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**Odette Marie Celine Hallows, GC MBE Legion d'Honneur**

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**Access Code A**

CXW Can you tell me first of all Mrs Hallows how you came to join SOE?

OH I think through a mistake, really. I'm saying a mistake because I saw in a newspaper and heard on the radio that if people had some photographs of a certain part of the coast of France, would they send them to an address in London. Of course I sent them to the wrong address, I think I send them to the navy instead of the army, but in any case they reached where they should have been going to in the first place and as far as I was concerned, I thought: This is the end of it, because I shall never get my photographs back. They were very innocent photographs, most, I should say of no use to anybody because they were photographs of my brother and myself, taken on the beaches of France, Boulogne, Calais, all that, but I was very surprised because a few weeks after I had a letter thanking me and asking me if it would ever be possible for me to come to London and have an interview at an address given. I thought, why, it's probably to give me back my photographs. So I organised to come to London and was very surprised by all the questions that were asked of me. The only thing I said I wanted to do, if I can be of any use to do some translations or adopt two or three French soldiers or send away to a few - I would like to be able to do something, because after all I am French-born and I was brought up in France. My family has always lived on the battlefield of world wars, my father was killed 30 days before the armistice in the first one, my brother is in this one, my mother is in France, suffering with the Germans, I suppose in her home, so I would like to be able to do some little thing. But I have got children. Therefore it's very limited what I can do.

They were very kind, they say: Yes, well we can think of something and all that. So I went back to Somerset and thought: Well, that's the end of that, I still haven't got my photographs. I sent my French coffee pot to be melted, I thought that was good, and tried to forget about it all for a moment. And I had some very bad news

from the Red Cross of my French family.

CXW What kind of news?

OH My mother had to run away from her home. It was the second time in her life she had lost everything, because it had been over run by the Germans and things had happened to the rest of the family. My brother was no longer taking part in the war because he had been wounded and he was in the Val de Grace, a military hospital in Paris. Some of our friends were already in captivity. I felt terrible because being married to an Englishman, I am in England, I am in what I considered the safety of beautiful Somerset with my children under those lovely trees. Am I going to be satisfied to accept this like that, that other people are going to suffer, get killed, die because of this war and trying to get freedom for my own children, let's face it. So am I supposed to accept all this sacrifice that other people are making without lifting a finger in a way.

X I used to say, well, I've got children and they come first. It's easy enough to go on thinking that way. But I was tormented. Then I had a letter asking me to come back to London for another interview. I came back and I was told: You would not know the way we do these things but we have made enquiries about you in this country and in France and we're very satisfied with what we found. I lost my temper, I said: well, what do you mean, why did you have to make enquiries about me, what do you think I am? I was told: Oh, calm down, we're going to explain to you why. I was told: We train people here, you will not know that but we do and we send them to the country of their origin, or, if they speak a foreign language very well, we send them to that country where they can use it and they are extremely useful to the war effort. I could see that, I agreed with all that. I said: Yes, of course, I can see that. Until I was told: Well, we think women could be very useful too. Yes, I said, I think women are very useful, any way. And that did it, I was told: So glad you think that way because we're going to ask you to be one of them. I said: No, it's not possible, it's

absolutely not possible, my children come first; I want to do everything I can for this country which is my adopted country and the country that has adopted me; my children are English and I have a French family and all my roots are in France, I have two reasons for wanting to help but I can't do that.

CXW Were you horrified?

OH Absolutely. And I said: Further more you've got the wrong person because you must be of a certain type to do this kind of job - I am not it, I haven't got the brain for it, I haven't even got the physical things that are necessary for the job, so: No. They said: Well, we did of course know about your children, we don't want you to give an answer now, go away, think. So I went back having said 'no, no' and I started thinking and I thought for months and months, thinking: What do I do, if everybody thinks my way, what is the future going to be for all those children everywhere. If I were in France with children I could be like some other people who've already been captured, even with their children in concentration camp, because I'm here I have a good excuse for not doing anything more than staying put with my children. I was really very tormented. After a time I thought: There's really only one solution, I'll go back and say 'If you like I'll do the training and you'll see that I'm not the right person' and at least I can come back feeling that I've tried and I'm satisfied to have tried that, I'll think of something else to do like knitting or something like that.

So I came back to London and I say: Alright, if you are still in the same mind, I am prepared to try the training and you will see I am not right for it at all.

CXW How much pressure did they put on you to change your mind?

OH No, they left it to me, really. I think that's where they were clever. They knew too much about me, I think they knew

I was going to be in two minds. You see my background is such an extraordinary one because not having known my father who was killed 30 days before the armistice in the First War, I was brought up with the image of my father who had been a very brave man. Every Sunday morning after church I would be taken with my brother to his grave. My grandfather used to say: In 20 or 25 years time there is going to be another war; it will be your duty both of you to do as well as your father did. I listened to that for years and, being a girl, after a time, when I got to fourteen, fifteen, sixteen the war was away and the duties of war and everything else. I got engaged and married very young and I got children very young and of course I wasn't war-minded. But the seed was there. Like my brother we had to do what we could.

EEW What did you feel at that time towards the Germans?

OH There again, it was very difficult because my grandparents and my mother had to live with them in the First War. They knew them well. I was too small to understand it, but I knew what they said to me all the years after, so for me they were, I'm not going to say evil people, because my grandparents and my mother did not have to speak of them as evil people because in those days they were soldiers they were not specially more evil than anybody else in the First War. But after all they were the enemy, so there you are, they had been the enemy, I grew up with knowing the Germans were our enemy and once more they were, only this time it was a different picture.

CXW So at that time you didn't feel bitterness towards the Germans.

OH No, never, and then I never have.

CXW Did you discuss the proposal with your husband?

OH He was of course consulted and left it to the War Office people and to me to decide. He agreed that I should do the training and at the end of it he was told I was acceptable and he said: Alright, if you want to.

CXW He didn't try to stop you going?

OH Not at all.

CXW Who conducted the interview with you?

OH Just Selwyn Jepson.

CXW How did he conduct the interview?

OH Yes, very kindly, he's a very kind person and I think perhaps that was the clever part of it, that you felt you could say anything to him. He's a very intelligent man, he's a writer by trade, he's kind and generous and certainly understood me extremely well.

CXW Did you come across Colonel Buckmaster during...?

OH Yes, of course, very much so, even before I started the training. It was the same story again, I found there that there was a lot of understanding, in fact I remember Maurice Buckmaster, one of the first things he said, he said: My God, you look like a child yourself, when I was talking about my children because in those days I used to look younger than my years. I suppose I looked rather childish, I suppose I was too. Yes, of course I knew him well by the time I went away.

CXW Did you like Colonel Buckmaster?

OH We got on very well.

CXW Whilst you were doing the preparation for going did you have opportunities for changing your mind?

OH Yes, we were never put under pressure that way. We learned a lot during the training it was discoveries all the time, things that were being done to people who had been captured, we were

woken up in the middle of the night ourselves during the training for example, taken into a room with eight or ten men wearing German uniforms to see our reaction of shock if you like. The training was very good and at the end of it you knew enough to be able to make up your mind if you wanted to go in the field or not and you could still say no, I've changed my mind, I'm not going.

CXW During the training did it occur to you to change your mind?

OH No, the training made me more and more decided to do this if I could.

CXW Was that because you were becoming more confident?

OH No, it was because I knew more of what was happening to other people.

CXW Such as?

OH Well, some people did manage to get back to England having been caught in the field abroad, in France or anywhere else. They used to tell their dreadful tales, they used to tell stories of what happened to their friends and all that. So you had a pretty good idea of what could happen to yourself. The only confidence I had was, I was confident in myself, not to do a marvellous job, that I never was, not to do perhaps marvellous physical things, but I knew I could endure quite a lot and I thought: Alright. What you don't know is if you are put against the wall or put to the test how much you are really and truly to endure. In some ways I knew that I would have to because for example I had a suit made of charcoal grey flannel and I think it was Vera Atkins at the office said: Oh, why that suit? I said: When I go to prison it will be very useful because it won't show the dirt like black

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or a pale colour and believe it or not I wore this suit all through my captivity, turning the skirt every day an inch about so that it could be worn all over. I came back in that suit, I've still got it. So I had an instinct that things could go wrong. I'm not going to say I was prepared for things to go wrong but I was accepting the fact that it could go wrong.

CXW What made you think you could endure what was to come?

OH Well, again when I said I was prepared in an extraordinary way for what was to come because I had been blind as a little girl, I was blind for three and a half years so I had had that experience. I also had polio and I was paralysed for more than one year. I had suffered quite a lot. I had a very wonderful grandfather who did not accept weaklings very easily so one had to learn to put up with pain, even when I was blind he was absolutely marvellous and would not accept the fact I could not be more clever than I thought I could be. So I was prepared in a way. And this feeling in my family that we all, boy or girl, had to do our duty not only to our country but to our father was with me. All those things put together, I was so prepared.

CXW When you said to Vera Atkins you would wear this suit in captivity did you really think you would be caught?

OH Yes, in some ways, I hoped I wouldn't be of course, because that's not the right way to think. Then, when it was decided what I would do in France, I felt there was more chance because I felt all the time that if I could be more on my own I would last for as long as necessary, I would not be captured. But things changed because I had to pass by Cannes where Peter Churchill, known as Raoul was already working in order to get some papers to cross the demarcation line to go to Auxerre where I was to start a reseau. When I was in Cannes the Italians came to occupy the south of France so orders came to London that I should stay there and work

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with Raoul. That I did not want to do because I never wanted to work in the south of France, and I wanted to be on my own. But circumstances were such that that never happened, I never went where I should have gone. The other thing was I knew very well that by working in Cannes I was going to work with a large reseau, a large group of people who were not specially security minded and therefore it was very much a possibility that anything could happen any time anywhere.

CXW Was there anything about the training you didn't like, any aspect of the training?

OH No, I think it was very good training for what people were supposed to be doing.

CXW Is there any part of the training you enjoyed?

OH I don't know. I was facinated by it I think not so much by the physical part of the training, I don't think I was any good at it, nor really but the pattern of it, I was very intrigued by the pattern of it, I thought that was very clever really. The preparation of one's mind, that was quite good.

CXW In the biography that was written of you by Tickell, he says you had problems with getting a man called Jan to take you in the felucca - how did you persuade him?

OH Yes, the Pole. He was a very brave man who had done quite a number of crossings, very dangerous crossings, imagine from Gibraltar to France in a fishing boat, you know what kind of seas. I had been refused by the navy when they were asked to send me to France by submarine, they said no, they were not going to have a woman on one of their submarines, they never have and never would, so the submarine was out of the way. I had tried to go by air and every time I step into an aircraft something happened to it so I think I was getting to be too costly. So they say, alright, from Gibraltar to France in that fishing boat. Then when I got

to Gibraltar this man refused to take me, he said: What am I going to do with women on board. Well, I said, I'll do anything, the washing up or something, any way he had orders that if he likes it or not he was supposed to take us to France, so he did. So he didn't make things terribly easy but we did manage to get there

CXW When you got to Cannes, were you surprised at the activities and size of the reseau?

OH Yes, because I wasn't supposed to know about it, because I wasn't supposed to stay or work there, so I had to discover that, once I was supposed to be working with them. Yes, I was, I thought that Peter Churchill, Raoul, as he was certainly had done a lot of groundwork there and establish a really large reseau with the French. I was worried about it, by it's size, some of it's people, but it had nothing to do with me, I wasn't the commanding officer there, I was under orders.

CXW You were worried because you thought it was insecure?

OH Yes, I did.

CXW Did you ever suspect that it might have been infiltrated?

OH At that time I wasn't in a position to be that suspicious about it. Then I had doubts about one or two people. Perhaps it's unfair to say that I simply did not trust them, I did not like them and did not trust them. So I thought well, my own personal feelings did not come into this, it's nothing to do with what I feel or think, if they do their job very well all to the good, it isn't for me to - but strangely enough it was proved to be right.

CXW Which individuals didn't you trust?

OH I don't think I want to start naming people after all those years and I think it is very well known those who were not to be trusted, it's been written about, everybody who knows about those

times and years. It has appeared in so many books, so I think it was an instinct in me at the time, I just proved to be right in the passing of time.

CXW Can I ask you some questions about your captivity?

OH Yes.

CXW When the Gestapo were asking you the questions at first, did you know the answers to the questions?

OH Yes, of course, absolutely. I could have told them what they wanted to know just like that. They wanted to know where our radio operator was, they wanted to know where another British agent who had arrived some little time before had been to and was, where he'd gone to. Yes, they wanted to know things about people they didn't manage to capture and in fact they never did manage to capture this British agent. They did not even manage to capture the radio operator, he came back to England and was captured when he went back to France but he wasn't captured because of us.

CXW Did you at any stage feel like weakening and answering the questions?

OH It's very difficult to answer such a thing without sounding so terribly sure that one is brave and courageous and all that and it's no good, I'm not brave or courageous, I just make up my own mind about certain things. When this started, this treatment of me I'm not going to say I thought: This is fun. I thought: There must be a breaking point, even if in your own mind you don't want to break up but physically you're bound to break up after a certain time I suppose. If I can survive the next minute without breaking up this is another minute of life and if I can feel that way instead of thinking of what's going to happen in half an hour's time, having torn my toe-nails they were going to do my fingers.

They were stopped because the commandant came in and he say: Stop. Then they had burned my back and of course there are many things they can do to me. Now I have lived through those things, had the experience of that, that's passed, what next is coming how do I know? I can only hope for the best, but I know I've been able to accept this and to survive it. I know there must be a moment when you cannot no matter how much you want to, nature is stronger than you are and you can't. But if I accept that it will not be my decision, if they kill me, they will kill me physically but that's all, they won't win anything, what is the point, they'll have a dead body, useless to them but they will not have me, 'cos I won't let them have me

From the moment you accept that some extraordinary, I don't know what it is, grace or I don't know, it's no good saying that you do it by yourself, it's a kind of bargaining, some people would say with God, I don't know what comes, but it comes.

CXW Did you feel it was a matter of personal honour not to say anything?

OH I felt it was a duty. I had been brought up all my life with a sense of duty, I had been trained with a sense of duty, I was a woman with a sense of duty to life, it was part of it.

CXW Were you a religious believer then, a Christian?

OH I was brought up very much a - in the church if you like, but again I got married and I was busy with my children. Yes, I was a religious person, but not a religious person to think that I could be a martyr or anything of the kind, no.

CXW But you believed in God?

OH I believe in God and my belief in God is I believe in the

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soul of people. I believe that we all have a soul, that we don't know where it comes from, what it's made of, it's our own we don't know what happens to it and I believe we've got to use it for the best possible things we can do with it. I have great respect for the human beings because I think they are miracles. You can invent the atom bomb, you can create fantastic robots, you can do everything like that today but whoever is going to create such a miracle as the mind of a human being?

CXW What did you think about the people who were perpetrating the torture?

OH That was clever because the German nearly always found somebody of your own nationality to torture you so that you could never say: I was tortured by a German. In my case it was a very good-looking Frenchman. I felt he was a sick man. I think all those people who were doing those things were mentally sick. In fact I told him because on Remembrance Day I had been in prison since April then November on Remembrance Day ten o'clock one evening I was taken out of my cell and taken down the courtyard of the prison. There was a car waiting with two men in uniform and my man who tortured me who was not in uniform said: well as you are so devoted to your country I thought you'd like to go to the Arc de Triomphe on the 11th of November and see the German guards standing there. We went, believe it or not, round and round the Arc de Triomphe and I said to him: They are there now but how long for and I said to him: You like what you are doing, the job you are doing, you are a sick man, you like doing this. Actually I was right because I discovered after the war that he was the son of a very well-to-do people from Elbeuf near Rouen a very good family indeed who were absolutely broken hearted to discover they had a son like that who was condemned to death after the war. But let's face it, if it hadn't been for the circumstances of the war he would probably have married a nice

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girl and have children and nobody would have known what he was made of.

CXW It sounds as though you didn't hate him.

OH No, because I soon discover - to begin with, when you are like that you say you want revenge, you want to be able to do to those who do things like that to people the same kind of things so they learn what it's like. Then you discover that if you think that way you are going to end up as they are. It doesn't do anybody any good at all. You've got to dismiss all that and say I'm healthy, they're sick, I don't have to be sick, I don't have to be bitter because bitterness creates such terrible misery that you live with it, inside yourself, it's there all the time like some kind of cancer so what is the point of being like that, you have to keep...

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OH You have to keep your mind healthy as much as possible 'cos after all it is the only way to survive, the only way to win something. If not it is their victory, they have got you physically and mentally and in every way so it's a complete victory as far as they are concerned, you are left with nothing. You have to find a way.

CXW In the biography by Tickell he emphasises how in Fresnes prison you had this attitude of defiance, why did you adopt such an attitude?

OH Because I discovered that, I don't know what the Germans are like today, but in those days I called them a race de valets. I think if you treated them in a certain way, as if they were almost your servants they had a type of respect for you. If you didn't go under they had a kind of respect. so therefore the only attitude to have is to dismiss them to almost say: Well, I'm here but what does it matter, you don't exist.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.

CXW Do you think if you hadn't been defiant that...

worse for you?

OH I suppose not. It would have been worse for me in so far that I would not have kept a certain attitude, a certain personality if I can call it that, even the word is too strong, identity would be better, I kept my own identity.

CXW Did you see women in Fresnes who were not defiant?

OH I never saw anybody 'cos I was always in solitary with written on my door: Grande criminelle, pas de privileges. You see I was condemned to death, officially.

CXW Tickell in fact says in his book that you were sentenced to death for being a Frenchwoman.

OM And an Englishwoman which of course took away the drama of the situation at the time because when this sentence was read to me in the Avenue Foch they said: You are condemned to death twice, once for France and once for England. Personally in my mind: For which country I shall die I'll never know, it happened just like that, it was ridiculous. Then a lot of ridiculous things happened all through my captivity. They saved me, they really did those ridiculous moments because in every tragedy there is an element of comedy if you can see it and the comedy helps you to survive the tragedy and it did with me all the time right up to the very end.

CXW Can you give an example?

OM Yes, even the end of my silly war. The fact that the commandant of Ravensbrueck, with all his authority and his years of dedication to Hitler, a man of great importance who had seen dying over 100,000 women not batting an eyelid, choose to save me by taking me out of my cell and carting me away, travelling all day long saying he was taking me, at the end of the day, when he said to me: Do you want to know where we are going? I said: No. I honestly believed like so many people that he would take me to a wood and I would be killed there, therefore not leaving

any traces. I said: No. He said: I'm taking you to the Americans. I said: You are, you must be mad. And it is true, at about - after ten o'clock, between ten and eleven at night we were stopped by some Americans, American army and he said: This is Frau Churchill, she has been my prisoner. I said: This is the commandant of Ravensbrueck, you make him a prisoner. So they took his gun, they broke it and gave it to me and I was left with this wonderful white Mercedes, lining red leather and they say: We are going to find you a room for the night, and I say: No, if you don't mind, I have not seen the sky for a very long time and the stars, I would like to sit in this car till the morning. I had two reasons for doing that, that reason and the other reason was I knew he had a lot of documents in the car. I wanted to have a look at those documents to bring them back to this country. I did, I brought them back here.

CXW Why do you think he did that, that he took you?

OH Because Winston Churchill had been wonderful and that kept up the story that Peter Churchill was related to him. I had said, to save Peter Churchill's skin, that I was his wife, which of course I wasn't, I'd never met him before. They accepted that, it's a possibility of course. I said to them while we were in captivity: He would never have done this job but for me, I am a Frenchwoman, I influenced him in coming back to France to do this job. They accepted that, they really did accept the fact that it was very much a possibility that I was the guilty one. Winston Churchill never said: It isn't true. I thanked him after the war and his answer was wonderful, he said: Madame, this is indeed an honour. Wonderful. So it was lucky.

CXW So the chief of Ravensbrueck...

OH Thought he was taking somebody of importance who could help him perhaps to a better future, I don't know what he expected.

CXW Do you think you owe survival to the fact that you were able



to use the name Churchill?

OH Certainly, there is no other reason why I should have survived because I was condemned to death and after all I am the only one of all the girls who did the same job who was really condemned to death and they haven't come back. I came back, so how can one explain this. Furthermore, they had every right if you like to carry out the sentence. They should have done it.

CXW In Fresnes prison I think that you sent a message to an address via this lady called Michelle.

OH Yes, who was a communist by the way, wonderful girl.

CXW What was the address that you sent that message to?

OH I gave her the address of the my mother.

CXW Did the message get through?

OH No, because I don't know exactly what happened to her after that. We managed to - you see, I never saw her, because I never saw anybody. The message was given to her in the wall of the cell, just a little square like that and when the prison was a normal prison, it used to be slightly warmer than it was in my days, in fact it was very cold 'cos there was no heating whatsoever. But it used to be built with a possibility of warming up something between the walls. So you could sometimes communicate with the cell above your's and the one under through that opening in the wall. That's the way I contacted Michelle.

CXW Did she do a lot for your morale with being in contact with her?

OH Well, she was young, I was young. I could not say to her why

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I was there, I knew why she was 'cos it was easy for her to tell me why she was there. Yes, when you are in those circumstances it is good to have somebody else you can talk with, you're not brave all day long and every day. For example when I used to be brought back from the Avenue Foch she used to know that I'd been, first she could that, she would hear them bringing me back in my cell. When everything was quiet she would say: Are you alright? And I would say: Yes, Michelle, it's alright this time. That kind of thing, yes it is a comfort of course to know that there is another human being who knows something, the fact that you exist.

CXW Were you able to learn about her background, some facts about her?

OH No, not very much because one used to be very careful, you didn't ask a lot of questions, you didn't want to answer questions yourself and you had to accept the fact that everybody more or less was in the same position. You couldn't endanger other people by talking about - I never would have said to anybody at all that I had been in England, nobody knew I had ever been in England. For three years I lived with the fact that nobody knew I had been in England, ever. You have to do that kind of thing.

CXW This man called Bleicher, I think he invited you to spend the day out with him...?

OH You know, for six months he used to come and have me taken out of my cell and taken to an interrogation room in Fresnes and he would talk and say: I went to a beautiful concert last night, Lise, I thought of you, you would have loved it. I would say: Yes, Henri, it's very kind of you. He was clever, he used to try to break you down that way. I used to listen to what he had to say. Then, one day he came and said: I've decided tomorrow I am coming to fetch you very early in the morning, take you to Paris for the day, bring you back about ten o'clock. You can have a bath, a good meal, you can wash your hair. I said: Henri, if you

ever do a thing like that I'm going to scream so loudly that everyone will know I am taken out of this place by force. I will not go to Paris with you, not to friends or anything. I will have no contact with anybody and you cannot take me away without people knowing that you are doing it by force, I will not go.

CXW You thought it was a trick, really?

OH No, simply that I wasn't going to give anything whatsoever. No, I don't suppose I would have lost anything. The proof of it is that he did the same thing for Peter, for Raoul. Raoul did spend a day with some friends of his in Paris, with Bleicher of course, had a bath, a good meal, played some records or whatever, came back with a parcel of food, nothing happened out of that. But you see I wasn't going to have any kind of compromise with them, I wasn't going to accept anything, not a drop of water or crust of bread, nothing, so that was the only way.

CXW But did you hate the Germans at that time?

OH No, no, they were in their situation, I was in mine. I was their prisoner, they were the masters of the situation. If you accept to do that kind of job, call yourself an agent of some kind or something you accept what goes with it, it's no good all at once because you are caught to think: They are wrong and you are right.

CXW But some people would have compromised wouldn't they?

OH Well, people do what they can, I suppose, or what they feel is right or wrong, I don't know. It is difficult - until you are in those circumstances, how are you to judge and know what's right, what's wrong, what is weak, what is strong. I get very upset when people have said and still say to this day that so-and-so was weak because he gave away this and that, or somebody else. And I say: How do you know that he was weak; put yourself in his shoes.

Would you have been strong, stronger; do you know that because I claim that it is impossible to know it, it is impossible for both of us just now to know what we would do. With what I know, I still don't know and you not having, thank God, gone through all that, you don't know, you can't. And on top of that I was a free agent if you like in so far that I knew that if they were going to torture me, they were going to torture me only, not a member of my family, not a loved one. So you can be stronger. But if they said to you: Look, if you don't talk we are going to do this to your wife or husband or mother, faced with a decision like that who knows. It's easy to blame.

CXW What was the worst thing for you in captivity would you say, separation from your children?

OH Yes, that was the only thing, the only thing. But, you know, again people have said very kindly over the years that I was brave or courageous or this or that but nobody realised that what happened to me in the field really didn't matter in a way because I really can truly say that I know what it is to have a broken heart because I left England with a broken heart so nothing could break it after that ever again. The rest was physical. That was the only thing that demanded courage and I will never do it again.

CXW I interviewed a British airman some years ago who was shot down and captured and eventually taken to Fresnes prison. He said he was confronted by a woman in Fresnes and she was a prisoner who was asked if she recognised him. He said he thought it was you, do you remember such an incident?

OH No, I don't no. But you see I wasn't the only one. He could have met, it could have been one of the other girls of course, i wasn't the only one.

CXW There was an SS guard in the prison called Trude about

whom Tickell writes and he says you managed to gain control of her.

OH You see, she spoke French very well because she had been a governess in a Belgian family for many years before the war so her French was good. I think she was fascinated by the fact that my name was Churchill. In fact it is true to say that because after the war I received a letter from her. She had spent some years in prison and she wrote to me saying that when she was free she would very much like to come and work for me - it's a strange thing but it's true. It just shows you what strange minds some people have got after having been your jailor to want to come and work for you in appreciation of I don't know what, it's quite fun.

CXW So again the name Churchill was of some importance.

OH Yes, of course it was impressive. So impressive that I did the rest of my captivity in Ravensbrueck under another name - they put me, registered under the name of Shuer(?) and not Churchill. They didn't want the prison personnel to know who I was really.

CXW How do you spell it?

OH Shuer(?) I don't know how to spell it, it's a German name which I never saw in writing of course.

CXW When you travelled to Germany you travelled with six other women from the French section, what condition were they in?

OH Not bad, at that time not bad.

CXW Were they able to tell you anything...?

OH I wasn't with the six of them, we travelled in two separate compartments. Yes, of course we exchanged all our little bits of

news information, yes. Some of us were a little more depressed than others or not so depressed or we tried to give each other a little courage because after all we didn't know where we were going to and we had a good idea what for. We try not to think too much about that. they were all very brave.

CXW Can you remember any details of what they told you?

OH Well we all exchange our views on the Avenue Foch of course more than anything because that was the set up we knew above all. We had the same people dealing with us. Yes, we talk about the people from the office here because after all we knew them all, Buckmaster and everybody. We talked of what we all knew of. We tried to talk of what we would do one day when the war was over. We didn't talk too much about that but we did try. We tried to keep our spirits up by exchanging our hopes or consoling each other if necessary a bit. We did what women do when they are together in difficult circumstances. I must say they were very brave, very brave, young women, pretty young women, I will never forget them ever.

CXW Can you remember what they said about the office?

OH Some of them were unsure about certain people, one or two looked for an answer to some questions. They had had time to think that this had happened because of something else, where was the source. You know when you are like that you - when you are captured like that you search endlessly why it happened. In my case I didn't have to search, I knew why, but some of them were not absolutely sure of the reason that was given to them, I'll put it that way.

CXW Were they wondering if there was a traitor in London?

OH I suppose they did. I suppose it is a thought that could have come into one or two minds, yes. The, after all it is in that game, I suppose it is a thought that is always a possibility.

CXW Did you think there was any foundation for such a speculation?

Oh Yes, yes.

CXW When you first entered Ravensbrueck did you realise it was something extraordinary?

OH Well obviously from the appalling size of it, the appalling number of women there who were no longer looking like human beings, more like wounded animals, by the sheer misery of it all, such a size, yes. I spend the first night in the shower room of the camp on the concrete floor there because I think they were not organised to receive me in the prison, in the bunker, because I never was in the camp ever and never was with people, I was always in solitary. The only time I was with people was travelling from one prison to another. So I didn't know what to expect in the morning, I knew they were going to throw me in the camp with the other women, or I wasn't sure, didn't even know anything about the prison inside the camp of course. Then in the morning I was taken to the - what we called the bunker, the prison. And there I started, I was taken and put in an underground cell there with the window completely blocked, bricked off with just holes so I could get some air but I could not see through, and there I was, that was that.

CXW Did you quickly discover that people were being killed there, exterminated?

OH No, you could hear everything, you could hear everybody screaming you could hear everything and every evening it was another punishment if you like, they put me in the cell next to the punishment cell. So every evening there used to be women coming to that cell to be beaten, I could count every stroke, I could hear everyone, I could hear the screams. Yes, you do know what was going on. Then, when I was moved, a few months after, more to the

/end

end of the war really when they decided that they were not doing so well, they moved me to a ground floor cell on the other side of the bunker and I was by the side of the crematorium so I could hear what was going on in the crematorium. In fact I used to have the top of my window, 'cos I was ill then, very ill, they opened the top of my window that much, I could not see through it but the air was made of the cinders of the crematorium. My cell was covered with cinders from the crematorium, pieces of burning hair and, ugh, and the smell of it all, yes, I know it all, absolutely.

CXW So you saw the women being driven to the crematorium?

OH I didn't see them, I heard it. All my experiences were sounds, the only time I saw a dreadful thing was when I was leaving Ravensbrueck, then I saw dreadful things.

CXW What did you see?

OH The most dreadful things that human beings can do to other human beings, and there's no limit to that, none at all. I think animals do it to each other in certain circumstances probably, and you have to understand it but it's a very sad spectacle, very.

CXW Can you say specifically what you saw?

OH Yes, not that I wish to remember it but of course I can never forget it, so... One example I can give you, I was left for a moment in the camp like that before I was taken out of all that to be put in the commandant's car. I saw a girl of about eighteen I suppose, nineteen, who certainly had not been there long because she was still fresh, her head was shaved, but she was still fresh-looking and the next minute she was dead at my feet, they shoot her down and the women around her attacked her like dogs, still warm - they were starving, they were demented, they were crazy. You know that situation exists even today if a plane crashes in



the middle of nowhere then people have to survive, well the only way they can survive is whichever way they can find, so one can't be surprised.

CXW Why was she shot?

OH I don't know, nobody ever knows, perhaps because she was talking to me, she will never know, I will never know.

CXW When you were taken out of Ravensbrueck you were taken to more than one other camp?

OH Yes, I was taken to two more where I spent a very short time on our way to where he wanted to go, to the Americans, in fact in the last camp he came about three o'clock in the afternoon, he said to me: Hitler is dead. I said: Oh? He said: Yes, he died as a hero. I said: Are you going to do the same thing; I thought: Well, I'm dead anyway too, so why can't I say what I think. So I asked him that question and I thought: Well, you've had it, Odette. And to my great surprise, no, we started back in his car to go further on.

CXW Do you know the names of the camps you were taken to afterwards...?

OH I've got them somewhere in writing, I don't remember them just like that. I didn't stay long enough to get to know them. I should remember the names of them, they were on the way to the north, after Ravensbrueck, on the way to the border of - I suppose we would have found ourselves in Poland or somewhere like that in the end.

CXW Did they seem to be the same type of place...?

OH Yes, they were all the same type, the only difference I suppose was the size of them, but it was all the same kind of thing everywhere. I suppose you could say that Ravensbrueck was

one of the more active ones if you like because Himmler came once and gave order that it wasn't working fast enough, killing people so they built another crematorium. I suppose in that sense it was one of the largest and also perhaps more equipped I don't know.

CXW You didn't see Himmler?

OH I never saw anybody but the camp commandant who used to come and see me once a month. He would stand - I was punished. When our forces landed in the south of France he came to see me in my cell, he said: You are being punished. I said: Oh! He said: Yes; he could speak quite good enough English to make a conversation. He said: Orders have come from Berlin, you are punished. I said: Why? He said: Because you have been responsible for some information about - something to do with the disembarkment there, it was ridiculous.

CXW Passing on information?

OH Yes, passing on information. It was too ridiculous for words, so the punishment consisted of leaving me entirely in the dark, that was no light and no artificial light and never seeing anybody coming into my cell and having the central heating full on in August. I spent three months and eleven days like that. He used to come once a month, the door would open, he'd stand in the doorway and say: Have you anything to say? And I would say: No. I couldn't see him, 'No', the door would close again and that was it. We went on like that for three months eleven days.

CXW What condition were you in when you left Ravensbrueck?

OH Aha, like that. You see I had started TB...

OH I had a TB and a still had no toenails of course, in fact

I had no toenails for three years so I was walking very badly because I had one septic toe and I learnt to walk on my heels to save my toes in fact when I came back to England I could only wear a pair of men's shoes. I had a bad spine because on coming down from a mountain in France three days before we were captured I had hurt my back on the edge of a rock. Of course it was never attended to. To this day it is not what it should be. But everybody was in more or less a terrible state, I was just one of them. I've made quite a good recovery. I've been very fortunate and very lucky. People used to say to me when I came back: You must have such a terrible idea of human beings, you must be frightened almost of human beings. I used to say: No, why, nothing has changed, there were always bad people, I've seen a lot of bad people but because of those evil ones I've seen the most noble people, I've been very greatly inspired. This is what I wish to remember of it. I consider it has been an extraordinary experience. I'm a thousand years old and I love people, I do, definitely do.

CXW So you didn't feel bitter when you came back?

OH No, of course not, there was nothing to be bitter about, bitterness is a waste of everything. What you have to do is to remember because it is a duty one has to the people who did great things to one's comrades, to all the good and brave people, you have to remember them. But there's no point in being bitter and wanting to create the same kind of feelings of hatred, it's pointless and harmful. You know, I have been so terribly fortunate, I've got my wonderful family, I'm a very happy woman, I've got a marvellous husband, people are most kind and generous to me, very much more than I deserve, it is extraordinary, I'm touched every day by the generosity of people, it has been fantastic. I'm only extremely sad and always will be for the rest of my life that my comrades did not come back, that's all.

CXW If you had to face the choice of going as an agent again would you do it?

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.

OH No, never.

CXW Why not?

OH Because it is a game that I suppose is a good game for certain people, it is also a game of youth in a way, You've got to have high ideals to carry you through and therefore you've got the mental and physical strength to play that game. But I think it is not possible for that game to ever be a completely clean game and I would not be involved with such a game ever again; if there was another war and I could still stand on my two feet or do whatever I could, I would nurse or cook or do anything else but I would not enter into that ever again. It is very difficult to accept some factors of that game.

CXW We've mentioned Tickell's biography several times, was that biography accurate or were there any corrections which you feel need to be made to it.

OH No, there are not. I think it was as it was. The only embarrassing thing about it, as it was about the film, in fact we did not even end the film that way because my story is more like a bad Hollywood film than a good one. I'm sure it is difficult for people to believe some part of it but it did happen the way it did and I can't alter the fact. I did survive and I know I should not. I don't take any pride in that, it's nothing to do with me whatsoever, a lot of things like that I have been, I don't know what you call it, lucky, if one wants to call it that.

CXW Can I ask you the same question about the film that was made - were you satisfied with the film?

OH Yes, very, because I found in Anna Neagle someone of great honesty and sincerity, they were two main qualities and Herbert Wilcox had wanted a French actress and the Americans wanted to make the film, I was against that. If Gerard Tickell had wanted it done in America he would have been paid much more for it, I could not have stopped it but he was kind enough to understand that it would upset me so he decided to let Herbert Wilcox make the film.

Herbert Wilcox wanted a French actress and I said it doesn't

matter. I don't want to be in the film. I don't want to be in the film.

I want everybody to see the girls through the film. They were not all French girls so it's just as well done by an English one. It's not me I want to see in the film, I want to see them and really it is their story, it really is. I discovered when I came back and I tried to interest people in their story, it was always the same thing: Ah, yes, very interesting, but what did you... And it was always coming back to me because there I was and I could answer, I had a voice to answer with. So I decided that the best thing to do was to try and give them some kind of publicity, which was started by the book of Gerard Tickell and the film and then after that by Violet Szabo. I did help a little with Violet Szabo's book, quite a lot, I was technical advisor on the film about Violet Szabo, so it really started the ball rolling like that. That's the only satisfaction I've got from all that. I think Anna was very good in the film because she had this great simplicity and honesty and she did it with all her heart really. I shall always be grateful to her because the film passed a test in places where I thought it would be difficult. It passed more than the test in Paris, we had a wonderful show of it at the Opera. It was the first time a film had been shown at the Opera in Paris. It had a wonderful reception for it and I was worried because I thought: Now we are in a country where they know it all. And it was for charity, it was for the families of the people who had been in concentration camps. It was a very successful evening in every possible way and the critics said the film was very to the truth.

We took it to Belgium where it was extremely well received and to Holland where it had to pass the test and it did. I think everybody felt the sincerity and the simplicity of it, if you like it really wasn't clever. When I think what the Americans would have made of it, 'cos they had about a year to make a Hollywood film and they would have used it to absolutely a hundred per cent. But Herbert and Anna were very good because they didn't, they turned him down rather than turn it into a Hollywood story. And they had the material to make it so.

CXW So you felt if it had been done in Hollywood it would have been less true?

OH Absolutely. For one thing, I spent a year with Anna. We went everywhere together. We went to the prisons, where I had been. She met many of my comrades in France. She knew Maurice Buckmaster, in fact did appear in the film. She was absolutely into it. In fact it took her one year after the end of the film to get back to normal, she was more upset by doing that film than I was re-living the experience. It really did things to her. We established an enormous bond - we ended up as sisters, I miss her very much.

CXW Can you tell me how you got the news of the George Cross?

OH Yes, I can, that's part of the Hollywood story. I did not know the George Cross existed because of course when George VI created the George Cross I was away, so I was trying to get my bearings, recover completely with the children in a little cottage at Petersfield. One evening about seven o'clock there was a knock on the door, it was a newspaper reporter from the Daily Mirror and said: Congratulations. I said: What's the matter, you've got the wrong address, it's not my cottage, it's just rented. He said: Yes, I've got the right person, you'll soon see. I said: What is it about? He said: Well, the George Cross. I said: The George Cross, what's that? He nearly say: You can't be that stupid. I said: I don't know what the George Cross is - to do with me? He said: Yes, you read it in the Gazette tomorrow morning, it's going to be published tomorrow morning. My reaction was: Well, if it's going to be published tomorrow morning in the official gazette, why is it you know it tonight, how much did you pay for the information. He said: Well, you'll have to get to be more clever than that with the Press.

CXW In other words he had?

OH Yes. And he was right. The next day we had forty-two news-  
This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.  
paper reporters in our little cottage, Pathe newsreel, I don't

know, everything and everybody. I didn't know what people were talking about. The best moment of that day was when I put the children to bed and my youngest daughter said to me: Mummy, is the George Cross the best thing you could do? I said: Well, I don't know, but it seems to be an important thing so perhaps it is. She said: You see, I want to know about school, what to say. I said: Well, we'll have to learn, won't we, we had to learn.

CXW How old was she then?

OH About six, we had to learn.

CXW You said that when you were in Fresnes there was a notice on the cell saying no privileges for you, what were the privileges you were deprived of?

Oh You see this notice is certainly for the personnel of the prison. It is a warning to them that they are not to take you to the shower room ever, that they are not to enter into any kind of conversation with you ever, that you may get slightly less food than other people, that you are not to come into contact with anybody in the prison. Therefore they are not to leave your door open at any time, your food is to be given to you through the little trapdoor in the door - those kind of things. In fact it is that you are more in solitary.