

The Corps of Free French Women by David Gray

The Corps of Free French Women (primarily the Corps des Volontaires Françaises or CVF) were the first female units in the military history of France, established in London on 7th November, 1940 to serve alongside General de Gaulle's Free French Forces in London. These women were pioneers in bridging the gap between non-combat auxiliary roles and active, front-line military service during World War II.

Here is a breakdown of the key units and roles:

1. Corps des Volontaires Françaises (CVF)

- **Formation:** Founded on November 7, 1940, in London by tennis champion Simonne Mathieu (*below left*), and later commanded by Hélène Terré (*below right*), who took command in 1941 and oversaw its formal militarisation.



- **Purpose:** To "free fighters from jobs that could be held by women," specifically by filling roles in administration, communications, and health services.
- **Expansion:** Starting with just 26 volunteers, the unit grew to approximately 430 women by 1943.
- **Disbandment:** In 1944 the CVF was disbanded and merged into a larger body called the Auxiliaires Féminines de l'Armée de Terre (AFAT), which reached nearly 14,000 members by the war's end.

Unlike earlier volunteer groups, members of the CVF lived in barracks and signed military contracts for the duration of the war. They were trained as military personnel but were initially restricted to "feminine" roles like typists, drivers, and nurses. Their success eventually paved the way for women to hold officer ranks and pursue permanent military careers in the French army after the war.

While the CVF was the primary administrative body, other specialized groups of Free French women did become famous for their front-line contributions:

2. Merlinettes (Corps Féminin des Transmissions - CFT)

- **Role:** Women's Signal Corps, nicknamed after Colonel Lucien Merlin.
- **Operations:** Formed in 1942 in Algeria, they were specialists in communications, serving as radio operators, telephone operators, and signals analysts.
- **Frontline Duty:** They served during the Italian campaign, the liberation of Provence, and the advance from Paris to the Rhine.
- **Special Ops:** Some were trained as commandos and dropped into occupied France; four were executed by the Germans at Ravensbrück.



(Above right), Merlinettes landing on a beach in Provence during Operation Dragoon in 1944.

3. The Rochambelles (1st Medical Battalion)

The Groupement des Ambulancières de Rochambeau was the only all-female unit integrated directly into a combat division (the 2nd Armoured Division).

- **Origins:** Founded in New York by Florence Conrad (*below left*), an American philanthropist, and Suzanne Torrès (*below right*), a French-American attorney. They purchased 19 Dodge ambulances with donated funds.



- **Key Missions:**
 - Normandy & Paris: They landed at Utah Beach on 1 August 1944 and participated in the Liberation of Paris later that month.
 - The Winter Campaigns: During the brutal winter of 1944–45, they operated in sub-zero temperatures during the Battle of the Colmar Pocket in Alsace.

- o Into Germany: They advanced all the way to Hitler's "Eagle's Nest" in Berchtesgaden.
- **Legacy:** Known for their skill in both nursing and auto mechanics (they often repaired their own vehicles under fire), many received the Croix de Guerre for their bravery. (*Below*) The Rochambelles at Southampton, July 30th 1944.



4. AFAT (Women's Auxiliaries of the Army)

- **Unity:** On April 26, 1944, many of these separate units were brought together into the *Corps des Auxiliaires Féminines de l'Armée de Terre* (AFAT).
- **Impact:** By 1945, around 14,000 women were serving in this capacity, ranging from drivers to mechanics, nurses, and office staff.

These women were trailblazers who, despite initial scepticism and social pressure, proved their capability in military operations, with many being honoured with the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Military Medal*.

Women in the Clandestine Resistance

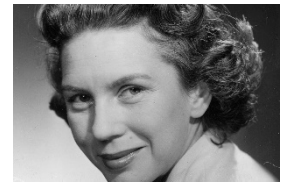
Women made up roughly 15–20% of the French Resistance, often taking advantage of gender stereotypes to move through checkpoints without suspicion.

- **Intelligence & Espionage:**

- o **Marie-Madeleine Fourcade:** Led the Alliance network, one of the largest spy rings in France. Known as "Noah's Ark" because agents used animal codenames, it provided vital intelligence on the Atlantic Wall fortifications.



- o **Jeannie Rousseau:** Delivered intelligence on the German V-1 and V-2 rocket programs, allowing the Allies to bomb the base at Peenemünde.



- o **Josephine Baker:** The famous entertainer used her sheet music to smuggle intelligence written in invisible ink.



- **SOE Secret Agents:**

- o The British Special Operations Executive (SOE) recruited 39 women for the French Section, including **Noor Inayat Khan** (*below left*), (a wireless operator), and **Violette Szabo** (*below right*). Both murdered by the Germans.



- o These agents were trained in sabotage, silent killing, and explosives before being parachuted or flown into occupied territory.

- **Everyday Sabotage:**

- o Women served as couriers (staffette), moving messages, weapons, and forged documents in bicycle handlebars, shopping baskets, and baby carriages.
- o They operated escape lines, such as the Comet Line, which rescued over 1,000 downed Allied airmen and guided them to safety in Spain.

Free French women contributed to the Allied victory through both the highly visible front-line courage of the Rochambelles and the shadowy, high-stakes clandestine work of the French Resistance, and this should always be remembered.

Below, a photo from a British newspaper dated November 22nd, 1941.



Sources

- [Wikipedia](#)
- [EHNE](#)
- [Steweross.com](#)