

Simone Segouin, French Resistance fighter, dies at 97

‘It’s true, the Germans were our enemies, it was the war, but I don’t draw any pride from it,’ she later said

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Simone Segouin in 1944. (U.S. Army Audiovisual Center/National Archives and Records Administration)

When Life magazine war correspondent Jack Belden drove into the embattled French city of Chartres in August 1944 with soldiers from Gen. George S. Patton’s Third Army, he spotted a young French woman toting a captured German MP-40 submachine gun. Although the occupying German forces had begun retreating, snipers in and around the city’s historic twin-spired 13th-century Gothic cathedral were still firing at the arriving American and French army troops and the ragtag local resistance fighters. Among the latter was 18-year-old Simone Segouin, who used the nom de guerre Nicole.

She was “clad in a light-brown jacket and a cheap flowered skirt of many hues which ended just above her knees,” Belden wrote in the Life article titled “The Girl Partisan of Chartres,” which included photos by Robert Capa. Belden described her as looking like “a charming hoyden.”

When he asked her for an interview, she agreed but was suddenly whisked away by comrades.

The following day, the Life reporter spotted her again, this time with an MP-40 Schmeisser weapon, leading a group of 25 German soldiers she had helped capture the night before. She was still wearing an armband with the letters FTPF, signifying she was a member of the resistance’s Francs-Tireurs et Partisans Français (Irregulars and French Partisans). Ms. Segouin, Lt. Roland Boursier — a local resistance chief code-named Germain — and a handful of fighters had confronted the 25 Germans, cut off from their unit, at a millhouse near Chartres and captured them without a fight.

She and Boursier had worked together for months, blowing up bridges and derauling trains carrying German troops or munitions. Although he was 20 years her senior, they became lovers.

After Chartres was liberated, Ms. Segouin and her resistance comrades linked up with the French 2nd Armored Division on the 55-mile push toward Paris, occupied by the Germans for more than four years. She engaged in heavy street fighting in the capital for several days until the 2nd Armored Division reached the center of the city, quickly followed by the U.S. 4th Infantry Division.

Ignoring Hitler’s orders to destroy the French capital rather than capitulate, Gen. Dietrich von Choltitz, a Nazi commander, signed a surrender on Aug. 25, 1944, in the presence of American and French commanders and resistance leaders.

The following day, Ms. Segouin, still in her dress and with her Schmeisser, marched close behind Gen. Charles de Gaulle down the Champs-Élysées boulevard to a joyous reception interrupted by a few sniper shots from lingering German soldiers who were soon silenced by the resistance.

“The proudest moment was probably going to Paris with General Charles de Gaulle,” she said in 2016 after receiving an award from the British military charity Soldiering On. “It was a wonderful feeling entering the city but my excitement was limited because it felt very dangerous.”

With the award was a message from Lord Richard Dannatt, a former chief of the British army: “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.”

Ms. Segouin died Feb. 21 at a nursing home in Courville-sur-Eure at 97. The nursing home director and an official in the town hall confirmed the death but did not specify the cause.

Simone Segouin was born to a farming family in the village of Thivars, near Chartres, on Oct. 3, 1925. Her father had fought in the French army against the Germans during World War I. After World War II commenced in September 1939, her father sided with the anti-Nazi resistance, and partisans used his farm as a hideout.

As Hitler’s forces began occupying France in May 1940, Ms. Segouin — then only 14 — helped her father shelter and feed resistance fighters. It was there, in March 1944, that she met Boursier, the dashing commander of the local resistance network who was in hiding after ambushing and killing a group of German soldiers.

“I told her little by little about the work I was doing,” Boursier told Belden for the Life article. “I asked her if she would be scared to do such work. She said, ‘No, it would please me to kill Boches,’” using a derogatory French word for German soldiers.

The teenager helped him exchange messages with other resistance members on a bicycle she had stolen from a German patrol outside a hotel in Chartres after slashing the tires of their other bikes.

She repainted her bike and, in the guise of a sweet-faced farmer's daughter carrying baguettes in a basket, moved around the German-occupied countryside without suspicion. Her bike, she said, was her "reconnaissance vehicle."

Boursier taught her how to use handguns, rifles and submachine guns, and she soon became an expert in explosives and guerrilla tactics. He also gave her false identity papers with the name Nicole Minet from the Channel port of Dunkirk.

For her wartime action, she was promoted to lieutenant and, along with other resistance fighters, was awarded the prestigious Croix de Guerre. She went on to become a pediatric nurse in Chartres. She and Boursier never married but had six children, all taking the surname Segouin, before they separated in the mid-1950s.



Ms. Segouin
in Paris in the early 1940s. (Copyright Barbara Hammer Productions/Everett Collection)

Belden, the Life journalist, was not the only American captivated by the young fighter in August 1944. Hollywood film director George Stevens was heading a U.S. Army film unit during the advance toward Paris. Some of his rare personal color film, which he shot in addition to his official black-and-white Army footage, was uncovered in 1980 by his son. The footage showed a shyly smiling Ms. Segouin with her MP-40 slung over her shoulder. George Stevens Jr. included the footage in a 1994 documentary of his father's wartime work, "[George Stevens: D-Day to Berlin.](#)" It also appeared in a short film titled "Women of France — Liberation 1944."

Information about survivors was not immediately available.

Speaking to students at a high school in Chartres in 2014, Ms. Segouin, then 89, was asked if she had ever killed anyone.

"On July 14, 1944, I took part in an ambush with two comrades," she replied. "Two German soldiers went by on a bike, and the three of us fired at the same time, so I don't know who exactly killed them. You shouldn't have to kill someone like that. It's true, the Germans were our enemies, it was the war, but I don't draw any pride from it."