The Important Posthumous Second World War George Cross group awarded to Violette Szabó, Women's Transport Service (F.A.N.Y.) and ‘F’ Section, Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.), late Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.)
INTRODUCTION

Just four direct examples of the George Cross (G.C.) have been awarded to women, three of them members of the Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.): Violette Szabó, Odette and Noor Inayat Khan. The fourth example was awarded to Barbara Harrison, a B.O.A.C. stewardess, who died as a result of gallant rescue work at Heathrow airport in April 1968; her G.C. is owned by British Airways.

Violette, Odette and Noor Inayat Khan have all been the subject of biographies, in Violette’s case Carve Her Name With Pride, by R. J. Minney (1956), Violette Szabo - The Life That I Have, by Susan Ottaway (2002), and Young, Brave and Beautiful, by her daughter, Tania Szabó (2007); two have been the subject of films, Odette being portrayed by Anna Neagle in the film of the same name in 1950 and Violette by Virginia McKenna in Carve Her Name With Pride in 1958. As a consequence, their lives have been the subject of ongoing study and media coverage, evidence - if it were needed - of their sublime gallantry and example.

Odette, whose G.C. is owned by the Imperial War Museum, survived Ravensbrück; owing to her then married name of ‘Churchill’, the camp commandant used her in a failed attempt to save his own skin on surrendering to the Allies. Violette - and her S.O.E. comrades Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe - were executed at Ravensbrück in late January / early February 1945, being shot in the back of the neck by an S.S. Corporal, who sought extra pay. Cecily Lefort, another comrade, was gassed at Ravensbrück about the same time. Noor Inayat Khan was shot at Dachau in September 1944, a fate shared with three other women of S.O.E. on the same date; four more died in truly horrific circumstances at Natzweiler in July 1944. Here, then, a sobering - shocking - reminder of the sacrifice made by the women of ‘F’ (French) Section, S.O.E.

The story of their courage never fails to inspire, imbued as it is with extraordinary daring in the face of incalculable risk and, in the case of those who were captured, subsequent subjection to beastliness on a scale it would be difficult to exaggerate. All set an example of stoicism second to none.

Yet it is the story of Violette in particular that has continued to capture an international audience, by way of books, articles, documentaries; even a video game said to have been inspired by her life as an undercover courier; the Royal College of Music awards The Violette Szabó G.C. Memorial Prize for Accompaniment; then just a few weeks ago there was a ceremony to re-dedicate her memorial at Salon-la-Tour, where she was captured after her gallant stand in early June 1944. It is an enduring legacy, an inspiring legacy for the younger generation.

None of this is surprising, for Violette’s life evokes immense admiration and sadness in equal measure. The happiness occasioned by her whirlwind wartime romance with a dashing and gallant French Legionnaire, Etienne Szabó; their marriage and the birth of their beloved daughter, Tania; and then the hammer blow of Etienne’s death in action at El Alamein in October 1942. That blow proved to be the catalyst for Violette’s volunteering for S.O.E., a catalyst that in turn sealed her fate and enshrined her name in history.

To borrow the title of Tania Szabó’s biography, it is indeed the story of a ‘young, brave and beautiful’ woman who pulsated joie de vivre and who invariably brightened the lives of those with whom she came into contact. One is reminded of the occasion she winked at a fellow agent as they were about to take to their parachutes over France; so, too, of her insistence on kissing the entire crew of a Liberator bomber before exiting the aircraft on her second mission.
There were exceptions to the rule - for good reason - a case in point being the S.S. officer who confronted her at Salon-la-Tour in June 1944: she laughed - and spat - in his face, having single-handedly faced-off his stormtroopers for nearly half an hour with a Sten-gun, crouched, wounded, behind an apple tree. As supported by eye-witness accounts that emerged from her captivity, it was a typical display of defiance. On one occasion, much to the consternation of her brutal guards at Ravensbrück, she belittled their authority by dancing ‘The Lambeth Walk’: she was sent to solitary confinement in the camp’s bunker.

The events surrounding her capture - and subsequent courage in captivity - have tended to diminish the scale of her earlier exploits in Rouen in April 1944, when she undertook a solo mission to investigate the fate of the ‘Salesman’ circuit. Even by S.O.E. standards it was a deeply perilous mission but, over the course of two weeks, she never flinched from her duty. Nor did she lose her nerve when arrested and questioned by the Milice on two occasions. Back in Paris, she embarked on a shopping spree and spent a small fortune on high fashion in the Rue Royale, as well as purchasing a dress for young Tania. Agent and shopping were duly returned to R.A.F. Tangmere in a Lysander, a memorable trip on account of heavy flak. Owing to a lack of communication between pilot and passenger, confusion reigned after the damaged aircraft’s bumpy landing at Tangmere and all manner of French expletives accompanied Violette’s descent from the cockpit. At length, however, honour was satisfied and her startled pilot was rewarded with a kiss.

It is well known that in 1956 Dame Irene Ward mounted an unsuccessful campaign to have Violette’s G.C. exchanged to a Victoria Cross (V.C.). The issue was raised again in the House of Commons in 1963. It was no doubt a well-intended initiative. In truth, however, Violette’s magnificent exploits and example transcended such debate. Her award stands at the pinnacle of such distinctions; her legacy, yet higher.

It is for those reasons that a catalogue entry of this nature can never do justice to such a remarkable life. In the biographical section I have attempted to rely on eye-witness statements, or to make balanced observations deduced from such information, the whole largely sourced from Violette’s official S.O.E records and her biographies. However, any errors are mine and mine alone.

I am extremely grateful to Tania Szabó. We first made contact in 1992, when she kindly loaned Violette’s awards for display in ‘An Exhibition of Important British Gallantry Awards, 1800-1950.’ It was a typical example of her dedication in respect of nurturing - and protecting - such a special legacy. The busy procession of viewers that followed was, more often than not, drawn to the Szabó display.

Back in the early 1980s, at the commencement of my career as an auctioneer, I was asked by my mother to visit her friends, the Buckmasters, who lived in our village in Sussex; apparently Maurice - that is Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, late Head of ‘F’ Section, S.O.E. - wanted some advice. It transpired he was considering the sale of his foreign decorations at auction on behalf of a military charity, a typically generous gesture that was duly fulfilled. The sum total of British recognition for his part in orchestrating what Eisenhower considered a campaign of resistance that shortened the war by six months was an O.B.E.: there was no campaign to have it exchanged to a worthy K.B.E. and nor would he have desired it.

So I turn to him by way of closing this introduction, for although I respected his right to retain private memories, I somehow dared to coax him into recalling Violette at another meeting, over a glass of sherry at our family home, a year or two later. His piercing blue eyes stared into the middle distance, unquestionably in direct contact with the past, and, at length, he muttered a single word. I think he said ‘Tremendous’. It was certainly a single word of praise, not his preferred expression, ‘My cup of tea.’ He would have bought her those all day long.

David Erskine-Hill

www.dnw.co.uk
‘She was the bravest of us all.’ Odette, G.C., M.B.E.

VIOLETTE SZABÓ, G.C. (1921-45)
Sold by Order of Tania Szabó

The Important Posthumous Second World War George Cross group of five awarded to Violette Szabó, Women’s Transport Service (F.A.N.Y.) and ‘F’ Section, Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.), late Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.)

GEORGE CROSS (Violette Madame Szabo, Women’s Transport Service (F.A.N.Y.), 17 December 1946); 1939-45 STAR; FRANCE AND GERMANY STAR; WAR MEDAL 1939-45, these three privately engraved, ‘Lt. Violette Szabó, F.A.N.Y.’; France, CROIX DE GUERRE 1939-1940, with bronze star, minor wear from display, good very fine or better (5) £250,000-300,000

To be sold with:

(i) A metalled badge of the G.Q. Parachute Company, 35mm. diameter, the same badge that Violette’s father found under the sofa at their family home after it had fallen out of her handbag; its discovery revealed to her parents for the first time the true nature of her military employment.

(ii) Four letters (in French) sent by Violette’s aunt, Madame M. Leroy, to her friend Madame Delathe, dated 23 February 1938, 22 June 1938, 3 January 1939 and 16 August 1939, in which are charming references to her niece.

(iii) A small booklet with a list of family accounts, circa 1938-39, with entries for Violette and her brothers, John and Noel.

(iv) A pass for ‘W/83061 Pte. Szabo, V. R. E.’ to be absent from quarters/duty from ‘8/12/1941 to 0600 hours 18/12/41’, with ink stamp of ‘481 H. (MD) A.A. Battery, R.A.’ and the signature of a 2nd Lieutenant on behalf of the unit’s C.O.

(v) Violette’s National Registration Identity Card, ‘APA 851551 Szabo, Violette R. E., 36 Pembridge Villas, W.11, signed in her hand, ‘V. Szabo’ and date stamped ‘My. 27 43.’

(vi) A legal declaration in respect of Violette’s daughter, Tania, in her own hand and signed ‘V. Szabo’, and dated ‘17 Nov. 1943’, together with a related letter from the Manager of the National Provincial Bank, Charing Cross Branch, dated 16 April 1946, in which he forwards the legal declaration to the solicitors ‘Radcliffe & Co. of 10, Little College Street, Westminster, S.W. 1’ on behalf of Miss Vera Maidment and her mother, Mrs. Alice Maidment, who Violette nominated as her favoured guardians in the event of her death.

(vii) The remnants of a book of French coupons for the period October 1943 to June 1944, believed to have been used by Violette during her first mission to France in April 1944.

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(viii) Army Council condolence slip for Violette’s campaign medals, in the name of ‘Mrs. V. R. E. Szabo’.

(ix) Letter of notification for the award of Violette’s G.C., from Lieutenant-Colonel E. Lancey, War Office (Room 900), Whitehall S.W.1, to her parents, dated 18 December 1946, in sealed protective cover.

(x) A presentation edition of The Roman Missal (Browne and Nolan Limited, Dublin, MCML), the interior inscription in gilt, and blue, black and red ink: ‘To Tania / In memory of her Mother / Violette Szabo / George Cross: Croix de Guerre: From her Fellow Members of 481 [Mixed] Heavy A.A. Battery’, white leather binding with gilt spine title and gilt Cross to front cover, marbled boards to interior, gilt page ends, in slip case.

(xi) A translation of correspondence from Madame Marie Lecomte, in the hand of Violette’s mother, 11 pp.; a major witness to Violette’s time in captivity at Fresnes Prison and Ravensbrück, Lecomte became a firm friend of Tania and her grandparents; together with a letter (in French) from Madame Anna Ribiéras, the owner of the grocery shop in Sussac where Violette stayed for two nights in June 1944 during her second mission, dated 1 March 1963, as sent to her mother and describing how she prepared a separate attic room for Violette and of her understanding of the events that followed in Salon-la-Tour.

(xii) A selection of original photographs, dating from the 1930s to the current day, the images including Violette with her family in France before the war, her wedding day and a portrait of her with Tania taken at her flat in Notting Hill around 1943; several images of Tania as a child, attending events and wearing her mother’s medals and of reunions and events in later life.

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If a calling-out of the whole Army Reserve is ordered every soldier on parade must return immediately to his unit without waiting for instructions.

No. 2 Battery

R. E.

has permission to be absent from his quarter-duty, from

8/12/41 to 16/12/41.

for the purpose of proceeding to London.

Station: Yelva

(Station) Yelva

Date: 7/12/41

CMMDG. 491 H. (MD.) A.A. BATTERY, R.A.

Major, R.A.

No. 33001 (Rank) Pte. (Name) J. ANGLADE

Destination: not required unless absence is to exceed 24 hours, unless notification is desirable owing to local conditions or is necessary to enable purchase of a rail ticket at reduced fare.

Note: ticket number is not practicable.

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NATIONAL
REGISTRATION
IDENTITY
CARD

NUMBER
APA 85/551

SURNAME
SZABO

CHRISTIAN NAMES (First only in full)
VIOLETTE, R. E.

CLASS CODE
A

FULL POSTAL ADDRESS
36, PEMBRIDGE VILLAS

HOLDER’S SIGNATURE
V. Szabo

CHANGES OF ADDRESS. No entry except by National Registration Officer, to whom removal must be notified.

REMOVED TO (Full Postal Address)
17 Nov. 1943

I hereby appoint Miss Vera Maidment, my Secretary, Alice Maidment, the loyal guardian of my child, Jeane Damerow, in the event of my death.

V. Dabo

Witness: M. Aleson.

.: N. J. Cartridge.

18th April 1946

Telephone conversation the document dated 27th, 1945, the document and Miss V. Maidment and knowledge and consent.

I, V. Dabo,

London No. BKAB. 44. 2.

Sincerely,

[Signature: Han Dabo]

Manager.
The life that I have
Is all that I have
And the life that I have
Is yours

The love that I have
Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours

A sleep I shall have
A rest I shall have
Yet death will be but a pause

For the peace of my years
In the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours’

The code poem said to have been written for Violette Szabó by Leo Marks, one of S.O.E’s code-masters.
‘She was afraid of nothing . . . speed, thrill and excitement - that’s what she loved. She had a temper too and a very strong will. You could never make her do anything she didn’t want to. She would purse her lips together and her little chin would harden as she said - I can hear her saying it now - “I won’t. I won’t.” ’

Violet Buckingham, Violette’s older cousin, recalls an adventurous determined child.

‘She vibrated personality. She seemed to have a lot of push and drive.’

Violette’s Headmistress at the London County School in Stockwell recalls a memorable charge.

‘The boys would induce her to come into London and they would go to one of the shooting galleries which at that time abounded in the West End . . . with her great determination and the aid of a steady hand and eye, she was able to forge ahead of them and was eventually refused a gun because she unfailingly won all the prizes.’

Early signs of a crack shot (R. J. Minney’s Carve Her Name with Pride, refers).

‘Violette was really beautiful, dark-haired and olive-skinned, with that kind of porcelain clarity of face and purity of bone that one finds occasionally in the women of south-west France.’

Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, O.B.E., Head of ‘F’ Section, S.O.E.

‘Not easily rattled.’

Violette’s first S.O.E. training report.

‘She had the eye of a hawk and was very quickly extremely efficient with both automatic and Sten gun.’

Peggy Minchin, one of Violette’s conducting officers at S.O.E’s training establishment at Arisaig, Scotland.
Top: A coloured portrait photograph of Violette, circa 1932.

Bottom: Violette as a young girl and, aged 16 years, with her brother Roy at the Savoy Hotel Ball in 1937.
'A dark-haired slip of mischief ... she had a Cockney accent, which added to her impishness.'

Leo Marks, one of S.O.E's code-masters, recalls his meeting with Violette on the eve of her first mission to France in April 1944.

‘I’ll never forget her entry, everyone turned to stare at her. She had on a red dress she had bought in Paris and was wearing a pair of new ear-rings she had also got in Paris - they were bunches of red flowers dangling from a gilt chain - and, though she was very sparing as a rule with perfume, that night she seemed to have splashed it on because it was something one could no longer get very easily in England. All the women in the room raised their nostrils to breathe it in and shut their eyes in ecstasy at the heavenly scent. She looked really wonderful.’

Bob Maloubier describes Violette’s arrival at the Studio Club in London following her return from her first mission to France in May 1944; he would accompany her on her second mission.

‘Violette was smiling and laughing, looking lovely. I watched her step down into the dark tunnel never to see her again. As she descended, she turned one last time with a smile on her face and waved lightly to her mother and me at the top.’

Tania Szabó’s last memory of her mother, as she parted company with her at Stockwell Tube Station on the eve of her second mission to France in June 1944.

‘There was a lot of tension in the room that night. All the boys were going out on various operations. You could feel the jumpiness of their nerves. Astonishingly, Violette alone was perfectly calm and composed. I was very struck with the contrast.’

Vera Atkins, Colonel Buckmaster’s assistant, recalls Violette on the eve of D-Day and her second mission to France in June 1944; the ‘boys’ were S.A.S. Jedburgh Team members.

‘I was quite struck by her sense of humour and even her tendency to practical jokes ... When she winked at me on the plane of an aborted flight over our drop zone in France just before we were supposed to jump, I interpreted it as a sort of flirtation. Probably a typical male reaction on my part. As I look back since then, I realize that it was a kind of attempt at reassurance on her part.’

Jean-Claude Guiet, who served with Violette in “Salesman II” prior to her capture in June 1944; as quoted in his foreword to Young, Brave and Beautiful, by Tania Szabó.
Top: Etienne and Violette on their wedding day, outside Aldershot registry office, 21 August 1940.

'The last I know was that half an hour later Szabó was brought to that very farm by the Germans. I heard them questioning her as to my whereabouts and heard her answering, **laughing**, “You can run after him, he is far away now.”'

Jacques Dufour (“Anastasie”), whose life was saved by Violette’s defiant stand at Salon-la-Tour.

‘A German officer approached and offered her a cigarette. She spat in his face and didn’t accept it.’

Mme. Montintin, who witnessed Violette’s first encounter with the enemy after her capture.

‘Regret to inform you arrest reported of Mrs. Szabo. As report unconfirmed, request no official action be taken yet to FANY or other authority as it is possible she may be rescued. You may like to know what her chief wires about her [quote] Reverting to arrest Louise she displayed outstanding gallantry firing back half hour with Sten before dropping exhaustion [unquote]. A magnificent show.’

A message sent by Colonel Buckmaster.

‘We all felt deeply ashamed when we saw Violette Szabo, while the raid was still on, come crawling along the corridor towards us with a jug of water ... My God that girl had guts.’

Wing Commander F. F. E. Yeo-Thomas, G.C., M.C.

‘She would have done anything to help anyone else.’


‘One day, a French woman, who had been a prisoner there [at Ravensbrück] with Violette, told my friend and me that Violette had stepped out one day and danced the “Lambeth Walk” while all the English girls joined in the singing with her. It gave the women who witnessed it a huge lift and there was much laughter to the furious shouts of the S.S. overseers. Violette then found herself in the Bunker in solitary for a week ... ’

Tania Szabó’s *Young, Brave and Beautiful*, refers.
Left: Violette at a wedding between missions, possibly wearing the same ‘blue leather, wedge heel type shoes, made in Paris during her former stay’, described by Mme. G. Meunier, who shared a cell with her at Fresnes Prison.

Top right: Violette’s false identity card, as used on her first mission to France in April 1944; the original is held in The National Archives (T.N.A.).

Bottom right: a ‘wanted’ poster featuring Charles Staunton and Bob Maloubier, as seen by Violette on her first mission in Rouen.
'This Bunker was a labyrinth of tiny, airless cells, a gaol within a gaol. It was a place of even greater darkness and fear for here the beatings were carried out and nameless things done to women’s bodies.’

Jerrard Tickell’s Odette, refers.

‘Even among the thousands of women in the camp these three were outstanding. They were British and the Germans knew it. Nothing could break their spirit.’

Mrs. Julie Berry, an ex-Ravensbrück inmate, pays homage to Violette Szabó, Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe.

‘We are holding a brown paper parcel containing your daughter’s camel hair coat. As we have to give up our store room I am arranging to have the parcel delivered to you for safe keeping ... We are unfortunately still without further news.’

Vera Atkins in a letter to Violette’s mother, 19 October 1945.

‘The fatal shots were fired, and to the world was lost, 
Madame Violette Szabó, how well she earned her Cross. 
Never to be forgotten, this girl aged twenty-four 
Torture could not break her, she was British to the core.’

From the poem Faithful Even Unto Death, written by Violette’s father, Charles Bushell.

‘All three were very brave and I was deeply moved.’

S.S. Obersturmführer Schwarzhüber, who was present at the execution of Violette, Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe.

‘And so the years passed and many people in the English speaking world and in France remembered the courage of one lovely young woman who had fought like a tiger and who had died with great dignity.’

Tania Szabó, from Young, Brave and Beautiful.
The execution alley at Ravensbrück, where Violette, Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe were shot in late January / early February 1945; the inscription on the memorial stone reads, ‘Here hundreds of women and girls were murdered by S.S. shots to the back of the neck.’
VIOLETTE SZABÓ - A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Violette Reine Elizabeth Szabó was born in Paris on 26 June 1921, the daughter of Charles George Bushell and his French wife, Reine (née Leroy). Violette’s father met Reine in France while serving as a motor driver in the Army Service Corps during the First World War; he had earlier been a regular soldier in the Royal Horse Artillery and a member of the fledgling Royal Flying Corps.

Charles and Reine were married at Pont-Rémy, near Abbeville, shortly before the Armistice in 1918; their first child, Roy, was followed by Violette, John, Noel and Richard.

Remaining in France at the end of the war, her father worked as a taxi driver in Paris but when Violette was aged about three, the family relocated to England, where Mr. Bushell set up a private bus service in Berkshire. Afterwards, he established a car dealership in London. In R. J. Minney’s Carve Her Name with Pride, the emerging character of Violette is the subject of extensive family commentary. Her cousin, Violet Buckingham recalled:

‘She was afraid of nothing ... speed, thrill and excitement - that’s what she loved. She had a temper too and a very strong will. You could never make her do anything she didn’t want to. She would purse her lips together and her little chin would harden as she said - I can hear her saying it now - “I won’t. I won’t.” ‘She said it with emphasis and determination. She had great determination - even when she grew up.’

Towards the end of 1926, the year of the General Strike, the family relocated to France. Violette’s parents however then returned to England and so, in the interim, she lived with her Tante Maguerite at Pont-Rémy until about 1932; her brother Roy, meanwhile, lived with a great aunt at Quevauvillers, a neighbouring village. Violette attended the Lycée Privé St. Pierre at Abbeville.

On returning to London, where her parents had settled at 12 Stockwell Park Walk, she attended the London County School in Stockwell Road; about 1935, the family relocated to 18 Burnley Road, also in Stockwell.

Her old Headmistress later told R. J. Minney, ‘She vibrated personality. She seemed to have a lot of push and drive. She was a sort of immature leader.’ Her P.T. mistress recalled that she was physically very strong - ‘she had firm and sturdy limbs and was quite outstanding in everything I set the girls to do.’

In fact Violette was an extremely good athlete and natural acrobat; she enjoyed all manner of outdoor activities, cycling, swimming, canoeing, skating and rock climbing among them.

In June 1935, on reaching her fourteenth birthday, Violette insisted on leaving school and found employment in a shop in South Kensington.

Work aside, she was a regular visitor to her cousins in Buckinghamshire and Herefordshire, and enjoyed numerous sorties into central London with her brothers and their friends:

‘The boys would induce her to come into London and they would go to one of the shooting galleries which at that time abounded in the West End; and at the gallery at Marble Arch or in Coventry Street or the Strand each would try to match the other’s skill at winning a prize, which were generally no more than a packet of cigarettes. The boys were good at this but she had no intention of being outclassed. With her great determination and the aid of a steady hand and eye, she was able to forge ahead of them and was eventually refused a gun because she unfailingly won all the prizes’ (R. J. Minney’s Carve Her Name with Pride, refers).
She was also proficient at darts.

Since settling in England, Violette had regularly journeyed to France for holidays with her Aunt Marguerite at Pont-Rémy and, on growing bored with her job in South Kensington, took her leave - and passport from home - without telling her parents. At length, she was tracked down to Valenciennes, where her aunt was staying with friends. She was 15.

Back home, she started work on the counter at Woolworth’s in Oxford Street, another dull interlude brightened by a special invitation in the autumn of 1937, shortly after she had turned 16. Her brother Roy, who was working at the Savoy Hotel, asked her to the staff ball. Her mother made her a white satin dress with gold trim and the evening was a great success, so much so that Violette went on to enjoy a spate of invitations to all manner of dances.

According to her parents, who told Tania as much in later years, it was about this time that she took a job as a film extra. Interestingly, in researching her biography *Violette Szabo, The Life That I Have*, Susan Ottaway found that Violette’s future wartime home in Notting Hill, a flat at 36 Pembridge Villas, was registered as the property of an Italian barrister, the brother of Filippo del Giudice, who was the partner of a film production company, Two Cities Films. Filippo became a well respected film producer, whose work included Olivier’s *Henry V*, *The Way Ahead* and *In Which We Serve*.

At the time of the outbreak of war, Violette and her younger brother Richard were staying with their aunt at Pont-Rémy. Thanks to the latter’s prompt and determined actions, she and Richard were fortunate to gain a passage home from Calais.

Now 18 years of age, Violette found work as an assistant in the perfumery department of the popular store Bon Marché in Brixton, where she remained employed throughout the period of the ‘Phoney War’; she was a popular member of staff, her manageress recalling that she was a ‘delightful person to be with - always happy, always laughing.’

Yet she yearned for a more active part in the war and decided on a trial run with the Land Army, joining a friend similarly employed in Fareham, Hampshire.

*Whirlwind wartime romance - Etienne - the gallant Legionnaire*

It was on her return from Fareham that Violette’s mother suggested that she and her Land Army friend, Winnie Wilson, visit central London on 14 July - Bastille Day - to see if they could bring a homesick Free French soldier back to Burnley Road for a meal. The rest, as they say, is history, for Violette was engaged in conversation at Hyde Park by Etienne Szabó, an Adjutant-Chef in the Foreign Legion, who was attached to De Gaulle’s Free French Forces. A gallant veteran of several colonial campaigns, he was 31 and, by the time of his death in action, had been appointed a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour and won the Médaille Militaire and Croix de Guerre.

A rapid courtship ensued and they were married at Aldershot just six weeks later, on 21 August 1940. Their one week honeymoon over, Etienne was ordered with his unit - the 13th Demi-Brigade of the Foreign Legion (DBLE) - to West Africa, where De Gaulle was intending to take Dakar in Senegal from Vichy forces. The attempt failed and Etienne and his men were subsequently deployed to Eritrea, a successful campaign in which Asmara and Massawa were captured from the occupying Italian forces in April 1941.
Having then seen further action against Vichy forces in Syria, Etienne returned to the U.K. on leave, arriving at Liverpool in about September 1941. Here, then, the last occasion that Violette would be united with her husband. She had meanwhile been working for the General Post Office in central London throughout the Blitz.

**Auxiliary Territorial Service - Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery**

With Etienne’s blessing, Violette now enlisted in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.) and was posted to 481 (Mixed) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery, Royal Artillery in October 1941.

In *The Royal Artillery Commemoration Book 1939-45*, Violette’s ex-C.O., Lieutenant-Colonel J. W. Naylor, wrote:

‘Ours was one of the first of the mixed H.A.A. batteries to be formed. In those early days nobody knew very much about this type of unit, and one had more or less to make rules as and when minor problems presented themselves. Since the type of unit - with its 200 or so A.T.S. and 180 R.A. men - was ‘strange’ - I suppose one just accepted odd incidents as being a part of the set-up and took things and did things in one’s stride. So it was that one day my Junior Commander Torry said to me, “Do you know, sir, that we have a “Free French” girl among our A.T.S.?” I was naturally interested, and asked Torry to point the girl out to me some time.

It was soon afterwards at a Saturday morning barrack-room inspection, while we were still at Oswestry, that I first met Violette Szabo. She was tiny, about five feet tall, very slim and very attractive. Her kit and clothes were all beautifully laid out and cared for, and I told her so. She was visibly pleased with the ‘pat on the back’.

Later the battery went off to practice camp, and then on to our action stations near Warrington, as part of the Mersey defences. Szabo had by now become a really excellent predictor number and because of her height, or lack of it, seemed always to stand on her toes when at her instrument. She was very popular with all the girls on her site, and her officers and N.C.Os always spoke very highly of her as a soldier and as a comrade. Whatever she did, she did with a hundred per cent enthusiasm; whether it was site concerts, guard duties, inspections, games or anything else, she was always the example and the leading spirit.

One Saturday night I went over to the site she was on, for their weekly dance. I made a special point of dancing with her and having a talk. Her husband was an officer with the Free French Forces, and had only recently gone over to North Africa. She was very happy and loved the life and the people on the site. Her French accent was most difficult to detect, and she and another girl were holding French classes in the evenings with excellent results.

Then one day Torry came to me and told me that ‘Little Szabo’ was leaving the battery. She was getting her discharge, and was going home to her parents to have a baby. We all of us, the whole battery, felt quite dismayed at the news that she was going to leave us. I had a chat with her before she left us. Yes, she was very pleased to be having her baby, because her husband would be so pleased too. She would hate leaving the battery, but she would keep in touch with us, and yes, she would try to come back to us as soon as the baby was old enough to be left with its grandparents.

Some time afterwards we heard, through one of the girls, that Szabo had had a daughter and that both were well, and also, about the same time, we heard that her husband had been killed in Africa, at El Alamein. Poor little Szabo. We heard from her from time to time, and then I left the battery on promotion and lost touch.’
Released from her A.T.S. duties in early 1942, Violette set about finding rented accommodation in London and settled for a flat at 36 Pembridge Villas in Notting Hill. Tania Damaris Désirée Szabo was born at St. Mary’s Hospital, Paddington on 8 June; a delighted Etienne, who was now serving in the Western Desert, wrote to say he would do all within his power to get some leave.

Since the beginning of 1942, Etienne and about a thousand Legionnaires of the 13th DBLE had been manning the southern end of the Gazala Line at Bir Hakeim. On 3 June 1942, Rommel launched a determined assault on the Free French positions, a relentless assault supported by a total of 1300 Luftwaffe sorties. The French, under General Koenig, held their ground. Speaking of events on 8 June - Tania’s first birthday - Rommel later confessed:

‘This was a remarkable achievement on the part of the French defenders who were now completely cut off from the outside world. To tire them out, flares were fired and the defences covered with machine-gun fire throughout the following night. Yet when my storming parties went in the next morning, the French opened fire again with undiminished violence. The enemy troops hung on grimly in their trenches and remained completely invisible.’

Two days later, Rommel sent in 15 Panzer Division, but on reaching Bir Hakeim it was found the French had broken out during the night. The price for their defiant stand had been heavy, a third of the Free French Forces being killed or wounded. Nor would there be much respite: El Alamein beckoned.

During the battle, which commenced on the night of 23 October 1942, Etienne and his comrades were charged with carrying out a diversionary action against enemy forces on the mountainous feature known as Qaret El Himeimat. It was a suicidal mission, the mined approaches being covered by artillery and machine-gun fire from the heights and protected by enemy armour. Even when the base of Qaret El Himeimat was reached, an exposed rock face had to be surmounted. As a consequence, many were killed or wounded, Etienne being among the latter; some sources state he suffered multiple chest wounds. Certainly he is on record as having displayed great courage. He died of his wounds on 27 October 1942.

Violette, who had meanwhile found work at an aircraft factory, was inconsolable when news of Etienne’s fate reached her. Notwithstanding her grief, it proved to be the defining moment in her life: she was going to avenge her husband’s death.

‘F’ Section, Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.)

As one might expect, the exact circumstances behind Violette’s recruitment remain shrouded in mystery. Some sources suggest she was inadvertently introduced to S.O.E. by an Italian lady, the widow of a Battle of Britain pilot. A friend of S.O.E. agent Harry Peulevé, the lady in question is believed to have mentioned Violette’s name during an interview with Selwyn Jepson, the well-known detective novelist who served as a recruiting officer for the secret organisation.

The Peulevé connection is a strong contender for he later wrote of his affection for Violette and of a long standing friendship that appears to have commenced about this time. As an ex-B.B.C. cameraman, he would have had much in common with Violette’s time as a film-extra; moreover, like Violette, he was an ex-A.A. gunner.

Peulevé carried out two missions to France, helping to establish the “Scientist” and “Author” circuits. He was captured in March 1944 and was re-united with Violette at Fresnes Prison.
A surviving document in official archives, which actually post-dates Violette’s S.O.E. security clearance, adds another name to the frame. The memorandum, sent to Selwyn Jepson by E. Alexander, on 20 July 1943, states:

‘George Clement, who left today to go into the field, has given me the following name and telephone number as a possible recruit for the organisation: Mrs. Czabo (sic), Tel: Bayswater 6188. He mentioned that the lady had already applied to the Belgian Section but had been told to wait a month, which she did not wish to do. He asked that his name should not be mentioned when contacting her.’

Clement, an officer in the 3rd Hussars, was indeed parachuted into France in July 1943, as a wireless operator for the “Butler” circuit around Le Mans. He was captured that November and executed at Mauthausen concentration camp in September 1944.

Given the date of Violette’s S.O.E. security clearance - 1 July 1943 - it seems likely Selwyn Jepson interviewed her in the previous month. Although he alluded to ‘special work’ in France he could not fully explain to her the exact role she might be called upon to perform. The risks involved, however, were made clear: she accepted his offer without hesitation.

Training

In common with other would-be female couriers, Violette was duly appointed a Section Leader in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (F.A.N.Y.); according to Section Commander Mason, she ‘had an undying faith in the Corps and would not go into the field until she had a personal interview with me at the last moment’ (official records refer).

Next enrolled at S.O.E’s new Student Assessment Board (S.A.B.), at Winterfold House, Cranleigh, Surrey, she undertook her initial assessment in August.

Such were the stringent standards of her S.O.E. taskmasters that Violette - in common with many other potential couriers and agents - was the recipient of considerable criticism. Her overall grading of ‘D’ and a spate of ‘averages’ did not bode well for future employment; yet in a common theme taken up in most of her reports, the concluding lines offered a glimmer of hope:

‘She could probably do a useful job, possibly as a courier.’

In September, she joined Group A’s No. 24 Special Training School (S.T.S.) at Arisaig in the Scottish Highlands. The school’s courses included P.T., silent killing, weapons, demolition, map reading, fieldcraft and elementary Morse. After one week’s attendance, Violette’s report was disappointing:

‘I seriously wonder whether this student is suitable for our purpose. She seems lacking in a sense of responsibility and although she works well in the company of others, does not appear to have any initiative or ideals. She speaks French with an English accent.’

There were indeed concerns over Violette’s accent, yet as Tania Szabó has speculated in Young, Brave and Beautiful, it was likely a regional accent of the Pas de Calais; besides, ‘what it did for her was to ensure she paid direct and strict attention to what she said and how she said it.’

Another concern that emerged during Violette’s training in Scotland was her ‘fatalistic mind’ and a sense that she was merely enjoying the courses for their spirit of competition rather than improving her knowledge.
One of Violette’s conducting officers in Scotland, Peggy Minchin, later touched upon her ‘fatalistic mind’ when she spoke to R. J. Minney. Violette once told her: “I only want to have some Germans to fight and I should die happy if I could take some of them with me.”

Minchin also recalled, ‘how good she was at weapon training. She had the eye of a hawk and was very quickly extremely efficient with both automatic and Sten gun’.

She added:

‘She used to entertain us, when we were doing our physical training, by literally tying herself into knots with acrobatic turns. But the other thing I especially remember about her training in Scotland was when two ropes were slung between trees about twenty feet from the ground. You had to place your feet on the bottom rope and hold on to the top one as you walked across from one tree to the other. I could never pluck up courage to try it. But it was just Violette’s cup of tea. She would set out quite briskly along the rope, stop halfway and indulge in idle banter with the chaps below, while she swayed dangerously in the breeze, holding on by one hand and her toes.

Though essentially feminine, there was something gallant, debonair and quite genuine about her. I shall never forget how gaily she crawled through bog and burns and heather during her field training and flung herself over the most hair-raising obstacles in our private assault course.’

In conclusion, her instructors found her to be ‘rather a puzzle’. Nonetheless, towards the end of her course, one of them observed:

‘She has proved to possess certain qualities which I never would have suspected her to have, and for this reason I consider it advisable for her to carry on with the training.’

In mid-October, Violette was passed on to Group B, in her case the finishing school based on Lord Montagu’s estate at Beaulieu in Hampshire and, more particularly, to S.T.S. 32c, a house on the estate called Blackbridge. Here her training was more classroom based, subject matter ranging from enemy uniform recognition, code work, and escape and evasion. However, practical exercises to such places as Bournemouth were undertaken, fledgling agents and couriers shadowing each other around town. Violette completed her course in November.

Parachute badge

About this time Violette attended a parachute course at Ringway, Manchester, but disaster struck when she badly sprained an ankle. She was sent home to recuperate but it was an unhappy reunion with her parents. Unable to explain the true reasons behind her injury on account of the secrecy of her new found role, she had to maintain the unlikely story that she was merely employed on driving and canteen duties. As related in Carve Her Name with Pride, however, her parents quickly discovered the truth:

‘Mrs. Bushell, having said good night to her at the foot of the stairs just as Violette was limping up to her bedroom, came in and sat with Mr. Bushell, and they talked for well over an hour about her evasions and her vague excuses until they too, feeling tired, got up to go to bed.

As he moved towards the door of the sitting-room Mr. Bushell noticed something lying on the floor, half hidden by the sofa. He drew it out and was startled to see that it was a parachute badge. He held it out in his hand towards his wife and tears began to course down his cheeks. Everything suddenly became quite clear. He could hardly speak, and when he did his words came with difficulty through his sobs.
He had suspected the girl, challenged her cruelly. He had used many harsh, hurtful words - and all the while, with neither reproach nor rebuke, Violette had suffered it, without betraying her secret.

Mr. and Mrs. Bushell passed the badge from one to the other, wept a little, and were very proud of their daughter - and yet they could not understand what canteens and lorries or even First Aid, the normal work of the F.A.N.Ys, had to do with jumping out of a plane by parachute.

“She’ll tell us when she can,” said Mrs. Bushell, and, taking her husband’s hand in hers, they walked together through a mist to their room.

At breakfast the next morning her father said, “How do you like parachuting, Vi?”

She flushed. “How did you know, Dad?”

He held out the badge.

“Thanks.”

“It fell out of your bag.”

They ate in silence for a while, then, unable to resist it, Mr. Bushell asked: “Have you to do much more of it?”

Looking him full in the eye, all her evasions now behind her, Violette sighed with relief. “I can’t tell you anything. I’m not allowed to, Dad. I’m under oath.”

“O.K., Vi,” he said. “I can guess what the job is. I won’t ask you any more questions.”

And he never did.’

By February 1944, after a period of convalescence at Bournemouth, Violette was deemed sufficiently fit to return to Ringway to complete her parachute course. Her subsequent report stated that, ‘she gained confidence and carried out the remaining descents with verve.’ It added:

‘On the first landing she parted her feet slightly and on her second she brought her knees up to her chest. These points were brought to her notice and she seemed fully to appreciate their danger, especially if she were to jump in any wind. Three descents. Second Class.’

It was while at Ringway that Violette met Major Charles Staunton - actually Philippe Liewer - the founder of S.O.E’s “Salesman” circuit which operated in the Rouen and Le Havre area; the circuit had carried out a number of successful sabotage operations in the latter part of 1943. They became friends and met up in London on their return from Ringway, Staunton introducing Violette to another “Salesman” team member Bob Maloubier. The latter had been arrested near Rouen after curfew one night in December 1943 and was seriously wounded in making a remarkable escape from German motor-cyclists. He was evacuated to London and made a full recovery.

Of this London meeting, R. J. Minney wrote: ‘When she and Staunton returned to London, Bob, who was resting for a while before going on an extended arms course at a school in Hertfordshire, joined them on their first evening in town. He found Violette delightfully refreshing. She was gay and amusing and, now that her ankle was all right, she was able to dance again. He thought she danced divinely. Evening after evening the three sat in her flat and were joined by others who dropped in. Among them
were many they had met at one or other of their schools of training. Others were chance acquaintances
in army or air force uniforms. They sat talking, drinking, smoking, singing the choruses of various songs,
swapping yarns, laughing, while they waited for their next assignment, and varied it by going round to
restaurants, cinemas and night clubs. Suddenly one of them would be missing. He had gone without
a word, and as suddenly somebody else would loom across their horizon. Fresh friends were made
almost every day. You met them at the Studio Club or on the crowded dance floor of the Astoria or one
of the night clubs and it was possible that you would never see them again.’

Shortly afterwards, and invariably with Colonel Buckmaster’s backing, Staunton elected to enlist Violette
as his courier on his next mission, for he was due to return to the “Salesman” circuit.

**Last Will and Testament**

Violette’s early concerns for her daughter’s well-being in the event of her death are highlighted by a
memorandum sent by Vera Atkins to Colonel Buckmaster’s planning officer, Captain Bourne-Paterson,
on 4 September 1943:

‘RE: Mrs. Scabo (sic)

You have probably not yet met this woman who is a new and fairly promising trainee. She has a one-
year-old child and is very anxious to know, at once, what pension arrangements would be made for her
in the event of her going into the field.

Provision for her child is such a primary consideration to her that I am sure she feels unsettled about
her training and future until this question has been dealt with. I told her that she would no doubt be
entitled to the pension payable to a service woman of her rank i.e. Section Leader, but I wish we could
give more precise assurance to our women agents with children.’

In mid-November, Violette signed a legal declaration appointing her friend, Miss Vera Maidment, as
Tania’s guardian in the event of her death.

In January 1944, as her training neared completion, she made her last Will and Testament:

‘This is the last Will and Testament of me Violette Reine Elizabeth Szabo of 36 Pembridge Villas Notting
Hill London W11 in the county of London made this Twenty-fourth day of January in the year of our
Lord one thousand nine hundred and Forty-four.

I hereby revoke all Wills made by me at any time hereto-fore. I appoint Reine Blanche Bushell 18
Burnley Road Stockwell S.W. 9 to be my executor, and direct that all of my Debts and Funeral Expenses
shall be paid as soon as conveniently may be after my decease.

I GIVE AND BEQUEATH unto
my daughter Tania Damaris Désirée Szabo
59 Fernside Avenue Mill Hill Edgware N7
All of which I die possessed. V. Szabo.’

The Will was witnessed by Vera Atkins and Bourne-Paterson. It was sent by Atkins to the National
Provincial Bank in Trafalgar Square when S.O.E. was wound up at the end of 1945.
First Mission

As stated, Violette had been chosen to act as Staunton’s courier on his return to the “Salesman” circuit. However, on the eve of their departure the mission was postponed, for news had been received from Violette’s old friend, Harry Peulevé, who was running the “Author” circuit, that “Salesman” had been compromised and penetrated by German intelligence: rumours abounded of a string of arrests, the victims possibly numbering Staunton’s designated leader in his absence, Claude Malraux, and his wireless operator Isidore Newman.

Violette was hastily despatched on a refresher course in wireless operation, her tutor being Leo Marks, S.O.E’s senior cryptographer and, it is believed, the author of ‘The Life That I Have’, the coded poem she is said to have memorised for use as a worked-out key. As it transpired, Violette never had to make use of her wireless operating skills: her task was to prove lonelier still.

She would travel under the name of Corinne Reine Leroy (the latter two her mother’s first and maiden names), a commercial secretary from Le Havre who had been born in Bailleul on 26 June 1921 (her real birth date). This would enable her to travel in the Zone Interdite - Restricted Zone - on the coast. Her task was an extremely perilous one, to travel alone to Rouen, and thence to Le Havre, to establish the fate of “Salesman”, both towns now infested by enemy security forces riding high on a spate of arrests.

Violette visited her parents and Tania on the eve of her departure, her mother afterwards telling R.J. Minney of their parting conversation:

‘Mr. and Mrs. Bushell realised at once, of course, that their daughter was to be sent abroad on what would be not only a dangerous mission, but might even prove to be fatal. They could not discuss or even hint at what was afoot and they tried hard not to show their grave anxiety. By their silence Violette could tell how heavily it was weighing on their minds. She said: “Don’t worry, Mama. I’ll be back! I promise you I’ll come back. And I’ve been equipped with a wonderful new career. I shall do well at it when the war is over.” Smiling through the tears she was pressing back, Mrs. Bushell asked, “And what is that?” - “A cat burglar,” said Violette with eyes twinkling. “I can scale walls. I can crack through roofs and blow open safes. There is nothing in that line I can’t do.” And for the moment the anxiety dissolved in laughter.

Violette went along again and again to Mill Hill to see Tania. The March moon period drew near and the moment came to say good-bye. She and Staunton got ready. Papa asked if he could go a part of the way with them. “As far as Victoria Station,” she said and there they parted.’

On 5 April 1944, Violette was driven to R.A.F. Tempsford. Minney states:

‘Violette was cheerful and quite calm when she reported at headquarters on the afternoon of the appointed day. Staunton had gone straight on to the aerodrome, but Violette travelled with Vera Atkins by car ... As they passed through Mill Hill, Violette leaned slightly towards the window. Seeing that Vera had noticed it, Violette said: “It’s where my child is.” That was the only hint she gave that Tania was in her thoughts. “I know she was devoted to her child,” says Vera Atkins. “Every moment she could spare she spent at Mill Hill. But she said nothing more to me that evening about Tania. She just sat there calm and composed - the picture, one might almost say, of a poster girl, for she was really very beautiful - the sort of loveliness that churned up the emotions of every man. But she did not seem to be conscious of it at all.’

That night, a B-24 Liberator bomber from the U.S.A.A.F. base at Harrington, Lincolnshire flew into Tempsford. It was the aircraft in which Violette and Staunton were to be flown to France, once they had completed collecting their parachute gear from the barn at Gibraltar Farm on the airfield. The flight proceeded to plan and S.O.E’s latest arrivals by parachute landed in the countryside south of Paris.

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Following much cycling and a brief rest at a farmhouse, they made their way to Paris by train the following day, arriving at Austerlitz Station on the evening of Thursday 6 April. Staunton had arranged for them to stay at his aunt’s apartment. By Monday the 10th, it was time for Violette to depart for Rouen in the Zone Interdite, a railway journey that is said to have been shared with a number of German officers in a First Class carriage.

On her arrival at her destination, Violette was shocked to see a ‘wanted poster’ bearing photographs of Staunton and Maloubier, together with their correct cover names. The infiltration and collapse of “Salesman” was well under way.

Seeking out Madame Denise Desvaux, a dressmaker who had housed Staunton’s wireless operator, Isidore Newman, she discovered the latter had been arrested at the end of March, while Claude Malraux, who Staunton had appointed head of the circuit in his absence, had befallen a similar fate in late February.

Over the next fortnight (10-23 April), Violette made contact with a number of known sympathisers and resisters, an extremely dangerous exercise in view of the ongoing arrests taking place in the region. However, as a result of information received from people like Madame Jean Sueur, whose husband was a member of the resistance group “The Black Devils”, the wider picture emerged; confirmation, too, came from Le Havre that the local resistance leader had been arrested by the Gestapo and beaten within an inch of his life. In fact by the time of her departure, Violette had established that 96 resisters and members of the “Salesman” circuit had been arrested.

Nor did the perilous nature of her mission inhibit her determination to travel around the area by bicycle to seek the wider picture; by way of example she journeyed 15 miles to Ry, where she met Madame Pascaline Boulanger, who had taken on the guardianship of “The Black Devils” resistance group following the arrest of her two sons. Such outings also enabled her to gather valuable information in respect of local factories producing war materials for the Germans, potential targets for the R.A.F. in the lead up to the Normandy invasion. Rouen itself was regularly bombed during the course of Violette’s stay, a raid on the 17th proving particularly heavy. Research undertaken by Tania Szabó also suggests that Violette assisted in the reconnaissance of the V-weapon site at Trossy St. Maximin.

Invariably, perhaps, and as verified by the recommendation for her George Cross, she was twice taken into custody by the German authorities and Milice, most likely to Rouen’s Palace of Justice. Her cover story clearly held, for on both occasions, ‘she escaped by ruse’ to live another day.

It was time for her to return to Paris and report to Staunton but before boarding her train, she removed as a souvenir one of the ‘wanted posters’ of her boss and Maloubier.

**Shopping spree in the Rue Royale**

Back in Paris, she rendezvoused with André Malraux, Claude’s brother, at the Varsovie Fountains, and met per chance another S.O.E. operative, Jacques Poirér, who later described her as ‘an adorable young woman.’ More importantly, after at least one failed attempt, she rendezvoused with Staunton in the Luxembourg Gardens on 26 April. Her first mission was coming to a close and with typical aplomb she embarked upon a shopping spree. R. J. Minney takes up the story:

‘She went to Molyneux, the famous couturier in the Rue Royale, which, despite the German occupation, was still carrying on. The bill head proclaimed quite bluntly that the firm had a branch open in London. There she bought, as her bill dated 28 April 1944 shows, three dresses and one very attractive jersey. The bill, made out to Mademoiselle C. Leroy, states that one of the dresses was of black crêpe de chine
- it was draped with a lace neckline and cost 8,500 francs. There was, of course, no official rate of exchange between England and France at the time, but the franc was worth a great deal more than it is now: at the pre-war rate of 176 francs to the pound, the cost of this dress works out at nearly £50. Another of the dresses is set down as “en écossais”: it was a red plaid dress. The third was of silk print. The jersey, described as a golf jersey, was yellow in colour ... The total bill came in all to over £200.’

Having then visited the Madeleine to light a candle - Violette’s mother had told her Etienne wanted to take her there after the war - she continued on her way, in search for a dress for Tania. Minney continues:

‘Walking boldly up to an attendant, she asked where she could buy a dress for a child aged two. She was directed to the second floor. The choice was restricted. There were not many children in Paris now ... She selected one at last. It was of gay flowered silk, with tiny pink and blue flowers and green leaves against a white background, and had a smocked bodice; in it she felt the sallowness of Tania would be set off to perfection. But she would have to wait a year or two before she could wear it. When she was four perhaps. Violette saw herself leading the child by the hand as they set off together for perhaps her first party ... For her mother she bought some perfume, a compact, a pretty scarf and a pair of black gloves; for Vera Atkins she got a pendant brooch with three small and one large cluster of red and green enamel beads, a pearl at the end of each cluster.’

A bumpy ride home

On the evening of the 30th, after making their way to open countryside south-west of Châteauroux, Violette and Staunton were flown home in separate Lysanders. Violette’s pilot was Bob Large, D.F.C., of 161 Squadron. Owing to heavy flak encountered over Châteaudun, it proved to be a traumatic flight, and Violette was heavily thrown about in the rear cockpit. She started to shout at Large on the intercom who, having to concentrate on the danger at hand, switched it off. Unfortunately for him, as events would prove, he forgot to switch it back on after clearing the danger zone, thereby leaving Violette incommunicado. Moreover, unbeknown to pilot and passenger, one of the Lysander’s tyres had been shredded by a flak burst, so on finally making a very bumpy landing at Tangmere, the aircraft ground-looped. Large swiftly exited the aircraft to go to the rescue of his confused and battered passenger, who was convinced they had made an emergency landing in France. Nor had she seen his tall, blond Germanic-looking frame exit the aircraft, as a result of which she perceived him to be a German. As Large would later recall, she closed him with a tirade of French expletives. Happily, her confusion was short-lived. Happier still, her gallant pilot was rewarded with a kiss.

Staunton having safely reached terra firma as well, the pair of them were swept off by car. Violette was dropped of at her parents home where - to general amazement - she distributed her gifts from Paris.

The following day she reported to Baker Street for the commencement of her debrief with Buckmaster and Vera Atkins, following which she dined at the Studio Club with Staunton and Maloubier. The latter would later recount to R. J. Minney:

“I'll never forget her entry, everyone turned to stare at her. She had on a red dress she had bought in Paris and was wearing a pair of new ear-rings she had also got in Paris - they were bunches of red flowers dangling from a gilt chain - and, though she was very sparing as a rule with perfume, that night she seemed to have splashed it on because it was something one could no longer get very easily in England. All the women in the room raised their nostrils to breathe it in and shut their eyes in ecstasy at the heavenly scent. She looked really wonderful.”

One of the songs played by the band was “The Last Time I Saw Paris”.

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Second Mission

Promoted to Ensign in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (F.A.N.Y.) on 24 May 1944, Violette rested for a few days in Herefordshire, with her aunt, uncle and cousin, Norman. Time, too, was passed with young Tania. Precious little time, as it transpired, for D-Day was but a week or two away, and Staunton and Violette had been assigned to a new mission in the department of Haute Vienne: to establish “Salesman II”. Her cover on this occasion was Mme. Villeret, the young widow of an antiques dealer from Nantes. Her code name was once more “Louise”. Bob Maloubier and Jean-Claude Guiet, an American wireless operator, made up the team, the four of them getting together for a dinner in London shortly before the “Off”. The latter recalled that Violette was a lively and amusing companion, ‘who moved gracefully.’

In *Young, Brave and Beautiful*, Tania Szabo remembers the last occasion that she saw Violette, as she took her leave at Stockwell Tube Station. It is one of just two distinct memories she retains of her mother:

‘Violette was smiling and laughing, looking lovely. I watched her step down into the dark tunnel never to see her again. As she descended, she turned one last time with a smile on her face and waved lightly to her mother and me at the top.’

The team gathered at Hazell’s Hall, Sandy, near the airfield at Tempsford on 5 June. As Vera Atkins later recounted to R. J. Minney:

“There was a lot of tension in the room that night. All the boys were going out on various operations. You could feel the jumpiness of their nerves. Astonishingly, Violette alone was perfectly calm and composed. I was very struck with the contrast.”

The ‘boys’ were members of the S.A.S’s Jedburgh teams.

However, Violette’s ensuing flight was aborted just as the aircraft was taxi-ing to the runway, postponed on account of a bad weather report. Vera Atkins was present:

“On their faces one could see their acute disappointment. It was the most awful anti-climax - to say good-bye, to get into the plane and to be on the point of taking off and then to troop out again, get back into the car and drive back to the house.”

When Vera Atkins returned to Hazell’s Hall the following morning, she found Violette engaged in a brisk game of ping-pong. As she recounted to R. J. Minney:

“I have never seen her looking more beautiful. She had on a pair of white marguerite ear-rings which she had bought in Paris. Her dress had a plunging neck-line. She wore no stockings, but just a pair of bright sandals. She made a really striking picture - her well-chiselled features, her high cheekbones, her eyes bright and lively, her hair so pretty: a lithe, girlish figure, young, strong and supple, she was bursting with health and pulsated with vitality, all of her just coiled energy.”

Violette, Staunton, Maloubier and Guiet set-off to Cambridge for the day, where they strolled around the city, enjoyed lunch and swam in the Cam.

Back at Tempsford that evening, where they had to undergo all the usual last minute checks, team “Salesman II” duly embarked another aircraft for France. Unbeknown to them, it was the night of the invasion. Arriving over the proposed dropping zone south of Limoges, the aircraft circled around awaiting the correct recognition signal from the ground. No such signal appeared and the pilot had no option but to turn homeward.
The exhausted team retired to bed at Hazell’s Hall, Staunton, Maloubier and Guiet being awoken by a batman at 5 a.m. It appears Violette, in one of her practical jokes, had left a notice on their bedroom door: ‘Please call at 5 a.m. sharp, without fail - and see that we are up.’

Furious as they were at this unwelcome intrusion, Violette appeared in person at 7 a.m. to rouse them again: she was clutching the newspapers announcing the invasion of Normandy.

Back at Tempsford that evening, following another outing to Cambridge, team “Salesman II” boarded a B-24 Liberator of the U.S.A.A.F, which had flown in from Harrington, Lincolnshire. This time everything ran like clockwork, and passengers and containers landed safely on target in the fields of Le Clos.

According to the aircraft’s radio operator, Violette insisted on kissing each crew member before exiting on her parachute. It was the 8th June, Tania’s second birthday.

The team gathered at Mme. Anna Ribiéras’s grocery shop in Sussac, who had prepared an attic room for Violette.

In his foreword to Young, Brave and Beautiful, Guiet recalled:

‘Once we were in France, I saw her only three times: twice for meals at a restaurant with the others and one time alone, the day before she was captured. This was primarily because, as the American radio operator for the group, I was to be segregated from all operational activities as our sole source of contact with London. On this occasion Violette walked me to the little house near the water mill I had moved into as my base. She needed to know where to contact me, since she was our courier. She was pushing the bicycle she was to use the next day. Other than telling me she was going on a trip the following day, we had a pleasant conversation though we knew nothing about each other except that she was Corinne and I was Claude. She spoke forcefully of her admiration for our team leader, Charles Staunton, and of her determination and belief in duty. I was looking forward to seeing her again often.

Two days later, I was in a flurry of transmissions concerning her capture. I found that I missed her, even though I was very much occupied.’

Last stand and capture

Of those events leading to her capture on 10 June 1944, Staunton later reported:

‘On the morning of 10 June 1944, I sent out Szabo on a liaison mission to contact NESTOR and prepare a meeting between him and I, as per instructions from my briefing in London.

The distance to be covered was over 100 miles and due to the complete disrupture of normal means of communication, I accepted DUFOUR’S [Jacques Dufour - “Anastasie”] suggestion to drive her, with her bicycle in the car, as far as safety allowed, through Maquis controlled country. He intended to drive her about half-way down South.

I saw them both off, made sure DUFOUR’S Martin G.M.G. was in working order, and handed Szabo a Sten-gun, loaded two magazines for her, as she specifically insisted on carrying a weapon for the car journey.

The following is the report which DUFOUR gave me, to the best of my recollection:
“We stopped at the first village on our way, namely La Croiselle, to collect my friend BARRIAUD, who could thus keep me company on the way back later. BARRIAUD climbed in the rear seat and I drove on, Szabo sitting beside me in the front.

Nearing the village of Salon, we came, after a bend in the road, to a T junction. At a distance of 50 yards, I saw we were coming to a road block manned by German soldiers who waved at me to stop. I instantly put out my arm and waved back, and warned Szabo to get prepared to jump out and run.

I stopped at 30 yards distance from the road block, jumped flat on the road surface by the car and started shooting - I noticed BARRIAUD, who was unarmed, running away, but found that Szabo had taken up a similar position to mine on the other side of the car and was firing too.

By that time, though one of the three Germans had been hit, the other two were spraying us generously. I ordered Szabo to retreat through a wheat field, to a wood 400 yards away, under cover of my fire. As soon as she reached the high wheat, she resumed firing, and I took advantage of it to fall back.

At first, the going was good, as we walked, bending so as not to show our heads over the top of the wheat, but soon we heard the rumble of armoured cars and machine-guns began spraying close to us, as they could follow our progress by the movement of the wheat. So we had to continue our progress towards the wood crawling flat and cautiously on the ground, an exhausting and awfully slow process.

Then we heard the infantry running up the road and entering the wheat field while the armoured cars went driving around it. So we had to keep firing, each in turn to cover the other’s progress, to keep the infantrymen from running up to us.

When we weren’t more than thirty yards from the edge of the woods, Szabo, who by then had all her clothes ripped to ribbons and was bleeding from numerous scratches all over her legs, told me she was exhausted and could not go an inch further.

She insisted she wanted me to try and get away, that there was no point in my staying with her. So I went on while she kept firing from time to time and I managed to hide under a haystack in the courtyard of a small farm.

The last I know was that half an hour later Szabo was brought to that very farm by the Germans. I heard them questioning her as to my whereabouts and heard her answering, laughing, “You can run after him, he is far away now.”

I later ascertained that Szabo was taken to Limoges the same day, entered the local prison the next day (11 June) and left the prison for an unknown destination on 12 June (sic).”

Events after Dufour had parted company with Violette were witnessed by Albert Tisserand. He was staying at a farm owned by the Montillet family and, as the Germans approached, sought refuge in a barn that looked directly out over a field leading to an orchard:

‘German soldiers rumbled up to the farm, jumped from their vehicles into the farmyard. The old iron fence and gate acted as a support to their machine-guns. They fired at Violette, their spent cartridges falling around them as she ran, fell, got up, hopped and stumbled and picked herself up again. She made it to the single apple tree, far across the field in a small dip. All the while, she turned and fired ... One or two smaller vehicles and a good number of soldiers had arrived at the farmer’s yard. Larger armoured vehicles blocked the roads and were still trundling about in the fields. A Das Reich unit rolled in, wondering just how large the enemy Maquis force was. The soldiers rushed over to the iron
rails and gate. There they took careful aim. And so, they fought it out. A young woman dressed for summer against a grey uniformed horde' (*Young, Brave and Beautiful*, refers).

Her ammunition finally exhausted, and suffering from a flesh wound and a painfully swollen ankle - the same ankle she had injured at Ringway on her parachute course - Violette was roughly manhandled from her last position by the apple tree by two German soldiers. They were likely from the 2nd S.S. Panzer Division, *Das Reich*, who were searching for their C.O. *Sturmbannführer* Kampfè, who had been kidnapped by the Resistance the previous day.

Violette was taken to the small farm where Dufour had taken refuge under a pile of wood and hay. Mme. Montintin, an eye-witness, said an ‘officer approached and offered her [Violette] a cigarette. She spat in his face and didn’t accept it.’ Other eye-witnesses have stated that she shouted at her captors, telling then to leave her arms free so that she could smoke one of her own cigarettes.

It is also said that the officer in charge of the roadblock commended her on her bravery, even saluted her, before she was driven away in an armoured car. Her destination was Limoges.

At the nearby village of Oradour-sur-Glane this same day, elements of the S.S. *Das Reich* Division under *Sturmbannführer* Adolf Diekmann embarked on an orgy of murder and destruction. The men and boys were lined up and shot; the women and children herded into the church. It was then set alight.

*Limoges*

News of Violette’s capture eventually reached Staunton - not via Dufour who went to ground - and a plan was hatched to free her from captivity, the idea being to snatch her from her guards as she was walked over to the Gestapo H.Q. from the prison.

As stated by Jean-Claude Guiet, “Salesman II’s” wireless operator, he was quickly engaged in processing the resultant ‘flurry of transmissions’ concerning Violette’s capture; it appears from a related message sent by Colonel Buckmaster back in London that plans for a rescue attempt were indeed afoot:

‘Regret to inform you arrest reported of Mrs. Szabo. As report unconfirmed, request no official action be taken yet to FANY or other authority as it is possible she may be rescued. You may like to know what her chief wires about her [quote] Reverting to arrest Louise she displayed outstanding gallantry firing back half hour with Sten before dropping exhaustion [unquote]. A magnificent show.’

Alas, by the time everything had been organised for the rescue attempt on Friday 16 June, including a brace of getaway cars, Violette had been moved to Fresnes Prison, outside Paris.

At Limoges, she shared a cell in the local prison with 16-year old Huguette Deshors, who would later provide eye-witness testimony in respect of those early days in captivity. It is clear from her testimony that Violette was taken away to the nearby Gestapo H.Q. for interrogation on a daily basis.

Deshors witnessed Violette’s first encounter with one of her interrogators, an S.S. officer, when he entered their cell; it was likely *Hauptsturmführer* Aurel Kowatsch or *Obersturmbannführer* August Meier:

‘The scene was so intense, so dramatic that it is still just as clear today as it was then. She [Deshors] would not - could not - ever forget it. He leaned towards Violette with a sardonic smile, that of a victor
before its prey ... Violette never moved a millimetre away, she seemed to defy him. After this incredible and silent confrontation, he left, as he had entered, without a word, just the clack-clack of his boots’ (Young, Brave and Beautiful, refers).

The previous day, at Tulle, a hotbed of resistance, Kowatsch had overseen the hanging of 99 teenage boys and men, a reprisal undertaken by troops of the 2nd S.S. Panzer Division, Das Reich.

Violette’s future looked bleak.

It is true that she rarely spoke to Deshors about her treatment at Gestapo H.Q. during her short stay at Limoges, but the latter would recall seeing her skin marked with red wheals. Above all, she never forgot the occasion a distraught Violette returned from the Gestapo after witnessing a French resistant being tortured to death.

Her final recollection of Violette was the moment the guards came to take her to a new destination: Violette turned in the doorway, smiled and said “Courage!”

Fresnes Prison and Avenue Foch

As a consequence of the publication of Carve Her Name with Pride in 1956, and the film that followed, eye-witness accounts of Violette’s time at Fresnes Prison also emerged. In September 1957, the War Office received a letter from Mme. G. Meunier, who shared cell No. 435 with her on the ‘4th floor, 3rd Division, German Section’. She described Violette as:

‘About 1m 75. Very slim. Very dark hair and eyes - Gypsy type, very good looking. While in jail at Fresnes, she had her hair parted, and she wore it in a plain long style ... she was wearing the same dress as when she left London: a new one, in crêpe de chine, with blue and white flowers. Her shoes were a blue leather, wedge heel type, made in Paris during her former stay. She was also wearing a shirt in black crêpe georgette, with yellow lace, this being one of her personal belongings.’

Mme. Meunier went on to describe how Violette suspected betrayal, for her real identity had been known by the Sicherheitsdienst (the S.S. security service) at 84 Avenue Foch, where she was taken for interrogation on her arrival in Paris. The nature and degree of Violette’s treatment at Avenue Foch will never be known, but if in any way comparable to Odette’s experiences, it was a period of suffering that requires no further description. Certainly she was there, probably for a week or more: her S.O.E. records contain a report confirming that she had carved her name on the wall of cell No. 45 - reference ‘Gordonnier File 1/10’. The date carved by her name was stated to be 5 June 1944, when in fact it must have been the 15th.

Moving and extensive information in respect of Violette’s time at Fresnes was also received from Mme. Marie Lecomte, who wrote to Mr. and Mrs. Bushell in April 1958. A much decorated member of the French Resistance, who had been captured in Brittany - and brutally tortured - Lecomte shared another cell at Fresnes with Violette. Tania Szabó takes up the story in Young, Brave and Beautiful:

‘Marie Lecomte had promised Violette faithfully to contact us at war’s end and at last, after the years had passed, was able to keep her promise.

This is the first extract of what Madame Lecomte wrote, translated by my grandmother. Violette’s mother, and concerns her meeting with Violette in Fresnes prison:
Morlaix, 19 April 1958

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Bushell

You will be surprised to hear from me in far away Bretagne. Please excuse me writing to you, but I have to do my duty. With all my heart must I give you the message, which now comes from the grave. It is from your darling daughter Violette, she was of the heart and the flesh to you, to me she was a daughter of the heart and I loved her very much. Violette and I were inseparable.

I was arrested by the Gestapo, horribly tortured, put into prison in Brest 60 km. from Morlaix. After being condemned to death, I was transferred to Fresnes prison in Paris, arriving there at 11 o’clock at night. Everything I had was taken away from me, then up to a cell on the third floor, No. 24 - already in this cell were an old lady of 69, a portrait artist, and your dear Violette. She was looking at my face, covered with bruises, lips cut, etc. She understood why I was there; we were both in prison for the same cause.

I was forty years of age and your daughter 23. She looked upon me as a second mother. Maman Marie she used to call me. She told me about her parachute jumps and how, on the first one, she could not get out of it. Had to keep very still when she heard heavy steps approaching. She thought, Germans. But they were only gendarmes talking French to one another. She was then saved to join the Maquis. After her second jump, she stayed at a farm, she was to meet her chief at a certain place and by car to Salon-la-Tour to pick up a young man Jack, when they came to the cross-roads, they saw Germans on each side of the road. They started firing on them, so a terrific battle took place and ended only when their ammunition ran out. Violette and the other man were taken to a guard post and brutally assaulted. From there Violette was taken to Fresnes where I met her ten days later.

We both suffered terribly, morally also because the stairs in the prison were made of iron, very noisy to walk upon. Each day several women were taken away, we used to listen to the steps coming up, wondering if it was for us they were coming today, and in an instant open our cell door, but when we heard those steps going away noisily, we knew we had another day to live.

Violette was always hoping to escape, so she kept doing her P.T. exercises to keep as fit as possible ... one day someone came for her, she was going, we were in despair to be separated; it was 13th August 44. She left, and myself two days later, the 15th, the day of our Virgin Mary, also my own birthday.

Ah, I almost forgot to tell you about the small hole we made in the windowpane, so we could watch the yard below where the men prisoners were kept in iron cages.

Each morning they were allowed one hour for exercises. With a piece of meal bone from my corset, we made a small pin sharp enough to pierce the glass. We were only able to put one eye to it and see what was going on down there.

One day Violette saw a man she had worked with. She made me look at him too. “We must send a message somehow - you are much taller than I,” she said. “Get on the head of the iron bed and use the stiff curtain as a funnel. Shout loudly through it: “All is well, V. All is well V.” Violette, looking at the hole, saw him looking up. He had heard our message ...’

It was Harry Peulevé.
To Germany

They would shortly be re-united on a train bound for Germany, for the pace of the Allied advance towards Paris was quickening and the Germans started moving their more valuable prisoners closer to home. For Violette, Peulevé and around 35 other S.O.E. operatives or members of the Resistance, that journey commenced in the second week of August, when they were gathered, chained together, in the main hall at Fresnes, prior to being taken to Gare de l’Est and thence to Saarbrücken. There were seven women in the party. Mlle Rosier recalls:

‘... one of the three English girls was described as Corinne or Violette, small, dark, large eyes, said to have been arrested in a maquis at Limoges.’

The other two ‘English girls’ were Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe, who were destined to be shot with Violette in early 1945. The gathered throng, a shocking sight after weeks and months of appalling treatment and torture, numbered among its ranks some of S.O.E’s greatest heroes and heroines. One such was Wing Commander F. F. E. Yeo-Thomas, G.C., M.C.; another Noor Inayat Khan, G.C.

The subsequent journey was nothing short of a nightmare in the August heat, with many delays and detours. The men were locked in a prison carriage, where they festered without water; the women, chained in pairs, confined to Third Class compartment. It took 22 hours to reach Châlon-sur-Marne and then the train was attacked by Allied aircraft. The German guards jumped from the halted train to take cover. In the prison carriage, panic broke out among some of the men. As Yeo-Thomas reflected at a later date:

‘We all felt deeply ashamed when we saw Violette Szabo, while the raid was still on, come crawling along the corridor towards us with a jug of water ... My God that girl had guts.’

So, too, the girl chained to her: Denise Bloch.

Harry Peulevé told R.J. Minney: “I shall never forget that moment. I felt very proud that I knew her.”

The attack over, the train moved on to Metz, where the prisoners were housed overnight in a stables bordering a barracks. The men and women were separated by a central drain, but Peulevé and Violette managed to exchange words:

In Young, Brave and Beautiful, Tania Szabo, quotes Peulevé:

“Violette and I talked all through the night. Her voice, as always, was so sweet and soothing, one could listen to it for hours. We spoke of old times and we told each other our experiences in France. But by bit everything was unfolded - her life in Fresnes, her interviews at Avenue Foch. But either through modesty or a sense of delicacy, since some of the tortures were too intimate in their application; or perhaps because she did not wish to live again through the pain of it, she spoke hardly at all about the tortures she had been made to suffer. She was in a cheerful mood. Her spirits were high. She was confident of victory and was resolved on escaping no matter where they took her.”

Another day was spent at Metz before the journey to Saarbrücken was resumed. A camp at Neue Bremm, on the outskirts of the city, was reached a day or two later, where the men and women were separated. The women were destined for Ravensbrück, north of Berlin, which they finally reached in the third week of August.
Violette, Bloch and Rolfe were sent to *Hansblock N.V.* (Block 5) for political prisoners on their arrival at the concentration camp:

‘Roll-call took place at three-thirty every morning in summer. Every woman had to congregate in the large yard. There, they were to wait at attention until the ‘Appel’ or roll call, was completed. Sometimes it did not start for two or three hours. In winter, they were summoned into the yard at four-thirty in the morning. A number of women died every day. They died from the suffocating heat, lack of water and food or the terrible cold, lack of sustenance and so forth. Other prisoners had to cart them off and layer them up on top of one another, very neatly against a wall. Punishment ensued if the piles were not neat. In the winter, snow and ice covered the ground, icicles hung from the *Blockhäusern*, the women’s faces froze, they got frostbite and their summer clothes, like Violette wore throughout her incarceration and *Kommando* work in Torgau and Königsberg, gave not a modicum of warmth. Sometimes, the roll-call would be repeated two or three times. Six hours or more could be passed in the Ravensbrück yard of terror and torture’ (*Young, Brave and Beautiful*, refers).

Soon after her arrival, Violette had a happy reunion: it was her old cellmate from Fresnes, Marie Lecomte. The latter, as reported to Violette’s parents after the war, was shocked at her appearance, for she had been kept in chains and on a starvation diet at Neue Bremm. She had sunken eyes and no footwear.

Violette also met at this time Jeanne Rousseau, a communist who had served an espionage group in Brittany. Talk of escape, prompted by Violette, was swiftly curtailed, for they were ordered to the munitions factory at Torgau in early September.

Rousseau, who spoke fluent German, subsequently led a delegation in protest at having to work with munitions, a protest supported by Violette and around 200 women. Meanwhile, talk of escape with Violette continued apace, a fact confirmed by Eileen Nearne, another S.O.E. courier, who survived the war, and who was part of the plan.

Violette managed to obtain a vital key but much to the disappointment of all concerned, she had to throw it away when the plan was compromised by a fellow inmate.

Escape plans aside, contact was made with some French prisoners at a nearby P.O.W. camp. It seems likely one of them was responsible for getting a message to Violette’s parents, for a mysterious postcard, which bore a stamp mark for ‘Leipzig’ - which is about 50 miles from Torgau - arrived in London after V.E. Day. It said:

‘Dear Godfather

I am pleased to say that I am well. It is a long time since I wrote. Glad to hear from you. Happy to say I have met Violette. She is well and wishing for the war to end, as I do.

Petit.’

Violette returned to Ravensbrück on 5 October, where she was put to work in the fabric store.

As recounted by Tania Szabó in *Young, Brave and Beautiful*, her mother remained a constant thorn in the side of German authority:
‘A French woman, who had been a prisoner there with Violette, told my friend and me that Violette had stepped out one day and danced the ‘Lambeth Walk’ while all the English girls joined in the singing with her. It gave the women who witnessed it a huge lift and there was much laughter to the furious shouts of the S.S. overseers. Violette then found herself in the Bunker in solitary for a week...’

A hint of the inner workings of the Bunker is to be found in Jerrard Tickell’s *Odette*:

‘This Bunker was a labyrinth of tiny, airless cells, a gaol within a gaol. It was a place of even greater darkness and fear for here beatings were carried out and nameless things done to women’s bodies.’

Those savage beatings were carried out on a wooden block and, if enacted under the auspices of senior wardresses such as Dorothea Binz, regularly resulted in death; it is believed that some 90,000 women died at Ravensbrück in the period May 1939 to April 1945.

As a consequence of her part in the protest against working with munitions at Torgau, Violette was next sent to the punishment camp - or *Aussenkommando* - at Königsberg, towards the end of October 1944. Tania Szabó writes in *Young, Brave and Beautiful*:

‘At Königsberg they replaced the Russians as vital slave-labour to cut down trees and turn them into neat stacks to be transported all over Germany. The snow frequently came up to their knees as they wielded axes on trees and logs. Violette, as testified by Marie Lecomte, wore nothing but her summer dress and clogs. She had little else to keep her warm. Nor did Marie and many others. Marie was livid when she saw how warmly they had dressed the women in the biographical film of Violette. She kept exclaiming how they worked in the lightest of clothes with the snow coming up to their knees in the bitter Königsberg winter of 44-45. She writes, “The place was so terribly dirty it was frightening. What few bits of clothing were left with the paillasses were full of vermin of the worst kind. There again, Violette went to work all the time while I stayed in the camp thanks to our Corsican doctor - Maria Perete.”

The work was backbreaking. The food hardly replenished a fifth of the energy output her now skinny body produced. Violette’s health was finally on the decline. That of Denise and Lilian was dangerously low as was Marie’s.

Marie continues: “My poor darling had to work in the snow, helping in the work of building an aerodrome out of forest land. It was getting colder all the time, near freezing weather, with the east winds from Siberia ... One night, Violette got back to camp at six o’clock. We had a fire that day. She was almost out of her mind with the cold. She had a fit of screaming and crying. I could not quieten her for a long time. I took her in my arms, trying to warm her up a little. ‘I’m so cold, so cold’ she said ... I brought her to the fire and showed her the little food I had saved from my dinner for her, a couple of thin slices of potato that I stuck to the stove to cook them. A kind of feast. She enjoyed it.” She went on to describe the arrival of Sühren [the commandant of Ravensbrück] accompanied by a woman to take charge of the prisoners. A fiend, lashing and kicking the girls ...’

Notwithstanding such circumstances, eye-witnesses speak of Violette maintaining her morale and continuing to plan escape. It was not to be, for on the direct orders of the Reich’s main security office in Berlin - the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (R.H.S.A.) - she, Denise and Lilian were now ordered back to Ravensbrück.

On learning of these orders on 20 January 1945, Violette asked Marie Lecomte to promise her she would visit her parents and Tania in South London after the war; Marie wrote the address on a slip of paper and hid in the hem of her dress. Finally, at the hour of her departure, Violette kissed Marie seven times, a kiss for each of her parents and siblings, and one for Tania.
Marie Lecomte was herself ordered back to Ravensbrück in February 1945, where she was fortunate to escape the gas chamber. Evacuated to a hospital in Pilsen on the camp’s liberation, her dress containing the slip of paper with Tania’s parents’ address - was exchanged by the medical staff. It would be thirteen years before she was able to trace them, thanks to the publicity occasioned by the release of the film, *Carve Her Name with Pride*; moreover, in the fullness of time, she was able to meet them and Tania to deliver Violette’s kisses.

By this stage, according to another friend and inmate, 17-year old Hortense Daman, a mass of sores had erupted all over Violette’s legs; nonetheless, she gave up her raised bed to the sick teenager and slept on the ground. It was the last time they met.

**Execution**

The precise date of Violette’s execution - alongside Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe - remains unknown. It most probably occurred on 26 January and not later than 5 February 1945, and was enacted at Ravensbrück’s ‘shooting alley’.

Of their movements in the interim, Vera Atkins later established they had been sent to the *Straflöck* - the punishment block - for three or four days. The night before their execution, they were transferred to the camp’s Bunker: ‘All three were in a pitiful state and Lilian was too weak to walk.’

Of subsequent events, the full facts were only formally established when Vera Atkins, who had attached herself to a military intelligence unit on S.O.E’s disbandment, travelled to Europe in search of some 400 missing agents, couriers and wireless operators. And those facts emerged when she confronted the imprisoned S.S. *Obersturmführer* Schwarzhüber, who had been second-in-command at Ravensbrück, in April 1946. He made the following statement:

“I declare that I remember that I had delivered to me towards the end of January 1945, an order from the German Secret Police countersigned by the Camp Commandant Sühren, instructing me to ascertain the location of the following persons - Lillian Rolfe, Danielle Williams [Denise Bloch, who used the code name ‘Williams’], Violette Szabo. These were at that time in the dependent camp of Königsburg on the Oder and were recalled by me. When they returned to the Camp they were placed in the punishment block and moved from there into the block of cells.

One evening, towards 1900 hours, they were called out and taken to the cemetery yard by the crematorium. Camp Commandant Sühren made these arrangements. He read out the order for their shooting in the presence of the Chief Camp Doctor, Dr. Trammer, S.S. Sergeant Zappe, S.S. Lance-Corporal Schult or Schulee (a block leader from the men’s camp), S.S. Corporal Schenk (i/c of the crematorium), Dentist Dr. Hellinger. I was myself present.

The shooting was done by Schult with a small-calibre gun through the back of the neck. They were brought forward singly by Corporal Schenk. Death was certified by Dr. Trammer. The corpses were removed singly by internees who were employed in the crematorium and burnt. The clothes were burnt with the bodies.

I accompanied the three women to the crematorium yard. A female camp overseer was also present and was sent back when we reached the crematorium. Zappe stood guard over them while they were waiting to be shot.

All three were very brave and I was deeply moved. Sühren was also impressed by the bearing of these women. He was annoyed that the Gestapo did not themselves carry out these shootings.
I recognise with certainty the photograph of Danielle Williams and I think I recognise the photograph of Lillian Rolfe. I know that the third had the name of Violette.

I am prepared to make this declaration under oath. Read, found correct and signed of my own free will.’

The War Office now wrote to Violette’s parents:

‘We have now obtained from an eyewitness news of her fate. This witness was the camp overseer who is now under arrest. Mrs. Szabo, together with two friends, was executed by shooting one evening by special command of the German Secret Police. The witness has testified that the bearing of the three women was of the highest order and greatly impressed all those that performed or who were present at the execution. Death was instantaneous and the body was immediately cremated.

In giving this news to you, news which I know must be very difficult to bear, I should like to offer on behalf of this Branch my own very sincere sympathies. You must be very proud of the way your daughter maintained her calm dignified courage throughout her ordeal. It is testimony of that courage that she impressed and moved even those responsible for her death.’

Colonel Buckmaster added in another letter:

‘I felt I must write to you at this time, now that more has been learned of Violette's heroic behaviour, to tell you how much we all admired her and how magnificently she upheld the tradition of the French Section, of which we were all very proud.’

The evidence gathered by Vera Atkins was supported by eye-witness statements that emerged in the immediate post-war period, including ex-Ravensbrück inmate, Germaine Tillion. The latter described the three S.O.E. women as ‘the little parachutists’ and was able to identify Ruth Neudecker, a camp Aufseherin, as having been the one who collected the three women for their execution.

It was, however, in the pages of The News of the World, that further news of Violette’s fate appeared, an article prompted by her parents’ frantic search for information. The correspondent - Mrs. Julie Berry - was another ex-Ravensbrück inmate:

‘It was this camp into which the three British parachutists were brought. One was Violette Szabo. They were in rags, their faces black with dirt, and their hair matted. They were starving. They had been tortured to wrest from them secrets of the invasion, but I am certain they gave nothing away.

Mrs. Szabo told me all about herself - about her dead soldier husband and her child, to whom she was devoted. I think that she and her two companions knew they had been brought to Ravensbrück to die. Even among the thousands of women in the camp these three were outstanding. They were British and the Germans knew it. Nothing could break their spirit.

One morning came the order for the three of them to go to the Commandant’s office. Mrs. Szabo walked unaided. The other two were carried. Many of the inmates wanted to die, but Mrs. Szabo and her companions wanted to live to tell the world how they had been treated.’

Violetlette is believed to have been the last to have been shot, thereby suffering the agony of seeing her two friends being put to death. According to Mrs. Berry, as they were taken away to be executed, ‘on each face was a look of contempt for the guards’. 
On 17 December 1946, the following announcement appeared in The London Gazette:

‘Madame Szabo volunteered to undertake a particularly dangerous mission in France. She was parachuted into France in April 1944, and undertook the task with enthusiasm. In her execution of the delicate researches entailed she showed great presence of mind and astuteness. She was twice arrested by the German security authorities, but each time managed to get away. Eventually, however, with other members of her group, she was surrounded by the Gestapo in a house in the south-west of France. Resistance appeared hopeless, but Madame Szabo, seizing a Sten-gun and as much ammunition as she could carry, barricaded herself in part of the house, and, exchanging shot for shot with the enemy, killed or wounded several of them. By constant movement she avoided being cornered and fought until she dropped exhausted. She was arrested and had to undergo solitary confinement. She was then continuously and atrociously tortured, but never by word or deed gave away any of her acquaintances, or told the enemy anything of value. She was ultimately executed. Madame Szabo gave a magnificent example of courage and steadfastness.’

The original recommendation states:

‘Lieutenant (F.A.N.Y.) Violette Szabo volunteered in early 1944 to undertake a particularly dangerous mission in France. This consisted in investigating a report that one of our secret organisations previously established in Rouen and Le Havre had been broken up by the Gestapo, and, if this report proved accurate, to establish contact with any elements remaining uncontaminated.

It was evident to Szabo that such work called for a particularly high degree of courage and finesse, but she undertook the task with enthusiasm and in her execution of the delicate researches entailed showed great presence of mind and astuteness. She was twice arrested by the German security authorities, but each time managed to get away by ruse.

In April 1944 she, together with other members of her group, was surrounded by the Gestapo in a house in the South-West of France. Resistance appeared hopeless, but Szabo, seizing a Sten-gun and as much ammunition as she could carry, determined to try and hold out, in the hope that help might come. She barricaded herself in part of the house and, exchanging shot for shot with the enemy, killed or wounded several of them. By constant movement, she avoided being cornered and went on firing until she dropped exhausted after several hours, her ammunition expended. The German commander paid tribute to her courage.

She was taken off in captivity and had to endure solitary confinement and the torture of the cold douche, and others. When she was moved from France to Germany, she travelled by train, in which several other captured members of this department were being conveyed to concentration camps. Szabo knew by sight some of these men, who were in a cattle truck at the far end of the train. Between Chalons and Marne [?] the train was heavily attacked by the R.A.F. The German guards having secured the prisoners and locked the train, left the track to go to shelter. Szabo, taking a pannikin of water, crawled on all fours (her hands were manacled) up the entire length of the corridor of the train to bring water and comfort to the officers she knew. Her action raised morale incalculably and was instrumental in encouraging many of these officers to continue resistance.

Although Szabo was continuously and atrociously tortured she never by word or deed gave away any of her acquaintances or told the enemy anything of any value. She showed great courage in exhorting other women prisoners to be of good cheer and walked proudly to the gas chamber, knowing full well the fate that was in store for her. She gave a magnificent example of courage and steadfastness to all that had the honour to know her. She is very strongly recommended for the George Cross.’
The recommendation - and *The London Gazette* entry based upon it - are at fault, possibly as a result of the rapid closure of ‘F’ Section at the war’s end and the resultant loss of of first hand knowledge; the struck out text in the final paragraph may well have been made on account of breaking evidence that Violette had been shot. None of the errors detract from her sustained gallantry under fire or her magnificent example in captivity. The contrary: by way of example she never had the luxury of bricks and mortar to protect her in her final stand at Salon-la-Tour, merely an apple tree in the middle of a field.

*Buckingham Palace and French Embassy investitures*

On 28 January 1947, Tania, wearing the dress that her mother had purchased in Paris on her first mission, and her grandparents, attended a private investiture at Buckingham Palace:

‘The courtiers smiled and asked my grandparents if they would accompany me. Before my grandfather could say a word, my grandmother said, “Oh no, that would not be right. It is Tania’s mother that is being honoured today and it is Tania who must go to the audience with the King as her mother’s representative. She has lost her mother. She must have this honour to remember all her life.” I walked into a much larger room, but not huge. I think it was quite beautiful in a muted kind of way. And then the King came over to me - he was very tall and slim. Perhaps he had a navy-blue suit on. I curtsied as I knew so well how to do. And he leant forward and pinned the George Cross onto my right hand side, saying that as my mother’s representative I must always wear it on my right-hand side.’

Tania Szabó continues:

‘It was lovely. A fine silver cross nestling in a beautiful blue bow. And it was his cross. He handed me the box to keep it in and then I do not remember quite how I left, except there just may have been a lady who led me out into the ante-chamber to my grandparents.

I remember meeting a very well dressed gentleman who seemed very kind. He talked to my grandmother for some time. It was Philippe Liewer [Staunton] ... ’ (*Young, Brave and Beautiful*, refers).

Back in the summer of 1944, Colonel Rivier, a regional commandant of the French Forces of the Interior, had cited Violette for her courage in a Divisional Order dated at Limoges on 15 September. The citation - for the award of the Croix de Guerre - stated:

‘Ensign Taylor, Vicky, alias Szabo, Violette, F.A.N.Y., parachuted into France on 7 June 1944. She was stopped at a road block at Salon-la-Tour (Corrèze) on 10 June while undertaking a liaison mission. Refusing to give herself up she fought with her sub-machine gun for twenty minutes, killing a German Corporal. She eventually had to give up for lack of ammunition. Imprisoned at Limoges on 11 June, she disappeared on 12 June.’

[‘Vicky Taylor’ was the pseudonym which Violette intended to use if ever compelled to make a bid for freedom via the Pyrenees to Spain].

Tania Szabó takes up the story in *Young, Brave and Beautiful*:

‘Some years later, by then I was seven, my grandparents and I were invited to the French Embassy to meet the French Ambassador, M. René Massigli, K.B.E., who would present me with Violette’s Croix de Guerre with bronze star ... A gala dinner had been laid on in my honour (in reality of course, in Violette’s honour) and before dinner commenced I was to give a speech from the head of the table
to the resplendent dignitaries sitting at the long mahogany table. Crystal chandeliers glittered and glasses too, cutlery glimmered and dark wood gleamed. All around were servants in red wearing white gloves. They were ramrod straight, quiet and very serious. At our kitchen table in Stockwell with my grandmother, I had memorised the short speech, and then been tested by my grandfather. In the great dining-hall of the Embassy, I felt a little nervous but pushed nervous thoughts away because it was important to say what I had to say. On finishing my speech, I suddenly realised the import of the words I had spoken and felt a tear or two prick my eyes. With great endeavour, I breathed in to hide the sniff and get rid of the feeling and went to sit down while the table applauded ...

The Trial

At No. 1 War Crimes Court at Hamburg on 5 December 1946, under the Presidency of Major-General P. Westropp, C.B., C.B.E., the trial of ex-Ravensbrück staff and three ex-inmates commenced; Major Stephen Stewart led the prosecution, ably assisted by Vera Atkins.

C. L. Stirling, O.B.E., K.C., the Deputy Judge Advocate General to the Forces, read out the following arraignment. It was a simple one: ‘Pursuant to Regulation 4 of the Regulations for the trial of War Criminals, the persons in the dock were charged jointly with committing a war crime in that they, at Ravensbrück in the years 1939-45, when members of the staff of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, in violation of laws and usages of war, were concerned in the ill-treatment and killing of Allied nationals interned therein.’

There were nine men and seven women in the dock, all of whom pleaded not guilty to the charge; among the former was S.S. Oberstürmführer Schwarzhüber, who had been second-in-command at Ravensbrück and overseen Violette's execution; among the latter was the aforementioned Dorothea Binz, the Chief Wardress of the punishment block where Violette had been under her charge on more than one occasion.

Schwarzhüber and Binz were found guilty on 3 February 1947 and hanged. The camp commandant, Fritz Sühren, who was also present at Violette’s execution, faced justice and the hangman’s rope at a later date.

S.S. Lance-Corporal Schult (or Schultzer), who is described as Violette’s actual executioner in Schwarzhüber’s submission to Vera Atkins, appears to have escaped justice. He is described thus by Jerrard Tickell in Odette:

‘An S.S. Corporal - who had brought to a fine art the method of shooting victims in the nape of the neck - arrived [at Ravensbrück] from Berlin and, having demonstrated his prowess, applied for - and was awarded - proficiency pay. He shot some two hundred women.’

Carve Her Name with Pride

In 1956, R. J. Minney published his famous account of Violette’s life, a biography that enjoyed the benefit of much eye-witness material, for many of those who had known Violette were then still alive - family, friends and wartime colleagues; sadly, however, her gallant boss, Staunton, was not a contributor, owing to his sudden death in Morocco in 1948; nor Jacques Dufour, who had died on active service in Indo-China in 1946.

In common with Jerrard Tickell’s Odette, published in 1949, Carve Her Name with Pride became a best-seller. It was duly followed by an equally successful film, Virginia McKenna portraying Violette in a heartfelt and memorable performance.

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In the epilogue of Tickell’s biography, Odette concluded:

‘I am a very ordinary woman to whom a chance was given to see human beings at their best and at
their worst. I knew kindness as well as cruelty, understanding as well as brutality. I completely believe
in the potential nobility of the human spirit. It is with a sense of deep humility that I allow my personal
story to be told. My comrades, who did far more than I and suffered far more profoundly, are not here
to speak. Because of this, I speak for them and I would like this book to be a window through which
may be seen those very gallant women with whom I had the honour to serve.’

Among others, she was speaking for Violette, ‘the bravest of us all.’

Since the publication of Carve Her Name with Pride, two other biographies have been published,
namely Susan Ottaway’s Violette Szabo, The Life That I Have, and Tania Szabó’s Young Brave and
Beautiful. Both have added considerably to our knowledge and understanding of a remarkable woman.
Top: Tania wearing the dress her mother purchased in Paris during her first mission; she wore the same dress at Buckingham Palace on the occasion that she received her mother’s G.C. from the King.

Bottom: Tania being held up by Odette, G.C., to look at her mother’s name on the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (F.A.N.Y.) Memorial at St. Paul’s Church, Knightsbridge; Odette said, “While I held Tania in my arms, I could not help feeling that it might so easily have been the other way round - Violette holding up my child, with my name instead of hers on the memorial.”
Tania wearing her mother’s G.C., Croix de Guerre and campaign medals, and her father’s tunic ribands.
Top: Tania with Madame Marie Lecomte, Violette’s friend in adversity at Fresnes Prison and Ravensbrück.

Bottom: Tania and the actress Virginia McKenna, who portrayed Violette in “Carve Her Name with Pride”, at the unveiling of a memorial plaque at Lambeth Town Hall.
Top: Tania unveils a memorial stone at Pont-Rémy, where Violette lived for several years with her aunt.

Bottom: Virginia McKenna opens the Violette Szabó Museum at Wormelow, Herefordshire, in 2000; Violette was a regular visitor to the same building throughout her life, when it was the home of an aunt and uncle.
The bronze bust of Violette on S.O.E’s Memorial on the Albert Embankment, opposite Lambeth Palace.

In Tania Szabó’s words:

‘Her life was short but lived to the full, with much happiness, joy, some deep sadness and great endeavour ... What a great old lady she would have made, what a contribution she would have given and what wisdom and fun she would have passed our way.

She and all those other brave souls who gave their life for our fragile liberties would urge us most strenuously to be ever vigilant and strive to remain free. Lest we forget.’

Bottom: Tania flanked by Jean-Claude Guiet and Bob Maloubier at the Violette Szabó Museum in 2000; Guiet and Maloubier parachuted into south-west France with Violette on the night of 8 June 1944.
PLACES OF COMMEMORATION

The Violette Szabó Museum, Wormelow, Herefordshire; situated in the property formerly known as Old The Kennels, the home of Violette’s aunt and uncle, Florence and Harry Lucas, which she regularly visited in her lifetime. Tania Szabó writes: ‘On her birthday, 26th June, or the weekend closest to it, there is a picnic [at the Museum] and usually a couple of hundred people of all ages come to remember her.’

The F.A.N.Y. Memorial, Brockwood Military Cemetery, near Woking, Surrey (Panel 23, Column 3).

The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (F.A.N.Y.) Memorial, St. Paul’s Church, Wilton Place, Knightsbridge, London.

The S.O.E. Memorial on the Albert Embankment, opposite Lambeth Palace, London, which is surmounted by a bronze bust of Violette; sculpted by Karen Newman, it was unveiled in 2008.

A plaque at the entrance to Lambeth Town Hall, London.

A blue plaque at her old home 18 Burnley Road, Stockwell, London.

Violette Szabó House, Vincennes Council Estate, Rommany Road, West Norwood, London.

A mural at Stockwell Road, London; painted on the exterior of the entrance to a deep-level shelter at the local Tube Station, by Brian Barnes, with the assistance of children from Violette’s old school, in 2001.

A commemorative garden at Stockwell Park School, London.

The S.O.E. Memorial at Tempsford, Bedfordshire.

Display at the Tangmere Military Aviation Museum, Sussex.

Display in the Jersey War Tunnels.

A plaque unveiled at Ravensbrück, Germany in June 1993.

At Noyelles-sur-Mer, the street outside one of Violette’s old schools has been named rue Violette Szabó, and her name appears on S.O.E’s Memorial at Valançay. Of further sites of commemoration in France, Tania Szabó writes:

‘In France, at Pont-Rémy, in Picardy a few miles south-east of Abbeville on the Somme River, there is a stele in her memory opposite the Leroy family home and where she lived with Tante Marguerite. In a neighbouring village, Quevauviller is the street, La Rue Violette Szabó, named in her honour. There is mention of her in the Museum of the Maquis des Diables Noirs just outside Rouen at Forges-des-Eaux. In Sussac, she is honoured each year when the people of Haute Vienne climb to Mont Gargan to honour all the Resistors who died for France and for freedom. On the way at a crossroad, they stop at an imposing monument to commemorate Violette and are debating whether the road of the ambush should be named after her ...’
The Important Posthumous Second World War George Cross group awarded to Violette Szabó, Women's Transport Service (F.A.N.Y.) and ‘F’ Section, Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.), late Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.)