

The British Special Operations Executive was commissioned in 1940 to help the French in their fight against Germany in WWII. SOE agents went to assist in France, Belgium, Poland, Denmark, and more. Churchill expanded the program in 1942 to include using women in the field. An estimated 200 SOE agents died during WWII.

The Gift of a Memory

I met her in San Francisco. Her name was Elisabeth. She was a proper British woman with big glasses that made



her blue eyes seem watery and large, as if you were looking at a well-dressed goldfish swimming in its comfortable home.

She served tea and small sandwiches with the crust sliced perfectly from the bread and she told me about her childhood in England while we sipped the tea and I ate the sandwiches.

She did not eat but talked all through that hot, weary September day, her perfect British accent purring softly through what seemed like every movie ever made about England and then her days at Oxford where she met, Harold - we called him Harry, she said.

She was nineteen and he was twenty-three. She was studying ancient Greek and he was a history major and he had commented on her ability to perform - that was the word he used - perform - the Times Crossword, in ink, in just a few minutes. He thought that was remarkable and he gave me several word puzzles and when I finished them all quickly, and correctly he asked if I wanted to meet a friend of his.

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Of course, I said yes, she said, for I was delighted to be in his company and everything about him seemed so dashing and keen.

She said keen without a trace of self-consciousness, and I



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let my eyes drift over the things in her sitting room, as she called it; the commemorative plates embossed with images of the royal family, the Union Jack under glass beside the smaller tricolor of France.

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She paused and stood, and followed my gaze to a photo. She went to it and picked it up with care and sighed a little and then she turned the photo, popped open the back and pulled out a neatly folded cloth.

She brought both the photo and the cloth to me and put them on the low table between us and said - yes, this was our little group. There, she said, pointing at a tall, thin man with red hair, that was Harry.

Harry, she said, recruited me to service with the SOE - Strategic Operations Executive. I wasn't sure what to say, but then she unfolded the cloth and showed me that it was a scarf and then, calmly, a faint gleam of mischief showing in her big blue eyes, she folded the scarf one way and then another and said: See my dear boy, it's just a scarf, but folded correctly, it becomes a map of France.

I sat there, mutely, a cup of tea in one hand, a sandwich in the other, while this proper old British lady, erect and prim at somewhere near seventy, proceeded to tell me about parachuting into occupied France, her French lover, who betrayed her to the Germans, her incredible escape, and how that scarf had

helped save her life.

I thanked her and thanked her for her time and the tea and sandwiches, and she walked me to the door and then she asked me to wait a moment.

She returned with a small square of violet colored tissue paper with a piece of red twine around it.

For you, she said, so someone remembers what we did.

I thanked her again and left her there and hurried home clutching the tissue tightly. I got home and opened the package carefully and inside was the scarf. It was colorful, still, so

many years later and smelled faintly of vanilla and holding it up I looked at the pattern of the lines and saw roads, towns, and rivers but mostly, I saw a young girl, in love, and in danger, trying to do the right thing in impossible circumstances, and whenever I look at the scarf, I see her as she was then, and as she was when I knew her, and I know that she had given me a wondrous gift: the gift of remembering.