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And There She Was

by Chris Baker

And there she was. The brown service folder lay open on my desk. It was the fourth that I'd read that morning. I had another six to read. Each folder contained a head and shoulders photograph of the volunteer, face on and in profile from left and the right, their service record, personal details: date of birth, family history, education, language and details of anything that might just keep them safe and everything that would not. Her page was blank in that respect.

The volunteers, mostly women, were all singular characters. Possessed of great courage: the kind that weighs the risks yet chooses that course. There was nothing impulsive about any of them. So, what caught my attention about this one? After all this time, I am so sorry I really cannot remember. How annoying for you!

I do remember that her upbringing was slightly unusual. French mother and Norwegian father, who captained from Bremmerhaven what must have been one of the last of the four masted schooners taking grain to Australia. She was educated first by governesses in Oslo and then at good schools in Paris and Dresden. Her French, Norwegian and German were fluent. Her favourite holidays were spent in Devon on a farm where she roamed field and marsh day and night, observing without being observed, the ways of wild creatures. To-day, one'd say that she was a very gifted naturalist.

The personal detail only alluded to her encounter with three bears. Yes, only an allusion. Odd isn't it. Why? I don't know. Strange, when one thinks that hers is such an enduring tale. Perhaps the report's author felt awkward in confirming a fairy tale. We'll never know why more wasn't made of it. Perhaps for her own safety. But the extra photographs lying loose at the back of her folder put it beyond doubt: golden hair cascading, almost like breaking waves over her head and shoulders.

By then of course her childish features had changed. She was elegant. There is no other description.

Her intake would have been with us for about six months: perfecting everything: cover story, Morse – each agent had a distinctive rhythm you know. We could tell who was transmitting by the cadence of their keys. It was re-assuring – another day alive. But it was a false comfort you know: the enemy came to recognise their transmissions.

What else did they practice? Navigation by day and night using only the most basic sketch map, the stars or a button compass, how to knife and throttle a sentry without making a sound, stripping and re-assembling small arms, blindfolded.

She was pretty adept at getting into and out of places without detection and most important of all they were put through it with R to I - resistance to interrogation: it was brutal but nothing that could properly prepare them for capture and what followed.

Once they'd finished their training with us, they went abroad. We didn't know where. We weren't allowed to.

Towards the end I went abroad to interrogate senior officers and collaborators. Our interest by then was to know how lines had been penetrated. Most were co-operative and it was in one of those sessions that quite unexpectedly I learned that she'd been betrayed and taken her own life rather than face what she knew would follow. And there she was.