

New at Beaulieu for 2024: Lady Montagu tells the personal stories of two agents in the Special Operations Executive

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Lady Montagu's display in the Secret Army Exhibition at Beaulieu.



Lady Montagu reveals the true life stories of two agents in the Special Operations Executive, who trained at Beaulieu and who ventured into occupied France to harass the German invasion forces.

(Kim adds: Of course this is a motoring magazine website, and I often feature the National Motor Museum activities and displays on the site, but, as this story shows, Beaulieu is – and was – about far more than just cars and motoring. The heroic efforts in occupied France of many secret agents trained at Beaulieu may not be widely known. Their stories are thought-provoking and in many cases heartbreaking. I thought that our readers would be interested to read about these two brave souls.)

(All words and images from Beaulieu).

Beaulieu tells us:

Lady Montagu has taken a unique approach to researching and telling the story of two Beaulieu-trained agents in the Special Operations Executive (SOE), to show the private lives of the people behind their hazardous exploits and the ultimate sacrifices they made.

Francis Suttill (codenamed *Prosper*) was the leader of the biggest SOE circuit in France, yet his story has rarely been told. Yvonne Rudellat (codenamed *Jacqueline*) was one of his couriers and the first female SOE agent to be sent behind enemy lines in German-occupied France. She was also part of the same regiment as Lady Montagu, who is a member of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY).



Francis Suttill *'Prosper'*





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Francis Suttill – leader of the Prosper network.



Yvonne Rudellat *'Jacqueline'*





Yvonne Rudellat from the Prosper network.

Both agents were very different people, though trained at **Beaulieu's** SOE 'finishing school' during the same month, worked in the same circuit and were captured only a few days apart. They were ordinary people living in the safety of England at the outbreak of WWII and yet put themselves forward for some of the most dangerous missions in France, their country of birth.

Lady Montagu said: "The personalities of those who volunteered for such hazardous work has always fascinated me. I believe that being part of two countries gave a shared allegiance, but also created a tension which made them feel they didn't wholly belong to either. This set them apart from their compatriots."

She added: "Whether or not you concur with this view, I am sure you will agree when you have read their stories that the war turned two ordinary individuals into quite exceptional people."



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Lady Montagu. Copyright Allan Warren.

Following the 80th anniversary of the fall of the Prosper network, Lady Montagu has opened an exhibition to share their stories for the first time. It can be seen as part of a visit to Beaulieu in the Secret Army Exhibition.

Painting a family picture

Surviving family members of both agents have met with Lady Montagu to build a picture of their lives before they joined SOE and what led to that decision. Francis left two baby sons who he never saw again after joining SOE and taking up his role in France, where he organised hundreds of agents and supporters for the network.

Yvonne left a daughter behind when she trained to become an agent at the relatively late age of 45, then kept explosives under her bed in France and used them to sabotage train links, factories and a power station.

Yvonne Rudellat 'Jacqueline'

Yvonne Rudellat's background was very different from Francis Suttill's. She was born on 11th January 1897 at Maisons-Laffitte near Paris, to a French father and an English mother - the only surviving child of ten. Her father Henri Cerneau was a horse-dealer for the French army who doted on his daughter. He died suddenly when she was in her early teens, and she was left in the care of a disciplinarian mother with whom she did not get on.



Yvonne aged 15 with her younger brother Jean

Yvonne eventually left home, moved to England and found a job as a saleswoman in a London department store, settling in Pimlico, where - to her regret - she was joined by her mother. She was an attractive woman with a delicate face, shining eyes and a bubbling personality, and no shortage of admirers. In October 1920 she married one of them, Alex Rudellat, an Italian waiter.



Yvonne with her daughter Connie

In 1922 the Rudellats had a daughter, Connie, but soon realised they were ill-matched. While her husband was at work Yvonne would invite friends, mostly French expatriates, to the house for evening coffee parties. She was homesick for France, where she briefly returned just before the war, hoping to secure a divorce after beginning an affair with a former French army officer. Her husband refused and she was forced to go back to London.

by now the family had bought a larger house at 146 Warwick Way, Pimlico. The Rudellats lived in the basement of the six-storey house, with other rooms let to a range of interesting tenants. Yvonne and her husband now led separate lives. She managed the apartments and collected the rent, though she was never good with money and had little left over for herself. As a landlady, she was more of a friend, often sharing a bottle of Calvados and a chat with her tenants or letting them off the rent if they were hard up. Never interested in housework, she spent much of her time making clothes for herself and for clients, disregarding regular mealtimes and sleeping at odd hours. Friends remembered her as a romantic soul, often creating fantasies about herself, dreaming of adventure and always of one day returning to France. Through contacts with her tenants, she developed a wide range of interests, including interior design, Buddhism, yoga, Eastern philosophy and



Yvonne Cerneau aged eight in 1905



Alex Rudellat



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Yvonne 1911



Telling the story of Yvonne Rudellat, codenamed Jacqueline.

Their families have loaned personal photographs and the agents' medals, as well as one of Prosper's original canisters which would have contained guns and ammunition when it was dropped by parachute for the Resistance. Yvonne's suitcase, complete with her lace-bordered handkerchief, has also been loaned to Lady Montagu to help illustrate her story.

Personal letters home put their stories into context. One from the War Office to Mrs Suttill says "I am very pleased to be able to inform you that your husband has arrived safely at his destination and is in good health", while another encloses a letter from her husband. In it, he says: "I was, as you know, to be going today but it has now been postponed till the 27th (September 1942) so as to give me time to get everything ready. Ever since Friday midday till late last night, I have been talked and talked at - I am sorry if I was not too clear last night but I had completely ceased to think at all clearly."

Francis was dropped 'blind' with no reception committee 12km from his intended point and dislocated his knee, breaking the cartilage where the muscles were already atrophied from his childhood polio. The package dropped with him was not his suitcase of clothes but a wireless set he knew nothing about. As there were doubts about his accent, he met up with his courier Andree Borrel several days later and together, they set off on a tour of northern France to begin creating and organising groups to resist the German occupation.

Before being recruited by SOE, Yvonne had worked as a saleswoman in a London department store and settled in Pimlico, then married an Italian waiter. She developed a wide range of interests, including interior design, Buddhism, yoga, Eastern philosophy and vegetarianism. Her friends remembered her as a romantic soul, often creating fantasies about herself and dreaming of adventure.

In his report about Yvonne, Francis later said: "She cycles about at night with her plastics and is extremely handy at blowing up things. Her explosives are stored under her bed. She looks 15 years younger and has definitely found her niche."



Neither of the agent's stories ended well. After the fall of the Prosper circuit, both were captured. Francis was executed, while Yvonne was in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp when it was liberated on 15 April 1945, but died from typhus and dysentery a few days later and was buried in a mass grave.



Francis Suttill and Yvonne Rudellat from the Prosper network.

Lady Montagu can be heard telling their stories in a recording at the new exhibition, which can be seen as part of a visit to Beaulieu.

Find out about special agents in the Secret Army Exhibition, discover life 'upstairs and downstairs' in Palace House, walk in the footsteps of monks at Beaulieu Abbey and explore



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the beautiful grounds and gardens. See over 285 cars in the National Motor Museum, the World of Top Gear and On Screen Cars, then ride on a 'skytrain' monorail and have fun in **Little Beaulieu's** adventure play area - all together in one ticket to Beaulieu. For tickets and details see www.beaulieu.co.uk or call 01590 612345.