

Women at War- and why nineteenth century soldiers all seemed to wear moustaches

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Perceptions of women's role in war tend to draw on film and television portrayals as nurses or other support staff, or as decoders of intercepted enemy communications. Women in combat roles is, for most of us, very much a twenty first century development.

Apart, that is, from fabled people like Joan of Arc, who not only participated in combat, but lead it. Joan of Arc was unusual, but hardly unique. The famous image of Liberty, baring one perfectly shaped breast (Eugène Delacroix, the artist, was a man after all), leading a troupe of French revolutionaries is surely imagined. Other, more realistic engravings depicting scenes from that revolution and conventional wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show women actively contributing on frontlines, notably feeding munitions and reloading cannons and, of course, they also cooked and treated the injured.

When peace seemed to break out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a backlash against women serving close to frontlines led many armies to exclude them from those roles. Women resisted, hence moustaches and, in some armies, enforced nudity for uniform provision.

Various reasons were given for the prohibition, including carnal temptation and consequent degeneration of soldiers' morals, possible risks to women's reproductive capacity or simply that warfare was unbecoming to women. These, of course, boil down to the assumption, shared by plenty of women, that women can be only seductresses, baby machines or objects of beauty.

Manufacturing arms and munitions, tending farms, cooking and caring kept women out of harm's way during twentieth century wars, but also well removed from the possibility of a meaningful career, let alone decoration. Some women served in anti-aircraft units, but that was generally as close as they came to military action.

Not all women are cut out for military careers, just as not all men. But the argument that women are especially unsuited to military roles is specious. If you've ever played paintball, you may have noticed that all women teams have a habit of beating male opponents. Women are often better strategic thinkers and, being mostly less competitive, more cooperative in teams. They also tend to be less emotional than men, more likely to retain composure under extreme stress, notwithstanding popular stereotypes.

Which is one reason why they make excellent spies. In twentieth century wars, thousands of women excluded from combat, served, necessarily very quietly, as spies. Many war historians agree that allied forces are unlikely to have prevailed without their contribution.

Many women in recent wars were all the more remarkable as they were fighting on several fronts. Not just totalitarian invaders, but more persistent injustices, such as racial and gender prejudices and religious intolerance. For them, defeating a hated occupier was just the start. Of the unsung thousands, here are three amazing women, only one of them you are likely to have heard of.

Josephine Baker - 3 June, 1906 - 12 April, 1975 435 words

I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents. And much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee.

Being derided by her co-citizens as a “Negro wench ... whose dancing and singing might be topped anywhere outside of Paris”, with a voice that was “too thin” and “dwarf like”, broke Josephine Baker’s heart. So much so, that she assumed French nationality and relinquished her American citizenship.

Having moved to France in 1925 at the age of 19, Josephine became a star of stage and screen, so that by the time war broke out in September 1939, she was already one of the most popular music hall entertainers in France, with star billing at the Folies Bergère.

Her fame allowed her to mix with the powerful and influential, socialising at embassies, ministries and night clubs, charming not only German, but also Japanese, Italian and Vichy officials. What they didn’t know was that she was working for the *Deuxième Bureau*, the French military intelligence agency, feeding information to Jacques Abtey, head of French counterintelligence in Paris.

When the Germans invaded France Baker left Paris. She moved to the *Château des Milandes*, in the Dordogne, where she sheltered those eager to help the Free French effort, helping procure identity documents among other things. Making clever use of licence to move freely around Europe and beyond, she carried information, often written in invisible ink on her sheet music, about airfields, ports and German troop concentrations.

In 1941, with her entourage she went to Morocco, ostensibly to aid recovery from pneumonia; in reality, to tour Spain with critical information concealed in her underwear (counting on celebrity to avoid a strip search). After a traumatic miscarriage and hysterectomy, she organised events to entertain British, French and American soldiers in North Africa, with her troupe organising each event unaided, admitting no civilians and charging no admission.

After the war, Baker was awarded the Resistance Medal by the French Committee of National Liberation, the *Croix de Guerre* by the French military, and was named a *Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur* by Charles de Gaulle.

But there was still plenty more to do, starting with the Civil Rights Movement in the USA. Having been refused reservations at 36 American hotels, she and her husband toured the South, speaking on subjects like: On ‘France, North Africa and the Equality of the Races in France.’ She steadfastly refused lucrative offers to

perform for segregated audiences, applying pressure to integrate live entertainment shows and earning threats from the Ku Klux Klan, among others. This work continued with the NAACP, speaking beside Martin Luther King at the famous 1963 Washington March - the only woman to do so.

Marie-Madeleine Fourcade

1/8/1909 - 20/7/1989

434 words

The Hedgehog: a small, inoffensive animal that even a lion hesitates to attack.

Having spent much of her childhood in Shanghai, where her father worked in the shipping industry, Marie-Madeleine was determined to do exceptional things, not least acquiring a pilot's licence, racing cars and working in radio. In 1936, at a gathering attended by Charles de Gaulle, she met and was recruited by Georges Loustau-Lacau, code-named 'Navarre', to collect information about the expanding German military programme.

When Germans invaded France in 1940, it became clear to Marie-Madeleine that men could not rid France of the enemy without a lot of help from women. She also understood that for those women to be confined to subordinate roles was an intolerable waste of talent. Her solution was Alliance, the 3,000strong resistance information cell for which she recruited agents and gathered information, later forming a partnership with the UK's MI6, whereby Alliance benefitted from British financial and communications resources to establish an effective information-gathering network to feed the British war effort.

The Gestapo dubbed her network Noah's Ark because its members sported the names of animals. Marie-Madeleine was the hedgehog. Twice she was arrested and escaped.

She took charge of Alliance in 1941 following a failed anti-Vichy coup in Algeria and the capture of Navarre. In doing so, she defied not just the Nazis but also the French (and British) patriarchy. In fact, it was only when her mother was captured she revealed herself to MI6, fearing that as a woman she would not be taken seriously. She was right to worry, but, after some hesitation, MI6 decided that this hedgehog was just too useful to be ignored.

The information this network of agents furnished was no less impressive than the woman who ran it. An agent employed by German Admiral Karl Donitz supplied details of German submarine operations, an artist drew maps showing the exact positions of German fortifications in Normandy and a twenty year old translator used feminine guile to extract information about deployment of rockets, thereby making the D-Day landings possible as well as the raid that devastated the testing of some of the most important German secret weapons.

While doing that, Marie-Madeleine bore three children that she managed to hide in the South of France and Switzerland before her capture in 1944. Her amazing escape is another story.

Marie-Madeleine Fourcade is commander of *la Légion d'honneur*, holds the *Médaille de la Résistance (avec Rosette)*, *Croix de Guerre française et belge*, is an

officer of the Order of the British Empire and *l'Ordre de Léopold*. She also served in 1980 and 1981 as a member of the European Parliament.

Lucie Aubrac

29/6/1912 -14/3/2007

369 words

Liberation

Having trained as a teacher, Lucie's disgust at the rise of fascism in the early 1930s led her to join the Young Communists. Attending the Berlin Olympics in 1936 brought home to her the full measure of the fascist threat.

When war broke out, she was working at the university in Strasbourg, where she met and married Raymond Aubrac, a gifted engineer and officer on the Maginot Line, who she helped escape from imprisonment in June 1940. After to Clermont-Ferrand moving with the university, Lucie helped form a first core of resistance there that prefigured the Libération-Sud.

This work continued after the couple moved to Lyon, where she taught while continuing as a director of Libération-Sud; in 1941 contributing the first issue of the journal Libération, which is still an important French daily newspaper. Known to her co-combatants only as Catherine, she also forged papers and helped resistance fighters breach the demarcation line.

In 1943, her husband by then assistant to the chief of the secret army, was arrested again, she exerted pressure on the public prosecutor to have him freed.

Clearly talented in escape manoeuvres, she organised escapes for numerous resistance operatives, notably the particularly audacious escape of Jean Moulin and eleven others on 21 October, 1943 in which Lucie mounted an armed, broad daylight attack on the van transporting them.

Now known to the German and Vichy police, she, her husband and their young son were pursued for four months from one hiding place to another until 8 February, when a plane was finally able to take them to London. Four days after arriving there, she gave birth to a little girl, who she called Catherine.

From July the following year until the end of the war, she worked with liberation committees, after which she resumed her teaching career, also working for the League of Human Rights.

Even after retirement, she continued attending conferences to maintain awareness, especially among young people, of the importance of human rights. A 1992 film, *Boulevard des hirondelles*, was about her and her husband's lives.

In 1944, she was the first woman to sit in a French parliamentary assembly and in 1996 was awarded *la Légion d'Honneur*.

228 words

Estimates of the size of various resistance organisations in Europe range widely, but certainly numbered hundreds of thousands. About 15% are thought to be women, though that is certainly an underestimate; in fact, these women neither knew, nor knew of each other, so tight was the organisation of resistance movements.

The four women we feature were lucky to have lived to see fascist regimes overthrown. Thousands were less lucky. Worse, those who were caught were often dismissed by their captors as 'useful idiots', insulting the conviction and courage leading them to sacrifice all.

Unable to serve in combat roles that attract open admiration, being denied recognition for their undercover work only adds insult to injury for tens of thousands of amazing women. For most it was the worst injury of all. Of 1,036 members of the Free French or Resistance honoured by Charles de Gaulle in the Order of Liberation, only six were women.

Have things improved since? Watching women now achieve the rank of general in regular armies, it might be tempting to say yes. But not quite. Women continue to risk their lives spying to support democratic regimes against those who would undermine them. As a fascinating film by journalist Chloé Aeberhardt, *Female Spies Tell All (they weren't Bond girls, but girl Bonds)*, makes clear, all share the common frustration of not being recognised for their work and sacrifice.

This article was first published on TheEuropeanNetwork.eu in February, 2022