

# Mansfield Memories: Countess from Mansfield aided French Resistance in WWII

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MANSFIELD - A small town girl marries a French aristocrat. During World War II she hides Allied airmen from the Nazis. She is discovered and sent to a concentration camp for almost two years. Is this the plot of a Hollywood movie? No, it is the real life story of Mansfield's Roberta Laurie.

Born in Scotland in 1891, Roberta Laurie's family moved to America when she was a child. They settled on Otis Street in West Mansfield. Her father worked as a landscape gardener. Roberta graduated Mansfield High School in 1909. She was popularly known as "Betty."



Mansfield's Roberta Laurie became a countess when she married Count Henri de Mauduit in 1938.

*Boston Globe Photo*

New York and Miami working toward her dream. She ventured to Europe in 1925, leading to a period of study in Paris.

There she met Count Henri de Mauduit. A dashing nobleman six years younger than her, Count de Mauduit was a decorated hero of World War I. His title was among the oldest in France. The couple married in 1928. His sprawling Chateau de Bourblanc in Brittany would be their new home.

Laurie soon found work as a "hello girl," or switchboard operator, in Mansfield's telephone office. She became interested in acting and performed in several area plays. She was active in the cause of women's suffrage. She was well-known in Mansfield's social circles, where she was often described as "pretty" and "genial."

Laurie dreamed of a career in fashion design. By the early 1920s she was spending time in



Count Henri de Mauduit in 1928  
*Photo from  
[www.francaislibres.net](http://www.francaislibres.net)*



Roberta Laurie.  
*Photo from [www.bourblanc.fr/our-history](http://www.bourblanc.fr/our-history).*

The couple entertained the wealthy and well-known of pre-war France. But with the coming of World War II and the Nazi occupation of northern France, life would be turned upside down. The count went to England to serve in the Free French government under Charles de Gaulle. The countess remained at Bourblanc.

When British and American airmen were downed over France, the French resistance risked their lives to get them back to England to fly once again. The countess joined an underground network dedicated to that purpose.

“Only one maid and I knew they were there,” the countess told Stars and Stripes Magazine in 1945. “They hid between floors and only came out at night to eat and listen to music on the radio. They would eat and clean up the dishes themselves before going back to their hiding place before dawn.”



During World War II the countess hid Allied airmen from the Nazis at the Chateau de Bourblanc in Brittany. *Photo from [www.bourblanc.fr/our-history](http://www.bourblanc.fr/our-history).*

“At the time I was arrested, June 12, 1943, I had five American fliers hidden,” she said. “One hundred Gestapo agents came and searched the place without warning but didn’t find anything. Someone must have tipped them off that I was helping Allied fliers get back to England though, because they arrested me anyway.”

The countess was sent to the concentration camp at Ravensbruck, and later near Buchenwald.

"Don't ever tell me women talk too much," the countess said. "(The Nazis) put them in bathtubs full of water at Ravensbruck and held their heads under to make them talk and give away secrets. I know several women who drowned that way but none of them talked.”

After the war the couple resumed their life together at the Chateau de Bourblanc. In 1953 the French government awarded her the Croix de Guerre and inducted her into the French Legion of Honor. She was also decorated by the British and American governments.

In that same year she returned to Mansfield to visit old friends. She wondered what became of the Tavern, the well-known hotel that burned down a few years earlier. Writing from France at Christmas in 1954, she said “I’m a little homesick at this time for New England so send all my friends who remember me a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.”

The couple lived out their remaining years peacefully at the home they loved. Count Henri de Mauduit died in December 1974 at the age of 77. The countess passed away eight months later, on Aug. 1, 1975. They were laid to rest in a cemetery near the chateau.



Roberta Laurie.  
*Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph Photo,*  
August 1945