

Voices of War Life Story

Violette Szabo
1917 - 1945





Name: Violette Reine Elisabeth Szabo (nee Bushell)

Other names/aliases: Louise, Corinne Reine Leroy

Date of birth: 21 May 1917

Place of birth: Atcham, Shropshire

Nationality: British/ French

Date of death: 5 February 1945

Place of death: Ravensbrück concentration camp

Service No:

Unit(s): Auxiliary Territorial Service, First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, Special Operations Executive (SOE) F Section

Rank: Ensign

Burial:

Memorials:

Medals and awards: George Cross, Croix de Guerre, Resistance Medal (France)

Education & Employment: Woolworths, Post Office, Women's Land Army

Life Story

Violette Reine Elizabeth Bushell was born on 26 June 1921 in Paris, France, to Charles George Bushell, a British Army driver, and Reine Blanche Leroy, a French dressmaker. She was the second of five children and the only daughter. During her early years, Violette lived in France but moved to London with her family at the age of 11. They settled in South London, where she attended school and developed a love for gymnastics, long-distance cycling, and ice-skating. Violette was known for her lively and active personality.

Marriage and Widowhood

In 1940, Violette met Étienne Szabo, a French officer of Hungarian descent serving in the French Foreign Legion. Their whirlwind romance led to marriage on 21 August 1940, when Violette was 19 and Étienne was 31. They enjoyed a brief honeymoon before Étienne was deployed to North Africa. After her marriage, Szabo worked as a switchboard operator for the General Post Office in central London during the Blitz. Finding the work monotonous, she enlisted in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) on 11 September 1941. She first trained in Leicester, then continued her instruction at one of the first mixed anti-aircraft batteries — the 7th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Training Regiment, Royal Artillery — in Oswestry, Shropshire, where she trained as a predictor. She was later assigned to the 481st Heavy (Mixed) Anti-Aircraft Battery and underwent additional training in Anglesey. From December 1941 to February 1942, Gunner Szabo and her unit were stationed in Frodsham, Cheshire, near Warrington.

A few weeks later, Szabo discovered she was pregnant and left the ATS to return to London for the birth, moving to a flat in Notting Hill. In 1942, Violette gave birth to their daughter, Tania. Violette placed her new baby with childminders while she worked at the South Morden aircraft factory, where her father was also employed. During this time,

she received devastating news: her husband, Étienne, had been killed in action on 24 October 1942. He had suffered fatal chest wounds while leading his men in a diversionary attack on Qaret el Himeimat at the start of the Second Battle of El Alamein. He never had the chance to meet his daughter.

Devastated by his loss, Violette resolved to continue the fight against the Nazis. Grief-stricken but determined, she decided to join the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) as a field agent — seeing it as the most meaningful way to fight the enemy responsible for her husband's death. never having met his daughter.

Joining the Special Operations Executive (SOE)

In 1943, Violette volunteered for the SOE. Her fluency in French and her previous service in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) made her an ideal candidate. Violette was granted security clearance on 1 July 1943 and selected for training as a field agent on 10 July. She was commissioned as a section leader in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, a civilian service often used by SOE as a cover for female agents. She underwent rigorous training in Winterfold House and Arisaig, Scotland, where she learned fieldcraft, navigation, weapons handling, and sabotage techniques. She was then commissioned as an Ensign in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), a civilian organization often used by the SOE as a cover for female agents.

First Mission to France

In April 1944, Violette was deployed on her first mission to France under the codename “Louise”. She acted as a courier for Philippe Liewer, whose resistance network in the Rouen area had been compromised by the Gestapo. Her task was to re-establish contact with members of the network and gather vital intelligence. Despite the risks, Violette successfully completed her mission and returned to England.

Second Mission and Capture

In June 1944, shortly after the D-Day landings, Violette was sent on a second mission to France. She parachuted into the Limoges area

to assist the Resistance in disrupting German communications and supply lines. During her journey, Violette's vehicle was stopped at a German roadblock. She attempted to escape but was captured by the enemy. Violette was interrogated and tortured but refused to divulge any information.

Imprisonment and Execution

Violette was deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany, a facility exclusively for women. Conditions were harsh, and prisoners faced starvation, forced labor, and brutality. Despite the dire circumstances, Violette maintained her dignity and morale. She was executed on 5 February 1945, aged 23, by a single gunshot to the back of the head. Her body was cremated, and she has no known grave.

Awards and Honours

For her exceptional bravery and sacrifice, Violette Szabo was posthumously awarded the George Cross, the highest civilian decoration for bravery in the United Kingdom, on 17 December 1946.

Szabo was the second woman to be awarded the George Cross, bestowed posthumously on 17 December 1946. Her citation, published in the London Gazette reads:

St. James's Palace, S.W.1. 17 December 1946

The KING has been graciously pleased to award the GEORGE CROSS to: —

Violette, Madame SZABO (deceased), Women's Transport Service (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry).

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 any value. She was ultimately executed. Madame Szabo gave a magnificent example of courage and steadfastness.

In 1947, her daughter Tania was presented with the George Cross by King George VI on behalf of her late mother.

She was also awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government for her courage in the field.

Violette and Étienne Szabo are believed to be the most decorated married couple of the Second World War.

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