestine Special Operations Executive to “set Europe ablaze.” From that moment on the S.O.E. took its own war to Nazi-occupied Europe by conducting a mix of espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance missions, with its F Section dedicated to aiding the liberation of France. The risks and dangers of being associated with the S.O.E were obvious, and the consequences of being caught could only be imagined by those who volunteered. Yet the volunteers still came, from all walks of life, and each a specialist in their own field.

Amongst those recruited were Gus March-Phillipps, who led the Small Scale Raiding Force, Peter Churchill, who survived by convincing his captors he was related to the British Prime Minister, Tommy Yeo-Thomas, known to the Gestapo as the White Rabbit, and the legendary Newton 'Twins' who waged their own private war against the Nazis simply to get personal revenge. As F Section grew in numbers, it turned to recruiting women and from its ranks came some of the bravest to have operated in occupied Europe. These included women such as Odette Sansom, Vera Leigh, Noor Inayat Khan, Violette Szabo and Nancy Wake. Then, as the Allies invaded Europe in 1944, the S.O.E. inserted small elite teams, known as Jedburghs, deep behind enemy lines to link up with the French resistance and to coordinate more widespread and overt acts of sabotage to prevent the German reinforcement of Normandy.

Peter Jacobs describes the extraordinary contribution to the Allied war effort made by the S.O.E. in France and tells the gripping story of the men and women who so bravely operated behind enemy lines, many of whom were betrayed and did not live to tell the tale. It pays tribute to the extreme courage and bravery of the individuals who did exactly what Churchill asked of them; they set France ablaze.

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