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Julie Wheelwright
Withering review
The Independent (2013)

Carole Seymour-Jones, *She Landed by Moonlight: The Story of Secret Agent Pearl Witherington*, Hodder and Stoughton, 412 pages, hardback, £20.00

The women who were active members of the Special Operations Executive, the brainchild of Winston Churchill, created in 1940 to spark revolt in Germany's conquered territories, holds an enduring fascination. In recent years, there have been major biographies of intelligence officers Vera Atkins, Violette Szabo, Christine Granville (a Polish agent) and Sebastian Faulks' novel, *Charlotte Gray* did much to popularise their image. The interest partly stems from a desire to put women back into history, especially as the accomplishments of these SOE agents, who often ran major resistance networks, some of them dying horrendous deaths in concentration camps, were largely overlooked after the war.

But their stories are also a microcosm of how women who had proven themselves able in the utmost test of masculine accomplishments – in the theatre of war – find themselves side lined. In one of the most moving passages in Carole Seymour-Jones' new biography, Pearl Witherington, who commanded a ragged crew of almost 4,000 men and who had a million franc bounty on her head, was offered only an MBE (civil) for her wartime efforts. As Pearl tartly commented, 'There was nothing civil about what I did.'

Seymour-Jones' meticulous biography is full of such revelations where Pearl finds herself fighting to be taken seriously by her superiors which often results in less funding and fewer resources for her 'circuit' and later, in less public recognition. That women were recruited into the SOE in 1942 and sent on dangerous missions was kept secret for fear of a public outcry. Even during training, when Pearl made the requisite three parachute jumps alongside the men, the women jumped first 'to shame the men into not showing their own terror.' The men were awarded with parachute wings; Pearl was not.

But Pearl Witherington was tough, having grown up as the eldest daughter of four to English parents in Paris; her father Wallace, an alcoholic, lost the family's money and from an early age, she dragged her father out of bars, negotiated with shopkeepers and dodged debt collectors. Her mother Gee was both hearing impaired and 'an inadequate mother', a situation made worse when Wallace died in 1930. She got a series of secretarial jobs, landing one at the British embassy before the war, establishing her credibility with her mother country. As she would later say, her childhood experiences were 'what made me a fighter in my life'.

Even before Pearl was recruited into the SOE, she drew on that fighting spirit to get her mother and sisters out of occupied France, a difficult task for the increasingly frail Gee. Once they'd arrived in London, like many female soldiers before her, Pearl longed to become involved in the action. 'I'm a child of the 1914 war,' she once said. 'I hated the Huns.' She approached her new boss at the Air Ministry and eventually joined the newly formed 'Baker Street Irregulars' who were being dropped into

occupied France to form networks of resistance that would erode the Germans military and financial power.

Seymour-Jones' suggests that Pearl was also motivated by a longing to be reunited with her fiancé Henri Cornioley who had been captured while fighting in the French Army in 1940. The small, telling details about Pearl's first few months, disguised as a cosmetics saleswoman, illuminate a portrait of courage. As a single woman it was difficult to find a place to live so Pearl spent her first seven months sleeping on a train.