

Anne-Marie Walters:

Secret Agent

Anne-Marie Walters worked behind enemy lines in France. For seven months during World War II, she was a messenger for French Resistance groups, which were fighting back in secret against the occupying Germans. Anne-Marie was in constant danger of being captured, but her courage and quick thinking helped her survive.

Anne-Marie was born in 1923. Her father was English and her mother was French. The Walters family lived in the city of Geneva, Switzerland. Life there was good. The family went skiing in the winter and spent summer vacations on the sunny beaches of the south

of France. Anne-Marie grew up speaking both English and French.

This happy period ended with the outbreak of World War II. In May 1940, as German forces prepared to invade France, the family left Switzerland and moved to the United Kingdom. Anne-Marie was determined to be a part of the struggle against the Nazis. Though her mother tried to stop her, she joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in 1941. This all-female service took on many of the daily jobs in Britain's Royal Air Force, leaving the men free to fight on the front line.

Anne-Marie began work near London as a plotter, tracking the positions of enemy aircraft over the United Kingdom. Little did she know that she would soon be heading for the front line herself. In July 1943, Anne-Marie

was asked to join the Special Operations Executive (SOE). This top-secret band of men and women helped organize Resistance groups in countries occupied by the Germans.

The groups gathered important information about the German forces, which was sent back to London. They also caused as much damage as they could, including wrecking railroads and weapons factories and arranging escape routes for airmen who were shot down. To support them, British planes dropped supplies of arms, radio equipment, money, and other essential items into France.

Why was Anne-Marie invited to join a secret and very dangerous organization like the SOE? For a start, she could speak French perfectly. The Germans would think she was just another French citizen. The other reason

was that she was a woman. Men were much more likely to be stopped and questioned than women. Anne-Marie was one of about 50 brave women sent as secret agents from the United Kingdom to France.

SOE recruits had to be examined to make sure they were suited to this daring and dangerous life. Over four days, they were given a series of exercises that tested their bravery and intelligence. Many failed these tests, but not Anne-Marie. Her report said that she had “ample courage, determination and a sense of humor.”

After this, Anne-Marie went to a special training school in Scotland. Here she learned how to find her way across unknown country and how to send messages by radio or Morse code. She was also taught how to use weapons

and ammunitions, as well as how to fight with her bare hands. Later on, Anne-Marie was sent for parachute training. Now all she had to do was wait for the order to go into action.

At last, on December 16, 1943, the call came. Anne-Marie was to parachute into southwest France with another agent. That night, they boarded the aircraft and took off. But it was too foggy to see clearly, and they were forced to turn back. The plane crash-landed, killing four members of the crew.

They made another attempt on January 3, 1944. This time it was a bright, moonlit night. Anne-Marie jumped out of the aircraft, but at first her parachute would not open properly. She tugged and kicked until it was fully open, then floated down into a marshy field.

She later wrote:

*There, under my hand lay the soil of France,
soft and friendly.*

Suddenly, Anne-Marie heard voices nearby. She crouched down in terror. Then she realized they were French voices, so she got up and waved. Members of the Resistance had come to welcome her. Soon, she was safe and warm in a local farmhouse.

The next day, Anne-Marie was driven to a town in the Gascon region of France. As she walked through the streets, she felt very nervous. She thought everyone was looking at her and knew she was a British agent, though of course, they didn't. She told herself she was alone and would have to take care of herself. Anne-Marie was just 20 years old.

That afternoon, she met her commanding officer for the first time. George Starr was a short, bald, and nervous man known as “Le Patron,” or the Boss. He was in charge of a huge network of Resistance groups in southwest France and was one of the most successful of all SOE agents.

Starr arranged for Anne-Marie to live at a remote farm in Gascony. She had a new identity as a student from Paris. She even had a new name—Paulette. At the farm, Anne-Marie was looked after by Odilla and Henri Castagnos. She became part of their family, enjoying huge meals, a warm bed, and security. The farmhouse would be a trusty refuge in the terrifying months to come.

By this time, the war was turning in favor of the Allies. They had begun pushing

German and Italian forces out of their conquered territories. The next big event was to be a huge Allied invasion of France due sometime in 1944. The task of the SOE was to help the French Resistance prepare its own uprising once the invasion had started. This meant gathering guns and ammunitions and planning strikes against the Nazis.



Anne-Marie’s main job was to carry messages, money, and important papers between the various groups in the network. She had a huge area to cover. It stretched for over 200 miles (320 kilometers), from the Dordogne region down to the Pyrenees on the Spanish border. She traveled by bicycle, bus, and train and even learned to drive vehicles called *gazos*. These were powered by charcoal, since only Germans were allowed to have gasoline.

On her travels, Anne-Marie met all sorts of people. She soon learned whom to fear. German soldiers were easy to spot because of their uniforms. Members of the Gestapo—the dreaded Nazi secret police—were dressed in suits and gray raincoats. Many had close-cropped hair and wore dark glasses. Some French people worked for the German

occupiers and were happy to betray their fellow countrymen.

Anne-Marie also learned whom to trust, but only once she knew them well. Among these were her many contacts in the Resistance, including the Castagnos family and their friends. One unexpected ally was the local bus driver. He always kept a warm seat for her at the front and allowed her to get off the bus early to avoid checks by the Gestapo.

Anne-Marie soon found she had other duties. Starr arrived at the farm with news that a group of prisoners had broken out of jail. They were mostly Resistance fighters and SOE agents. Fifteen of them would be arriving in the region. Anne-Marie was to hide them from the Germans and arrange their escape over the border into Spain.

The risks were high. Anne-Marie discovered that the prisoners would have a delay of two weeks before the guides could take them over the mountains. They would also have to pass through the town of Agen, but the Germans had already sent SS (security force) soldiers there. They were setting up roadblocks on all routes out of Agen.

Anne-Marie was jammed in the back of a *gazo* van with the prisoners. The van passed through the first roadblock easily. Then it was stopped at another barrier by policemen who wanted to inspect the cargo. Sensing disaster, the driver put his foot down and roared off. The police yelled “Stop!” and fired a few shots, but the van got away.

On the next day, a much more powerful truck was found to take the prisoners to the

foot of the Pyrenees mountain range between France and Spain. Anne-Marie went with them, but it was another nightmare journey. The brakes on the truck did not work properly, making it swerve all over the road. On top of this, the driver brought a box of grenades, which bounced around alarmingly as the truck bumped along. In the end, the prisoners were safely delivered.

In early March 1944, Starr had another refugee for Anne-Marie. His name was Pierre and he was a French police officer who worked for the Resistance in Paris. Pierre was being chased by the Gestapo and needed to escape to Spain. He was carrying a fake identity card and a gun.

The pair boarded a train heading for the Pyrenees. Suddenly, a Gestapo officer entered