



## **Code Name Pauline: Memoirs of a World War II Special Agent**

*Pearl Witherington Cornioley, Kathryn J. Atwood (Editor)*

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**Code Name Pauline: Memoirs of a World War II Special Agent** Pearl Witherington Cornioley , Kathryn J. Atwood (Editor)

One of the most celebrated female World War II resistance fighters shares her remarkable story in this firsthand account of her experience as a special agent for the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). Told through a series of reminiscences—from a difficult childhood spent in the shadow of World War I and her family's harrowing escape from Paris as the Germans approached in 1940 to her recruitment and training as a special agent and the logistics of parachuting into a remote rural area of occupied France and, later, hiding in a wheat field from enemy fire—each chapter also includes helpful opening remarks to provide context and background on the SOE and the French Resistance. With an annotated list of key figures, an appendix of original unedited interview extracts—including the story of Pearl's fiancé Henri who escaped a German POW camp to become Pearl's second-in-command—and fascinating photographs and documents from Pearl's personal collection, this memoir will captivate World War II buffs of any age.

## **Code Name Pauline: Memoirs of a World War II Special Agent Details**

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## **From Reader Review Code Name Pauline: Memoirs of a World War II Special Agent for online ebook**

### **Sheila says**

A fascinating look at an amazing woman. Pearl (whose code name was Pauline, hence the title of the book), was a British subject who grew up in Paris – making her an ideal candidate for working in occupied France.

The book is a translation from a series of interviews that Pearl did in French, and Pearl's requirement that her story be told as she shared it precisely made for some structural challenges for Atwood. However, I think Atwood does an excellent job of arranging the interviews in a coherent arc, and of including introductory material for each chapter to set up the story that Pearl tells in that chapter. I also enjoyed Henri's interview in the appendix – he also had some amazing experiences!

If you liked the fictional book *Code Name Verity* and would like a nonfictional look at events, I think *Code Name Pauline* would be an excellent choice. While "Pauline" isn't a pilot, her intelligence work in France is still close enough to some of the events in *Verity* that it provides a compelling counterpoint.

Review originally posted here

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### **Manchester Military History Society (MMHS) says**

#### **Dry and unemotional account of a female SOE agent, but great value in hearing it as she really saw it**

Told in her own words you can hear the stiff upper lip and the way that people of that period try to make everything that they did sound so "matter of fact".

Whilst you feel Pearl is not telling the whole story here, this eyewitness account of the SOE is an important work as readers now have access to Witherington's actual words.

Although other books have been published recently about Pearl Witherington they appear to be very economical in what could be termed historical accuracy.

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### **Jane says**

I received this book as a Goodreads First Read.

This book is aimed at young adults but can be read by anyone. It's the true story of Pearl Witherington, told by her to Herve Larroque, this is the English language adaption by Kathryn J. Atwood. It's an inspiring book showing a woman's determination to fight for a country she loved.

Pearl joined the SOE in London. She was described as 'probably the best shot (male or female) we have yet had' and 'completely brave' by her instructors. After being parachuted into France she became a courier, carrying and delivering secret messages. This was dangerous work but Pearl got on with her job showing

great courage.

The message she gives to young people is to be determined. It is compelling to read, some areas would have benefited from more information but that perhaps would have lost the spirit of Pearl who shines through in this book.

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### **Sesana says**

Different from the other books in the series, in that it's largely in the subject's own words, based on extensive interviews before her death. A bit dry in spots.

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### **Lynn says**

I read about Pearl Witherington Cornioley in Kathryn Atwood's interesting book on Women Heroes in WWII and was fascinated by her story. Kathryn Atwood is the editor for this English publication meant for teens.

Cornioley was always extremely reluctant to talk about her experiences and only in old age did she agree to be interviewed. Humble to a fault and coming from a generation that seldom boasted, she downplays her role and truly brave actions. The result is that at first the memoir is a little dry and very matter of fact but after a while it is easy to read beneath the reserved nature and get a glimpse of how extraordinary Cornioley was. There is real value here as primary source material but also as a window into a generation that stepped up, did what needed to be done and kept their counsel. Most of those people are gone now and books like this are a treasure. Some extraordinary back matter adds to the overall picture. The photographs also were very interesting.

This would be an outstanding book to use in a high school class studying WWII.

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### **Samantha Shank says**

Growing up, Cecile Pearl Witherington didn't have an easy childhood. Her father was an alcoholic and her mother grew up in a well-to-do family and wasn't prepared for the struggles of being a "single parent." At a young age, Pearl took on a lot of responsibility that ultimately prepared her for her important role in World War II.

Because of her British citizenship and her upbringing in Paris, Pearl spoke English and French. She became an SOE agent. When the Germans invaded France, Pearl and her family fled back to England.

The SOE (Special Operations Executive) is one of those little-known yet fascinating events of World War II. It was so top-secret most had never heard of it until after the war. A British organization designed to help resistance movements in Nazi-occupied Europe, the SOE participated in sabotage, espionage, reconnaissance, and all types of guerrilla warfare. After grueling SOE training and three practice jumps, 29-year-old Pearl parachuted into Nazi-occupied France on a cold September night in 1943.

Posing as a cosmetics saleswoman, Pearl began her resistance work by participating in little acts of defiance against the Nazis. Things take a turn for the worst when her boss Maurice Southgate was captured by the Gestapo (Nazi police) and taken to Buchenwald (a concentration camp) - leaving Pearl in charge of 3,500 resistance workers. For the rest of the war, she bravely led the 3,500 resistance workers under the name Pauline.

After the war, Pearl settled down with her pre-war fiance, Henri Cornioley. She never spoke about her work in the resistance because she was afraid her story would be twisted with Hollywood-drama or exaggerations. Fifty years later, Pearl began to realize the impact her story could have on young people. She told a French journalist about their wartime experiences, and her story was published in France as Pauline. This book, *Code Name Pauline*, is the English translation, edited by Kathryn J. Atwood.

This book, since it is aimed at a young adult audience, is pretty easy to follow along. The story is straightforward and told solely as it had happened - very little drama is present. Pearl gracefully took all of life's challenges. The beginning of each chapter fills us in with some historical background, which really helps the reader, especially if you've never heard of the SOE.

I have always loved strong female protagonists, especially in true stories. I loved Kathryn Atwood's book *Women Heroes of World War II* and I was so excited to hear she was in the process of editing another book (this book). Our culture does not put enough emphasis on true heroes, like Henri and Pearl. We need to show young girls courageous females like Pearl and do exactly what she would have wanted - share her story to encourage young people facing trials in their life.

Disclaimer: I received a free copy of this book from the author in exchange for an honest review. This in no way affected my review.

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## **Ed says**

I really enjoyed this book. This really is history in the raw. An excellent first-hand account by a participant in this era of history, who does not do spin, does not over-dramatize her role, but factually recounts what happened to her and nevertheless makes you feel as if you were there in the dark parachuting into occupied Europe on only your fourth parachute drop. For many years, Pearl Witherington had said nothing about what she had experienced, and was only reluctantly in old age willing to set the record straight in a series of interviews with a French journalist in 1994-5. It is the record of these interviews that form the basis of this really interesting memoir that I read in two sittings.

I found Pearl's personality immediately engaging. She clearly had a very difficult life growing up, hungry and managing a very dysfunctional family. However, this in many ways this prepared her for the improvisation under pressure required in the Resistance. She was used to hardship and uncertainty about where the next meal was coming from and as a result could work well in the clandestine world. I also took to her sense of outrage at the injustice of the German occupiers that angered so much she felt she had to fight back after she finally arrived in England with her family after a very difficult journey across Occupied and Unoccupied France and Franco's Spain. She did not take the soft option of remaining in a job in the British embassy in Lisbon in neutral Portugal as many might have been tempted to do, but took her family on to England which was being heavily bombed at the time.

Pearl's role was initially as a courier with the cover of being a cosmetics' saleswoman, and I enjoyed her

anecdotes of this period, the way she blended in and moving around the numerous security checks and seemed to have nerves of steel considering the risks she was taking. But in many ways her most important role was to take over a rapidly growing Resistance network after her boss, its leader was arrested by the Gestapo. This she describes without ego or self-aggrandization as just what had to be done in the circumstances. There are so many questions you want to ask her about this, and I like a book that makes us want to know more.

I have traveled extensively in France and liked the memoir's background account of France, its local landscapes and people. It is a country of many 'petits-pays': little areas with different cooking and landscape, each a little different from the one next door. And the French Resistance, as Pearl portrays it, was very locally based and grounded in its communities. She shows how important personal trust was and the amazing way that people found the courage to support the Resistance. And she was very cross when after D-Day, the incoming French army made her Maquis group move to another unfamiliar territory, completely contrary to the rules of guerilla warfare, if there are any.

The book is very intelligently edited by Kathryn Atwood. She selects the right passages in the right order and her context-setting is at just the right level for the audience I think and never patronizing. Though a book based on a memoir that was aimed at young people to help them see how hardship can be overcome and even used, I think that, like Kathryn Atwood's other book Women Heroes of World War 2, this book is for all ages who are interested in how someone with a relatively ordinary if tough background ends up in an extraordinary role in extraordinary circumstances. And yes it does suggest that early hardship has its upside and that is a valuable lesson for those enduring childhood hardship.

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### **Maria Pascarella says**

This review is from my 10 year-old son, who really enjoyed the book. "I loved it! I didn't even eat or drink from when I started to when I finished it. I read it in less than 24 hours. It was very unique, especially how it was a piece of history from the point of view of someone who was there, and not a history book."

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### **Christie says**

Peal Witherington Cornioley served as a British SOE agent in France during WWII, ferrying messages for the British and assisting resistance leaders in their fight against the Nazis. Her code name was Pauline and she was remembered fondly by all who came in contact with her during the war.

After reading Code Name Verity, I was interested in the history behind the British SOE, a secret organization that supported resistance against the Germans in Nazi-occupied countries. Very few women worked for the SOE, and Pearl was one of them. The book is fascinating as it allows Pearl to tell her story with a series of interviews. The editor adds in some history snippets at the beginning of each chapter which give Pearl's story context in the events of the wider world. The maps and photographs were great additions to the book.

My only complaint is that book seemed very one-sided being just Pearl's story. I found the appendices very interesting as they included Henri's perspective on events. It would have been nice to have had some other perspectives here and there.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoyed Code Name Verity, as it is a great companion piece to the fictional story. If you are interested in women's history at all, especially their roles in WWII, it is a great book to read. It is an inspiring story of a girl who struggled through early life to become essential to France's fight against occupation.

Paranormal scavenger hunt: Full moon

Scavenger hunt: Australia

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### **Lois says**

First of all, I read this book because of a competition on school. This is a good book for teenagers to read, talks about World War II. I don't want to be a spoiler, so there's no summary. Good to read this book, and bless you, have a joyful time with it.

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### **Sara Braunshweiger says**

I found this book really interesting because I never knew so much about an agent and what they did. Pearl, also known as Pauline, in my opinion has a really cool job that is really fascinating and in some cases life risking. I also liked how this book was her diary and some parts were real unedited interviews. The book also included great pictures and documents from Pearl's personal collection. I thought that all of these little things, such as pictures and interviews, actually made a good visual for me and made me enjoy this book a whole lot more. I would recommend this book to other people our age because it is very interesting and gives a lot of good information. I also think that if you like social studies, especially World War 2, you will like this book.

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### **Apryl Anderson says**

This was such the tiniest hint of an unforgettable period of history that's so quickly slipping away. I can respect that Mme. Cornioley refrained from telling her story for the fear of misrepresentation, but what a shame that she kept silent for so long. She held a key of truth that's worth remembering. Thankfully, we can read at least a part of what she knew.

For instance, we don't often go into the difference between the Gestapo and the German Army. They were 2 completely opposing forces! On page 100, she rightly says, "Personally I think that someone who hasn't lived through this type of war can't understand what it was really like; it's impossible." Yet, it is worth the effort. One can't over-explain to those of us who've grown up surrounded by the luxury of peace. Unfortunately, this book was far from detail. In consequence, I may be more likely to turn to embellishments in search of context.

In the Conclusion, Cornioley writes: Nothing is completed easily in life, and this book took a lot of time and dedication from both Henri and me. We wanted to tell our story as it happened and as we experienced it. I hope this testimony will help young people get over the problems and difficulties that happen in any life. Never lose hope, never give in, because life will not make things easy, but it knows how to reward those who

approach it conscientiously, bravely, and with determination.

We have both come to the end of our lives by facing life together and by creating a close circle of friends who were chosen for their humanity. We would like to thank them with all our hearts for being so wonderful.

I recommend this short book to anyone who needs more heroes to teach them a thing or two.

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## Rupert Colley says

Born in Paris to English parents, Pearl Witherington Cornioley was an extraordinary SOE agent who, at one point during World War Two, had over 3,000 fighters under her command. In 1995, her memoirs were published in France. Now, eighteen years later, as *Code Name Pauline: Memoirs of a World War II Special Agent*, they are finally available in English, edited by American author Kathryn Atwood, and published by Chicago Review Press. Atwood first introduced us to Pearl in 2011 in her excellent *Women Heroes of World War II: 26 Stories of Espionage, Sabotage, Resistance, and Rescue*. And here we get Pearl's story from the woman herself. And it's quite a story.

Pearl's father was a drifter and an alcoholic, rarely at home. Although she states she was "never unhappy at home with Mummy", it was, nonetheless, a difficult childhood, having to bear her parents' arguing, often rummaging for food and fighting off her father's debt collectors. As the eldest of four girls and with an English mother who found it hard coping with life in Paris, Pearl was imbued from an early age with a sense of responsibility; a responsibility that deprived her of a proper childhood. As soon as she was old enough, and following her father's death, Pearl went out to work to earn money, not for herself, but her mother and her sisters.

Pearl met her future husband, Henri Cornioley, the son of prosperous parents, in 1933. But with war, six years later, came separation. Drafted into the army, Henri was not to see his sweetheart for over three years. Following the fall of France in June 1940, Pearl and her family, as British citizens, were still technically enemies of Nazi Germany and therefore had to flee. Following a circuitous journey lasting some seven months, they finally arrived in London in July 1941.

Vehemently opposed to the occupation of France, Pearl felt impelled to help the Allied cause and being a fluent French-speaker was able to join the newly-formed SOE (Special Operations Executive). Established specifically to cause disruption and sabotage within Nazi-occupied territories, Winston Churchill hoped that the SOE would "set Europe ablaze".

Like many SOE agents, Pearl was given an honorary rank of second lieutenant in the "vain hope that, if captured, the enemy would treat these 'officers' as POWs according to the Geneva Convention". Pearl's SOE trainers were much impressed with her. Her weapons instructor referred to her as "probably the best shot (male or female) we have yet had".

After months of training and preparation, Pearl was parachuted into France in September 1943 disguised as a cosmetics saleswoman. What follows is an account of her work in France, which includes, at one point, being shot at by the Germans. The tone is continually matter-of-fact and the descriptions of her adventures understated. But we know that here is a woman of immense courage, working under the most difficult of situations, fearful of arrest at every turn.

Following France's liberation, Charles de Gaulle, "anxious to not credit the British for their help during the

Resistance", ordered Britain's SOE agents to leave France within 48 hours. As French residents, Pearl and Henri did not fall into this bracket but nonetheless an even greater slight awaited them... Pearl was offered an MBE - the civilian version. Indignant, she refused it, stating that she hadn't done "anything remotely 'civil' for England during the war". Her obstinacy paid off and in 1946, Pearl was duly awarded the military MBE.

Code Name Pauline is an illuminating read. Atwood introduces each chapter with a summary or explanation written in such a way that, as the reader, you feel you are being gently guided. But at no point does Atwood's commentary detract from the main narrative.

Atwood, who wrote an article especially for History In An Hour on editing Code Name Pauline, finishes with a number of useful appendices, including brief biographies of the key figures, figures from within Pearl's story, and national figures such as de Gaulle and Philippe Petain. Following this are extracts from an interview with Henri Cornioley, who died in 1999, a man who obviously enjoyed telling a story. His story of begging to be allowed back into the POW camp he'd inadvertently escaped from is an amusing highlight. The book has a number of photographs, including Pearl in uniform, beside Henri and in her latter years, including a photo taken in 2004 of Pearl alongside the Queen.

In accidental tandem with Code Name Pauline, is a biography of Pearl called She Landed By Moonlight: The Story of Secret Agent Pearl Witherington: the real Charlotte Gray by Carole Seymour-Jones. (Pearl has often been stated as the source of Sebastian Faulks's eponymous heroine although Faulks denied the connection). Both titles, Atwood's and Seymour-Jones's, were published within a month of each other. She Landed By Moonlight has generally received favourable reviews and no doubt was intended to honour Pearl and her work during the war. But, rather strangely for a biography, it reads as a novel, using imaginary dialogue and imagined thoughts. For a woman who was so down-to-earth and fervently opposed to the romanticism of her story, one wonders what Pearl would have made of it.

Pearl Witherington Cornioley died, aged 93, on 24 February 2008. Kathryn Atwood's finely edited book honours her memory in a manner I imagine Pearl would have thoroughly approved of.

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### **Keith says**

Written in a very understated way, the book describes the life of a female SOE operative in occupied France. Describing the minutiae of life under the constant threat of exposure and arrest, 'Pauline's' story is intriguing. None of the 'glorification' of war here, it describes her utter dedication to the cause of removing the Nazis from France and her tireless fight to ensure the men under her command were provisioned. She neither cared nor was interested in your background - her only stipulation was that you were there to fight the Germans.

An amazing woman who is still a beacon of light to those whose life is difficult.

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### **Alex (not a dude) Baugh says**

When most of us think special agents, the figure that most often comes to mind is that of James Bond, code name 007, part of the Secret Intelligence Service, or M16. Bond is fun, but he is nothing like real life. In reality, being a special agent can leave you cold, wet, dirty, hungry, and sometimes your stuff ends up in a lake when you parachute into an occupied country as you will discover when you read Code Name Pauline.

In a series of interviews, Pearl Witherington Cornioley tells about her life in the SOE, or Special Operations Executive, whose purpose was to "locate, assist, supply and train willing resisters within occupied countries by sending them British-trained agents," (pg xxi) people who could speak the language of the occupied country with native fluency. The SOE was a top secret organization, so top secret no one in it knew its real name until after the war.

Pearl Witherington Cornioley was a perfect candidate. Although she was a British citizen, she had been born and raised in Paris and so, naturally she spoke fluent French. When the Germans began their invasion of France in June 1940, Pearl, her mother and three sisters (her father had already passed away) needed to get out of France and back to England. It was a long, harrowing seven-month trip, but they luckily received help along the way and arrived back in London in July 1941.

Morally opposed to the occupation of France by the Nazis, Pearl knew she could do more to help the resistance working in France than doing paperwork for the Air Ministry in England and so she applied to the Inter-Services Research Bureau, which actually turned out to be the SOE, along with an old friend from France, Maurice Southgate, also a Brit.

After a grueling training period and only three practice jumps, Pearl, at the age of 29, parachuted into France in September 1943 disguised as a cosmetics saleswoman. For the most part engaging in acts of sabotage to slow down and thwart the Nazis, Pearl recounts some of the small every day details of resistance work we don't usually hear about in fiction and about her close calls with the Gestapo where luck was on her side.

Then, when her friend Maurice was captured by the Gestapo and sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp, Pearl took over the leadership of 3,500 resistance workers and assumed the code name Pauline for the remainder of her time with the Resistance.

Pearl never spoke about her work in France with the Resistance after the war. She married Henri Cornioley with whom she had been involved even before the war and who she worked with during it, and lived a relatively quiet life. In 1994, she and Henri decided to give some interviews to French journalist Hervé Larroque, which were published in French under the name Pauline. *Code Name Pauline* is Kathryn Atwood's English translation of the work.

*Code Name Pauline* is an interesting, exciting memoir about a woman I would love to have met. Pearl/Pauline is feisty, almost fearless, and very morally principled, but she is also stubborn, as you will discover when you read about why she refused an honor given to her by Britain for her work in the resistance. Bravo, Pearl!

And because reminiscences aren't always linear, or clear and sometimes digress, Kathryn Atwood, who first introduced English readers to Pearl's story in her excellent work, *Women Heroes of World War II*, has written a comprehensive introduction to each chapter and has also included in her back matter a list of key figures, an extensive appendix and chapter notes, all very interesting and useful to the reader. There is also an insert of photographs of Pearl, her family, her forged documents and, of course, Henri.

Pearl's intention for allowing herself to be interviewed was to hopefully inspire young people and to that end, this is indeed a fascinating book that will appeal to readers interested in WWII history as well as readers interested in women's history and it is most definitely inspirational.

This book is recommended for readers age 12+  
This book was sent to me by the publisher

This review was originally posted at The Children's War

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