

# Voices of War Life Story

Pearl Witherington  
1914 - 2008



WWII, SOE, Pearl Witherington, 1914, Main

[www.voicesofwar.co.uk](http://www.voicesofwar.co.uk)



**Name:** Cecile Pearl Witherington Cornioley

**Code names:** Marie, Pauline

**Date of Birth:** 24th June 1914

**Place of birth:** France

**Nationality:** French

**Date of Death:** 24th February 2008

**Place of death:** France

**Service No:**

**Unit(s):** Women's Auxiliary Air Force (W.A.A.F), Special Operations Executive (SOE)

**Network(s):** STATIONER, WRESTLER

**Rank:** Sergeant

**Medals and Awards:** Commander of the Order of the British Empire, Legion of Honour (France)

**Education:**

**Clubs and Affiliations:** Girl Guides



## Life Story

Pearl Witherington was born in 1914 into middle-class family living comfortably in France during the First World War. Remaining in France after her first experience of war ended, she was to be pitched by a second into a role as one of the most successful and impressive agents of British secret services during the Second World War.

Pearl was born in Paris on 24th June 1914 to a French mother and British father. After the end of the First World War, the family remained in Paris. By 1939, Pearl was working as a secretary to the Air Attaché office in Paris and living with her mother and two sisters. Her father was an alcoholic and struggled with debt as a result, with the rest of the family having to bail him out with his creditors. This caused his early death some time before Pearl enlisted with SOE as her recruitment forms note: "*father – deceased.*" The responsibility this must have brought on her in her early life may well have given her a grounding that helped her later on. She was engaged to a Parisian perfumer named Henri and her life seemed settled and happy. The outbreak of war was to change all of that.

Pearl managed to remain in Paris until December 1940 when she left for Marseilles, forced to flee after the German occupation of Paris. Henri had joined the military and subsequently been captured by the Germans and transferred to a POW camp. Alone in the city, Pearl only stayed there for three months, before heading to Lisbon in March 1941. This was a common route for people to get to the UK given the supposedly neutral status of Portugal and the transports to the UK were over subscribed. Pearl and her family arrived in the UK in July of 1941.



Pearl immediately signed up for work with the Air Ministry, with a strong determination to do something for the war effort, joining the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. This was a popular recruiting ground for the Special Operations Executive (SOE) - although the majority of agents were men, women were used as wireless operators or couriers as it was easier for them to move around occupied territories without raising suspicion. Pearl pestered the recruiters as she was desperate to play a part to defend France, and was eventually recruited, officially joining the SOE on 18th June 1943. She started her training immediately.

**Training:** Pearl was put through her paces doing all aspects of training – fieldcraft, map reading, security and parachute training. Women were required to do one less jump than the men in training, so three during practice and then the final one being into the field. Some agents might return to the UK and then go back to France, but Pearl was to stay there continuously so she never obtained that fifth jump, which was to cause issues later on.

She was part of party 27AA who trained at STS 5 (Wanborough Manor near Guilford) commencing on 13th June 1943. It seems she didn't like one other member of the group, whoever No. 19 was (the agents were given numbers and false names) as this is recorded in her training notes. She was described by her trainers as *"...the most sensible and intelligent member of this party."* Some of the other comments of her instructors are somewhat amusing when seen in light of her subsequent achievements:

*"She is loyal and reliable but has not the personality to act as a leader, nor is she temperamentally suited to work alone. She would best be employed as a subordinate under a strong leader"*



*in whom she had confidence.”*

Unsurprisingly, Pearl successfully completed her training, to the extent that she was described as *“probably the best shot (male or female) we have yet had”* and was parachuted into France on the night 22/23rd September 1943, landing near Tendu in the Indre region. The flight was rough and on landing she lost both of her suitcases which made life very difficult from the outset. A later debriefing recorded *“Informant never received sufficient clothes. Shoes were the greatest worry. Very.”*<sup>1</sup>

She was to remain in France for over a year, an extremely long time for an agent as they were often discovered and arrested, as many of her network were to be. Her initial assignment was to join the STATIONER network of Maurice Southgate. The other courier for the network was Jacqueline Nearne, with two couriers being necessary due to the large area the network covered across central France.

Her cover was a travelling cosmetics saleswoman, which meant that she could travel around in her role as courier without raising too much suspicion. The downside of this was that she had no stable base and had to use the long train journeys to rest and catch up on sleep. Pearl was actively sought by the Gestapo and had a million Franc reward on her head, so in reality getting any rest was difficult and unsafe. Despite this, she managed to successfully evade detection.

In April 1944, Jacqueline Nearne was sent back to the UK, having been in the field for many months and near also exhaustion. Pearl

---

1 Article taken from the Guardian dated 1st April 2008.



To: D/AIR.

From: F/REAR LINK.

30 AUG 44.

S/O WITHERINGTON.

With reference to the attached A.P.5 for the above-named.

This Officer went into the Field in September 1943 to act as courier to one of our most important Organisers, and to help build up his circuit. Since June she has been in complete charge of this circuit and has shown outstanding powers of leadership and organising ability. Her group has had several encounters with the enemy, and on each occasion they have acquitted themselves with distinction.

We feel that this is a most deserving case for promotion.

**Above:** Pearl's recommendation for promotion.

**Left:** Pearl and Henri in military uniform.

**Below:** Pearl in uniform.



went to Paris the same month to discuss an escape route for USA pilots, the care of which also fell under her remit. From here she was able to send photographs back to her family in the UK. Pearl also reported back that they desperately needed more financial help to look after the airmen and she left 30.000 Francs to cover some expenses in the meantime. In a personal letter to Vera Atkins she said they were doing well in France, although she occasionally she got *“a bit hot round the collar now and again but I must say I’d far sooner be here than sitting in an office”*.<sup>2</sup>

The stress of the constant checks on her documents and fear of getting detected as well as the physical toll meant that after eight months she was struck down with neuralgic rheumatism which took her out of action for a couple of weeks and while she was recovering, her commander was arrested.

With Southgate now a prisoner, Pearl set up her own network and established herself as leader under the codename “Pauline”. WRESTLER, her new network, was active across the Valençay–Issoudun–Châteauroux triangle, and Pearl was now working alongside her fiancé Henri who had escaped the POW camp. With this command, she became the first female agent to lead a network.

**D-Day - June 1944:** Pearl’s new network was to be instrumental in the ground disruptions prior to the Normandy landings. Sensibly, Pearl decided not to issue orders to the maquis groups directly as they may not have responded well to a woman, and so found a willing French colonel to do so. WRESTLER agents were to work closely with the adjacent SHIPWRIGHT network, headed by Pearl’s former colleague Amédée Maingard. Together, their networks

---

2 Pearl’s personnel file in the National Archives (TNA) HS-9-356



caused more than 800 disruptions to railway lines in June 1944, with particular focus on cutting the main rail line between Paris and Bordeaux, which was used by the Germans to transport troops to Normandy.

On the morning of 11th June 1944, German soldiers attacked Pearl and a band of men at the Les Souches château, her headquarters near the village of Dun-le-Poëlier. Only a few maquis and non-combatants were present when the Germans arrived. Under fire, Pearl had to think quickly. She hid the money supplies for the network and escaped into the fields where she hid until nightfall. Henri was hiding nearby too and from his vantage point counted 56 truckloads of Germans participating in the operation. Pearl's later account stated that the Germans were more interested in destroying the weapons they found stashed at the château rather than searching for the maquis and the SOE agents. Although it later transpired that the attack was part of a larger operation targeting the Marquis which saw 32 men killed, Pearl and her men remained safe.

This German attack devastated the network, and with no weapons or means of communication Pearl cycled to nearby Saint-Viâtre to meet another SOE agent, Philippe de Vomécourt. With him she was able to radio London to request resupply and on 24th June, three planes air-dropped the much-needed supplies. WRESTLER was back in action.

The Allied invasion had emboldened the resistance movements and as a letter from her Wing Commander in September 1944 attested, she managed to double the number of Marquis under her control to approximately 3000 men. She and Cornioley divided the maquis into four subsections, each with its own leader, and





meanwhile SOE HQ ensured they were supplied with arms. They were now coherent fighting units.

In late August 1944, the four groups of maquis in under the WRESTLER network were ordered by French authorities (now trying to take back some control as the Germans were being pushed out of France), to move to the Forest of Gatine near the town of Valençay. The objective was to stop the German army in southern France from linking up with German forces in northern France. Pearl opposed the movement, but nevertheless accompanied the WRESTLER maquis. On the 9th and 10th September, a battle ensued that saw over 19,000 German soldiers encircled by French maquis. Fearing retribution, The German commandeer was nervous to surrender to the resistance men. Instead they negotiated a surrender with American General Robert C. Macon, cutting the maquis completely out of the negotiations and the formal surrender on 16th September at Beaugency bridge. *“Thus, the most tangible contribution of the FFI (French Forces of the Interior) was not even registered.”* according to historian Robert Gildea, Pearl was livid at this, and noted later that after the surrender ceremony the Americans showered the German soldiers with *“oranges, chocolate, the whole works. But that’s an old story, you know, soldiers were welcoming other soldiers. We weren’t soldiers.”*<sup>3</sup>

It was not just Pearl that was disgusted by this show. The local French citizens could only look on as the Americans distributed food and luxuries to the Germans who were their recent occupiers, while they were left with next to nothing. American flags were torn down and outraged letters were published in local and national newspapers.

---

3 Cornioley, Pearl Witherington; Larroque, Hervé (2013).



On the 21st September 1944, Pearl was ordered to return to London, her mission completed. She returned with an complete breakdown of her expenditure in the field: amounting to several million francs. The records, which remain today in the National Archives detail every franc spent, including haircuts, cigarettes and clothing. The frequent communication between Pearl and Vera Atkins (who managed communications between Pearl and her mother) is also preserved in her SOE file. Communications seem to have been frequent and there are numerous letters in her file (one of the most comprehensive in the archives) including passing on money from Pearl for her niece's birthday. A letter from Mrs Witherington asking for information in July 1944 received a very British response from Vera Atkins – bearing in mind the date is 4th July 1944 – “I am sorry it has been slightly delayed, but we have been rather busy during these past weeks”<sup>4</sup>

Pearl was promoted in October 1944 to the rank of flight officer with personal from Wing Commander Redding. In that same month, Pearl married her long-time love and comrade in arms Henri Cornioley at Kensington Registry Office. F Section gave them a wedding present of £7.10s, and at the same time Buckmaster himself gave Pearl a reference stating he “*should be pleased to vouch for her integrity and thorough reliability at any time*”<sup>5</sup>

Returning to civilian life came with its own challenges – Pearl had been away for so long she needed extra coupons to buy civilian clothing. She was not the only agent in this position – a note in her file shows Sonya Butt returned at the same time and both were granted 80 coupons to help them build up an appropriate wardrobe. Pearl's mother wrote to Major Mackenzie to try and obtain their

---

4 TNA HS/9/356 letter from Vera Atkins ref. VA/FR/6910, page 65 in file.

5 TNA HS/9/356 letter dated 21st October 1944.



property that had been left sealed up in their flat in Paris.

In 1946, Pearl travelled to Washington for a publicity campaign, alongside with her husband who was encouraged to push his perfumes on the US market as people had apparently already been asking for his products. She was to travel according to her rank, which was temporarily reinstated along with her military pay for the occasion.<sup>6</sup>

In November 1945 she was awarded an MBE (civil division) which as a female, was the best she could be offered at the time. She was offended by this, later stating *“there was nothing civil about what I did”* and she refused the MBE. The recommendation actually stated:

*“it is strongly recommended that she be awarded the Military Cross. If ineligible, it is equally recommended that she be appointed an Officer in the Order of the British Empire (Military Division).”*

It is likely the change to a civil award that most annoyed Pearl. She made her feelings very clear in a letter to Vera Atkins:

*“I should like you to point out to the competent authorities that I am honoured that the British Government should wish to decorate me but that I consider the MBE as inappropriate, and do not wish to accept it, for the following reason:*

*“The work which I undertook was of a purely military nature in enemy occupied country. When the time for open warfare came, we planned and execute open attacks on the enemy. I spent a*

---

6 TNA - telegram dated 8th January 1946.



*year in the field and had I been caught I would have been shot or, worse still, sent to a concentration camp.*

*It is not for me to criticise the rules for decorating H.M. Forces, but I do consider it most unjust to be given a civilian decoration. Our training, which we did with the men, was purely military, and as woman we were expected to replace them in the field; women were parachuted in as W/T operators, etc., and I personally was responsible for the training and organisation, etc., of nearly three thousand men for sabotage and guerilla warfare,.*

*The men have received military decoration so why this discrimination with women when they put the best of themselves into the accomplishment of their duties? Precedence? If so, why should it not come into consideration. When I undertook my duties in the field I did not personally take into consideration the fact that my mission had no precedent; I was fully conscious of my mission and never doubted that I could not carry out my duties (which were equally entrusted to the men), my training was sufficiently thorough to give me that confidence.”*



In April 2006, aged 92 and now living in a retirement home in France, Pearl was finally awarded her parachute wings. (shown opposite). She had been previously ineligible due to the fact she had only had undertaken three training parachute jumps as a female recruit, with the fourth being into the field. As she did not leave France for her year of active duty, she did not have the chance to do another operational jump. *“the chaps did four training jumps, and*



*the fifth was operational – and you only got your wings after a total of five jumps, so I was not entitled – and for 63 years I have been moaning to anybody who would listen because I thought it was an injustice.”<sup>7</sup>*

Her “moaning” finally paid off when she was visited by Squadron Leader Rhys Cowsill, a Parachute jump instructor from RAF Cranwell who came to interview her about her wartime service. He took up her cause after hearing the reason she had never received her wings, and 63 years after her military service she was presented with them.

Pearl and her husband settled in France after the war and had one daughter Claire. Henri died in 1999, and Pearl passed away at her retirement home near Tours in 2008.

*“I don’t consider myself a heroine.  
Not at all. I am just an ordinary person who did her  
job during the war.”*



---

<sup>7</sup> BBC interview dated 11th April 2006, accessed 5th June 2024.



**Right:** Pearl and Henri in France after the war.



**Below:** Pearl with other Resistance leaders after D-Day (far right).



To add to this story, click the logo button below and complete an upload form.

