

Behind Enemy Lines

The Unknown Spies Series

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ESPIONAGE

Eileen Nearne

1921-2010

The Spy Who Took Her Secret With Her To The Grave—Almost

She may well have been the most anonymous spy in history. The sleepy town of Torquay in southwestern England became alarmed on September 2, 2010, when the elderly Eileen Nearne failed to appear after several days. The 89-year-old woman lived the life of a hermit, with hardly any contact with the outside world.

When police entered Nearne's home, they discovered that she had died of a heart attack. Since she was penniless and had no known family, the town prepared to have

her body cremated and the ashes buried in a municipal cemetery. But then workers who were cleaning her home discovered piles of discontinued French banknotes, yellowed letters written in French, and a treasure of French and English medals and decorations for valor.

To the utter shock of all her neighbors, it was revealed that Nearne had been a heroic British spy. She served her country bravely and even refused to divulge the names of her cohorts when she was tortured by her

captors. The news shook the entire country and left many people enraged. How could such a national hero have been forgotten about for so long?

Taking Revenge

Eileen Nearne was born in England on March 15, 1921, to a family of mixed English-Spanish ancestry. Her family later moved to France, where she was raised and learned to speak French fluently.

When the Nazis occupied France in May 1940, Nearne and her two siblings escaped. They fled first to Barcelona, Spain, then to Madrid, from there to Lisbon, Portugal, and next to Gibraltar. They finally reached England in 1942 – harboring a deep-seated hatred for the Nazis who had turned their lives upside-down.

Determined to do whatever they could to help resist the Germans, Eileen and her older sister Jacqueline volunteered for the armed forces, where they served as nurses.

In time, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a British espionage organization, a.k.a. “Churchill’s secret army,” discovered that the two Nearne sisters spoke French fluently. (Churchill’s secret army spoke French fluently. (Churchill’s secret army recruited more than 14,000 agents to conduct espionage and sabotage behind enemy lines.) This, in addition to their gender, made them very valuable as spies. The two sisters were recruited and trained to operate behind enemy lines, gather critical information and send back coded messages. The SOE recruited the two sisters separately, and each one was told to keep her new job a secret even from her closest friends and family. Still, it was only a matter of time until they discovered each other’s clandestine activities.

“Didi,” as Eileen was known, was first given a task with little risk to her safety: a desk job at SOE headquarters where she received the secret dispatches arriving from agents in occupied France. Her task was to decipher and translate the messages and pass them on to the appropriate official. Meanwhile, her sister Jacqueline was parachuted behind enemy lines in France to begin her dangerous work there.



Home where Eileen Nearne lived.

Gestapo agents in plain clothes and collaborators were everywhere. Nearne got into the habit of looking at her reflection in the shop windows to see if she was being followed.

Soon enough, Eileen became bored at her desk job. She hoped to participate directly in the war. Consequently, she requested to follow in her sister’s footsteps and be parachuted into France. On May 2, 1944, at the age of 23, her request was granted and she was parachuted into France, becoming one of 39 women sent by England’s military as spies during the course of the war.

The SOE preferred to use women as spies because men were far more likely to attract attention. This was especially true because under the German occupation much of France’s male population had been shipped for forced labor in Germany. In fact, it was this policy on the part of the Germans as much as anything else that created a powerful partisan movement among young French men. Women, on the other hand, were constantly on the move throughout France, trying to sell whatever valuables they still possessed in exchange for food and other necessities. Similarly, many women had taken over the men’s positions in French industries.

The French partisans, known as the Maquis, had received a dispatch from the British that a special agent was on her way

to France. Code named “Agent Rose,” she would be able to relay their requests to London and arrange shipments of supplies for the French partisans. Two French partisans were sent to greet Nearne. They were furious when they discovered that the British had “tricked” them: “Special Agent Rose” was a young girl!

“Go back home,” one of the two Frenchmen told her bitterly. “The work is too dangerous.”

Agent Rose

The Maquis were in for a surprise, however. The young girl turned out to be a courageous spy. Using the pseudonym Mademoiselle du Tort, she acted the part of a girl who worked in a store. With the help of a local partisan named Jean Savy, she set up a secret network known as “Wizard.” Unlike the Maquis, whose primary goal was sabotage, Wizard was expressly intended to gather information, pass it to the appropriate authorities and provide the French underground with financial support.

When she parachuted into France, Nearne brought with her a special wireless telegraph to send dispatches to England. After her first message was sent, she heard a coded response in the middle of a regular BBC radio program: “Happy to know that the duck has had a good trip.” Her message had reached the intended quarters in London.

Nearne was stationed in Paris, a fact which made her work that much more dangerous. The capital was bustling with Nazi officials who would have loved nothing more than to capture a British spy. For the next five months she sent back over 100 messages. These included critical information that the British needed in order to make plans for D-Day. She kept the SOE in contact with the French underground and arranged airdrops of vital supplies to keep the fighters going. Her work also contributed to the British effort

during Operation Crossbow, a major bomber attack targeting a store of 2,000 V-1 rockets, which were devastating England (see *Zman* Av 5770/August 2010).

To send a message through Nearne, the partisans had to choose some phrase that was to be kept secret. Then, when Nearne sent a message from that particular partisan leader, it was also accompanied by that individual’s identifying code phrase. That way the SOE knew that the message was reliable and that the dispatcher was not acting under duress after having been captured by the Germans.

Nearne lived in constant danger. By 1944, the Nazis had infiltrated a number of espionage and sabotage networks in France, eliminating many of their enemies. Gestapo agents in plain clothes and collaborators were everywhere. Nearne got into the habit of looking at her reflection in the shop windows to see if she was being followed.



Airplane that dropped Nearne into occupied France.



British spy parachutes into occupied France.