

Spies like us

They weren't soldiers, they were ordinary people who risked their lives to beat Hitler. Now a new series tells the story of Churchill's guerilla army

It was one of Churchill's most daring – and successful – plans of World War II. The creation of a secret spy network manned by ordinary men and women desperate to do their bit to beat the Nazis. Now the daring exploits of these half-forgotten heroes of the Special Operations Executive, or SOE, are fully revealed in a new TV series, *Secret War*.

Take the amazing story of the Polish aristocrat Krystyna Skarbek. She joined the fight against Hitler when she was parachuted into France, where she employed her magnetic and flirtatious personality to persuade the Gestapo to release a team of fellow SOE agents they had captured. James Bond author Ian Fleming, who is thought to have been Krystyna's lover, based Bond girl Vesper Lynd in *Casino Royale* and Tatiana Romanova in *From Russia With Love* on her. Tragically, after being awarded the OBE and George Medal for her exploits, Krystyna was stabbed to death in London by a spurned lover in 1952.

Equally fearless was Violette Szabo, whose story was featured in the classic film *Carve Her*

Name With Pride. Violette was the daughter of an English father and a French mother, and married to a French Foreign Legion officer. After her husband's death at the battle of El Alamein, Violette was desperate to fight the Nazis. She completed her first mission in occupied France successfully, despite being arrested and talking her way out of trouble. She was not so lucky on her next mission, which coincided with D-Day. She ran into an SS Panzer Division while working with the French Resistance, and was wounded and captured in a shoot-out. Tortured by the Gestapo in Paris, she gave nothing away and was executed at Ravensbrück concentration camp. She was 23. Her daughter Tania went to Buckingham Palace to collect her mother's George Cross in 1946, aged just four.

Bruno Gimpel is one of the *Secret War*'s few survivors. 'I



Casino Royale's Vesper Lynd, played by Eva Green, was based on Krystyna Skarbek (left)

was only 17 in 1944, and was running around with a revolver and a sub-machine gun,' he recalls proudly. 'What boy wouldn't have enjoyed that?'

Bruno's war began in June 1940 when, as the 13-year-old youngest son of an Italian banker living in London, he heard Italy's Fascist dictator, Mussolini, had joined Hitler's war against Britain. 'My father and elder brother were interned as enemy aliens, and my mother and I were put on a troop ship with other members of Britain's Italian community, and swapped in neutral Lisbon for a ship carrying Italy's British community.'

After the Allies invaded Italy in 1943, Bruno and his mother took to the hills, where the 16-year-old was contacted by an SOE mission parachuted in to make contact with Italian partisans fighting behind the German lines. 'I was recruited because I could speak English and Italian,' says Bruno, who had a ringside seat for some of the war's fiercest fighting – including Operation Tombola, when an SAS unit of just 40 men stormed the German 51st Division HQ manned by over 300 soldiers. Did Bruno ever think his life might end violently? 'When you are young you don't think about such things,' he answers modestly.

After the war, Bruno became an accountant in Milan. He looks back on his days as a guerrilla fighter as the most fulfilling of his life. And the best memory of all? 'Getting my own back on my two elder brothers who sat out the war in England. They'd always looked down on me as a *bambino*, but the war made me a man.' ■

Nigel Jones

Secret War starts on history channel Yesterday on Monday at 9pm.