

The Telegraph

Nancy Wake

Nancy Wake, who died on August 7 aged 98, was “White Mouse”, and among the most decorated secret agents of the Second World War.

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During her wartime career she was both a key figure in an escape ring in Vichy France and a leader of the Maquis against the German Occupation; her exploits won her the George Medal; the Croix de Guerre with palm (twice); the Croix de Guerre with star; the Médaille de la Résistance (a rare decoration for a foreigner); and the US Medal of Freedom with bronze palm.



Nancy Wake in 1945

When fighting broke out, however, she seemed nothing more than the frivolous young fiancée of a wealthy Marseilles industrialist. But by war's end in Europe she had become famed as a resourceful, dauntless Resistance leader, who topped the Gestapo's most-wanted list and had saved hundreds of Allied lives.

Nancy Grace Augusta Wake was born in Wellington, New Zealand, on August 30 1912, the youngest in a family of six. She grew up at Neutral Bay, Sydney, where the family had settled. A good-looking girl with a streak of rebelliousness, she set out alone in December 1932 to explore Europe, via Vancouver and New York, living by freelance journalism.

From London she headed for Paris, from where she sent reports to American press agencies. After Hitler's rise to power she travelled to Vienna to witness the Nazi brutality that she had heard of from German refugees. On seeing Jews being persecuted she “resolved there and then that if I ever had the chance I would do anything to make things more difficult for their rotten party”.

In the summer of 1936 she met a “charming, sexy and amusing” man in Juan-les-Pins named Henri Fiocca; though he had a reputation as a playboy they continued to see each other and in 1939 he asked her to marry him.

By the time France was overrun in 1940 they had married and, though initially squeamish, she was driving an ambulance. Later, back in Marseilles with her husband, she embarked on an exhausting double life.

She had acquired perfect French, and a chance meeting in a bar led to her employment as a courier for Captain Ian Garrow, a Scot who had helped create an escape route for officers and airmen from Vichy

France across the mountains into Spain. Henri Fiocca contributed money freely to this enterprise.

Nancy Wake made frequent train journeys escorting escapers towards the Pyrenees; as a courier for a French Resistance group based in Toulon, she also provided the Fioccas' chalet at Nevache, in the Alps, as a safe house. When Garrow was captured and imprisoned in Meauzae concentration camp, she contrived his escape by bribing a guard.

In the autumn of 1942 the Germans occupied Vichy France, and the Gestapo became aware of a troublesome agent whom they called White Mouse. But White Mouse proved elusive. Finally, when it seemed that the net was closing, Nancy Wake was advised by her husband to flee to England, where he hoped to join her.

In Toulouse, while she waited for the escape circuit to extricate her, she was arrested in a random round-up and accused (falsely) of blowing up a cinema. Bruised and weary after four days of interrogation, she was astonished when her group leader, Patrick O'Leary, appeared. O'Leary, who had succeeded Garrow in the role, was a Belgian army doctor (real name Albert Guerisse) and his exploits would also become famous.

He told the French police chief that he was a friend of Pierre Laval, the Vichy premier, that Mme Fiocca was his (O'Leary's) mistress, and that the story she had told was a cover to deceive her husband. The police chief felt he understood this intimate dilemma and set her free.

Nancy Wake made several attempts to reach Spain, but was thwarted each time by arrests that broke up the circuit. On her final attempt she had to leap from a train window and run for it with several companions, dodging bullets before escaping through a vineyard. She concluded that a German counteragent had penetrated the circuit; when O'Leary was arrested back in Toulouse, she knew she was right.

Eventually she found guides who buried her in the back of a coal truck with a New Zealander and two Americans, then led her by rocky Pyrenean tracks into Spain. She reached England in a convoy from Gibraltar in June 1943.

Within eight months Nancy Wake had become a fully trained agent of the Special Operations Executive, and had been commissioned in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. The official history SOE in France records: "[Nancy Wake's] irrepressible, infectious high spirits were a joy to everyone who worked with her." She and Violette Szabo once debugged an SOE instructor in London, hoisting his trousers up a flagpole.

Her training complete, she was parachuted into central France in April 1944, landing near Montluçon. As she came down her parachute became tangled in a tree. "I hope," said Henri Tardivat, the Resistance fighter who greeted her, "that all the trees in France bear such beautiful fruit this year."

Nancy Wake's role was as assistant to JH Farmer in running the circuit known as Freelance, part of SOE's "F" section, the "Independent French" section headed by Maurice Buckmaster in London. She threw herself into building up various Maquis groups into a formidable force 7,500-strong, controlling communications with London, allocating arms and equipment that were parachuted in, and holding the

purse-strings.

To coincide with the Normandy landings, the Auvergne Maquis launched a furious assault on factories and communications. A powerful German counter-attack, with aerial support, failed to stop them, but had the effect of cutting Nancy Wake's lines of communication with London when her wireless operator, Denis Rake, expecting capture, burned the code books.

To re-establish contact, essential before D-Day, she rode a bicycle from Auvergne to Châteauroux – 250 miles in 72 hours on a round trip through German-held territory. Rejected by one Resistance wireless operator because she had no password, by good fortune she found another, who informed London of the situation. "When I got off that damned bike I felt as if I had a fire between my legs. I couldn't stand up. I couldn't sit down, I couldn't walk. When I'm asked what I'm most proud of doing during the war, I say: 'The bike ride'."

For the remainder of the war she was involved in ambushing German convoys and destroying bridges and railway lines. When 10 men in her camp refused to perform their water-carrying duties she persuaded them by emptying a bucket over each. She interrogated a woman spy and ordered her execution, but saved two girls she considered innocent.

She was also on a raid that destroyed the Gestapo's headquarters in Montluçon, leaving 38 Germans dead. It was, she wrote later, "the most exciting sortie I ever made. I entered the building by the back door, raced up the stairs, opened the first door along the passage way, threw in my grenades and ran like hell."

On her 32nd birthday — shortly after the liberation of Paris — her Maquis comrades paraded in her honour at the chateau they had appropriated for their headquarters. "When we were fighting we were fighting," she said "When we weren't we were having a jolly good time. I never was scared."

With victory came the bitter news that Henri Fiocca had been tortured and then executed by the Germans. Nancy Wake was not only a widow, but also without means.

She duly continued in intelligence, attached to the British embassies in Paris and Prague, where she developed a loathing of communism to rival her enduring hatred of Nazis. Then, in 1949, she returned to Sydney. There she stood for the Federal parliament in the Liberal cause against Labor's deputy leader, Dr HV Evatt; at the second attempt, in 1951, she got to within a few hundred votes of him.

After the 1951 election Nancy Wake returned to England, spending five happy years as an intelligence officer in the department of the Assistant Chief of Air Staff at the Air Ministry in Whitehall. In 1957, however, she married John Forward, an officer in the RAF, and resigned her post. Three years later they returned to Australia.

In the 1966 Australian elections she once again tried unsuccessfully to enter the Federal parliament, running for the Sydney constituency of Kingsford Smith. Her profile gradually lowered until 1985, when she published an autobiography, *The White Mouse*.

She settled in Port Macquarie, on the north coast of New South Wales. After her husband died in 1997

she lived there for four further years until, in 2001, she decided to return to England for good.

Initially she became a resident at the Stafford Hotel in St James's Place, off Piccadilly, which had been a British and American forces club during the war. Nancy Wake had ordered her first "bloody good drink" there in 1946, lured to the bar, like many former secret agents, by the hotel's then general manager, Louis Burdet, who had himself also worked for the Resistance in and around Marseilles.

In old age Nancy Wake was to be found on a leather stool in the hotel bar most mornings, nursing the first of the day's five or six gin and tonics.

Though she celebrated her 90th birthday there, and the hotel's owners welcomed her, they were obliged to absorb most of the costs of her stay, helped occasionally by anonymous donors – thought to include the Prince of Wales.

The hotel said it was looking forward to planning her 100th birthday, but in 2003 Nancy Wake moved to the Star and Garter forces retirement home just outside Richmond Park, where she remained until her death.

Nancy Wake had no children. Her ashes are reportedly due to be scattered near Montluçon.

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