**Warrior Women**

**Vera Leigh – Episode One Transcript**

**Anna Ward:** This series was made possible with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. With thanks to National Lottery players.

Just a warning before we start, this episode contains an upsetting and graphic account of an execution.

Welcome to Warrior Women. A Royal Armouries series, where we tell the stories of women throughout history and explore what it really means to be a ‘warrior.’

We delve into the lives of complex characters, bust some myths and find out what weapons these women would have wielded. I’m your host, Anna Ward from the exhibitions team at the Royal Armouries.

In this episode we’re going to be talking about Vera Leigh.

What links the 1930’s Shanghai criminal underworld, Nazi occupied France and the shaving razor manufacturer Wilkinson Sword?

The answer is, of course, two British bobbies.

Their names were William Ewart Fairbairn and Eric Sykes, and they were members of the Police force in Shanghai which was said to be the most dangerous city in the world at that time.

They developed the ‘Silent Killing’ technique, a form of combat at close quarters in which you would dispatch of your enemy as quietly as possible.

I know what you are thinking, it’s a fairly unconventional way of policing, not very British you might say, but it was to be the British who would adopt this technique as part of its clandestine operations in France during the Second World War to subvert and sabotage the Nazi enemy.

Of course, it wasn’t the Shanghai Military Police doing the silent killing this time, it was Churchill’s secret agents who served in the SOE – or Special Operations Executive - who took part in covert activities and espionage behind enemy lines across Nazi-occupied Europe.

Formed in 1940 and nicknamed the ‘Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare,’ the largest and best-known unit of the SOE organisation was the one involved in operations in France, known as F Section.

And what about Wilkinson Sword? I hear you say, how were they involved in this? Aren’t they the ones that make our shaving products? Well, yes, they do but before they started making razor blades, they were a manufacturer of guns and you guessed it, swords.

Now, if you’ve travelled on the London Underground recently you might have seen posters advertising Wilkinson Sword razor blades which give a nod to the part that they played in the story of the SOE agents. The poster says:

‘A razor with quite a good blade is like a secret agent with quite a good accent.’

Of course, a good blade and a good accent would have been very useful things to have for an F Section SOE agent operating in enemy territory.

An exceptional grasp of the French language was an important trait for any new recruit so as not to raise suspicion. And for the time during a raid on enemy lines where the element of surprise was crucial, for this you needed a blade, or a knife to be more specific.

So, Fairbairn and Sykes (remember our two Shanghai policemen from earlier), they devised a knife for use in clandestine operations that could be concealed on the wearer and used during surprise attacks primarily in a swift stabbing motion or upward thrust.

The knife became known as the FS knife, after Fairbairn and Sykes, and the First Pattern, an example of which the Royal Armouries has on display in the War Gallery, was produced in 1941 by none other than the Wilkinson Sword company.

Ok, the question I’m sure you are all asking is whether the FS knife which was manufactured by a company that would go on to become a leading brand in the shaving market was indeed “the best a man can get”.

Ok, so I’ve taken some creative license stealing from Wilkinson Sword’s rival Gillette, but the answer is yes, the FS knife is considered one of the most perfect, silent killing weapons ever devised. Over two million were produced in Britain alone and it was used several times over to influence the design of other knives later on.

And for the SOE agents who were trained to use them, not only was the FS knife the best a man could get, but it was also the best a woman could get, because, out of the more than 400 SOE agents in F Section who were part of Churchill’s secret army of spies dedicated to aiding the liberation of France, 39 of them were women.

Now, the idea that women should be allowed to carry arms, let alone use them, would have been unthinkable back then. In the early years of the war, at least, the British public would not have stomached the idea of sending women into danger and allowing women to work as SOE agents was initially fiercely resisted by the authorities.

Women had proved themselves useful to the war effort, but on the home front, from working in munitions factories to clerical work and nursing, and only occasionally abroad and certainly not as secret agents.

However, sending male agents into France became increasingly problematic from the summer of 1942 as men of working age were vulnerable to being rounded up by the Nazi authorities to work in Germany. Furthermore, able-bodied men became few and far between in Nazi occupied France and so fit, young male agents were more likely to raise suspicions.

Therefore, the authorities realised that women would be a useful asset as they would make for more inconspicuous spies. Afterall, it was common to see women travelling around occupied France – often on bicycles - looking for work and visiting family and they were rarely stopped and searched at checkpoints, allowing them to carry out tasks and missions, such as courier work that men were unable to do.

As well as the practical reasons for recruiting female agents, it was also felt by some that women possessed the right qualities to be an agent which in many respects, made them more suited to the job than men, as F Section’s recruiting officer, Selwyn Jepson, explained:

“Women, as you must know, have a far greater capacity for cool and lonely courage than men...Men don’t work alone, their lives tend to be always in the company with other men”

The use of women as SOE agents was finally given the go ahead in April 1942, as Selwyn goes on to explain:

“There was a good deal of opposition from various quarters until it went up to Churchill whom I had met before the war. He growled at me, ‘What are you doing?’ I told him and he said, ‘I see you are using women to do this,’ and I said ‘Yes, don’t you think it is a very sensible thing to do?’ and he said, ‘Yes, good luck to you.’ That was my authority.”

So, who were these female SOE agents operating in the ‘Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare’? Whilst many of the male agents were often from well-off, university educated backgrounds, recruited from the old boy networks of the top schools and universities and the upper echelons of the business and finance world, such openings at that time were not available to women.

As such, the female agents came from a range of different backgrounds. Some came through the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, or the Fannies as they were called, and military organisations such as Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

Others came with little or no military experience, responding to an ad in the newspaper for an interpreter or a broadcast on the wireless asking for people who had drawings or photographs of interesting areas they had visited in the last few years.

As such, a surprising number of female agents came from middle to lower middle-class backgrounds, among them were shop assistants, clerks, a hotel receptionist and even a professional dancer.

Agents were selected for various personal qualities; an exceptional grasp of languages was an important trait. Dual nationality was prized because it usually meant an expert knowledge of a particular country and the way people lived so those agents could fit in perfectly to a foreign society without raising any suspicion.

One such agent was Vera Leigh who also came to the SOE with experience of working for the resistance movement in France at the beginning of the war, making her the perfect candidate to take up a position with F section.

Leigh’s story is a tale of rag to riches. She was born Vera Glass on 17 March 1903 in Leeds but was abandoned as a baby. However, her fortunes picked up when she was adopted by a wealthy American horserace trainer, Eugene Leigh, who had a stable near Paris.

After college, she gained experience as a dress designer and, along with two friends, established a boutique fashion shop in Paris, where she proved good at business and took her place as a smart society woman.

After the fall of Paris in June 1941, Leigh fled to Lyon and joined her fiancé and became involved with one of the underground escape lines guiding fugitive Allied servicemen out of the country.

In 1942, with the Germans on her trail, she crossed over the Pyrenees and after spending some months in a Spanish internment camp, was released with the help of a British Embassy Official and made her way via Gibraltar to England.

Upon arrival in London, she was quickly snapped up by the SOE. At her interview she was noted as a ‘smart businesswoman’ and that her pre-war life in Paris and perfect French made her a natural for the job.

Leigh began her training, like all new SOE recruits, at a shooting lodge up in Invernesshire, where the rugged landscape served well for physical training. It was here where agents would develop fitness and survival techniques, as well as training to use particular weapons and fighting techniques.

It is also where Leigh would have encountered the former Shanghai policemen, Fairbairn and Sykes, who devised the FS knife and from June 1942, were employed to instruct SOE agents on the ‘Silent Killing’ technique they developed in Shanghai. Dr Kate Vigurs, author of ‘Mission France: The True History of the Women of SOE’ explains more:

**Kate Vigurs:** SOE famously developed a lot of weapons for use by the agents but the one that stuck is the Fairbairn and Sykes knife. And it was devised by these two policemen who modestly named it after themselves.

Now they’d been out in Shanghai prior to the war, and they had been involved with bringing down drug barons and drug gangs. It was really quite a violent place. So, they started to develop this knife.

The first pattern Fairbairn and Sykes knife had a gold hilt, and it was silver. The idea is it is a thrusting blade as opposed to cutting, although it is very sharp on the edges, the idea is to thrust and pretty much anywhere that was a little bit squidgy, was where this knife would be most effective.

So, it was held in the palm of the hand and the idea was either an upwards or downwards movement as opposed to a cutting movement. And it’s extremely fine at the end, so it really can go through skin like a knife through butter.

Agents found it an incredibly effective knife, very easy to use. The later iterations of it were black, rather than silver because it was realised that these knives would primarily be used at night and if a searchlight flashed or the moon caught it as an agent was drawing it, it would catch the silver blade.

So, later models were black. And agents found them brilliant to work with, the only problem was, especially as a female agent, was hiding it because the whole idea behind SOE is you are clandestine, you’re working behind the lines, you’re in ordinary clothing, so you’re not going to be wandering round the streets, you know with a dagger in your hand, you need to conceal it.

And because of the length of it, I think the blade is about five and a half inches, it could be difficult to conceal. But agents were trained with them and there are reports er, Yvonne Rudelatt was said to be deft with a knife, she surprised everybody how good she was with it.

Virginia Hall was slightly terrified of it because she had to do a mock exercise where she had to slit somebody’s throat with the knife and when they turned round, she’s been using a red lipstick, and it really horrified her what she was about to do. So, primarily thrusting, can be used for cutting and extremely effective.

Other knives were developed, there was a lapel knife, there was a hatpin dagger, there was a sleeve dagger, but the F and S has probably gone down in history as being the most successful, and of course it’s still issued today.

**Anna Ward:** In addition to Silent Killing and knife training, Leigh would have been taught how to the use various firearms, including the standard issue submachine gun, the Sten.

The Sten, however, was not the first choice for the SOE organisation who had been working on their own prototype of submachine gun which would be more suitable for their purposes, as Keeper of Firearms and Artillery at the Royal Armouries, Jonathan Ferguson, explains:

**Jonathan Ferguson:** The interesting thing about the likes of SOE, or even other forces later on, you know, the American Special Forces units in Vietnam using versions of the Sten gun, is not so much that they are the ideal weapon for clandestine operations, it's that they're available.

This is the thing that was mass produced more than anything else. It's what's for dinner, as it were, when it comes to readily available submachine guns for the British to use. Where that's a bit weird is that SOE specifically had designed their own submachine gun. We have them in the collection here, known as the Welgun.

So, they didn't like where the Sten was going. They had their own concept for a submachine gun, developed it, tested it, but it was too late. The Sten was mass produced. The Sten was available.

**Anna Ward:** Despite this, the compact design of the Sten did serve its purpose, as Jonathan goes on to explain:

**Jonathan Ferguson:** Now, it did have a benefit for, clandestine operations insofar - and anyone that had a need to conceal it - because with the push of a button, you can take the buttstock off, you can take the magazine out, and you have something that will fit in a small bag or under a bed or in a wardrobe.

And of course, it doesn't immediately look like a firearm, although pretty quickly someone searching would realize that it was. But it can be made compact. Now. The downside there is, unlike the German mp40 where you just have to unfold the stock with this thing, you've got to reassemble it to use it.

But that didn't stop them using it. So, it was dropped for to partisans to use, SOE we made use of it and of course, it was the standard issue submachine gun of the British Army. So, the leader of every infantry section had one of these things.

Paratroopers used them. Vehicle drivers used them. Incredibly widely used. So, it's kind of a special weapon in the sense that it's not that special. It's made special by the user.

**Anna Ward:** As well as the Sten gun, Leigh would have been trained to use a variety of different firearms, including foreign weapons, indicating the need for agents to be adaptable in the field, as Kate Vigurs explains:

**Kate Vigurs:** The aim was that the use of firearms should become instinctive. And the idea was that trainees should be comfortable shooting as many types of weapons as possible because they never knew what type of weaponry they may come across in the field and be able to put to good use.

**Anna Ward:** In addition to the weapons that agents were likely to come across in the field, Leigh would have been introduced to weapons which had been specially designed for the SOE, but as Jonathan Ferguson points out, were used very little in the field:

**Jonathan Ferguson:** People like SOE you don't really want signature weapons unless they're doing sort of paramilitary operations where that might be an advantage. So, it’s kind of weird that they put so many resources into making special weapons for their use, and then didn't make a huge amount of use of them.

We even have a Browning 1903 in a special hip mount that you'd fire with a cable down your sleeve, you know, real kind of James Bond stuff, but they seem to have made very little actual use of that kind of sneaky beaky, secret agent stuff. Much more common was it was ordinary commercially available pistols and things like Sten guns.

**Anna Ward:** Whilst not every female agent was comfortable using a firearm, Leigh appeared to excel in their use. Her training report said she was ‘full of guts’, had kept up with the men and was ’about the best shot in the party’.

This may, in part, have been down to her former work as a dress maker which put her in a good position to handle weapons, here’s Kate Vigurs.

**Kate Vigurs:** Vera Leigh’s work prior to joining Special Operations Executive was actually in fashion. She’d originally wanted to be a jockey because she’d been brought up by a racehorse owner, but fashion had pulled her in and living so near Paris, the city of fashion she really wanted to get involved, so she set up a shop called ‘Rose Belvoir’ where she designed, and no doubt made, some of the clothes.

And this could have had a very positive effect on her as an SOE agent. It is said that one of her instructors remembered that she was very good with her fingers, and she could do fiddly jobs with charges and wires remarkably quickly and neatly.

So, the fact that she was used to intricate work, and having to concentrate quite possibly meant that when it came to making explosives, putting together detonators it really was a very positive thing for her.

**Anna Ward:** After completing their training in Scotland, agents moved onto Ringway Airfield, which we now know as Manchester Airport. But they weren’t there to board an Easyjet flight to Majorca as we might today.

In fact, they weren’t boarding a plane as much as jumping out of one, as the next stage of training involved learning how to parachute which is how the agents would be dropped into France for their mission. As Kate explains, it was not always plain sailing:

**Kate Vigurs:** You needed to do five jumps to get your parachute wings, so they did stationary jumps or jumps from a stationary balloon. They did jumps from an aircraft and they were required to do a night jump because infiltration would always be at night. And things went wrong.

Violette Szabo twisted her ankle, Odette Sansom smashed her face against the whole of the aircraft. Agents from other sections met an untimely death when their parachutes didn’t open, it was dangerous.

And I think the hardest thing for the women is they got their parachute wings, but they couldn’t wear them because women were not training to parachute at this stage of the war, not even Air Transport Auxiliary.

**Anna Ward:** Eventually, if agents had successfully passed all of these training procedures, they would be sent to a finishing school at Beaulieu House in the New Forest. It was only here that the real purpose of SOE and all their training was finally revealed to the prospective agents.

Training was completed with an education on clandestine life, with a particular focus on familiarising recruits with French customs and avoiding mistakes that would automatically give them away as English, such as not putting milk in her teacup first and remembering to look right and not left before crossing the road.

No doubt this would have been the easiest part of the training for Leigh who was accustomed to life in pre-war France, although even Leigh might not have been familiar with some of the changes that had occurred in France during the occupation, as Kate Vigurs explains:

**Kate Vigurs:** Many changes had occurred in France during the occupation. For instance, women were not given a cigarette ration so smoking in public could draw unwanted attention.

Coffee was only available without milk so asking for a Café au Lait would raise a few eyebrows. Certain food and alcohol were only available on set days of the weeks. Agents had to be aware of these changes which would be second nature to a French civilian. The smallest of errors could mark them out as different and potentially cost them their lives.

**Anna Ward:** After completing her training, Leigh finally had the chance to return to France on 14 May 1942 when she was dropped from a plane in the early hours, alongside another female agent, Julienne Aisner, and two male agents, in a field east of Tours in the Cher Valley.

The women made their way cross-country through the moonlit fields and lanes to the nearest railway station to catch the eight am train to Paris. Once in Paris, Leigh took up her assumed identity as Suzanne Chavanne and acted out her cover story as a miliner’s assistant which no doubt suited her well given her previous life in Paris running a boutique fashion business.

She threw herself enthusiastically into her new work as a courier, something which, according to her personnel file, she carried out with diligence. She was well respected amongst colleagues, earning her ‘high praise from her superiors in the resistance.’ Kate Vigurs describes what her job as a courier entailed:

**Kate Vigurs:** Day to day life as a courier specifically for Leigh would have involved going to rendezvous, meeting up with other agents, getting information and then having to relay it across the network. So, France was divided into a series of circuits or networks.

It’s a little bit like a patchwork quilt, and she worked for a subcircuit of a network called ‘Prosper’ which was primarily focused in Paris. One of her jobs was to liaise with another female agent, a lady called Julienne Aisner who ran a café at the Place des Ternes.

So, Leigh would frequently meet up with Aisner, they would sit and have a coffee, hiding in plain sight and discussed various things about the circuit that needed to be done or information that needed to be shared.

So, she would spend a lot of time travelling, a lot of time memorising information and being as security conscious as she possibly could, given that she was in the capital city of France at the time.

**Anna Ward:** Being security conscious, as Leigh and the other agents had to be, did not necessarily mean that she would have carried a weapon on her. In fact, despite the training that all recruits received on handling weapons, agents would be advised against carrying a gun as doing so in occupied territory would arouse suspicion and heighten the risk of arrest.

There was only one situation where it would be useful to have a weapon which is when you were landing with a parachute, and you didn’t have a cover story. Even then, agents were encouraged to consider how they would discard of the weapon after landing. As Jonathan Ferguson, points out, using a weapon as an agent was a last resort:

**Jonathan Ferguson:** If you've had to use a firearm as an SOE operative, something's gone wrong. You are probably about to be killed or captured. And they are more often than not going to be a last ditch try to fight your way out of trouble. God forbid maybe even, you know, take yourself out.

**Anna Ward:** Despite the good work that Leigh no doubt felt she was doing waging a secret war against the occupied forces in her beloved France, it is fair to assume that she would have longed for her pre-war life in Paris. For Leigh, the temptation to return to her days as a society woman before the Nazi occupation appears to have been too great, as Kate Vigurs explains:

**Kate Vigurs:** The fact that Leigh had previously lived in Paris, she’d escaped back to England across an escape route that she’d been helping to man and the fact she went back into Paris must have been extremely difficult. We find this with another agent as well, Noor Inayat Khan. In that they’re sort of sucked back into their old life.

And despite the fact that they’ve had training and been taught to avoid previous contacts and don’t go to places you used to go to, the agents, especially Leigh started to find herself drawn back into life. She went to her pre-war hairdressers, and she even bumped into her brother-in-law on the street.

At first, she pretended not to know him but that was really hard, so in the end she asked him to get involved in resistance activity with her, helping guide downed airmen through the streets from safehouse to safehouse.

**Anna Ward:** A number of fellow SOE agents reported after the war that they had warned Leigh of the dangers she was putting herself in by frequenting the same places she visited in her early life and renewing contact with some of her old acquaintances.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that she would eventually raise the suspicions of the German intelligence and one spy in particular, Hugo Bleicher, who was a Sergeant in the Abwehr (Nazi Germany's military intelligence agency). At first however, Bleicher did not seem interested in Leigh. He later said:

“For months I would watch her tripping along the pavement in the morning, so busy, so affairee. She was of no interest to me; so long as she kept out of my way, she could play at spies”

However, after Bleicher had failed to get the deputy leader of F Section, Nicholas Bodington, arrested during his visit to Paris in the summer of 1943, it is believed that in order to prove his loyalty to his superiors, he sacrificed Leigh by passing on intelligence which led to her arrest at the Cafe Mas on 30 October 1943.

As with anyone undertaking clandestine operations, Leigh was not protected by the Geneva Convention and therefore, not treated as a Prisoner of War. After a long period of imprisonment, she was taken to Natzweiler concentration camp where on the 6 July 1944 she was executed by the Nazi’s.

A warning here, Kate Vigurs’ description of Leigh’s final journey and execution contains distressing detail.

**Kate Vigurs:** Vera Leigh had been in prison for a considerable time, along with other SOE women, although she probably didn’t know that because they were kept well away from each other.

And eventually the camp guards were getting a little bit fed up with having these women in their care, so they asked the Reich Security, main office what they should do with them and the reply eventually came back “select four, send them to the nearest camp.”

So, Vera Leigh, Andrée Borrel, Sonia Olschanezky and Diana Rowden were selected to be sent to Natzweiler Struthof which was a men’s concentration camp, just on the outskirts of Strasbourg.

So, the women were taken by train, and they got to the local railway station where they were picked up by the Camp Commandant which is very unusual. He drove them up the mountain paths, into the gates of the camp and then drove them around. And their arrival had been at a time when most of the male inmates would have been coming back from their work detail, so they were very, very obvious.

In fact, another SOE agent, a man called Brian Stonehouse gave a very clear description of the four women arriving. They were then taken down to some cells. The site is on a hill, so they went down some steps and into some cells and around 6.30pm that evening, the crematoria oven was stoked to its maximum, optimum temperature and the women were taken out of their cells and down into the crematoria building.

They were told they were going to be given injections, and when one of them questioned this, they were told it was an inoculation for Typhus. One by one, the women were injected, and they were dragged out of the room, down into the corridor. That injection wasn’t for Typhus at all, it was a substance called phenol, carbolic acid. It had been used all over concentration camps.

However, they decided to give it to these women intravenously, whereas in other camps it was administered direct to the heart. So, there is a thought that they weren’t dead. They were taken to the crematoria ovens where one by one, they were burned.

And there is a story that one of them came to and scratched the face of the guard and this is how after the war the evidence came through about what had happened because he was interrogated, and he did speak out about the atrocities that had occurred at Natzweiler. So, these women went to a horrific death, and Vera Leigh amongst their number.

**Anna Ward:** Leigh was 41 years old when she was executed, reaching a status of martyrdom that inevitably comes from dying whilst fighting for freedom against an oppressive regime. So, is this what gives her the status of a warrior woman? We put that question to Kate:

**Kate Vigurs:** So, what made Vera Leigh a warrior woman is a very complex question. Because technically these women weren’t warriors, they weren’t soldiers. They were operating behind enemy lines, in civilian clothing and beyond the protection of the Geneva Convention.

Even worse than that actually, there was something called the ‘Nacht und Nabel’ this was something that Hitler came up with, saying that anyone who was caught resisting and who ended up in a prison or camp would disappear into the night and fog. So, technically and arguably, these women were not warriors but of course they were warriors.

Because they were making the sacrifices that men were making and far beyond that because they were operating without support, without protection, knowing that if anything happened to them, that would be the end of it. And they were trained like soldiers, they were basically soldiers but not in uniform.

They learned firearms skills, they learned about negotiating, they learned about working with the people in the countries they were in. Working alongside the French Resistance, helping them, aiding them, guiding them when things were a little complex. And those are all the skills of a warrior, of a soldier but they’re not recognised as such.

And even after the war, the likes of Vera Leigh and all the other female agents, there were 39 for F Section specifically, for France, they did not receive the same decoration or recognition as the men because they weren’t in uniform. They couldn’t receive the Victoria Cross for example, the highest decoration the women could get was the George Cross, a civilian decoration.

But they fought the same, they made the same sacrifices and some of them died in the same horrible ways, all with the patriotism in their hearts, knowing that they’d done their duty for their country and that to my mind, makes them warriors.

**Anna Ward:** We couldn’t agree more with Kate that Vera Leigh and the women of F Section are indeed warrior women. Born in Leeds, Leigh is a local heroine for us at the Royal Armouries who represents the bravery and sacrifice of a generation that were willing to put their lives at risk as the cost of protecting freedom.

Here at the museum, we have chosen to remember her in our own small way by naming a room after her, so next time you are in Leeds, come and visit us at the Royal Armouries and check out the Vera Suite.

The Vera Leigh episode was written using the following sources:

Books:

Dr Kate Vigurs, *Mission France, The True Story of the Women of SOE*, (Yale University Press, 2011)

Beryl E. Escott, *The Heroines of SOE F Section: Britain’s Secret Women in France* (Stroud: The History Press, 2010)

Rita Kramer, *Flames in the Field: The story of four SOE agents in occupied France* (Michael Joseph,1995)