

A Most Fascinating Character Simone Segouin.

By Geoffrey O'Connell

In the way of an introduction to this 'carry-on' I should point out that I was born on the 3rd June 1940, which was a month or so before the 'real' war commenced - that is rather than the declaration of the same on the 3rd September 1939. My family was bombed-out of Wembley, then in the County of Middlesex, and then from Greenford, just to the west of London, and also at that time in Middlesex. Subsequent to those two unfortunate events we settled at the hamlet of Chalfont Common situated in the Chiltern Hills, above Chalfont St Peter, in South Buckinghamshire. During those wartime years I well remember overflying fighter and bomber planes, V1 and V2 rockets and, as D-Day approached on the 6th June 1944, the endless convoys of armoured vehicles heading for the Channel ports. In addition, much of my canal boating life was spent at a site beside the 'Grand Union' canal, just to the south of Bletchley Park and its mansion. That was as distinct from, for instance, yacht building and running Whitehall Shipyard at Whitby, North Yorkshire. That latter estate of Bletchley Park and the private home of the Leon family was taken over during WW2 by the 'Government Code and Cypher School' which for the duration of the hostilities was evacuated from London. The most 'hush-hush' activity of the organisation was run by the team of code-breakers dealing with unravelling the wartime messages sent to and from all the German Armed Forces throughout the world by their 'Enigma' cypher machines.

Now the background to my interest in all matters WW2 has been sketched-in, Simone Segouin, the most remarkable subject of my narrative, can be addressed.

Simone Segouin was born on the 3rd October 1925 at the family farm, Thivars village, some 11km south of the City of Chartres. She was the only female child, the other three offspring being Brothers. After schooling she worked on the farm, as did her siblings. Her Father had served in WW1 for the French, probably some-when as a resistance fighter. During the occupation of France by the Nazis during WW2 he was a municipal councillor. As such he had to provide the Germans with a list of unemployed young girls. Those details enabled the intruders to force them to become servants at their local Thivars HQ, based at the 'Chateau des Boulard', known locally as the 'Chateau de Spoir'.



In an effort to ensure Simone was not roped-into those duties he passed her off as a seamstress. However, one morning the Germans arrived with a bundle of clothes requiring repair. Abruptly, it was time for Simone to leave the farm. She did so on the pretext that she was going to work in Paris for her Aunt at the department store '*Le Bon Marche (Rive Gauche)*'. The latter emporium was founded in 1838 and was heralded as the first such establishment in the world. That may well have been a deception for Simone's Father and a Brother persuaded her to join the 'Resistance'. Thus in 1944, probably in March, aged just 18 and a '*bit*', she joined the partisan armed freedom fighters known as the '*Francs-Tireurs et Partisans*' (FTP). That organisation had been created by the '*Parti Communiste Francais*' in April 1942. The latter was itself the coming together of the '*Bataillons de la Jeunesse*', the '*Organisation Speciale*' and the '*Main-d'oeuvre Immigree*'.



In joining such an outfit there were a number of priorities. One was her choice of a '*nom de guerre*'. That alternative to her real Christian and Surname was to protect her family if she should be captured by the '*Boche*'. She chose '*Nicole Minet*' allegedly from Dunkirk. That was a shrewd decision as early wartime bombing of the Channel port of Dunkirk had destroyed many of the family records, more especially the Identity Cards section.

The next move was to acquire some form of transport to enable her to convey resistance group messages and to carry out reconnaissance of possible 'targets'. Unbidden, she decided to 'acquire' a German officer's bicycle.

Having identified a possible quarry and his velocipede she crept up behind the 'invader', carefully and very quietly grasped the machine and without looking behind her slipped away.



She went unnoticed. Had she so been, she would probably have been shot on the spot. German justice was swift and deadly. Simone repainted the bicycle and thus had her transport.

Once that had been 'garnered', Simone underwent weapon training, following which she became involved in various acts of sabotage. They included: attacks on enemy convoys and detachments, which, with two companions, included the killing of a pair of German soldiers on the 14th July 1944; dynamiting bridges; uprooting railway lines and derailing a train.

She was also involved in the capture of 24 German soldiers in or around Thivars in August 1944. There can be no doubt she was a very busy young lady.

During all those seemingly hectic activities she was, by a quirk of fate, to meet a certain Lieutenant Roland Boursier, aka '*Germaine*'. He had been in charge of a resistance group operating in and around the Thivars area since 1940. They come across one another in a field close to Thivars in which Roland was hiding after he had been involved in the killing of a group of German soldiers. Roland requested Simone to 'run' messages to and from his resistance group, to which she agreed. That meeting was to have a significant outcome for the young lady, for it led to a long, passionate and lasting romance.



The last requirement was to acquire a weapon which she obtained during the Chartres City operations on the 18th August 1944. To obtain one she chose to sneak-up on a sleeping German on guard duty and simply take his Schmeisser MP 40' submachine gun. Not a pistol, no - a submachine gun. The lady possessed either nerves of steel and or a supreme confidence in her abilities and judgement - and Simone was still only 18 years of age. Incidentally, the MP 40 had a fire power rate of some 500 rounds per minute but its magazine only held 32 rounds.

Notwithstanding the previous resume of Simone's wartime activities, life was going to become more eventful, much more eventful. She took part in both the relief of Chartres City and days later that of Paris, the capital of France. The battle to throw the German Army out of Chartres began on the 18/19th August and ended on the 21/22nd August. The 'official' liberation was dated the 23rd August when General Charles de Gaulle arrived to attend a mass at Chartres Cathedral and to make a celebration speech from the steps of the Post Office.

The General was the 'Free French' leader and would become a future president of France. It was reported that nearby '*the striking (looking) Simone was noticed eating a baguette smeared with jam, her machine gun by her side and wearing an 'FTP' armband*'.

The slim young lady was usually dressed in a coloured blouse top, a red mid-waist sash, a khaki cap and blue shorts. She almost always wore rolled-over heavy socks and khaki boots and invariably carried her sub machinegun. Without doubt from the photographs of the day Simone was 'eye-catching'.

She allegedly told international journalists, who were on-hand, that she was present to assist in providing safekeeping of the General. 'Mmmmh'!



During the month of August Simone was photographed by the Hollywood film director George Stevens, interviewed by the American reporter Jack Belden and featured in a 'Life Magazine' article titled 'The Girl Partisan of Chartres' which was accompanied by Robert Capa pictures. For a time, they afforded her world-wide renown.

Simone trekked from Chartres to Paris where the battle for the capital lasted from the 19th to the 25th August.

On August 26th the newspaper 'The Independent of Eure-et-Loir' described Simone as 'one of the purest types of this legion of heroic Frenchwomen who prepared the path to liberalism'. They simply do not 'make them' like that nowadays, do they?

After the hostilities were over, 'for services rendered', Simone was given the rank of Second Lieutenant - of whom I am not sure. Later she was awarded the 'Croix de Guerre', a French military decoration created in September 1939 to honour those who fought for the Allies against the Axis forces during WW2. I believe that it was given to her at Chartres on the 24th March 1946 by none other than Charles Tillon. At that time, he was the 'Minister of Armament's', but he had been the head of the 'FTP' when it was formed.

Based in Chartres post-war, Simone became a paediatric nurse, which involved the medical care of infants, children and adolescents. Her love-affair with Roland Boursier continued after the hostilities and their first child caused something of a scandal as they remained unmarried. It should be borne in mind that the French religion was predominantly Catholic and births to unmarried women were largely frowned upon. Notwithstanding which, they were to have another five children, all the birth certificates of whom bore Simone's surname. It might be that Roland was already married or separated from a wife for up until the 1960s divorce in France was almost unheard of. In Simone's later years she moved into a nursing home in the village Courville-sur-Eure, near Chartres.

'The Soldiering on Awards' are awarded by a British military charity that annually honours *'the outstanding achievements of those who have served their country, and the diverse people and groups who work together in support of the Armed Forces community'*. In April 2016 Simone Segouin received their *'International Award'* for her wartime bravery. Due to her then frailty, being a *'youthful'* 90 years of age, the presentation of the decoration was made to her at her French nursing home. The citation said *'The award is in recognition of your exemplary courage and devotion to the vital work carried out by the French Resistance during the Second World War. They were an inspiration to your fellow countrymen and women and to those of us in Britain, more than 70 years ago and they continue to be so to this day. We in Britain are still keenly aware of the vital role played by yourself and your comrades in weakening German morale prior to the Allied invasion of France, often at great personal sacrifice. The French resistance and your part in it proved critical in supporting our armed forces, especially those stranded behind enemy lines'*.



A letter from the presenters of the Award said *'Your story is truly one of bravery and inspiration that serves as a reminder to all of what women can be capable of when faced with such atrocious circumstances'*. When the letter was read out to her, Simone said *"This is very kind of you and the charity. Merci beaucoup Britain"*. In an interview at that time Simone recounted that *"One of the best days was when we arrested 25 German soldiers towards the end of the war. It felt good as we knew we would soon have our country back from occupation. I was not the only woman who joined the resistance. I am proud of what we did as a team. But the proudest moment was probably going to Paris with General Charles de Gaulle. It was a wonderful feeling entering the city but my excitement was limited because it felt very dangerous"*.

In 2017, Frederic Hallouin, the Mayor of Courville-sur-Eure named a street after her, pronouncing she was *"A rebellious spirit, a strong character certainly, who took after her Father's example and rejected the enemy occupying our country"*.

On or about the 2nd April this year Simone Segouin passed away, aged 94½ years *'young'*.

In conclusion, I make no apologies for this article not containing any mention of a Jaguar car, let alone of any vehicle.

Geoffrey