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Violette Szabo (review)

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account is a product of the 1950s and the author, like the author of the official history prepared for the public, S. W. Roskill, *The War at Sea*, 3 vols. in 4 (1954–61), cannot reveal much information concerning intelligence. For this subject the reader will have to consult more recent works by Frank H. Hinsley or Ralph Bennett's *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy* (1989). The amount of German and Italian material that could be incorporated was also still relatively limited, for example excerpts from statements by Admirals Dönitz and Weichold, the latter liaison officer with the Italian command and later German C.-in-C. in the Mediterranean. Here the late David Brown, former head of the Naval Historical Branch, has been able to use recent publications such as R. Mallet, *The Italian Navy and Fascist Expansionism, 1935–1940* (1998) to supplement the admirable introductions he wrote for each of the two volumes.

In addition to the great amount of detail on operations, the major justifications for reprinting these volumes are the appendixes. These actually take up more space than the text itself in volume one and contain plans, appreciations, signals, orders, memoranda, logistics, and a summary of operations by the Greek Navy. There are specific references to them in the text so the reader can see them in their proper context. There is far less space (thirty pages) in relation to the text devoted to the appendixes in the second volume. This may be due to the fact there was really only a half year of intense operations in 1940 compared to a full year in 1941. Appendixes on the scale of the first volume would have produced a book of unmanageable proportions.

The maps and charts are useful although the general Mediterranean map in volume one is too ambitious. That is, even with a strong magnifying glass many legends are still too small to be read. This is a considerable inconvenience for the text contains many geographical coordinates or names of relatively obscure places. On the whole, however, these are volumes naval historians will relish. Let us also hope that the sales are sufficient to encourage publication of other Naval Staff histories cited in the text or David Brown's introductions.

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**Violette Szabo.** By Susan Ottaway. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2002. ISBN 1-55750-499-7. Photographs. Appendixes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiv, 194. \$32.95.

Britain's Special Operations Executive, famously charged by Winston Churchill in the dark days of 1940 to "set Europe ablaze," has given rise to an extensive literature ranging from memoir to monograph, from the sensa-

tional to the scholarly. A number of books have been written about individual agents among the four hundred who were sent into occupied France, thirty-nine of whom were women. Thirteen of the latter did not return. One of those was Violette Szabo, who had grown up in France and was living in England when war broke out. French-speaking and eager to help defeat the Nazis, she joined the Auxiliary Transport Service and in due course was recruited by SOE. Her short career in the organization carrying out sabotage and subversion in occupied Europe ended with her capture, imprisonment in Ravensbruck, and execution there at the age of twenty-three. By all accounts she had fought bravely when cornered and behaved with dignity under interrogation and imprisonment. Awarded the George Cross posthumously, she became the heroine of a 1958 bestseller, *Carve Her Name with Pride*, characterized by breathless prose and less than scrupulous accuracy, and of a film based on the book.

Supplementing well-known information about SOE's French Section with interviews with family members and childhood friends, Susan Ottaway has retold Violette Szabo's story. (The subtitle, "The life that I have . . ." is from a poignant poem on which Szabo's wireless coding in the field was based.) While this book avoids the excesses of the hagiographic tone of the earlier account of Szabo's life and corrects some of its misinformation, it presents problems of its own. Like many hard-working biographers, the author includes every piece of information she has unearthed, however trivial. Is it really worth devoting space to such questions as which of two roofs it was that the young Violette climbed?

The fact is that many of the young women SOE sent to France lived very ordinary lives until then. That makes their accomplishments in the field all the more admirable, but it does not follow that covering their early lives in minute detail makes for particularly interesting or enlightening reading.

While the book's descriptions of the recruitment and training of the women SOE agents and the difficulties and risks they encountered once dropped onto French soil will be familiar to those who have read any of the many books about SOE's French Section, one aspect to which Ottaway has contributed something more is the paramilitary training. A former security officer of the Scottish training schools provided her with details about the commando course in the rugged highlands where the women participated in rigorous toughening exercises right alongside the men with no distinction made between the sexes, an innovation in its time.

While this book has little to offer those already familiar with SOE, it might well serve the general reader to whom the subject is new as an introduction to the works of historians such as M. R. D. Foot and David Stafford.

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