

# Nancy Wake (1912-2011)

by **Wu WenJie & Kayson Wang**



## INTRODUCTION

Nancy Wake was a prominent figure in the *maquis*, the French Resistance during World War Two (WWII), and one of the Allies' most decorated servicewomen of the war. She played an important role in WWII, serving as a British Special Operations Executive (SOE) agent.

## EARLY LIFE

Nancy Grace Augusta Wake, also known as Nancy Wake, was born in Roseneath, Wellington, New Zealand, on 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1912. Wake's father, Charles Augustus Wake, was a journalist and due to his career, the family had to move to North Sydney, Australia in 1914. However, her father returned to New Zealand, leaving her mother, Ella Wake to raise the children.<sup>1</sup>

In Sydney, she attended the North Sydney Household Arts (Home Science) School. At the age of 16, she ran away from home and worked as a nurse. After Wake turned 20, with £200 that she had inherited from an aunt, she journeyed to New York,

then London where she trained herself as a journalist. In the 1930s, she settled in Paris and worked for the Hearst newspapers as a European correspondent. She witnessed the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi movement and "*saw roving Nazi gangs randomly beating Jewish men and women in the streets*" of Vienna.<sup>2</sup>

## WORLD WAR TWO

As the 1930s progressed, the rise of German Fascism formed the basis of many of Wake's stories. In 1935, she visited Vienna and Berlin where the overt and violent anti-Semitism movement formed in her a desire to oppose Nazism. In 1937, Wake met wealthy French industrialist Henri Edmond Fiocca, whom she married on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1939, in Marseilles. Six months later, Germany invaded France. Wake and Fiocca joined the fledgling Resistance movement after France's surrender in 1940.

After the fall of France in 1940, Wake became a courier for the French Resistance and later joined the escape network of

Captain Ian Garrow. In a reference to Wake's ability to elude capture, the Gestapo called her the *White Mouse*. The Resistance exercised caution with her missions; her life was in constant danger, with the Gestapo tapping her phone and intercepting her mail.

In November 1942, Wehrmacht troops occupied the southern part of France after the Allies' *Operation Torch* had started. This gave the Gestapo unrestricted access to all papers of the Vichy *régime* and made life more dangerous for Wake. In the war, she was credited with saving the lives of hundreds of Allied soldiers and downed airmen between 1940 and 1943 by escorting them through occupied France to safety in Spain.

Her growing involvement in the Resistance saw Wake and her husband assisting in the escape of Allied servicemen and Jewish refugees from France into neutral Spain. By 1943, Wake was the Gestapo's most wanted person, with a 5 million-franc price on her head. When her network was betrayed that same year, she decided to flee Marseilles. Her husband, Henri Fiocca, stayed behind; he was later captured, tortured and executed by the Gestapo. In her attempt to flee, Wake had been arrested in

Toulouse but was released four days later. An acquaintance managed to have her released by making up stories about her supposed infidelity to her husband. She succeeded, on her sixth attempt, in crossing the Pyrenees to Spain. Until the war ended, she was unaware of her husband's death and subsequently blamed herself for it.

Wake found her way to England and was accepted for training by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), an intelligence group working with the French Resistance. Her colleague, Vera Atkins, who also worked in the SOE, recalls her as a "real Australian Bombshell."<sup>3</sup> Wake was known for her tremendous vitality and immense fighting spirit. Training reports record that she was "a very good and fast shot," possessed excellent field craft and was noted to have "put the men to shame by her cheerful spirit and strength of character."<sup>4</sup> After her training, Wake became a courier and then an escort for Allied soldiers and refugees trying to leave the country. "It was much easier for us, you know, to travel all over France," she told an interviewer for Australian television. "A woman could get out of a lot of trouble that a man could not."<sup>5</sup> Wake once described her tactics:

"A little powder and a little drink on the way, and I'd pass their (German) posts and wink and say, "Do you want to search me?" Wake made use of her natural advantage as a woman and her charm to bypass many obstacles that a lot of men couldn't, which made her a very a capable agent.<sup>6</sup>

On the night of 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1944, when Wake was 31, she was among 39 women and 430 men who were parachuted into France to help with preparations for D-Day. Wake was parachuted into the Auvergne, becoming a liaison between London and the local *maquis* group headed by Captain Henri Tardivat in the Forest of Tronçais. Upon discovering her tangled in a tree, Captain Tardivat greeted her remarking, "I hope that all the trees in France bear such beautiful fruit this year," to which Wake replied with a firm tone, "Don't give me that French crap."<sup>7</sup>

Wake's duties included allocating arms and equipment that were parachuted in and minding the group's finances. Wake became instrumental in recruiting more members and making the *maquis* groups into a formidable force, roughly 7,500 strong. She also led attacks on German installations and the local Gestapo HQ in Montluçon.

At one point, Wake discovered that her men were protecting a girl who was a German spy. They did not have the heart to kill her in cold blood, but Wake did. After the war, Wake said that it was war, and she had no regrets about the incident.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the war, Wake helped establish communication lines between the British military and the French Resistance that were deemed crucial to weakening German strength in France in advance of the Allied invasion.

Once Wake was on a mission to replace codes her wireless operator had been forced to destroy in a German raid. She rode a bicycle for more than 500 kilometres through several German checkpoints. During a German attack on another *maquis* group, Wake, along with two American officers, took command of a section whose leader had been killed. She directed the use of suppressive fire, which facilitated the group's withdrawal without further losses.

From April 1944 until the liberation of France, her 7,000+ *maquisards* fought 22,000 Schutzstaffel soldiers (SS), a major paramilitary organisation under Adolf Hitler, causing 1,400 casualties, while suffering only

100 themselves. Her French companions, especially Henri Tardivat, praised her fighting spirit, amply demonstrated when she killed an SS sentry with her bare hands to prevent him from raising the alarm during a raid. After a period of training, Wake returned to France in April 1944 to help organise the Resistance before D-Day. Working in the Auvergne region, Wake was engaged in organising parachute drops of arms and equipment, and after D-Day, was involved in combat with bodies of German troops sent to destroy the *Maquis*.

During a 1990s television interview, when asked what had happened to the sentry who spotted her, Wake simply drew her finger across her throat. "They'd taught this judo-chop stuff with the flat of the hand at SOE, and I practised away at it. But this was the only time I used it—whack—and it killed him all right. I was really surprised."<sup>9</sup>

## AFTER THE WAR

Immediately after the war, Wake was awarded the George Medal, the United States Medal of Freedom, the *Médaille de la Résistance*, and thrice the *Croix de Guerre*. Upon liberation, Wake finally learned that the Gestapo

had tortured her husband to death in 1943 for refusing to disclose her whereabouts. In September 1944, Wake left the Resistance and went to SOE Headquarters in Paris, and then to London in mid-October. Shortly after, she worked for the Intelligence Department at the British Air Ministry attached to embassies in Paris and Prague.

Not long after, Wake returned to Australia and stood as a Liberal candidate in the 1949 Australian Federal election for the Sydney seat of Barton, running against Dr. Herbert Evatt, then Deputy Prime Minister, Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs in the Ben Chifley Labour government. While Chifley lost the government to Robert Menzies, Wake recorded a 13% swing against Evatt, with Evatt retaining the seat with 53.2% of the vote on a two-party preferred basis. Wake ran against Evatt again at the 1951 federal election. By this time, Evatt was Deputy Leader of the Opposition. The result was extremely close. However, Evatt retained the seat with a margin of fewer than 250 votes.

Wake left Australia just after the 1951 election and moved back to England. She worked as an intelligence

officer in the department of the Assistant Chief of Air Staff at the Air Ministry in Whitehall. She resigned in 1957 after marrying an Royal Air Force (RAF) officer, John Forward, in December of that year. They returned to Australia in the early 1960s. Maintaining her interest in politics, Wake was endorsed as a Liberal candidate at the 1966 federal election for the Sydney seat of Kingsford Smith. Despite recording a swing of 6.9% against the sitting Labour member Daniel Curtin, Wake was again unsuccessful. Around 1985, Wake and John Forward left Sydney to retire to Port Macquarie.

## LATER LIFE

In 1985, Wake published her autobiography, *The White Mouse*, which became a bestseller and has been reprinted many times.

After Wake's third failed attempt to enter politics, she and her husband John Forward ultimately retired to Port Macquarie, Australia where they lived until his death in 1997. The couple were married for 40 years and had no children.

In 2001, Wake left Australia for the last time and immigrated to London. She became a resident at the Stafford Hotel in St James' Place, near Piccadilly, formerly a

British and American forces club during the war. She had been introduced to her first "bloody good drink" there by the general manager at the time, Louis Burdet.<sup>10</sup> He had also worked for the Resistance in Marseilles. In the mornings, she would usually be found in the hotel bar, sipping her first gin and tonic of the day. She was welcomed at the hotel, celebrating her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday there, where the hotel owners absorbed most of the costs of her stay. In 2003, Wake chose to move to the Royal Star and Garter Home for Disabled Ex-Service Men and Women in Richmond, London, where she remained until her death.

Wake had received the George Medal, 1939-45 Star, France and Germany Star, Defence Medal, British War Medal 1939-45, French Officer of the Legion of Honour, French *Croix de Guerre* with Star and two Palms, US Medal for Freedom with Palm and French *Medaille de la Resistance* for her courageous endeavours. Wakes' medals are now on display in the Second World War gallery at the Australian War Memorial.<sup>11</sup>

## DEATH

Wake died on Sunday evening 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2011, age 98, at Kingston Hospital after being

admitted with a chest infection. She had requested that her ashes be scattered at *Montluçon* in central France. Her ashes were scattered near the village of Verneix, which is near *Montluçon*, on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2013.

Her obituary was included in and inspired the title for *The Socialite who killed a Nazi with Her Bare Hands: And 144 Other Fascinating People who died this Year*, a collection of New York Times obituaries published in 2012.<sup>12</sup>

## PERSONALITY

Nancy Wake did not like killing people. But in wartime, she once told an interviewer, "I don't see why we women should just wave our men a proud goodbye and then knit them balaclavas."<sup>13</sup> When the Nazi's violence terrorised her city, those attacks made her promise herself that "if ever the opportunity arose, I would do everything I could" to stop the Nazi movement, for her "hatred of the Nazis was very, very deep."<sup>14</sup>

When it came to the war and her training with the SOE, Wake once said "I was never afraid," she said. "I was too busy to be afraid."<sup>15</sup> On a side note, Wake never figured out what to do with her life after the war. "It's

dreadful because you’ve been so busy, and then it all just fizzles out,” she told an Australian newspaper in 1983.<sup>16</sup>

Wake kept on being an activist in WWII education even after her retirement and her attempts on joining politics shows that Wake has always been an enthusiast in making the world a better place, especially after what she had witnessed during the war. She led by example, not only as a woman, but also as a hero, which left a huge impact in the Allies victory in WWII. 🌐

10. The Telegraph, “Nancy Wake”, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/military-obituaries/special-forces-obituaries/8689765/Nancy-Wake.html>.
11. The New York Times, “Nancy Wake, Proud Spy and Nazi Foe, Dies at age 98”, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/14/world/europe/14wake.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/14/world/europe/14wake.html?_r=0).
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.

**ENDNOTES**

1. Australian War Memorial, “Nancy Grace Augusta ‘The White Mouse’ Wake”, <https://www.awm.gov.au/people/P332/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. The Guardian, "Nancy Wake obituary", <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/08/nancy-wake-obituary>.
5. Australian War Memorial, “Nancy Grace Augusta ‘The White Mouse’ Wake”, <https://www.awm.gov.au/people/P332/>.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Women in the Services, "Nancy Wake," [http://www.womenintheservices.com/?page\\_id=479](http://www.womenintheservices.com/?page_id=479)
9. Australian War Memorial, “Nancy Grace Augusta ‘The White Mouse’ Wake”, <https://www.awm.gov.au/people/P332/>.