

The women of war

YASMEEN MURSHED

HERE is a wealth of writing on World War II but unfortunately some very interesting titles particularly about the work of the Special Operations Executive (the SOE) are out of print. I have some treasured copies in my library which I hide from those of my friends who borrow books never to return them!

I find many of these books in second-hand bookshops in London and also at the stalls in the Portobello market which often yield unexpected finds. I can recommend any of the following titles as interesting and informative on the subject of the SOE provided one can find them: Odette by Jeremy Tickell (pub: Chapman & Hall 1949); Moon Drop to Gascony by Anne Marie Walters (pub: Macmillan 1946) who was herself a FANY agent; The White Rabbit by Bruce Marshall (pub: Evans Brothers Ltd. 1952) and Specially Employed by Maurice Buckmaster (pub: Batchworth Press 1952).

The last book was written by the man who selected, supervised or "ran" most of the women agents and who obviously knew their stories well. However the two most comprehensive books on the subject are Marcus Binney's The Women Who Lived For Danger: Women Agents of SOE in the Second World War (pub: Hodder & Stoughton 1988) and the definitive history of the SOE by Professor MRD Foot: SOE in France (pub: HMSO 1966).

Recently there have been some new books about these women agents as a new generation discovers these remarkable tales of individual heroism. One story which could have had a slightly different slant is that of Noor Inayat Khan, the only woman of Indian origin to become a member of FANY. A novel based on her life has been written by Canadian writer Shauna Singh Baldwin, The Tiger Claw (pub: Knopf 2004). There has also been a new biography published recently it is Spy Princess: The Life of Noor Inayat Khan by Shrabani Basu (pub: Sultan Publishing 2006).

Although The Tiger Claw offered the author a great opportunity to write a very stirring and exciting account unfortunately it turned out to be much below expectation. Baldwin's plot construction is weak and half way through the narrative seems to loose focus mainly because of the complicated flashback structure that she has used. Her control over language is also quite inadequate so all in the book is disappointing. This was also my complaint about her first book: What the Body Remembers. The subject was interesting but it was poorly researched with many small inconsistencies which could have been corrected by any South Asian and it could certainly have been

better told and written.

I find that as I grow older I am rapidly becoming less tolerant of bad writing and unsatisfactory research and am easily bored with a book which contains more solecisms than can be reasonably accepted by a reader. Poor plot construction, contrived action and loose ends are also unacceptable as far as I am concerned -- that is one reason why I could not read The Da Vinci Code and am waiting for the movie to be released to see for myself what the hype was about.

It is therefore particularly sad to see an opportunity to write a good novel being wasted because Noor's story provides much material for drama as well as reflection. It is not the ordinary tale of heroism and courage one would like to it have been, rather it is a story of how a young and impressionable woman was used in the desperate fight against the Nazi war machine.

By all accounts as an individual, Noor was singularly unsuited for the role of spy. In fact her suitability to be sent into the field was questioned even during the selection process

going into action regardless of her suitability because at that stage of the war they were extremely short of agents with the right background, training and linguistic abilities.

Noor's background appeared ostensibly to be particularly appropriate for an agent going into occupied France. She was fluent in French having been brought up in Paris where her Indian father was a well-established member of the Islamic Sufi community. He claimed to be descended from the royal family of Mysore (hence Basu's title: Spy Princess).

Although they were Muslims, Noor became more European in behavior and outlook as she grew older.

As a student at the Sorbonne, where she took a degree in child psychology and studied several modern languages Noor dressed and behaved like any of her contemporaries, more European than Oriental to all intents and purposes.

However beneath the veneer of Parisian sophistication was a gentle, shy, sensitive, musical, dreamy and poetic girl living by "a different rhythm" than others.

TALKING BOOKS

Noor was to be the first woman to be sent over as a wireless operator, all of the women agents before her having been sent as "couriers." Did she realize the dangers she was going to face or did her naive romanticism rule her thoughts? Certainly from the way she and her group behaved in France it seems that the dangerous consequence of their situation was not at all uppermost in their minds.

where the ultimate exercise was the mock Gestapo interrogation, intended to give agents a taste of what might be in store for them if they were captured. It helped them practice maintaining their cover story and taught them how to withstand at least the initial stage of interrogation and torture.

Noor's escorting officer found her mock interrogation "almost unbearable" and reported that "she seemed absolutely terrified ... so overwhelmed she nearly lost her voice" and that afterwards, "she was trembling and quite blanched." Her finishing report, which the official historian of F Section found in her personal file long after the war, read: "Not overburdened with brains but has worked hard and shown keenness, apart from some dislike of the security side of the course. She has an unstable and temperamental personality and it is very doubtful whether she is really suited to the work in the field."

Next to this comment, Buckmaster wrote in the margin: "Nonsense," showing clearly that her superiors had decided to send

When the father died the mother and other siblings looked to Noor, as the eldest, for direction. With the occupation of France they felt unsafe and managed to get on one of the last boats leaving for England. There Noor enlisted in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). She underwent various kinds of training including specialized signals training.

Then quite suddenly and without any warning she received the sort of summons that had come for other agents recruited by the SOE, a faceless man in Whitehall interviewed her and told her about the need for wireless operators to work with other British officers organizing resistance groups in occupied France. Apparently at this point he made clear the risk of capture, torture and death at the hands of the Gestapo but Noor seems to have welcomed the prospect of action and she readily accepted the offer.

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Yasmeen Murshed is a full-time bookworm and a part-time educationist. She is also the founder of Scholastica School.

SAARC needs to be dynamic



AS the Standing Committee of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meets in Dhaka, first time after the last 13th summit of the seven-nation forum in November in Dhaka, the committee is entrusted with a big task of charting the ways for implementation of the decisions of the leaders in addition to reviewing the progress made during the interregnum. True, the Standing Committee made up of the foreign secretaries of the member countries is not at the political level, but the top officials involved have a great role to play in advancing the objectives of the regional forum, which had appeared somewhat sluggish if not largely moribund till the last summit that certainly injected some life and vigour to it.

SAARC is now in the third decade, having been constituted through the first summit in Dhaka in 1985, and it was once again the Bangladesh capital that played host to the conference of the heads of government and state late last year marking its stepping into the third decade. The first important discussions relating to SAARC matters are now taking place in Dhaka and many eyes are fixed at the deliberations of the conference that will also give an impression about the shape of things to come leading to the next 14th summit in New Delhi in 2007.

Evidently, the SAARC is undergoing expansion and changes making it more representative at the

regional scale and also at international level. Consequently, both potentials and challenges for the forum are also increasing. Afghanistan has been admitted as the eighth member of this south Asian forum even though some kind of ambiguity still persists whether the country is located in this region or in the central Asia. In any case, this is not anything that should have been a stumbling block to Kabul's

may in a way also affect its cohesiveness. The SAARC has been a victim of politics over the last twenty years owing to the differences of the member states and such a fear may not be seen as totally unfounded. Hopefully, any such apprehension will be proved misplaced and the forum will accrue maximum benefits from the new interactions.

The United States and South Korea have sought "observer"

will take time obviously for the reason that high political level meeting is needed to approve them. However, it may be concluded that association of all these countries or forums with the SAARC is expected to provide much required economic stimulation to the regional body while there is a need for caution against intrusion of international politics in the body because of its expansion in different forms.

THE SAARC has a number of issues at its hand including strengthening of the SAARC secretariat, functioning of the regional centres, various national and sectoral focal points discussed by the last summit and a group of experts met last month in Kathmandu with a view to implementing them. An important matter for the Standing Committee is considering the mechanism and strengthening the regional centres, two of which are now functioning in Bangladesh, and four others are being set up -- on forestry in Bhutan, cultural affairs in Sri Lanka, energy in Pakistan and disaster management in India. The decisions taken at the highest level need implementation with all seriousness and here the top officials can play an effective role. Hopefully, the committee takes follow up actions with a view to making them functional as early as possible.

The Standing Committee meeting is also important since it takes place ahead of the meeting of the SAARC commerce ministers here April 20 and subsequently of the home ministers and then of the finance ministers in July in Pakistan. The meeting of the Standing Committee can provide a healthy basis for all the coming SAARC related discussions including its own agenda on a variety of issues.

entry in the forum and the last summit has cleared the issue. Afghanistan historically and in many other ways remains inextricably linked this region and its inclusion is no surprise. Two economically powerful Asian nations having close links with the South Asia have also been accepted as "observers" the last summit and this decision is likely to be beneficial for the SAARC, which requires innovative economic interactions and assistance in its gigantic quest for improving the quality of life for 1.4 billion people living in the region.

While the decision of the leaders to admit one country as member and two others as "observers" provide larger prospects for the SAARC, this has also opened up new challenges for the regional body. For, politics undeniably serves as an undercurrent of tension in the SAARC which is wholly meant to concentrate on the economic issues, and the forum's new contacts with varying political lines

Decisions on all these matters

MATTERS AROUND US

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status for the SAARC and this clearly points to growing international acceptability of the organisation, which is no longer nascent and has become more wellknown as the forum of the most densely populated area of the world regardless of the opinion about its effectiveness and concrete results delivered so far. In fact, the forum received a shot in its arms not long ago when the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) granted it "observers" status. Although this came late, nonetheless the recognition came as a boost for the forum which has now embarked on international interactions. There has been no decision on their applications since they were received by the SAARC secretariat after the last summit and the next conference of the leaders is expected to take a decision on the issue. Likewise, the European Union (EU) has expressed willingness for its association with the forum.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Foreign Editor of BSS.

Decisions on all these matters

EID-E-MILADUNNABI

The last and the greatest

SYED ASHRAF ALI

ON this auspicious day of Eid-e-Miladunnabi we celebrate the birthday of the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) whose chequered life has a special significance not only to the world of Islam but to the whole of mankind. For God, in His infinite Mercy, sent him as Rahmat-ill-Alameen -- a divine blessing not for one age or clime, but for all mankind to the end of the world." It is not a tall story. The teachings of Muhammad (pbuh) have indeed wrought a marvelous and mighty work. As a result, not only the Muslims but numerous non-Muslim scholars and historians also hail the Prophet of Islam as the greatest and most influential single figure in history.

It is almost universally acknowledged that religion in some form or other has always played a vital role in every society. Muhammad's (pbuh) contribution to mankind is to make religion a permanent force of vitality by giving it a natural and scientific basis and by differentiating between the real precepts of religion and the elements of superstition that had crept into various religions. (In fact, one of the titles the Holy Qur'an claims for itself is Furqan, i.e. the Differentiator). The last and greatest Prophet had the foresightedness to emphasise and stress the universal concepts of world's natural religion such as the Unity of God, the unity of human race, belief in the revealed scriptures of the world, the emphatic assertion that every country and nation had a Prophet, and that all religious personalities of the world should be venerated and respected. In this age of internationalism a true and intelligent follower of Muhammad (pbuh) feels much consolation when he finds that the words of the Holy Qur'an guide him towards the fact that "mankind is one family."

The agents who survived their stay in occupied France were those who scrupulously obeyed the laws of caution. In cities, they took care that even their associates did not know where they lived or what their cover name and identity was. In the country they moved from one house to another every few days. If they were radio operators, they did not stay on the air for more than a few minutes at a time and transmitted from different places whenever possible. Those who eluded capture were seldom those who were seen dining together in black-market restaurants, talking things over in English!

Therefore it was inevitable that the entire cell would eventually be rounded up by the Gestapo and sadly it was to all come to an end for Noor the same way it would for so many other brave agents with the interrogation, torture and transfer to a grim prison and an early morning execution. It must have been small consolation to her family that Noor was posthumously awarded the George Cross by the British Government and the Croix de Guerre by France to become yet another footnote in the annals of English history.

In the early days of his mission Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had the unstinted support of his economically independent wife. In the fearful opposition of the Qureish extending over his thirteen years of preaching in Makkah, he enjoyed the loving protection of his unbelieving uncle, with his whole clan. His small but devoted band of followers suffered all sorts of inhuman persecution rather than recant, and would even migrate to distant and unknown lands rather than make any compromise with their enemies. When on the death of his wife and uncle he was forced to leave Makkah for Medina, a strong band of admirers who would sacrifice their all was already there to welcome him in their midst. Opposition had to be there because of the radical reforms which his religion proposed. But neither was faithful support nor ungrudging sacrifice wanting from those who accepted him as the Apostle of God. And as soon as the mist of misunderstanding that invariably surrounds the personality of all true reformers lifted at the end of a few wars of defence which the holy Prophet had to wage, the total admiration of the nation came flowing to him like a river in flood.

So much so that, towards the very end of his life, he went on a pilgrimage to Makkah, he found himself in the midst of a vast concourse of ardent monotheists like himself, numbering 1,24,000, paying a similar visit to this most ancient House of God. The historic Farewell Address delivered on this occasion, for its brevity and eloquence, meaningful and profound grasp of the realities of life, surpasses all other sermons. At the end of the sermon he asked his God, "O Lord, have I conveyed Your Message?" We know not what reply he received from his Lord, but the human beings that were listening to him with reverence and emotion replied in one voice, "By God, surely you have." Thus the Prophet of Islam was first established in honour and prestige by his own country and people before his Faith saluted forth in the world and brought into his fold millions of men and women who would equally sacrifice their all for him and his religion. It is a unique feature of his mission and as such constitutes a miracle that supports his claim to prophethood.

Rev. Bosworth-Smith, a devout

Christian, very rightly admits hesitatingly, "Head of the State as well as of the Church, he was Caesar and Pope in one; but he was Pope without the Pope's pretensions, Caesar without the legions of Caesar. Without a standing army, without a bodyguard, without a palace, without a fixed revenue, if ever any man had the right to say that he ruled by a right divine, it was Mohammed! ... He never claimed the power of working miracles. Whatever he said he could do, his disciples would straightway have seen him do.... What more crowning proof of his sincerity is needed? Mohammed to the end of his life claimed for himself that title only with which he had begun, and which the highest philosophy and the truest Christianity will one day, I venture believe, agree in yielding to him, that of a Prophet, a very Prophet of God." (Mohammed and

the Prophet's mosque in Medina. Mohammedanism, London, 1874, p. 340).

It is really difficult to attempt a summary estimate of his historic achievements and amazing qualities of head and heart. The Herculean task would indeed be nothing short of churning a fathomless ocean. Memorable was his versatility, his many-sidedness.

Reformer, 'king', statesman, jurist, commander, arbitrator, adviser, patron of art and science, champion of women's rights, friend and guardian of the orphans, liberator of the slaves, protector of the non-Muslims, Muhammad (pbuh) was masterly at home in many diverse fields. In the inimitable words of Alfred de Lamartine, "If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in history with Muhammad?..... Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images, the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad! As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?" (Histoire de la Turquie, Paris, 1854, Vol. II, pp. 276-77).

Stanley Lane-Poole, who hails Muhammad (pbuh) as "the most excellent of the creations of God," provides us with a beautiful graphic description of the tender virtues of the towering personage: "He was gifted with mighty powers of imagination, elevation of mind, delicacy and refinement of feeling. 'He is more modest than a virgin behind

her curtain,' it is said of him. He was most indulgent to his inferiors, and would never allow his awkward little page to be scolded for whatever he did. 'Ten years,' said Anas, his servant, 'was I with the Prophet and he never said as much as 'uff' to me.' He was very fond of children; he would stop them in the streets and pat their little heads. He never struck any one in his life. The worst expression he ever made use of in his conversation was: 'What has come to him? May his forehead be darkened with mud.' When asked to curse someone he replied, 'I have not been sent to curse, but to be a mercy to mankind.' He visited the sick, followed any bier he met, accepted the invitation of a slave to dinner, mended his own clothes, milked the goats, and waited upon himself.....

The frank friendship, the noble generosity, the dauntless courage and hope of the man -- all tend to melt criticism into admiration." (Speeches and Table-talks of the Prophet Muhammad, Edinburgh, 1882).

But it is the 'secular' attitude of the Prophet of Islam (pbuh) which has perhaps enabled him to exert the greatest influence on the course of history. A man with the most unflinching faith in Allah and the Holy Qur'an, Muhammad (pbuh) always regarded Islam as the most perfect religion -- the one and only Deen approved by his Creator and Lord. No threat or lure could deviate him from the Straight Path towards the One and Only God. But although he refused to compromise with any other faith, he never nurtured or encouraged any hatred for the followers of other faiths. He was kind and merciful not only to the Christians, Jews, and Sabaeans, but to the pagans as well, always upholding the Qur'an's maxim that "there is no compulsion in religion."

This attitude towards pluralism enabled him to permit sixty Christian delegates from Najran to offer their prayers right inside the Masjid-e-Nabobi in Medina when the holy Prophet himself was leading the Magrib prayers. His first secretary in Medina was also a Jew. No wonder, the renowned astronomer and historian, Michael Hart, declared very boldly: "My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some persons and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels..... It is this unparalleled combination of secular and religious influence which I feel entitles Muhammad to be considered the most influential single figure in history." (Michael H Hart, The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History, New York, pp. 39-40).

John William Draper, the famous historian, also acknowledges unhesitatingly: "Four years after the death of Justinian, in AD 569, was born at Mecca, in Arabia, the man (Muhammad) who, of all men, has exercised the greatest influence upon the human race." (A History of the Intellectual Development of Europe, Vol. I, London, 1875, p. 329).

The Encyclopedia Britannica also testifies in unequivocal terms: "Muhammad is the most successful of all prophets and religious personalities." (Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th edition, Article entitled Koran).

Syed Ashraf Ali is former DG of Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh.

Two bright aspects of the Prophet's (pbuh) eventful life

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

OLUMES will be required to write on various aspects of the eventful and chequered life of a personage like Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) for he was not only an extraordinary person, but also the leader of all the Prophets (pbuh) Almighty Allah sent down to this mundane world for guidance of the mankind.

So let us concentrate our attention to two very important aspects of his eventful and chequered life. One of them is the holy Prophet's (pbuh) timely and pragmatic action for preservation of the holy Quran for the posterity and its authenticity.

According to the author of the well-known book, "The Bible, the Quran and Science" Dr Maurice Bucaille, "Not a single Gospel was written down at the time of Jesus (they were written down long after his earthly mission had come to an end)." Dr Bucaille further adds "the situation is very different for the Quran. As the revelation