



ODETTE SANSOM GC, MBE

For their bravery during the Second World War, three women were awarded the George Cross after working as undercover agents. Only one of them, Odette Sansom, survived to receive her decoration. In the latest article in his “Hero of the Month” series, Lord Ashcroft tells the story of her incredible courage.



In all prolonged global conflicts, including the two world wars, women have played a vital role in determining which side gets the upper hand. Many have toiled for long hours in factories and fields, while others have worked close to the front line giving crucial medical care to the sick and wounded.

A small number of women, however, have gone to even greater lengths to serve their country, risking their life time and again without being on the battlefield. One such individual was Odette Sansom, the first woman to be directly awarded the George Cross. Indeed few recipients, in the GC's seventy-three-year-history can have done more to earn the decoration.

Odette Brailly – her maiden name – was born in Amiens, France, on 28 April 1912. Her father was killed during the First World War, at the Battle of Verdun in 1916, when his daughter was four. As a child, she suffered from temporary blindness and rheumatic fever, both of which she overcame and, in 1926, her family moved from Saint-Saëns to Boulogne. She married an Englishman, Roy Sansom, in 1931 and the couple had three daughters, two of whom were born in Britain, where the couple had moved in 1932–3.

Early in 1942, and nearly three years into the Second World War, Sansom heard a broadcast that appealed for photographs of France. She wrote to the War Office explaining that she was French and where she had lived. Sansom ended up going for an interview and, on 28 June 1942, she was asked back to meet Captain Selwyn Jepson, the author and, at the time, the senior recruiting officer for the Special Operations Executive (SOE), which had been formed in the summer of 1940 after the fall of France.

Jepson later told how he preferred recruiting women rather than men. When interviewed by the Imperial War Museum long after the Second World War, he said:

“I was responsible for recruiting women for the work, in the face of a good deal of opposition, I may say, from the powers that be. In my view, women were very much better than men >>



TOP: Odette Sansom pictured on holiday in Hampshire in August 1946. This image was taken in the days immediately after the announcement of the award of her George Cross. (PA Archive)

ABOVE: The George Cross. The announcement of the award of Odette Sansom's GC was made in *The London Gazette* on Tuesday, 20 August 1946. (HMP)

Lord Ashcroft's “Hero of the Month”



ABOVE: Violette Szabo was one of the three female SOE agents to be awarded the George Cross. She was also held at Ravensbrück, arriving there in August 1944. Unlike Odette, however, she would not survive to see the camp's liberation, having been executed by a firing squad on or about 5 February 1945. She was aged 23. Her body was cremated in the camp's crematorium. (HMP)

RIGHT: Odette Sansom pictured whilst on her way to Buckingham Palace to receive her George Cross from the King, 19 November 1946. (PA Archive)

Jepson's style was to tell potential recruits: "I have to decide whether I can risk your life and you have to decide whether you're willing to risk it." After much soul-searching, Sansom agreed to work for the SOE. As a cover, she was enrolled in the Women's Transport Service (part of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry or FANY), while her three young daughters went to live in a convent.

What made Sansom willing to give up her children and risk her life as an undercover

agent? She had a deep love of both her French homeland and her adopted country, Britain. She wanted to help the Allied cause and, because she spoke fluent French and knew France well, she concluded that her most valuable role would be with the Resistance. She was single-minded so that, once she had made her decision to join the SOE, she was determined to see her role through to the end, come what may.

During her training, Sansom received an early setback. She had a bad fall during her parachute instruction and her injuries delayed her drop into France. After three abortive attempts to land her in France by air, she sailed to Gibraltar in a troopship. From there, in October 1942, she and six other agents were landed in France from a fishing boat. Her code-name was "Lise".

On 2 November 1942, she joined up in Cannes with Peter Churchill – code-name "Raoul" and the leader of the so-called



Spindle circuit. The intention had been for her to proceed to Auxerre but Churchill, realising her value to him as a courier, got permission from the Baker Street headquarters of the SOE for her to remain in Cannes.

After the Germans and Italians overran southern France, Churchill and Sansom were forced to move on. Accompanied by their wireless operator, Adolphe Rabinovich, they transferred to St Jorioz, near Annecy, in the French Alps. When Churchill returned to

London for instructions, Sansom was tricked into revealing her sympathies.

She was approached by a "Colonel Henri", who claimed to be a German officer wanting to defect to the Allies. In fact, the man was Sergeant Bleicher of the Abwehr – German military intelligence. Although Sansom was suspicious of the "officer", her cover was blown and she and, later, Churchill – who was by then back in France from the UK – were arrested.

As they were being moved, Churchill and Sansom secretly agreed that their cover story was to be that he was related to the British Prime Minister and that they were married. This story may well have saved their lives. Sansom was taken to Paris and to the notorious Fresnes prison outside the city.

There she endured terrible torture and deprivation. During fourteen brutal interrogations, she stuck to the cover story and even repeated that Churchill – in fact, her Commanding Officer – had only come to France at her insistence. She took full responsibility for her actions and insisted that she, not Churchill, should be shot.

Her story was believed and Churchill only had to endure two interrogations. The Gestapo was also desperate to trace a wireless officer and a British officer working with the Resistance. They repeatedly tortured Sansom in an attempt to extract the information: her back was burned with a hot iron and her toenails were pulled out but she gave



ABOVE: A portrait of Noor Inayat Khan, the third female SOE agent to be awarded (posthumously) the George Cross. Unlike Odette and Violette Szabo, Khan was imprisoned at Dachau concentration camp. It was there that in the early hours of the morning of 13 September 1944, she was one of four women who were executed by a shot to the head. Their bodies were immediately burned in the crematorium. (HMP)

LEFT: From left to right, Captain Peter Churchill, Anna Neagle (who played Odette), Odette Churchill, and Trevor Howard (who played Peter Churchill) are pictured at the film studios at Borehamwood on the set of *Odette*. In the film, Colonel Maurice James Buckmaster OBE, the wartime head of SOE's F Section, played himself. Both Odette and Peter Churchill served as technical advisors during the filming, and the film ends with a written message from Odette herself. (PA Archive)

MAIN PICTURE BELOW: Surviving buildings at the site of the former women's camp at Ravensbrück, which is located sixty miles north of Berlin. It was here that Odette was incarcerated for nearly two years.



nothing away. This meant she not only saved the officers' lives but their valuable secret work was able to continue.

In June 1943, Sansom was sentenced to death but instead she was reprieved and >>



RIGHT: Odette Sansom's medals on display in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in London.

BELOW LEFT: Odette, on the left, pictured with two other female George Cross holders at a VC and GC Association function. Standing behind Odette is Margaret Purves GC, whilst sitting to the SOE veteran's left is Daphne Pearson GC. (Courtesy of Tony Gledhill GC)

BELOW RIGHT: Odette, in the centre, pictured with other George Cross holders. The latter include Tony Gledhill GC (front right); Henry Stephens GC (back row, second from left); Jack Eastern GC (back row, third from left); and Carl Walker GC (back row, fourth from left). (Courtesy of Tony Gledhill GC)



taken to Ravensbrück concentration camp in northern Germany. There she was kept in solitary confinement for two years. At one stage she spent three months and eleven days in a darkened room – her personal punishment for the Allied landings in the South of France.

As the war neared its end, Fritz Suhren, the German camp commandant, decided that handing over Sansom might guarantee him lenient treatment from the Allies. However, although he drove her to an American unit, Sansom was in no mood to forgive him: in fact, after the hand-over, she returned to his car and found photograph albums that were used against him at the war crimes' trials.

Her physical and mental health was frail for some time after the war. Her doctor's report prepared at the end of 1945 concluded: "Mrs O. Sansom of 75 Harcourt Terrace, S.W.10 has been under my care since June 1945. At that time she was in a state of high nervous tension due to maltreatment received in German captivity. Some nails on her toes were missing; there was on her back a rounded scar of about half an inch in diameter, the result of a burn deliberately inflicted in the concentration camp.

"Since last July she has had numerous injections of calcium, artificial sunlight and intense general medicinal treatment. Her nails have grown again but some of them are still deformed. The scar on her back is still evident. She is still receiving treatment for her general nervous condition, and anaemia."

Sansom's George Cross was announced on 20 August 1946. Her lengthy citation ended: "During the period of over two years in which she was in enemy hands, she displayed courage, endurance and self-sacrifice of the

highest possible order."

Sansom was reunited with her children after the war, but her marriage did not survive. In 1946, she was a witness at the trial in Hamburg of sixteen members of Ravensbrück's staff.

After the Second World War, she became a national heroine and, for many, the symbol of defiance against the Nazi regime. Furthermore, she was the only one of the three female Resistance workers awarded the George Cross to survive her ordeal at the hands of the Germans; the two other women were Violette Szabo, code-name "Louise", and Noor Inayat Khan, code-name "Madeleine". Both women had, like Sansom, been recruited by the SOE.

Szabo was captured and tortured before being shot in February 1945, aged just 23. Her posthumous George Cross was announced on 17 December 1946, when her citation said that she "gave a magnificent example of courage and steadfastness". Khan was captured and tortured before being shot in the back of the head in September 1944, aged 30. Her posthumous George Cross took longer and was not announced until 5 April 1949, when her citation said that she had "displayed the most conspicuous courage, both moral and physical, over a period of more than 12 months".

In 1947, Sansom married Peter Churchill, with whom she had endured so much during their time working with the French Resistance. However, the couple divorced in 1953 and she

married Geoffrey Hallows, another former Resistance fighter, in 1956. Hallows had already been awarded the *Croix de Guerre* for his "cloak and dagger" actions, while Sansom had received the *Légion d'honneur*.

Having led such a secret life for so long, she then had to live in the public eye. In 1949, Jerrard Tickell published his book *Odette: The Story of a British Agent* after Sansom told him her story. A biographical film, *Odette*, starring Anna Neagle, was released in 1950. Sansom died in Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, on 13 March 1995, aged eighty-two.

After her death, a plaque in her honour was placed underneath the FANY Memorial in Wilton Place, Knightsbridge, London. In February 2012, the Royal Mail released a stamp featuring Sansom as part of its "Britons of Distinction" issue. ■

GEORGE CROSS HEROES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author.

The story of Odette Sansom's courage appears in his book *George Cross Heroes*. For more information please visit: www.georgecrossheroes.com

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes

For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

