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# Anne-Marie Walters vs. George Starr: Reflections on Gendered Representations within the Special Operations Executive

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## ABSTRACT

*This article explores gender relations within the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during the Second World War. To do so, it scrutinises the story of its agent Anne-Marie Walters. Although SOE was a trailblazer in recruiting women for military missions, this case study shows how gender prejudices could mark the experience of female agents. Walters' story indeed shows that her gender involved not only a limitation of her actions in the field, but also how it diminished her credit within SOE's headquarters and even how it was used against her when she reported serious misconduct by her senior officer.*

## The SOE and Womanpower: a “broad-minded staff”?

Some people have suggested that we should never have sent women on these missions at all. I cannot agree. Women are as brave and as responsible as men; often more so. They are entitled to a share in the defence of their beliefs no less than are men. The war was not restricted to men. From the purely tactical point of view, women were able to move about without exciting so much suspicion as men and were therefore exceedingly useful to us as couriers. I should have been failing in my duty to the war effort if I had refused to employ them, and I should have been unfair to their abilities if I had considered them unequal to the duties which were imposed upon them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Maurice Buckmaster, *They Fought Alone: The Story of the British Agents in France*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1958), pp. 213-214.

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Such is the tribute that Maurice Buckmaster, chief of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) F section, paid to the female agents he sent to occupied France during World War II. Created, to quote Churchill himself, to 'set Europe ablaze', the SOE oversaw cooperation between their agents and French resistance forces against the Nazi occupation. As such, it was responsible for establishing communications with underground forces in occupied countries and for contributing to organise them.<sup>2</sup> To that end, the SOE sent between a few hundred and more than a thousand agents to France.<sup>3</sup> Their missions required the kind of military training that was essential to their own survival, as well as to their general efficiency. Handling explosives, using a variety of weapons and training for combat became their routine.<sup>4</sup>

At the time, the role devoted to women within the military was always that of auxiliaries: combat was for men.<sup>5</sup> Women were seen as needing protection from the rigours of battle. All the allied armies involved in the French field during World War II, whether the Free French, or the British or US forces, employed women to undertake non-combatant functions, so as to free more men for combat. The British army was the most liberal: women's auxiliary forces were created as early as 1917 and the second National Service Act of 1941 extended conscription to single and widowed women aged 20 to 30 – always to incorporate them into auxiliary forces.<sup>6</sup> None of the female recruits were supposed to be put in a situation where they might use lethal weapons, except for those who expressed the willingness to do so.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>Sébastien Albertelli, *Histoire du sabotage. De la CGT à la Résistance* (Paris : Perrin, 2016) <https://www-cairn-info.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/histoiredu-sabotage--9782262067823.htm>. Accessed 6 October 2020, Chapter 11, paragraph 31.

<sup>4</sup>Juliette Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the SOE in the Second World War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 51-76.

<sup>5</sup>Yannick Ripa, Julie Le Gac, Élodie Jauneau & Fabrice Virgili, 'La féminisation des armées européennes', *Encyclopédie pour une histoire nouvelle de l'Europe*, 2016 : <https://ehne.fr/article/genre-et-europe/quand-la-guerre-trouble-le-genre/la-feminisation-des-armees-europeennes>. Accessed 6 October 2020; Luc Capdevila, François Rouquet, Fabrice Virgili & Danièle Voldman, *Sexes, genre et guerres : France, 1914-1945*, (Paris : Payot & Rivages, 2010).

<sup>6</sup>Ripa et al, 'La féminisation des armées européennes' ; Christine Levisse-Touzé, 'Les femmes dans la France libre', in Mechtild Gilzmer, Christine Levisse-Touzé & Stefan Martens (eds), *Les femmes dans la Résistance en France*, (Paris : Tallandier, 2003), pp. 165-185.

<sup>7</sup> Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, p. 26.

Therefore, the SOE challenged military traditions in many ways. The recruitment of women for military action was one of them. Since these recruits were volunteers, the SOE was even free to hire married women, mothers and young single women.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the service was able to infiltrate some fifty women into France, including those working for the French Services, alongside, at the very least, 450 men, or more probably, 1000 to 1800 men.<sup>9</sup> The SOE's allied counterparts, the Free French Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action (BCRA) and the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) were comparatively more reluctant to recruit women. According to recent studies, out of 400 to 600 agents sent to France by the BCRA, only four were women.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, of the 82 agents were sent to France by the OSS, only one was a woman.<sup>11</sup>

These facts indeed give credence to the long-time representation of the SOE as 'a broad-minded staff', to quote Michael Foot, whose masterly work initiated SOE studies.<sup>12</sup> More nuance has been brought to the picture by gender historians. First, it should be noted that circumstances played a major part in this process: the competition between services for recruits was fierce, and the SOE targeted special competences, among which the ability to speak French and to *pass* for French so as to escape arrest and repression.<sup>13</sup> Faced with a lack of available men, the SOE turned to women. However, the figures speak for themselves: to deduce, from the small proportion of female agents in its ranks, that the SOE made no difference between men and women in recruitment and that gender differentiation was less outright within headquarters than on the field seems to be an optimistic reading.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Juliette Pattinson's work shows a more nuanced reality.<sup>15</sup> Following her lead, this analysis scrutinises how gendered representations influenced not only the experiences of agents on the field, but also the credit given respectively to male and

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 43-53

<sup>9</sup>Albertelli, *Histoire du sabotage* chapter 11, paragraph 31.

<sup>10</sup>Guillaume Pollack, « Genre et engagement dans la Résistance : l'exemple d'Anne-Marie Walters », *Genre & Histoire* [Online], 19 | Spring 2017, put online 1 July 2017, Accessed 10 October 2020. <http://journals.openedition.org/genrehistoire/2697> (paragraph 11; Albertelli, *Histoire du sabotage*, chapter 11, paragraph 31.

<sup>11</sup>Fabrizio Calvi, *OSS : la guerre secrète en France, 1942-1945: les services secrets américains, la Résistance et la Gestapo* (Paris : Hachette, 1990), pp. 707-711.

<sup>12</sup>Michael R. D. Foot, *SOE in France. An account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France, 1940-1944* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1966), p. 47.

<sup>13</sup>A question studied by Juliette Pattinson in *Behind Enemy Lines*.

<sup>14</sup>Pollack, 'Genre et engagement dans la Résistance'.

<sup>15</sup>Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*.

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female agents within SOE headquarters. To do so, it will focus on the story of Anne-Marie Walters, a woman dropped into occupied France as a liaison officer at the age of 20 and who worked under the orders of George Starr, to whom she referred as 'le Patron'. Although their respective stories have often been discussed by historians much can still be learned from their personal files and war memoirs, as well as from diverse reports and testimonies referring to their action.<sup>16</sup>

'[...] la présence d'une telle auxiliaire, avide de plaire et d'étonner, paraît insupportable à l'homme dont la réussite problématique est uniquement basée sur le mystère'<sup>17</sup> (One can imagine how the very presence of such an aide, so eager to please and to amaze, seems unbearable to a man whose problematical success is only based on mystery').

That is how Raymond Escholier describes the shock of the meeting between Anne-Marie Walters and George Starr in his book based on testimonies of former resistance members from South-West France collected in the immediate aftermath of the war. In many ways, the story could end there: the impossible dialogue and cooperation between a young woman who joined the resistance in search of adventures and an older agent driven cantankerous by the months he has already spent within the resistance. Starr (aka *Hilaire*) was indeed sent to France at the end of 1942; Walters (aka *Colette*) only joined him in early 1944.

But one cannot ignore how gendered representations shaped this pithy description of Walters. Over the course of her time within the resistance in South-West France, she was regularly reminded of her status as a woman, either by Starr himself or by other agents and local resistance members. According to her memoirs, not only were her skills largely underemployed compared to those of male agents, but she also had to deal with doubts on her morality. This went from irritating jokes to a scandal used to justify her being sent back to London.

Many episodes echo the description left by Escholier and reveal that despite her training and abilities, *Colette* sometimes had a hard time being taken seriously in the field. This had direct consequences on her tactical employment, and on her own views on the assignments she should undertake. For example, when she was asked to assist Claude Arnault (aka *Jean-Claude*) in training local maquisards, she first refused, arguing that it was not a task for a woman. She finally accepted, but they disapproved of this

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<sup>16</sup>Pollack, 'Genre et engagement dans la Résistance'.

<sup>17</sup>Raymond Escholier, *Maquis de Gascogne*, (Genève : Editions du Milieu du Monde, 1945), p. 81.

undertaking, she never renewed the experience<sup>18</sup>. Walters' hesitations confirm that the taboo surrounding women in combat was partially internalised, even if *Colette* happened to lament the limits of her mission, concluding at the end of 1944: 'My work up to D-Day was neither particularly difficult nor particularly interesting.'<sup>19</sup> 'Hilaire seemed to object to sending me on very risky jobs, although I told him often enough that I'd do anything he wanted. The main fighting I did was getting into buses, which was no small enterprise!<sup>20</sup> According to Walters, a certain woman in the resistance bemoaned the fact that London had wasted a trained agent by employing her to complete tasks that could be undertaken by locals.<sup>21</sup> But it was SOE policy to confine female agents to the functions of *liaison agent* or radio officer except in cases of force majeure.<sup>22</sup>

Things got worse when *Hilaire* engaged in the organisation of a maquis group in June 1944. A maquis was indeed supposed to evolve to become a formation of military camps where the resistance lived and fought. As such, it was a masculine universe. Starr's maquis was composed of 300 young men and he placed it under the command of the French maquis chief Maurice Parisot, who also had his own men. If most maquis groups used women as *liaison agents*, their presence was always temporary, and they rarely shared the daily life of the *maquisards*. When they did, it cast a shadow on their morality. From this point of view, Walters was no exception. When Starr started his maquis, he let Walters know that she was no longer indispensable to his guerrilla plans. He asked her to join the village of Castelnau-sur-Auvignon, which was a centre of the maquis activities, to 'help with washing up and other fatigues "proper to women"',<sup>23</sup> she remembers in her memoirs, adding:

I began to see the change that would take place in my life: he had his 'staff' now, mostly young French officers who had been hiding for the past few months and working with the Resistance. I would no longer be a confident, he was too busy. And I was a woman, and not supposed to understand 'military strategy' [...].

I had dinner with the Patron and his personal staff; I was made to understand that I was to consider myself lucky to be treated with such honour [...].<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Anne-Marie Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony*, (London: Pan Books, 1951, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1946), pp. 66-77.

<sup>19</sup>Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, pp. 60-63.

<sup>20</sup>The UK National Archive (hereinafter TNA) HS9/339/2. Miss A.M. Walters, 18 September 1944, *Report on Mission in France*.

<sup>21</sup>Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony*, pp. 66-77.

<sup>22</sup>Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, pp. 60-67.

<sup>23</sup>Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony*, p. 134.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

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Whether this was the explanation Starr gave her, or Walters' own analysis, the order seemed clear: she was invited to follow the maquis' movements to help, but not to join the fight. From then on, she moved from village to village, following the maquis' relocations.

In many places, local inhabitants put a room at her disposal to give her some privacy. But she also recalls times when she had to share a tiny shelter with maquis men. In each case, she had to redouble her efforts to preserve her own reputation. One day in Castelnau, she went to the river to have a wash. Here is how she remembered it later: '[...] there I found all the rest of the maquis indulging in a thorough morning toilet... I tried not to see them, washed my face hurriedly and ran all the way up again. And so it went on. After four days of this, I went to Nasoulens, scrubbed myself in the duck-pond and slept fifteen hours [...]'.<sup>25</sup> Later, she had to share a room with six Spanish guerrilleros who joined the French maquis. She was unable to change clothes for an entire week. Finally, her roommates noticed the discomfort of her situation and found a way to give her some privacy so she could wash. Afterwards, she remained convinced that their memory of female combatants in the Spanish Civil War explained their concern.<sup>26</sup>

Such care was not always the norm and Walters' memoirs also relate moments when her very presence alongside the maquisards tarnished her reputation. Later in the summer of 1944, the maquis men were given a rest period after several deadly battles. As a result, 800 young men were camping around the village of Aveyron-Bergelle, where she stayed. She herself enjoyed a few days without her exhausting journeys as *liaison agent*, but tried and kept a careful balance in her interactions with the maquis men:

I relaxed gratefully. I spent long hours [...] reading and resting or discussing things with the young staff officers [...]. They were gay and intelligent and most of them had long record of underground activities. But I found that social relations with them were no simple matter: young men frustrated of the company of women for long periods are not easy to deal with. It was difficult to be both amicable and distant, friendly to all and friendly to none. I liked one of them in particular, a Toulouse medical student, but he had to suffer the constant jeers of his friends.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 154-155

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

The very presence of Walters among the maquis men was enough to create suspicion of immorality: she had to establish boundaries herself and to stress her precautions in her memoirs. Even if her story is also one of comradeship with many of the maquis, she was obviously not entitled to entirely share in the brotherhood which bounded male fighters. She was even suspected of sowing discord between them and was sometimes clearly told that she was not welcome to stay with some maquis groups. Let us recall that her functions involved crisscrossing the Gers department and the Pyrenean region by bicycle. On a warm summer day of 1944, she decided to trade her lady's tweed suit for pink shorts. When she met Yves de Changins, a Jedburgh of the Bugatti mission, he made her aware of how inappropriate he found her attire: 'My dear girl, do you know that a maquis is a place where women are not meant to be, as a rule? And what do you think the men say when they see you trotting past in shorts?'<sup>28</sup>

During the same mission, she asked if she could spend the night within a maquis camp – she had just arrived by bicycle, at night, to bring a message. According to her memoirs, American Major Horace Fuller – also a Jedburgh of the Bugatti mission – abruptly answered: 'Hate having women in the maquis'. He let her stay for the night, however, after discovering that she was ill.<sup>29</sup> No doubt that Jedburgh, whose teams were all-male, considered women agents as troublesome amateurs – even when these women had spent more time than them in the field. Furthermore, the experience of other female agents in the field confirms that to be taken seriously in their job, they had to put aside any expression of their femininity.<sup>30</sup> That is likely the main reason for Colette's disgrace: she did not respect these implied rules.

Meanwhile, her relationship with Starr slowly deteriorated between her arrival in January and the summer of 1944. He finally replaced her as a liaison agent; her job was to be done by Philippe Gunzbourg and Marguerite Merchez. Now out-of-work, she decided to write a 'maquis gazette' to entertain maquis men before combat. Starr then tried her patience by ordering her to become the secretary of the chief of a Spanish maquis group. The guerrillero Tomas Ortega (Camilo) brought valuable men to the maquis and Hilaire planned to stay in his good graces. Walters' new mission was mostly to become the confidante of an expatriate resistance member who often got lost in his memories of Spain:

I wasted hours with Alcazio in Castelnaud.<sup>31</sup> At two in the morning, he would call me to type reports for him [...]. At three or four in the morning, I usually

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<sup>28</sup>Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony*, pp. 216.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Patinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup>Most names are modified in the original version of 1951. For clarity, this article uses the names of the French edition (2012).



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succeeded in extracting myself from Alcazio's confidences and take the crumbled piece of paper with his six-line report to the Patron. The Patron would smile and throw it in the fire without even bothering to read it.<sup>32</sup>

It is hard to imagine a male agent accepting such an affront and such a waste of his ability. Colette was indeed hit hard by her relegation, reporting in her memoirs:

[...] the Patron called me to his PC [Poste de Commandement or local headquarters]. I felt a little more like an orderly every time he did: ended were the days of chatting in the garden and allowing me to carry out my missions according to my own initiative.<sup>33</sup>

On 28 July 1944, Starr sent her back to London to report on her mission. She followed this order, despite her disappointment at leaving the region before its Liberation,<sup>34</sup>

The origin of the dispute between the organiser and his liaison agent remains obscure. According to researchers who have seen Walters' personal archives, Starr had her arrested for having sexual relations with a maquis man and finally decided to send her back to London for this very reason. Burésie, a Russian veteran of the Foreign Legion who became Starr's bodyguard, would have carried out this arrest. Colette always refuted the accusation.<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that almost two months had passed between the moment the relationship between Starr and Walters started to deteriorate and her effective dismissal, which tends to suggest there is another cause that is independent of her supposed affair. Such a criticism would obviously never have been made against a male agent, as during their training, the SOE hired women to check that the agents would not talk about their mission, even in the company of an 'agent provocateur'. This was not a part of the training of female agents.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, once in France, some male agents felt that a dissolute life was the best cover for their secret activities, and nothing suggests that the SOE disapproved such choices.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony*, p. 140.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 221. For the exact date: TNA HS9/339/2. Miss A.M. Walters, 18 September 1944. *Report on Mission in France*.

<sup>35</sup>Daniel Hewson, postface to Anne-Marie Walters, *Parachutée au clair de Lune. Une Anglaise dans la Résistance française* (Marseille : Gaussen, 2012), pp. 257- 264 - translation from : Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony*.

<sup>36</sup>Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, p. 72 ff.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114 ff.

A question remains, was Walters' story the reflection of the SOE adapting to the customs of the French resistance? The traditional gendered division of roles adopted within the resistance has been amply demonstrated.<sup>38</sup> This was always an argument for Buckmaster, who claimed that his service had to fall in line with the resistance's practices. Nevertheless, the arbitration of the feud between Starr and Walters reveals a different story.

### **Arbitration: Double Standards or Unfounded Allegations?**

Sent back to London at the end of July 1944, Walters started a long journey through Spain and Algiers. By the time she arrived in London, Starr's report on her had already been received at SOE headquarters. He blamed her for a lack of discipline, her superficiality, and her loose morals.<sup>39</sup> Part of his accusations were supported by other reports and testimonies, all marked by strongly gendered biases.<sup>40</sup> Her personal SOE file reveals ambivalent comments. In July 1943, a report stated that she was

A keen, very intelligent girl with a realistic practical sense. Ample courage, determination and a sense of humour. She has marked latent possibilities but is at present immature, inexperienced and not sufficiently in control of herself for subversive work. With maturity she should prove a girl of exceptional qualities.<sup>41</sup>

The following October, the tone had evolved:

She is well-educated, intelligent, quick, practical and cunning. She is active minded, curious and has plenty of imagination. She is keen and, on the whole, worked hard, displaying outstanding initiative. Nevertheless, she is erratic and was inclined to be inattentive when she was not particularly interested. She has a very strong character, is domineering, aggressive and self-confident. She is vain and rather conceited. She has been badly spoilt [...]. She is rather an exhibitionist and hates being ignored. She resents discipline or any attempt to thwart her wishes. She is irritable and impatient of the mistakes of others less quick and intelligent than herself. She is inclined to get over-excited and is slightly hysterical. She is rather more immature than would appear at first sight [...]. She would make as many enemies as friends. She will not hesitate always

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<sup>38</sup>Catherine Lacour-Astol, *Le genre de la Résistance*, (Paris : Presses de Sciences-Po, 2015) ; Margaret Collins Weitz, *Les combattantes de l'ombre. Histoire des femmes dans la Résistance*, (Paris : Albin Michel, 1997).

<sup>39</sup>Hewson, pp. 257-264.

<sup>40</sup>Robert Gildea, *Comment sont-ils devenus résistants ? Une nouvelle histoire de la Résistance, (1940-1945)* (Paris : Editions des Arènes, 2017), pp. 141-142.

<sup>41</sup>TNA HS9/339/2. SAB reports STS, 7-29-43

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to make use of her physical attractiveness in gaining influence over men. In this respect she is likely to have a disturbing effect in any group of which she is a member. This influence was clearly discernible here. She has the brains, and to some extent the character to do valuable work. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether she should be employed. As an individual she is likely to be conspicuous. She would almost certainly resent occupying a subordinate position, yet she does not appear to be temperamentally suited to have authority over others. She will probably exercise an unsettling influence upon many with whom she comes into contact [...].<sup>42</sup>

Other instructors drew similar conclusions.<sup>43</sup> Even if seen as vividly informed by gendered representations, these previous reports gave credit to Starr's discontentment. They seem to show that there was nothing else there than a conflict of personalities in which Walters' chances were tenuous. She was younger – Starr was forty at the time – less experienced, and overall a woman who did not comply with the discretion expected from her gender. None of this was to plead in her favour. But negative reports within SOE were not restricted to women. Male or female, SOE recruits were expected to develop aggressivity, and presented strong-minded and unusual personalities.<sup>44</sup> Starr himself made many mistakes during his training, defying secrecy and security orders many times.<sup>45</sup> Joining the SOE after his younger brother John, George Starr made the following impression on his instructors:

He has given for reason of wanting to do the work, the fact that he was not going to be beaten by his young brother. He is continually making aggressive contradiction and assertions and is the worst type of know-all, namely one who is often right and can seldom be proved wrong. He is a bore who has a very high opinion of his own ability. From the point of view of security, he will probably be conscientious [...]. He is the least popular member of the group.<sup>46</sup>

Neither Starr's nor Walters' file was unanimously laudatory – far from it. They do not appear sufficient as evidence to take one's word over another. The situation even worsened with Walters' arrival in London; in September 1944, she brought far more serious accusations against Hilaire:

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<sup>42</sup>TNA HS9/339/2. STS 37 B – 26-10-43

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.. [Training reports]

<sup>44</sup>Pollack, 'Genre et engagement dans la Résistance', paragraph 13; Alain Dewerpe, *Espion, une anthropologie historique du secret d'État contemporain* (Paris : Gallimard, 1994), pp. 213-214.

<sup>45</sup>TNA HS/9/1407/1. GR. Starr (@Hilaire, Gaston). STS 23a 7/7/42. STS 23a. L/Sgt Ree, 21/7/42.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.. STS 5 –25/6/42

Hilaire is a very courageous, very patient and disciplined person but he has been in France too long and is very tired, I also believe very depressed at not having seen his wife and children for so long; he deserves a well-earned rest and a long one. We got along very well up to D-Day as long as we were leading an ordinary agent's life, but after it suddenly became difficult, he went for days and nights without sleeping one minute, was very worried and concerned with the first maquis organisation and very much over-worked. Thus it was that he simply followed blindly his impulses (and sometimes shrewdly given advice) without stopping to think of the consequences.

A small example: he adopted a Russian as 'Garde de corps' (which was hardly necessary in a maquis of 1200 men). The Russian, Burésie, was an ex-Foreign Legion soldier, a dangerous and blood-thirsty character and slightly mad who suggested and carried out horrible tortures on captured miliciens [...]

It was also quite wrong in my opinion to lower oneself to the standards of the Gestapo by torturing miliciens and collaborators to make them reveal the whereabouts of their colleagues – some were beaten until blood spurted all over the walls, others were horribly burnt: one man's feet were held in the fire 20 minutes and his legs were slowly burnt off to the knees; other tortures are even too horrible to mention. A good number of people were also shot. Had Hilaire not been influenced in all this (and Burésie played a great part in suggesting, encouraging and carrying out those tortures) I am sure he would never had started this.<sup>47</sup>

These allegations were likely to damage the reputation of the entire organisation. Buckmaster investigated them on his own and totally cleared Starr, concluding at the end of December 1944:

[...] I have carefully investigated the charge against Lieut/Colonel G.R. Starr in connection with the incident of the alleged tortures of German officers, and find quite definitely that the charge is totally unsubstantiated. I would add that in my personal view it is a travesty of the facts to impute sadism to Colonel Starr [...]. I should be most grateful if something could be done to offer him a job in his present rank [...].<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>TNA HS9/339/2. Miss A.M. Walters, 18 September 1944. Report on Mission in France.

<sup>48</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1. From Colonel Buckmaster to AD/E, 30 December 1944, Confidential – Copy.

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All accusations were purely dismissed by the command of F Section, without further explanation. Starr was expected to finish his mission without interference and even his future assignment was about to be planned. The entire event left very few traces and it is likely that the protagonists were forbidden to talk of it outside of the SOE. On 4 November 4 1944, Walters signed the usual form by which agents committed themselves not to disclose details about their mission without authorisation.<sup>49</sup> A discrete allusion in her memoirs – originally published in 1946 – tends to prove that she always stuck to her version. She quoted a conversation she had with André Bonnet, a double agent made cynical by the spectacle of the Gestapo's treacheries and tortures. When she argued that resistance fighters proved that 'humanity isn't bad', she remembers him answering: 'You've been away so much [...]. You don't know everything that goes on, even in this maquis. When men are pushed to a certain pitch, they do anything.'<sup>50</sup>

This is the one and only public trace of the matter. Buckmaster had made up his mind, based on his evaluation of his agents' personalities. And this evaluation was obviously biased. While Starr's future within the SOE was being settled by Buckmaster, Walters was dismissed as soon as Starr sent his first negative report on her. Thus, when she stopped over in Algiers on her way back to London, she was asked to return to South-West France to coordinate Jedburgh teams. We can only suppose that this proposal was made by the Massingham section of the SOE which operated from Algiers and whose shortage of recruits was even worse than that of the London branches. According to Walters, F section refused a reassignment because of Starr's report. In any case, while Buckmaster always thought very highly of Starr, he lost all faith in Walters. On 8 January 1945, he summarised his position in irrevocable terms:

When the matter was first raised [...] I explained that Colette (Miss A.M. Walters) was an unreliable witness because she suffered from the deluded idea that every man she came across fell in love with her and she bore a grudge against Starr because he did not comply.

Col. Starr appreciated her courage which was of high order, but so far from having a high opinion of her capacity as an agent and of her judgment, requested her removal. The matter boils down to the word of an excitable and romantic-minded young girl against that of a hard-bitten and utterly reliable Lt-Col. who is easily the most popular and most respected agent in the South-West of France. My opinion of Starr is reinforced by that of Col. Monnet, commanding the Brigade of the Armagnac who gave him very high praise indeed.

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<sup>49</sup>TNA HS9/339/2. *Declaration*. 4 November 1944.

<sup>50</sup>Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony*, p. 209.

I think that [the] suggestion that Starr should be asked to reply in person to the allegations of Miss Walters is an excellent one, but I cannot help the feeling that a mountain is being made of a molehill and that Starr will be disagreeably surprised to learn that the people whom he believed to have his confidence doubt his word.<sup>51</sup>

All was said in a few words: it was more important to preserve Starr's reputation than to investigate Walters' allegations. It is true that Buckmaster was already thinking of Starr's next mission, whereas Walters, as a woman, was not meant to be employed again. Buckmaster would not change his mind, even when proof would accumulate against Hilaire. To him, it was the word of the 'romantic-minded' Miss Walters against that of the gallant Lieutenant-Colonel Starr. His insistence and the caricature he gave of Walters as a superficial 'girl' even suggests that he used common biases against women to discredit her and bury the case.

### **Using Common Gender prejudices to Discredit an Embarrassing Witness?**

The virulence of Buckmaster's notes have indeed two potential explanations: either he was convinced that Colette lied shamelessly, or he felt that he had to protect Starr to keep him available for further missions, and protect the entire SOE from a pending scandal. Many clues give credence to Walters' version of events. First, her report provides multiple details; if these were lies, the deception was carefully built. In addition, Starr had been noticed for his aggressivity ever since his training period.<sup>52</sup> He also might have had a penchant for violence; his personal papers contain this undated note:

When I got back to England, I faced a court of inquiry for ill-treating German prisoners. Anne-Marie Walters had started it because she hated my guys because I threw her out of France and sent her home for indiscipline. Very lucky I didn't have her shot. She never forgave me, and when she got back, she started these stories [...].<sup>53</sup>

Lastly, it seems that Starr, a former MI5 agent in Belgium, who was repatriated via Dunkerque, had pursued his secret activities at the beginning of the war and was tortured by the enemy.<sup>54</sup> Raymond Escholier suggested it in his book, adding in very chosen words that Starr's practices were more than unorthodox:

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<sup>51</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1. From Col. Buckmaster to AD/E, 8 January 1945.

<sup>52</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1. STS 5 – 25/6/42.

<sup>53</sup>Imperial War Museum, London (IWM) 03/3/1. Papers of George Starr. Dossier 2, Tape 1-9.

<sup>54</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1. From Colonel Buckmaster to AD/E, 30 December 1944.

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Nothing was above his courage. It is true that Hilaire carries for ever in his flesh the indelible marks of German fierceness. One of his close relations got to see his torso, tortured by Nazis in 1941; he described for me this scarred back, crisscrossed, lacerated, burnt: a real lunar landscape, he said.

That does not predispose one to indulgence. Furthermore, the Secret Service does not recruit among little saints or kind souls. Its agents do not care very much for their one life, and even less for that of others. This is not where you find conformist minds. Lawrence's disciples escape common measure [...]. With all due respect to sensitive hearts, their law is often that of the jungle. [...] Were they to hesitate to strike when necessity commands it, their entire underground work would fall apart [...]

After that, don't be surprised if colonel Hilaire has today his apologists and his detractors, his followers and his resenters, if from both sides of the 'Channel' an atmosphere singularly charged with admiration and hatred surrounds this mysterious and unemotional man [...].<sup>55</sup>

Grateful to Starr for his actions within the resistance, that book will not say more.

This excerpt already tells a lot about torture, which is rarely evoked in testimonies and archives except to denounce the enemy's practices. Altogether, these allusions tend to confirm Walters' allegations. There is more, convergent testimonies led the SOE to open a court of enquiry despite Buckmaster's protests. After the facts, Starr stated that he had asked for the procedure himself, so as to clear his name.<sup>56</sup> Yet, nothing in his file confirms this declaration. What is certain is that the enquiry process was brought about by the spontaneous testimonies of officers who had heard Starr himself talk of the facts.

On 30 October 30 1944, Starr was in the United Kingdom, where he raised the issue of torture during a mess dinner in the presence of about fifteen officers among which was Lieutenant-Colonel L. H. C. Woolrych. On 2 November, Woolrych sent this letter to Air Commodore Archibald Robert Boyle, in charge of air security within the SOE:

[...] There is no doubt, both from Miss Walters' report and from Lt Col. Starr's own narrative on Monday, that they tortured prisoners in a fairly big way. It might be answered, of course, that this was the work of the FFI which Lt Col Starr was powerless to prevent. He recounted to us, however, with

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<sup>55</sup> Translated from: Raymond Escholier, *Maquis de Gascogne*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>56</sup> IWM 03/3/1. Papers of George Starr. File 2, Tape 1-9.

considerable relish, the episode of a capture he made personally, and for which, of course he must accept responsibility. Apparently, he was out in his car with his Russian 'bodyguard' Burésie, when he saw a large car approaching at speed and driving towards the Spanish frontier [...]. He found it to contain a German man and woman aged about fifty and twenty-three respectively. Both had Gestapo badges; the girl was far gone in pregnancy. Apart from the fact that they were Gestapo he had no evidence against them and did not even know who they were. He handed them over to the Russian who tortured both of them in the most revolting fashion for 7 days. As they were both unwilling to talk, Starr had them both shot, after refusing the girl's plea to have her life saved if only on account of the child.

Starr's recital caused something like consternation amongst my officers who felt it was hardly worthwhile winning a war on these terms. The indignation was increased when a rumour got about that there was a possibility of a further decoration being awarded to Starr. In fact, one officer who was present, who had won the DSO in the last war, declared that he would throw back his decoration to the army as a protest if a similar decoration were to be given to this man.

[...] I cannot help feeling that conduct of this kind must do a great deal to queer the pitch of the Allied Crimes Commission and may, indeed, cause an awkward repercussion for the Organisation.<sup>57</sup>

With so many witnesses and a second written testimony, the SOE finally had to face up to the problem. On 5 January 1945, the SOE's hierarchy noted that Walters's allegations did not concern a one-off event but regular practices over the course of an extended period of time.<sup>58</sup> A court of enquiry was set up to hear officers present during Starr's dinner confidences, as well as Walters and Yvonne Cormeau, Starr's radio officer on the field.<sup>59</sup> Neither French witnesses nor the Russian Burésie were summoned.<sup>60</sup> This strategy obviously aimed to prevent the matter from growing to an international scale. At the same time, this made Starr's defence easier, as he was free to invoke the initiative of Burésie and individuals within the French resistance groups.

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<sup>57</sup>TNA, HS9/1407/1. From L.H.C. Woolrych (cdt group B) to Air Commodore A.R. Boyle.

<sup>58</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1. Copy. Personal and confidential. From A/CD to AD/E. 5 January 1945.

<sup>59</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1. Personal and Confidential. From Commandant, B group to col. Ram. 20 January 1945.

<sup>60</sup>Hewson, pp. 257-264.



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In the end, this protected the SOE's reputation which would have been jeopardised by such facts becoming public. The problem was to be solved by discretion.

The court of enquiry heard the witnesses in February 1945. The hearings and the court's conclusions were included in Starr's personal file. Unfortunately, they are barely readable: the ink has for the most part faded, not to mention that the file has probably been expunged.<sup>61</sup> A file had been gathered for Starr's defence where the SOE's highest-ranking officers sang his praises. In a document dated end of December 1944, Brigadier Mockler-Ferryman stated that Hilaire was 'A brave, reliable, hard-working, persevering and tactful officer, but inclined to be swayed by the opinion of those around him. Thorough knowledge of France and all types of Resistance work'.<sup>62</sup> Not only did he vouch for his agent, but he also provided him with a line of defence and concluded that in the near future, Starr's knowledge of France would be useful to the service.<sup>63</sup> Needless to say, Buckmaster's contribution to this concert was in unison.<sup>64</sup> Major-General Gubbins soberly added in January 1945: 'I concur'.<sup>65</sup>

The SOE's opinion was forged. Starr was to be supported by all means, whereas Walters' disloyalty was to be sanctioned. Moreover, attacks on her reputation became a part of the strategy to stifle and bury an embarrassing story. Hilaire had taken the precaution to send his negative report on Colette to London before she arrived there, which preventively discredited her word. The officer who debriefed her four days before she had given her own report – most probably Vera Atkins<sup>66</sup> – declared in September 1944:

Miss Walters. She seems to have an idea of the unfavourable reports received by us and is in a most aggressive mood [...]. I do not doubt her courage, which I believe to be very great, but having said that, one has said everything. She has neither loyalty nor discretion [...].<sup>67</sup>

Questioning the loyalty of Walters in such circumstances is consistent with the practices of a secret service jealous of its reputation. She had accused a senior officer, breaking the code of silence as well as the hierarchical traditions, we can suppose that

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<sup>61</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1. *Court of Enquiry to investigate the conduct of Lt-Col. G.R. Starr of SFHQ Mission "Wheewright"*; and Hewson, pp. 257-264.

<sup>62</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1. Special confidential report – Type of Commission "Emergency". Document signed by Mockler-Ferryman, 22/12/44

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid. Documents by Buckmaster, 3/1/45 and 4/1/45.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Hewson, pp. 257-264.

<sup>67</sup>TNA HS9/339/2. VA/FR/7269. 14/9/44. Misses Fauge, Wilen, and Walters.

any junior officer in her position would have suffered counter-accusations of disloyalty. More astonishing is the way Buckmaster used her gender to compromise and silence her. From the autumn of 1944, the chief of F Section wrote numerous reports and notes attacking her on her morality as a woman rather than dwelling on her qualities as an agent. Studied for themselves, the declarations he made only serve to show how strong gendered representations were, even within a service known as a trailblazer of women's recruitment for military missions. However, when seen in the context of the multiple accusations made against Starr, they become a strategy to undermine a key witness in an affair likely to have an impact on the reputation of the entire service. The obvious conclusion is that Buckmaster, consciously or not, used common gendered biases to undermine Walters and to counter her accusations.

This strategy proved to be more than efficient. With SOE command standing behind him, Hilaire was totally cleared by the court of enquiry.<sup>68</sup> Following the line suggested by his superiors, he argued during his hearing that if Burésie and some French resistance members had tortured enemies, it was without his knowing. Thus, he could return to service and be sent to Germany, where he worked as a bomb-disposal expert for SHAEF until 1947.<sup>69</sup> He received the Distinguished Service Order in July 1945 and a Military Cross in April 1946.<sup>70</sup>

As for Walters, she was also eager to pursue the war to its very end. After her return to London in the autumn of 1944, she relentlessly asked to meet with Buckmaster to obtain a new assignment. Without surprise, her requests were denied. The SOE's Air Branch – whose officers had contributed to accusations against Starr – pleaded her case in vain in December 1944: 'D/AIR was very anxious for something to be settled, as he felt that this organisation was responsible up to a point for placing her after her outposting'.<sup>71</sup> Yet, Buckmaster always stood by the argument that, since British agents were no longer welcome on French soil, she was unemployable.<sup>72</sup> She never won her last battle, the recovery of her personal belongings that she had left behind in France before being sent back to London. She was told that as they had been bought with SOE funds, they were not hers.<sup>73</sup>

Tired of fighting, she finally had her father write Buckmaster a letter trying to settle the matter man to man. The exchange was delightful. Walters' father chose the following line:

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<sup>68</sup>IWM 03/3/1. Papers of George Starr. File 2, Tape 1-9 and Hewson, pp. 257-264.

<sup>69</sup>IWM 03/3/1. Papers of George Starr. File 2, Tape 1-9

<sup>70</sup>TNA HS9/1407/1.

<sup>71</sup>TNA HS9/339/2, *Matters Outstanding, From F/FIN to F/AIM*. 6 December 1944.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>TNA HS9/339/2 - Letter from Col. Buckmaster to F. P. Walters, 27 January 1945.

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I have always doubted whether it was right to invite young girls to accept such risks, and to place their parents in the cruel dilemma that they must either veto a patriotic ambition, with all the effects on family life that would produce, or accept to share the responsibility for something they do not approve [...]. I do therefore beg that you will see her and allow her to speak freely with you [...].<sup>74</sup>

Buckmaster's response sounded final:

I am extremely glad that you have written thus frankly about your daughter and am most anxious that any feeling of unfairness or bad treatment should be thoroughly ventilated. I should be extremely glad to see you regarding her as she has been somewhat of a problem to us.<sup>75</sup>

### Conclusions

Walters' evaluations show that in the space of a few months, she went from being seen as a courageous but undisciplined agent to being considered a heavy burden to the organisation. In all fairness, this probably would have been the case for any junior officer in her situation, as she had reported her commanding officer's misconduct in the field.

What is more interesting is how quickly gendered biases were used against her. If enlistment to the SOE represented to some extent a way towards emancipation for women, their journey within the service was marred by prejudice from the early days of training to the very end of their missions. Walters' story reveals not only how much gender weighed on the way agents' words were received, but also how easily the SOE could discredit its female agents when command felt it necessary to protect the organisation

Finally, she found some recognition in the media – albeit a media under vigilant SOE control, which kept a right of censorship on any public intervention by a former agent. She gave an interview to the BBC in the spring of 1945 and contributed to some newspaper articles.<sup>76</sup> She even went back to South-West France in the company of an American press attaché – to the great displeasure of the SOE, which feared she would spread rumours about Hilaire.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>TNA HS9/339/2 - Letter from F. P. Walters to col. Buckmaster, 22 January 1945.

<sup>75</sup>TNA HS9/339/2 - Letter from Col. Buckmaster to F. P. Walters, 27 January 1945.

<sup>76</sup>TNA HS9/339/2 - '*Cut Material for Parachute Girl*'; and TNA, HS9/339/2 - '*Went to join the Maquis – Her own Account of Secret Activities*'.

<sup>77</sup>TNA, HS9/339/2 - Notes and letters April 1945.

Most surprisingly given the history of events described here, Walters was awarded an MBE during the same period and with the following commendation:

She worked courageously for six months in difficult conditions, and her commanding officer has commented on her personal courage and willingness to undergo any danger. It is recommended that this FANY officer be appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (Civil Division).<sup>78</sup>

The SOE's command might have felt that it was somehow necessary to balance its judgement given her contacts in the press; such a citation had also the advantage of erasing all traces of previous disagreements.

The matter indeed did end there.

After the war, Walters married the French resistance member Jean-Claude Comerts, and lived in France and Spain, where she specialised in the translation and adaptation of adventure novels for young people, – a socially more acceptable activity that must have pleased her father.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>TNA, HS9/339/2 - Walters' Service History, April 1945. FANY is an acronym for First Aid Nursing Yeomanry – a source of many SOE agents.

<sup>79</sup> Hewson, pp. 257-264