



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

As Jules looks ahead to the centenary of World War I and the D-Day landings next year, he tells the compelling story of an extraordinary British war heroine

Is it just me, or is 2013 flying by? Already the harvest is over, and thoughts of autumn and cosy nights in are taking shape, which all means that 2014 and what might become of it are starting to race through my mind. As someone with a keen eye on military history, next year is lining up to be a momentous one. 2014 will of course see the centenary of the start of the First World War, a conflict that cost the lives of nine million men on the Western Front alone, and we will also commemorate the 70th anniversary of D-Day.

Not surprisingly many a new tome will be written on both conflicts by some of our most eminent historians, and a fascinating read they will be. But as is the case with such histories, the authors are left with the difficult task of deciding what to leave out. Many a footnote belies a compelling human story about ordinary people, who by a quirk of fate found themselves amidst the tumult of extraordinary times, undertaking extraordinary things.

One such story has in itself been commemorated just a few miles from my home in Herefordshire. Tucked away in the wonderfully named Wormelow Tump is a modest red sandstone cottage set back from the road. It was here in the early days of the Second World War that a young woman came to escape and relax for just a while. Her name was Violette Szabo.

In August 1940, this young woman met and married a dashing young French Foreign Legion Officer, Etienne Szabo. Much decorated throughout many campaigns stretching from Norway to North Africa, in 1942 Etienne was killed just south of El Alamein. He left behind his wife and their daughter Tania, who was born just months before his death.

Etienne's loss prompted his young widow to join up, and she eventually found her way into an organisation whose exploits were unknown during the war. A fluent French speaker with a good knowledge of France, Violette was trained in sabotage, coded messages and hand to hand fighting. She also knew what would happen to her if caught. On either side, spies were universally shot.

I met Violette Szabo's daughter, Tania, in Wormelow in the early summer of 2011, whilst filming for *How We Won The War*. She explained that the house had a family connection, and that often her mother would visit both before and during the war. These

days it's maintained as a museum to Violette by Rosemary Rigby. Tania had grown up an orphan, and yet had pieced together an account of Violette's exploits that ran as clearly as if she'd been alongside her. Dropped into occupied France in April 1944, Violette led a successful mission behind the lines working with the resistance before making a quick stop in Paris on her return journey to England. She had proved herself as one of the most tenacious and courageous of SOE's agents, gaining the admiration of all around her.

Sent back again just after D-Day to disrupt communications ahead of the 2nd SS Panzer Division, who were attempting to reinforce the troops opposing the landings, she was operating near Limoges when she was injured and captured. Interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo, she was eventually sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp. By early 1945, against all the odds, she was still alive when fate dealt its last hand. In the final throes of the regime, Himmler ordered that all allied spies being held were to be executed as the war and the Third Reich drew to its climactic end. With astonishing candour, Tania relayed how on, or around, the 27th February 1945 her mother was taken into a prison yard, made to kneel with her hands tied behind her back, and shot in the back of the neck. She was just 23 years old. Cremated, she has no known grave.

All of us who heard this story, a daughter's eulogy for a mother she never knew, were moved to tears. After the war, the Szabo tale was immortalised in the film *Carve Her Name With Pride*, with Virginia McKenna in the lead.

So when next year comes along, spare a thought for this young woman who gave her life in the struggle for freedom. Next time you're passing Wormelow Tump drop in and see Rosemary at the Szabo museum; as you'll discover, Violette Szabo's life serves as more than just a footnote.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

You can follow Jules on Twitter @thejuleshudson, or visit his website at www.juleshudson.com

