

SECOND WORLD WAR



Monique Hanotte at home in Belgium

It was our instinct to help, says Belgian war heroine

Joe Shute meets the woman who risked her life to save Allied airmen and joined the Comet Line resistance

Monique Hanotte was 19 years old in May 1940, when two

men walked into her family's hotel in the Belgian village of Rumes and her life changed forever. It was a fortnight after Germany had invaded Belgium, and the men – a pair of officers from the British Expeditionary Force – had become -separated during the retreat towards Dunkirk.

They pleaded with Hanotte's father, a First World War veteran, and mother to help them get over the French border, just a mile or so away, and evade capture. They dressed the men as coal merchants and walked them past the customs post and into France.

Those officers would prove the first of nearly 140 Allied airmen the family would rescue over the ensuing years. And, from that point on, it was Hanotte herself who would walk with them over the border or accompany them on trains to Paris and Lille.

Each time she did so, she placed herself and her family in mortal danger, risking torture and being sent to a concentration camp.

One day shortly after the Dunkirk evacuation, a member of MI9, the War Office department tasked with assisting Allied airmen who had been shot down over Europe to get home, arrived at the Hanotte residence and politely inquired over coffee whether they would lend their daughter to the British intelligence agencies.

Hanotte became one of the most prolific members of the Belgian resistance network known as the Comet Line, which saved more than 800 airmen and soldiers from captivity during the Second World War. She turns 100 tomorrow and is one of the last surviving witnesses to their extraordinary bravery, with just half a dozen or so Comet Line members now left alive.

A master of secrecy, her reticence remains drilled into her after all these years

The average time between signing up as a member of the Comet Line and being captured by the Nazis was just three months. But today, sitting in her apartment with her medals – including an MBE – pinned to a cushion and surrounded by birthday cards, Hanotte bats away any praise. “It was our natural instinct to help,” she says (in our socially distanced interview).

A master of secrecy, her reticence remains drilled into her after all these years. Such was her skill for evasion that she was later recruited by the British intelligence agencies and taken to England, where she was trained up as an operative with the Special Operations Executive (known as Churchill’s secret army, which waged war behind enemy lines).

Here, she was given the code name “Monique” instead of her real name, Henriette. She has used her wartime moniker ever since.

What was her individual impact on the Allied war effort?

Sometimes, it is best for others to put the deeds of the wartime generation into words. And for Hanotte, that honour belongs to retired Air Commodore John Maas, who last week travelled to Belgium on behalf of the Royal Air Forces Association to deliver a birthday cake.

“Monique bringing that many aviators back to rejoin the fight had a huge impact,” he explains. “The idea that there were people out there to help if you were shot down was simply phenomenal for morale.”

Before the Nazis invaded her village and the British escapees wandered into her family home, Hanotte’s life was like any rural Belgian girl. As well as the hotel business, her family had a small farm where she and her younger brother helped tend to the livestock.

Rumes was a key staging post, situated only a mile or so from

the border with France, split by a railway line and dotted with custom posts. It was the perfect place for a resistance cell. And Hanotte, a diminutive teenage girl in a bonnet and skirt, was to prove the perfect operative.

As a youngster, she attended school in the French town of Bachy just over the border, and travelled every day on foot or bicycle. She was a regular sight to the customs officials and knew every secret path snaking through the hedgerows. “For me, there was no border,” she says. “I went backwards and forwards across it every day.”

From that first visit in 1940, the Hanotte part of the Comet Line network was up and running by 1942. Generally, the airmen would arrive by train and come to the nine-room family hotel opposite. Hanotte’s mother, Georgette, would cook the men a meal and then spend the next few days teaching them to properly pronounce the new francophone names they had been given on their counterfeit paperwork. They were also given scraps from German magazines to make them appear more authentic.

The family were invited to numerous weddings by airmen they had saved

After two or three days, they were given their final documents and a sandwich, and then it was down to Hanotte to help them on their way.

Sometimes it was straightforward; walking the guards six miles or so through the patchwork of fields to hand them over to the next operative. If possible, she would pick a route that avoided the custom posts – and German pillboxes – which were situated around the village and can still be seen today. If she did come across an official, she would pretend the men were new boyfriends. “You had to think on your feet,” she says. “There

were German soldiers all along the border.” Often, though, she was required to travel further afield, accompanying the men on buses and trains to Lille and Paris. She recalls one of many close encounters when she and two British airmen were travelling in a first-class carriage to Paris. At one stop, a Nazi officer walked in and asked to borrow one of the German newspapers the airmen were pretending to read. “I quickly gave him mine instead so they wouldn’t have to speak,” says Hanotte. “It was a very scary moment.”



Ready for duty: Monique Hanotte in her Auxiliary Territorial Service uniform

Normally, once at the Gare du Nord in Paris, Hanotte would hand over the airmen to a Comet contact and return back home, but sometimes she would stay over in a safe house – on the

fourth floor of an apartment block on Rue Marguerite. On one day in 1944, she headed to the apartment but discovered the Paris network had been arrested. Hanotte had been denounced by a French collaborator.

The British spymasters decided to bring her in. She was ordered to follow the same escape route taken by the airmen, over the Pyrenees and into Spain and then Gibraltar, where she was flown back to London.

She was taken to the Royal Patriotic School – an MI9-run clearing centre for newly arrived immigrants – and then on to Manchester, where she was trained to be a secret agent and parachutist. A picture from the time shows Hanotte in the uniform of the Auxiliary Territorial Service complete with her parachutist wings (which she regretfully admits she has now lost). She was trained to drop into the Ardennes counteroffensive, but was never sent. This remains a source of great regret to Hanotte as she was not in Belgium when it was liberated in September 1944.

She remained in England until the end of the war. She recalls joining in the VE Day celebrations in London in May 1945, before being driven back to her village by the British for an emotional reunion with her parents.

Despite having saved so many lives, she says there is not a single airman who stands out in her mind today – although, after the war, she and her parents received numerous invitations to wedding receptions of British airmen they had saved.

During the war, she had a lover who was a Belgian border guard, and in 1945, they were married, having two children together.

With the benefit of 75 years of hindsight, Hanotte remains insistent that she didn't do anything out of the ordinary. "I was trying to protect my family and they were trying to protect me," she says. The strength of such a bond is enough to bring down even the most powerful of enemies.