CHAPTER ONE

The French Resistance

We don't know Madeleine's entire name. When she filed her story for the record in 1966, she still wished to maintain a great deal of anonymity. Now, twenty-five years after the writing, and forty-seven years after her incident, it is impossible to pinpoint exact dates or even last names.

In 1943, when she was first active in the French Resistance, she was but eighteen years old. In all likelihood, Madeleine was a Communist, but to what extent can a girl of eighteen be philosophically and religiously committed to communism? As events proved, she was very committed to a liberated France.

Her code name was Reneé. She was with the area Resistance leader when he was shot dead by the Germans. Michel (his code name) made the mistake of bolting like a scared fox from the foot of a bridge they were about to blow up. He ran straight across the bridge, giving the guards a clear field of fire. Reneé escaped unharmed through a thick, tangled hedge. The explosives they had intended to use came from a mine

in northern France, where they were cached by another group whom Reneé did not know. She was the only remaining member of her little central Paris band who knew the locations of the various weapons caches, as well as the identity of their parallel cells.

At her age and station in life she did not (even passively) seek out a position of leadership, but she knew that with most of the men still in prisoner of war camps, it was up to women like her to carry on the work of the Resistance. Her life was made no less difficult by an almost immediate directive relayed by message to every Resistance member in the Paris regional group: "You are ordered to kill one German."

Reneé picked two stout table knives from amongst the flatware in her apartment. (Perhaps one could do the job, but she wanted to be certain.) She hoped the dark, tattered clothes she wore made her look much older and less conspicuous. Slowly, stooped and shuffling, she picked her way down the street. Two blocks away, Reneé slipped into a short, seldom-used blind alley off of one of Paris' lesser streets. The few windows were either boarded or so grimed over with dirt that little light could pass through.

Acting quickly now, Reneé squatted down, using her full skirt to obscure the view back to the street. Pulling the knives from her pocket, she began cutting the greasy dirt and grime from around the twenty-second tile, counting from a small smudge on the dirty brown stucco wall. After a moment or two, she was able to raise the tile with the knife blade. Beneath it, under an inch or two of clay, was a small, rectangular tin box.

The box contained one fully loaded 8mm Modele d'Ordonnage 1892 revolver. It was one of two weapons the group possessed. This particular pistol had been in storage for many months now. Reneé noticed that the wooden grips had started to crumble as a result of the

street moisture settling in a spot where handling had wiped the Cosmoline away. She did not know who originally cached the weapons, but she supposed they were hidden prior to the occupation.

Unbeknownst to Reneé, the revolver was, because of its limited power and small ammunition capacity, considered substandard by French authorities. It had found its way into Resistance hands only because other potential users had no use for it.

After spending the night practicing a dry-fire routine with the weapon, Reneé climbed on her bicycle and pedaled to Pont de Solferino, a bridge over the Seine, for her appointment with the Gestapo chief. (French sport fishermen had reported that a Gestapo major customarily strolled the Seine every Sunday morning, usually stopping at Pont de Solferino to watch them catch fish.)

Predictably, the major was leaning on the rock walls smoking while he surveyed the anglers. He straightened a bit when he heard her shoes clacking on the cobblestones behind. As he turned, she fired point-blank into his face. The tough old Prussian stood like a stone statue rather than falling. She fired again into his chest. Now he was down. There were no sounds of alarm. The two, as far as she could tell, were alone. Even the fishermen paid little heed.

Reneé fought the instinct to run immediately; the Resistance desperately needed additional arms. It didn't take long to strip the major's Luger from its holster and place it in her handbag with the revolver.

On a desperate run now, she jumped on her bicycle and pedaled off furiously down the quay. The only sound was of an automobile coming up the street behind her.

Quickly and efficiently, the car sideswiped the bike, crumpling it and sending the girl skidding along the street. Kneeling on the pavement, she tried to retrieve

one of the spilled weapons and fire it into her assailant.

Before she could shoot, a French police officer twisted her arms behind her back and secured them with handcuffs. Reneé had suffered the intense bad luck of running into an officer out for a quiet drive with his mistress.

Automobile traffic in occupied Paris was extremely light, and Reneé was somewhat relieved to arrive at the police prefecture in three minutes. (The nervous mistress had held her at gunpoint, a situation Reneé rightly perceived to be very dangerous.)

She was turned over to a squad of Gestapo-trained French collaborators. (After the war, most of these people were tried and executed for their activities, but at the time they played the role of expert interrogators for the Germans.) However, due to the spirit and strength of the Resistance and the rumored imminent landing of the Allies, they chose not to mistreat her physically. By one elaborate subterfuge after another they tried to trick, cajole, or threaten the name of her section chief out of her. Little did her French tormenters know that this young girl was, in fact, the section leader.

"I was outraged by German atrocities in France," she repeated over and over, "so I decided to kill a German. I saw the officer and I killed him." Later, she shortened her account to a simple, "I don't know anything."

After her captors tired of this game, they turned her over to the Germans. She was marched into a bare room and ordered to strip naked. The shame of standing naked for the first time before men was worse than that of taking a human life. Slowly and methodically, the men pulled her hair out, burned her feet, and submerged her head in a tub of ice water. Through it all, she bled and festered, but she never said more than "I don't know anything."

Their last desperate attempt involved bringing in a

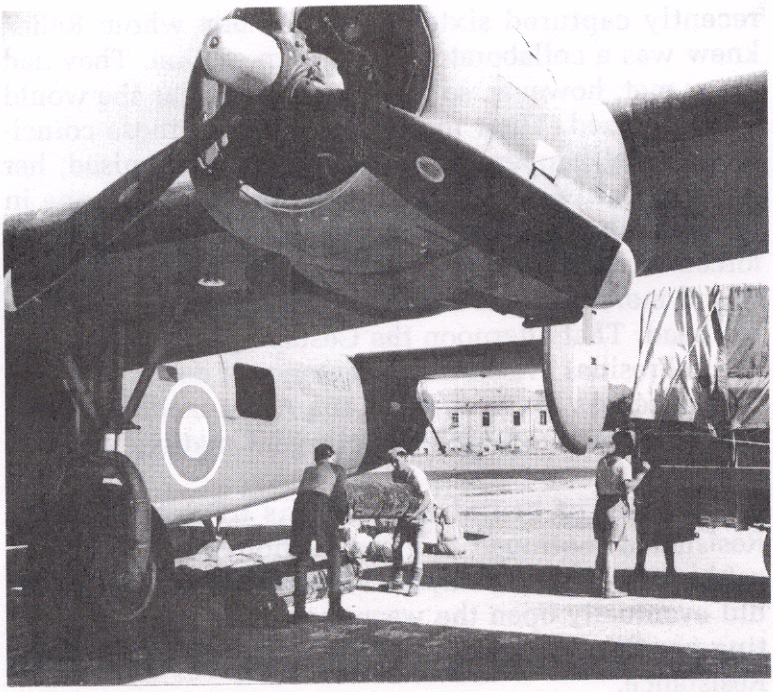
recently captured sixteen-year-old boy whom Reneé knew was a collaborator in her own section. They had never met, however, so there was no danger she would be recognized. Their meeting was one of those coincidences that happen in times of war. As promised, her professional Gestapo interrogators broke every bone in the boy's hands, feet, arms, and legs while she was forced to watch. Yet Reneé held to her story until finally and mercifully the lad was dispatched with a shot to the head. That afternoon the Gestapo gave up and sent her to Fresines Prison under sentence of death.

Reneé was liberated when the Allies landed and the Germans retreated with more urgent matters on their minds.

In spite of brutal repressions of this sort, the Resistance continued to grow. Although initially slow getting out of the blocks, the Free French and the Allies did eventually open the weapons supply pipeline, getting considerable tonnage of supplies through to the Resistance.

During all of 1941, the Royal Air Force (RAF) dropped a miserably small number of two-hundred-pound aluminum cylinders to the Resistance in France—9, to be exact. In 1942, when they finally understood the program, they dropped 201 containers. From January 1943 until liberation, heaven's gates were opened as literally thousands of containers full of explosive manna rained down from the many Stirlings, Wellingtons, Halifaxes, and Dakotas sent over occupied France. Even the U.S. Army Air Force helped with this supply mission, after initially claiming that the risks were not worth the potential gain.

By late 1943, the Resistance was collectively assassinating an average of one German soldier per day in Paris alone. They were derailing trains on a regular basis, destroying factories, and disrupting power supplies. As a result of their efforts, telephone service was



Cache tubes filled with weapons are loaded into airplanes to be dropped to Resistance fighters who will either store the arms or press them into immediate service. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London, England.)

virtually nonexistent. German field units were forced to use radios, which could be monitored in the U.K.

Various load configurations were used, but the standard two-hundred-pound cache cylinder usually contained the following:

6 Bren guns, 78 extra magazines, and 1,000 rounds per gun
36 Enfield rifles with 150 rounds per gun
27 Sten guns, 100 extra magazines, 300 rounds per gun, and 16 loaders
5 Enfield pistols with 50 extra rounds per gun
40 standard hand grenades

Toward the end of the war, the Parisians often met en masse to train, parade, and plan. A number of the weapons they display were captured from the enemy. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London, England.)

12 heavy hand grenades
18 pounds of plastique with caps and fuzes
156 field dressings
6,600 rounds of 9mm ammo
3,168 rounds of .303 ammo

Reports from the pick-up agents in the field claimed that no matter how they tried, they were never able to repack everything into the tubes. The British packers utilized every square inch of space. Often the recipients made the mistake of immediately opening the tubes to check for damage, forcing them to carry parts of the cache by hand because they would not all fit back in the tube.

Rifles, Sten guns, Bren guns, and mortars are packed into cache tubes for delivery to the French Resistance. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London, England.)

Most drops were made by air. Some supplies were sent in by sea, but because German activities were especially intense within twenty-five miles of the coast, these actions were limited. British commandos placed several caches of munitions in shallow, offshore locations, marking them with buoys of the type commonly used for lobster pots. One cache was found by fishermen who turned it in to the Germans for a generous cash reward. Another was found by members of the Resistance, who immediately made good use of it. A third cache of supplies, not recovered until a year after its deposition, was ruined. Apparently, the only agent who knew of its existence and location was inadver-

tently parachuted onto the roof of Gestapo headquarters. He survived but was not released in time to get to the weapons before the corrosive saltwater did. Limited caching technology of that era required that people give fully as much thought to where a cache was placed as to how it might be constructed.

Resistance cache builders ranged from cavalier to cautious with regard to their activities. In all cases, it was essential that the weapons be distributed and stored quickly. The Resistance estimated that, as a general rule, 10 percent of their deliveries was lost to the enemy, 10 percent was just plain lost, 20 percent was used immediately, and 60 percent was stored for future need. When the Allies landed at Normandy, these caches were bulging with enough arms and munitions to set up an internally generated Free French army. In this case, long-term caching was a major strategy that the French executed purposefully and successfully.

Now and again, reports filter out of modern France of accidental findings of an ancient Resistance arms cache uncovered in an old cellar excavation or a road cut. In general, however, most munitions landed and cached were ultimately recovered and used.

Resistance officers almost universally believed that farmers and rural people would do the best job of hiding weapons. Therefore, as a rule, they usually attempted to place caches on farms, in barns, and in other rural settings. Most French citizens supported the Resistance in concept if not out in the field. It was unlikely that German authorities would be notified of suspicious movements

At times, the cachers took incredible risks. Weapons were stored in wooden military crates inside barns, milking parlors, and horse stalls like so many bales of hay. Many had little more than a light straw covering or a cloth tarp to keep them from the eyes of casual

observers. Under such circumstances, Resistance leaders argued that the weapons were being issued as quickly as possible and that the open storage was only very temporary. Once the end users got hold of them, it became their duty to be sure their weapon was not discovered.

Nevertheless, keeping guns, ammo, and explosives out in almost plain view displayed an incredible amount of bravado, especially given the severe penalties one could expect for being caught with war materiel. Officially, it was a matter of policy for the Resistance that one never carried a weapon or explosive unless engaging in an actual preplanned operation. Those who violated the rule and were caught by the Gestapo quickly found themselves in death camps in eastern Germany and Poland. Rules regarding proper caching were, in that manner, strictly enforced.

Problems became especially severe in cities, where the number of Resistance members able to use firearms dwindled rapidly as a result of death and internment. Practice and training with live ammunition for replacement members was impossible, since the Germans were waging a fairly successful war of attrition.

Captured agents often revealed the location of their caches when subjected to torture. On October 14, 1941, a farmer named DuBove was raided by the Gestapo near the village of Lestiac (fifteen miles from Bordeaux) because a member gave in to torture. A newly arrived agent from England named Charles Hayes was among those at the farm when it was hit by the Gestapo in the wee hours of the morning. Fighting went on for more than three hours as the agent, the farmer, and the farmer's son ran from building to building in an attempt to hold off their attackers.

The stone house and barn afforded fairly good protection, but eventually everyone, including several female resisters, were too wounded to go on. The men

Here, two women, one armed with an Erma machine pistol, supervise a "free drop," done without a parachute to minimize exposure to the enemy. Initially, the Resistance was run almost entirely by women. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London, England.)

were captured alive and held for a time before being executed at Gross Rosen Prison.

Women were often executed when the Germans were reasonably sure they were involved in the movement of weapons and/or in the Resistance. The following account of four female agents is typical. Vera Leigh, Diana Rowden, Andrea Borrel, and Sonia Olschanesky were arrested for Resistance activities, including the transport of weapons and explosives. They were taken by train to a concentration camp at Natsweler in Alsace. There, a Resistance officer recognized them and made an attempt to talk to them, but the women

were immediately whisked away to individual cells, where they were held until late that night.

About 11:00 P.M., they were marched to the crematorium, given a lethal injection, and disposed of in the ovens.

While lax caching methods stand out because of their stupidity, they were the exception rather than the rule. Mistakes, when they occurred, were so costly that few operated under the illusion that they were dealing in a small-time game of chance. Most drops and subsequent caches were very well organized. A classic rendezvous occurred in the fall of 1943. A large number of Resistance members organized a full-blown funeral procession. Using clandestine wireless transmitters, they arranged for a drop near a rural cemetery. The operation took place at daybreak. Scores of mourners dressed in tall hats, black scarves, and gloves carried numerous concealed Sten guns. In spite of wartime rationing, they were able to arrange a motorized hearse with enough fuel for the operation. There were also many horse-drawn conveyances to help move the numerous aluminum cylinders from the landing zone to their cache site.

The weapons were placed in waiting open graves, in a few of the mausoleums, and otherwise scattered around the cemetery. Others were dispatched off with Sten-toting mourners to the various farms and chateaus in the region. For a time, several cases of ammo and C-4 explosive rode along under little more than a covering of flowers. Even though they crossed several police checkpoints, no one questioned the mourners or searched the vehicles. By nightfall, several dozen containers of arms were scattered about the region, ready for deployment.