

Sugar and Spice and Everything Spies



The History of Women Spies

It wasn't until 1948--after World War II--that women were allowed to join the military. It took another 67 years before they were allowed in combat. But that doesn't mean women didn't have a HUGE impact on various wars. Women have long served secretly -- as spies or agents for different sides in wars. They worked in occupied countries as couriers, spies, saboteurs, and radio operators. Some led large resistance groups. These women displayed courage, cunning, and an ability to hide their secret identities.



The History of Women Spies

Throughout history, many men—including German leader Adolf Hitler—believed women belonged in the home, being good wives and mothers. Women spies were less likely to raise suspicion since men were slow to believe they could be secret agents. It turns out Hitler and other male leaders were wrong! Let's meet a few of history's most effective women spies.



Anna Smith Strong



When Anna Smith Strong hung out her laundry, she also was sending secret messages to the Patriot soldiers fighting the British. During the Revolutionary War, the mother of nine lived in Strongs Neck, NY, a peninsula just south of Long Island Sound. Caleb Brewster, one of the Patriot's most important spies, frequently rowed his whaleboat across the Sound to receive secret information that eventually made its way to General George Washington's headquarters. To signal Brewster's arrival, Strong hung laundry on her clothesline in predetermined patterns. She hung a black petticoat when the spy was in town. The number of white handkerchiefs on the line signaled the location of the spy's whaleboat.



Mary Bowser

As the American Civil War raged, Confederate President Jefferson Davis believed a spy was sending information from his house to the Union army. But he never would have suspected household servant Mary Bowser. A freed slave, Bowser pretended to be capable only of the housekeeping tasks she performed at Davis' home. In reality, she was an educated woman with a photographic memory. While dusting, she read plans and documents and passed the information to fellow spy Elizabeth Van Lew, who relayed it to the Union. Bowser fled the Jefferson home a few months before the end of the war. Reports show her information was critical to the Union's victory and the end of slavery in America.



Louise de Bettignies



Fluent in German, English, and Italian, Frenchwoman Louise de Bettignies helped supply food and ammunition to soldiers defending her hometown of Lille, France, during World War I. After the German occupation of northern France and Belgium, the British enlisted de Bettignies as a spy. She adopted the name Alice Dubois, and she helped establish a resistance group known as the Alice Network, credited with providing vital information and saving more than 1,000 British soldiers. She was especially skilled at concealing messages—using toys, chocolate bars, umbrellas, and eyeglasses. Her work earned her the nickname *Queen of the Spies*.

Jeannie Rousseau

German officials enjoyed talking with Jeannie Rousseau--an interpreter helping French businesses negotiate with the German occupiers during World War II. One day Rousseau charmed a German officer into sharing plans for a new weapons system. The officer didn't know Rousseau was a spy with the French resistance--or that she had a near photographic memory. She was able to share the plans with her resistance leader. The Allies then bombed the weapons site, saving thousands of British lives.



Nancy Wake

Frustrated by Nancy Wake's ability to elude capture, the Nazis nicknamed the World War II French resistance leader *The White Mouse*. Wake was a glamorous, wealthy woman who could have shielded herself from the effects of war. Instead, she began working as a courier for the French resistance. When she learned German police officers were about to arrest her, Wake fled to Britain. She parachuted back into France in early 1944 as a member of the British Special Operations Executive. A fierce fighter, she coordinated a 7,000-member resistance group conducting attacks on German forces. Wake also helped pass messages to the Allies. Once she bicycled 310 miles (71 hours) to deliver information necessary for drops of weapons and supplies. After the war, France, Britain, and the United States all awarded her medals honoring her contributions.



Krystyna Skarbek



When Germany invaded Poland, which sparked the beginning of World War II, Krystyna Skarbek was out of the country. Skarbek, who wanted to fight the Nazis, proposed a plan to a British spy organization: She'd ski from neutral Hungary into Poland, bringing information, propaganda, and money to the resistance. Soon Skarbek became the organization's first World War II female special agent. Skarbek conducted several missions on skis. While in Poland, she gathered information, radio codes, and microfilm and smuggled it all back to the British. Once--after capture--she bit her tongue until it bled, then coughed up blood to convince the Nazis she had tuberculosis, a much-feared, contagious disease. The Nazis quickly released her.

Vera Atkins



Each time one of her recruits took off from the British airfield, Vera Atkins stood by the runway watching. She knew parachuting into Nazi-occupied France was just the first of many dangers they'd face as agents of the British Special Operations Executive. Atkins warned each of the agents there was a good chance they wouldn't survive; still, she felt responsible for each of the 470 agents, including 39 women, she'd recruited and helped train. When 118 special agents didn't return after World War II, Atkins insisted on investigating the cases herself. She was able to account for 117 agents--all dead--and helped bring their killers to trial.

Noor Inayat Khan



Imagine the surprise when this descendant of Indian royalty turned out to be an Allied spy during World War II. Raised in Paris, Noor Inayat Khan was a children's book author and musician. Her hatred of fascism inspired her to join the British Special Operations Executive. In 1942 she became the first female wireless operator sent into Nazi-occupied France during World War II. She refused to leave--even after the Gestapo (German police) captured her team. She was killed by the Nazis in 1944.

Lise de Baissac

In 1942 Lise de Baissac became the first woman to parachute into German-occupied France. Recruited by Britain's Special Operations Executive, she posed as an amateur archeologist exploring the beaches of France. In reality she was a spy gathering information for the Allied invasion at Normandy – the turning point of World War II. She also scouted the countryside for landing strips and spots for dropping weapons and other supplies. She fled the country after the Nazis spotted her. However, she returned in 1944 and worked with her brother to form a new resistance group that helped slow Axis troops attempting to reach Normandy.



Josephine Baker



Born in Missouri in 1906, Josephine Baker grew up cleaning houses and babysitting for wealthy white families. At age 13 she began performing with singing and comedy troupes. Her career thrived in Paris; by 1927 she was the highest paid entertainer in Europe. During World War II she performed for Allied troops and did undercover work for the French resistance, including smuggling secret messages written on sheets of music. She died in Paris in 1975 and was the first American woman buried in France with military honors.

Pearl Cornioley



Who would suspect a traveling cosmetics saleswoman of attacking German convoys and bombing railways? Pearl Cornioley, a member of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE), parachuted into France in September 1943. The SOE's best shot--male or female--she commanded World War II French resistance troops who killed 1,000 German soldiers. She also led sabotage efforts to keep German troops from reaching the Allies. She once hid among the cornstalks as German troops fired shots into the field. The Nazis offered a million-franc reward for her capture.

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