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Jun

16

1943

SOE Agent Noor Inayat Khan arrives in France



On 16/17 June 1943, cryptonymed 'Madeleine'/W/T operator 'Nurse' and under the cover identity of Jeanne-Marie Regnier, Assistant Section Officer/Ensign Inayat Khan was flown to landing ground B/20A 'Indigestion' in Northern France.

The Special Operations Executive, SOE, had been established, in Churchill's words, to 'set Europe ablaze'. It was now doing its best to support the French Resistance by dropping agents by parachute and plane to provide radio liaison with London. It was exceptionally hazardous work as the Gestapo were known to be making inroads into the Resistance.

An improbable candidate for this role was Noor Inayat Khan, a princess from one of India's Royal families and a Muslim. Her early life in Paris gave her the advantage of being a fluent French speaker but she lacked some of the qualities usually sought in secret agents. It was a sign of SOE's desperation to get agents into the field that she was selected for the role.

In the SOE, Leo Marks, the brilliant head cryptographer, was asked to give Noor Inayat Khan a final briefing in the coding and decoding of messages. Aware of rumours about her reliability Marks made contact with some of the training staff to try to discover more:

[T]he 'potty princess' had caused more dissension than any pupil in the history of Beaulieu. No two instructors could agree on quite how bad an agent she'd be. Yet none of them could deny that she was an excellent WT operator, though she tended to stay on the air as if she were part of it. They were also unanimous that her 'crackpot father' was responsible for her 'eccentric behaviour'.

I pressed him for details of Daddy and a formidable picture emerged. The 'crackpot' was head of a mystical sect (the Sufi), and had founded the 'House of Blessing' in Paris, where Noor had spent her childhood. He'd also founded Sufi lodges in most European capitals in order to spread the doctrine of love and forgiveness, but his 'Houses of Blessing' were a curse to Beaulieu.

'Do you know what the bastards taught her? That the worst sin she could commit was to lie about anything.'

As a result of this disastrous programming, she was unable to observe even the most elementary precautions. He was happy to provide a few examples.

Beaulieu had sent her on a WT exercise, and she was cycling towards her 'safe-house' to practise transmitting when a policeman stopped her and asked what she was doing.

'I'm training to be an agent,' she said, 'here's my radio — want me to show it to you?' She then removed it from its hiding place and invited him to try it.

Like all Beaulieu trainees, she was given a mock interrogation by the Bristol police, after which the superintendent in charge told Spooner not to waste his time with her 'because if this girl's an agent I'm Winston Churchill'.

She'd been so startled by an unexpected pistol shot that she'd gone into a Sufi-like trance for several hours, and finally emerged from it to consult a Bible.

Leo Marks went on to do his best to give Khan a briefing in the proper use of codes in the last few days before she left for France. Mark's memoir of his days in SOE are a fascinating insight into this secret world and reads like a thriller – see [Leo Marks: Between Silk and Cyanide](#).



Lysander Mark IIIA (SD), V9673 'MA-J', of No.161 (Special Duties) Squadron RAF on the ground at Tempsford, Bedfordshire. This aircraft was flown by Squadron Leader Hugh Verity on twenty missions to occupied France in 1943 to drop and pick up SOE and Resistance personnel.

There are no accounts of Khans last days in Britain but Jerrard Tickell gives a general account of how agents were flown into France:

The Lysander was a small, nimble aircraft, capable of taking off and landing in a restricted space. Because of its size and purpose, these Special Duty "Lizzies" had to be stripped of all guns, armour and wireless equipment — except radio telephones — in order to allow room for the passengers.

Amongst other disadvantages, this meant that the pilot had to fly without a navigator. On an operation which demanded absolute navigational accuracy, this also meant that he had to find his way in the moonlight with maps crumpled on his knees, stealing a glance whenever he could, acutely aware that the aircraft made a copybook target for both flak and fighter attacks.

On the crumpled map, the target was a needle-point. Seen from the air, it was not much larger. A tiny field in a darkened country- side; three glimmering lights arranged in an agreed pattern, lights that flickered and went out as the feeble batteries in make-shift torches died; all around, a vast darkness prickling with menace, for the Germans and their toadying collaborators were never far away.

It was not only the life of the pilot that was at stake — or even that of his passenger. The lives of the brave people on the ground could readily be forfeit and the hands that held the torches racked in torture or stilled in death.

The security of the whole elaborate underground network of which these men and women of France were a part could be ripped into shreds by one minute error made by the man with the map on his knees. The margin between success and disaster was frighteningly slim.

See [Jerrard Tickell: Moon Squadron. An account of the Special Operations Executive.](#)



{ 2 comments... read them below or [add one](#) }

[Marcilio October 16, 2015 at 6:21 am](#)

Khan was certainly a hero in WW 2, Here is my list of famous heroes: 1. Malala Yousafzai 15 year old girl from Pakistan who fought for the right of women to attend school and almost lost her life. She survived an assassination attempt and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. 2. Fawzia Koofi A candidate for the presidency of Afghanistan. This would have been unthinkable under Taliban rule prior to 9/11. She is a brave, very brave woman who has much work to do in the Muslim world.

Editor [August 12, 2013 at 9:18 am](#)

The following discussion took place in the Guest book...

Re Noor Inayat Khan

I find this post extraordinarily insulting to the memory of one of SOE's bravest agents. As a source Leo Marks has always been known for gossip and tittle tattle and a frequent guest in documentaries to promote himself and his career as a screenwriter and author.

May I refer you to the Noor Inayat Khan Wikipedia entry ...

Hugh Davie

Hugh

Thank you for your comment.

I do not think Leo Marks' comments were based on 'tittle tattle'. If you read 'Between Silk and Cyanide' you will see he devotes a chapter to describing his extended briefing with Noor Inayat Khan. He was very obviously full of admiration for her resourcefulness and determination. Nevertheless there was most definitely an issue with her difficulty in telling any untruth. Marks describes how he developed a strategy just for her, to help her work around it 'in extremis'.

I don't think any of this detracts from recognising the heroism and bravery of Inayat Khan. If anything I think it helps us understand a little more what a remarkable person she was, being so highly principled that she still took on this role, fully recognising the risks involved.

It is easy to find out more about Noor Inayat Khan, for readers that wish to do so. This website will be remembering her again, later in the war.

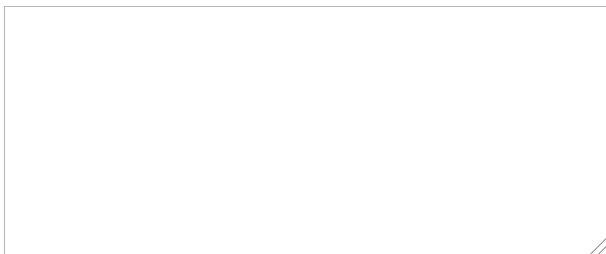
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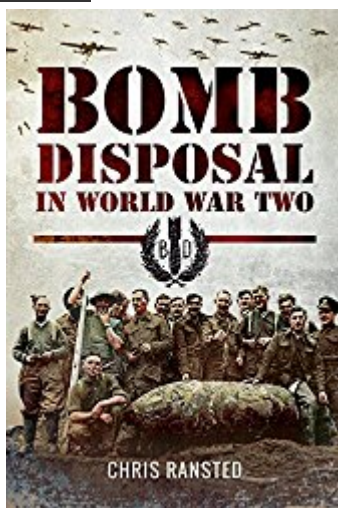
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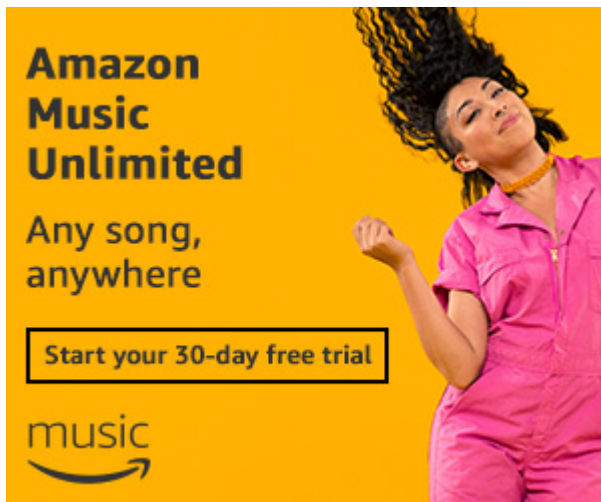
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