THE LAST SECRET AGENT

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF A WW2 SPY
IN HER OWN WORDS

PIPPA LATOUR
WITH JUDE DOBSON

monoray

This book is Pippa's memoir and is based primarily on her recollections of this period in her life, interwoven with historical record and information from other sources where possible. Some gaps in her memory were inevitable and not all details could be verified. Dialogue has been reconstructed in places in the interest of the story.

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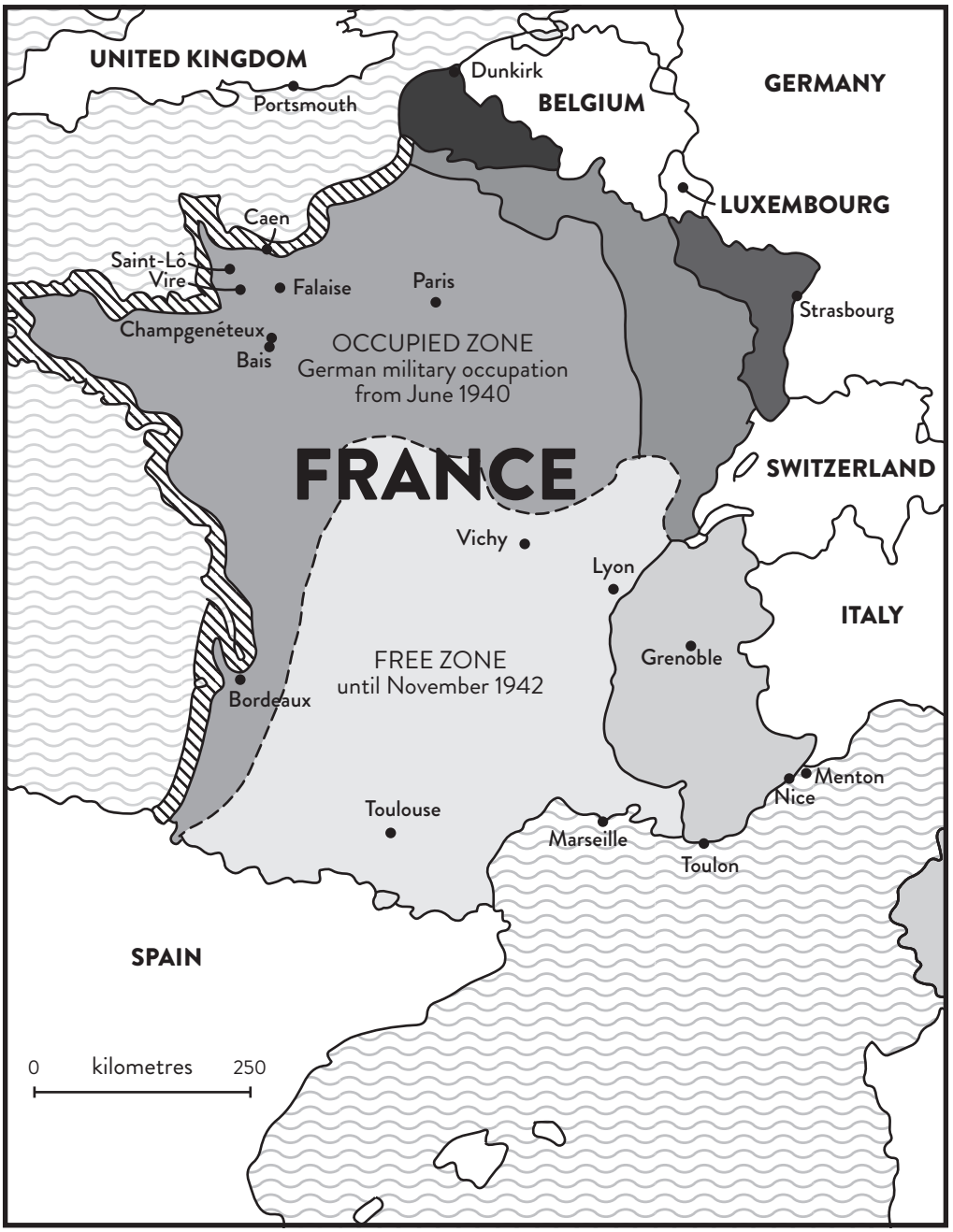
FRANCE 1940–1944



Military administration of Belgium and northern France

Territories annexed to Germany

Zone of German settlement

Italian occupation after November 1942

Coastal military zone

Demarcation line

FOREWORD

Pippa was much loved by the New Zealand Special Air Service. Even though her body finally aged, her spirit never did. I remember Pippa happily declaring, at her 100th birthday, that she had passed her medical and still had her own driver's licence.

For us as special operators, it was Pippa's fiercely independent spirit that we felt a kindred connection to, as well as the glint in her eye. Secretly, we all hoped we might shine at least half as brightly in our later years as she did in hers. But even we — as fond as we were of Pippa, and as secure as our environment is — only ever heard snippets of her story. Perhaps her great friend, Major David Hopkins, knew more. But David, ever fiercely loyal, would only allude to the tales of Pippa's derring-do — the details were never divulged.

So, this book is a rare and privileged glimpse into the life of the last surviving SOE agent to have seen action behind enemy lines in France. In many ways it is Pippa's last public service, her last contribution to freedom. It is a remarkable testament to one of

the most remarkable women I have ever met. As Selwyn Jepson, the recruiting officer for SOE F (French) Section, once said: 'Women have a greater capacity for cool and lonely courage than men.' Pippa's story, wonderfully told in the pages that follow, leaves the truth of that statement in no doubt.

In finally telling her story, Pippa does honour to the brave women in SOE and their French civilian allies, who served and suffered — and in many cases died — for our freedom. I hope that this story inspires other young people, especially young women, to take courage, to stand for what they value and, when faced by fearful odds, to set them ablaze.

Chris Parsons MNZM DSD
Commanding Officer NZSAS (2009–2011)

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Pippa in her WAAF uniform, circa 1942. *Pippa Latour private collection*.

PREFACE

My name is Phyllis Ada Latour, known to many in my later years as Pippa, and I am 102 years old. I am also known by other names — code names and alias names — because I was a World War II secret operative agent. This is my memoir, which finally tells the story of my life working behind enemy lines in France 80 years ago. It is a part of my life that, until now, I have intentionally never revealed to anybody. Not my husband (when I had one), nor my children — even when they became adults.

It would likely have stayed that way, which would have suited me perfectly, if it were not for my elder son finding something about me on the internet, some twenty years ago. Without the advent of the internet — something I could not have foreseen when I made the decision never to talk about these things in 1945 — my wish for secrecy would likely have remained intact. Because, as I see it, it wasn't anybody's business what I did in the war. It was my business. Mine alone.

My son was prompted to discuss the discovery with his younger

brother, concerned that their mother might be in some sort of trouble and that was why I had never mentioned it to them. He flew to New Zealand (where I live, as does his younger brother) to meet up with him. Together they decided to talk to me, and the two obvious questions were posed. Was this World War II operative, Phyllis Latour, their mother of the same name? And presuming that it was (as they had), why had I never mentioned this to them?

I could not lie to my sons once they asked me directly. Up until then, I had simply chosen not to tell them everything about my war. Instead I had told them what I thought they needed to know. I was a balloon operator for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in the Royal Air Force (RAF), and that was not incorrect: I did that job for three years. I am pretty sure I told them about my time in the Royal Navy records department before that. I just didn't tell them what came in the later stages of the war with the Special Operations Executive (SOE). And my former husband? I chose never to tell him because I saw how loose he was with quite sensitive information told to him by others. I thought if he was like that with their information, *my* information was never going to be kept secret by him.

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Before I start telling you about my life, you'll need some background on what SOE is. In June 1940, the Special Operations Executive was established by England's wartime prime minister Winston Churchill to wage a secret war using an underground army of sorts in enemy-occupied Europe and Asia. Its purpose was to conduct espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance in occupied

Europe (and, later, also in occupied Southeast Asia), as well as aiding local Resistance movements. Deliberately clandestine, the existence of SOE was not widely known even though some 13,000 people were involved. About 3,200 of these people were women. I was one of the women, and my job was to be a wireless operator in northern France, which I did in 1944.

Churchill instructed those, like me, tasked with the work across the English Channel to go forth and 'set Europe ablaze'. Sabotage and subversion behind enemy lines, and passing intelligence to Mother England, required courage, resilience and resourcefulness from those of us who agreed to these dangerous jobs. By working with local Resistance forces, our presence on the ground boosted their morale. They were, rightly, wondering when and how this dreadful war would ever end.

In France, with new identities and forged papers, we SOE agents covered hundreds of kilometres on foot, by bike, or on trains, all the time under the constant threat of arrest by the Gestapo should our identity be blown or the work we were undertaking be discovered. It was exhausting work, with the ongoing threat of possibly being betrayed by double agents and traitors. It was hard to trust anyone.

It was also not glamorous; don't think of me or my fellow agents as 007 types. Our job was to disappear — to fit in and not be noticed. Taking the job certainly didn't win you any friends in high places either; quite the opposite, in fact. There was plenty of tension between SOE and England's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, now known as MI6), which the Foreign Office had to deal with. The SIS viewed SOE with some suspicion. I did not know it at the time, but Sir Stewart Menzies, head of the SIS, argued

on many an occasion that SOE agents were 'amateur, dangerous, and bogus', saying that we would disrupt their own intelligence-gathering operations by blowing up bridges and factories. The SIS preferred to work quietly through influential channels and individuals, whereas SOE's way of operating was more grassroots. We also often backed anti-establishment organisations, such as the communists; I could only ever really trust communists in France. I also learnt after the war that Bomber Command and SOE did not always see eye to eye.

Although all these vested interests brought massive internal political pressure to bear on the fledgling organisation, SOE had Churchill as its ally; 'Churchill's Secret Army' not only survived, but thrived, throughout World War II. There was also resistance to our existence across in France. General de Gaulle was never keen to recognise our significance, and we definitely felt that on the ground there. Looking back, it was a strange and solitary existence I found myself in in 1944. I could only ever rely on myself — from the top echelons of the British establishment to the people on the ground with me in France, and everyone in between, I trusted very few people. That became ingrained in me in my early twenties as a survival instinct.

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Fast-forward 60 years to me in my eighties in New Zealand, where I have lived quietly for many years, keeping my head down about all that stuff. The discovery of this period of my life was a revelation to my sons and I have to say it caused some discord. If I am honest, I think there was some resentment that their mother

had actively chosen not to take them into her confidence. When confronted about that decision, I was at pains to explain that as much as I personally didn't want to talk about it, there was also something bigger behind this. I had signed an oath not to disclose anything about my war service with SOE. That pledge was something I knew I must honour, and that meant not telling a living soul — not even my family. I was subject to the rules of the Official Secrets Act, and that was not something I wanted to test. The stories were known only to me and the handful of trusted people I shared that hellish existence with. I had never wanted to revisit them. I had buried them. The flashbacks that had caused me to wake up in a sweat had by then become few and far between.

After the war, I simply disappeared. Given that I'd excelled at not being noticed as a spy in wartime, it was not so difficult to fade into an anonymous post-war existence. Besides which, the whole thing had been utterly exhausting, both mentally and physically, and I was completely fed up with double agents and collaborators and trying to figure out who I could trust. I had been fighting my own war within a war — there I was in France, and I couldn't even trust the French unless they were communists. If I say that to people now, they don't really get it, but it was the truth.

After the war ended, I was ready to move on with my life and vowed I would never step foot back in France after I left there in October 1944. And I never have. I have been asked more than once if I would go back, and the answer has always been a resolute no.

While I was silent about my experience, it seems that others were not. I heard about people wanting medals for this and that,

things they did in the war; people saying things that were not right; people writing things that were not right. I would simply think 'Poppycock — there's more poppycock coming out!' If people are going to write things, they must tell the truth — and the truth is not pretty; it's not good.

This book tells the truth about my war. I'm the last living female special operative from F Section, and I need to record what happened before I die. I would like to leave my story behind so that, perhaps, young women in particular might know what it was like for me back then.

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I am proud of being a woman in what was very much a man's world. Of the 430 SOE agents in France, only 39 of us were women and fourteen of our group never returned. We were a mixed lot, probably because we were chosen for our language skills and therefore were not your standard English girl. We were women of various descents, among them British, French, Polish, Finnish, American, or South African like me. We had different belief systems, too — Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, etc. Some of us were young and unmarried, others had husbands and children. Some were shop assistants, others were journalists. I had had no opportunity to even have a job because I was only eighteen when war broke out, so my vocation became 'fighting a war'.

What we women all had in common, though, was the knowledge that it was a dangerous job and that there was great hope from the hierarchy that we could do something our male counterparts could not: *survive*. We all knew that the remaining

life expectancy of a male wireless operator who entered occupied France was just six weeks, and on more than one occasion had it explained to us that the chances of us coming back were 50/50. It is a wonder that any of us actually agreed to the job — I am not sure people would do so today, but you have to understand that wartime is very different. We were all doing our bit, fighting for what we believed in, pushing back against a cruel and expansionist enemy.

Unlike other special forces, SOE operatives wore civilian clothes. That fact alone meant we could expect to be shot as spies if we were captured, and we were at risk of torture by German Gestapo operatives trying to extract information. This all came from the notorious Commando Order that Hitler passed in October 1942. It decreed that any commando or saboteur taken prisoner, whether uniformed or not, would be treated as a spy — even if they had attempted to surrender. They were to be handed over immediately to the Gestapo or the SD (the abbreviation for Sicherheitsdienst, another Nazi intelligence organisation) for immediate execution.

I could never escape that sobering thought. And as women there were even fewer protections for us if we were caught and survived the initial threat of execution. Many of the male SOE agents were treated much better by the German authorities than we were, because, allegedly, women were not covered by the Geneva Convention at the time. Our SOE women who died, died horrible deaths after enduring indescribable torture.

The hope, though, was that women could blend into the fabric of society better and draw less suspicion. We would also be able to move around more freely, because with so many French men of

working age being sent to Germany as forced labour, any 'new' men in a community were met with obvious distrust. The instruction to use women came from Churchill himself, with Selwyn Jepson, the recruiting officer for the French section of SOE, agreeing with him. After the war Jepson was quoted as saying: 'In my view, women were very much better than men for the work. Women . . . have a greater capacity for cool and lonely courage than men.' Many men were not of the same view as Jepson and simply did not believe that women should serve behind enemy lines. This was, as they saw it, not a place for the fairer sex, and they probably thought we weren't capable of it anyway. I, for one, felt that judgement at various points in training or on the ground and wanted to prove them wrong.

However, with intelligence-gathering from the front being so crucial to the war effort, women suddenly became useful on the front line, not just in the back room. Getting us into the thick of it was not so straightforward, though: the statutes of the British Army, Navy and Royal Air Force barred women from armed combat, so it required a workaround by the politicians of the day. That 'fix' had us joining the volunteer First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY). The FANYs were an amazing group of women, and they deserve their place in history. The corps' strength in World War II was 6,000 — of which 2,000 were also in SOE. I could contact the SOE FANYs at any time of the day or night from occupied France, secure in the knowledge that they would be there to hear my message and respond. Wonderful women. I can't tell you how important they were to me. They were my invisible, reliable lifeline to London and a former life that I often wondered whether I would ever be able to experience again.

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I was the first (and only) woman to be dropped solo by the Americans, and just the second woman they had ever dropped. (Nancy Wake was the first, a couple of day before me.) Once there I spent my days moving from place to place, only using fellow SOE agent Claude de Baissac's Scientist circuit (network) if I needed to — unlike other wireless operators at that stage of the war who were mostly stationary and connected to a group. I was also one of the very last female operatives to get out of France after its liberation.

Although I still have the feeling that my wartime work is not really anybody else's business, I can see that I should tell my story before it dies with me. In 2024, when this book comes out, it will have been 80 years since D-Day happened, and maybe there won't be too many of us left who can remember that day. I can.

I have been reassured that the Official Secrets Act is not a problem for me anymore. So, I would like to set the record straight (if it is wonky anywhere) and tell my own story; which, as I am recalling it, does not seem as long ago as it so obviously is. I appreciate that if you don't speak up, others can fill the void and say things that are not challenged, or may say things innocently while presuming them to be correct, when in fact they are not. I still do not have the internet and I don't want it. But what I do want is to have my story recorded for those people who are interested in World War II and some of the things that went on.

Just to set expectations, though: if people are aware of my history, one thing they often ask is 'How many Germans did you kill?' I always look them straight in the eye and say, 'None.'

Well, the truth is: 'Not directly.' I killed a lot *indirectly* with the information I messaged back to England, which then triggered air attacks. I am not sure if those people are disappointed when I answer, 'None.' It seems a funny thing to ask someone you don't really know. Death is traumatic — I don't have to have personally killed anyone myself to be traumatised by it. I have witnessed more than my fair share of death and destruction at very close quarters; sometimes because of me, sometimes despite me, and sometimes just because it is Wednesday and the Gestapo have come through a village, rounded up some people randomly and shot them dead. Remember: I was not a James Bond-style spy. I was a secret agent whose job it was to blend into the background and cause quiet chaos.

My story starts in South Africa and has traversed many countries and many names before ending up in New Zealand, 102 years later. Here, I now find myself talking about the life of one Pippa Latour, who started life as Phyllis in 1921, and embarked on an unusual childhood in Africa that set me up for an equally unusual wartime job. I think I like being a little unusual, even now. It suits me.

Pippa Latour
September 2023