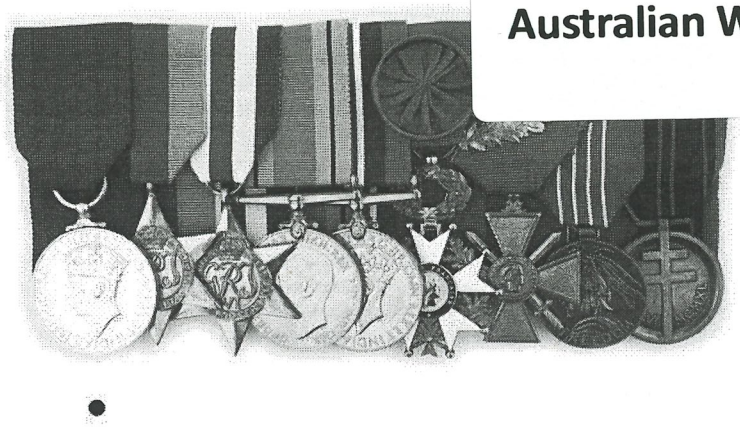
George Medal : Ensign N G A Wake, First Aid Nursing Yeom

Australian War Memorial, n.d.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL REL22576.001

ID number	REL22576.001
Collection type	Heraldry
Title	George Medal : Ensign N G A Wake, First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (Special Operations Executive)
C type	Award
Maker	Unknown
Date made	c 1948
Physical description	Silver
Description	George Medal (George VI). Impressed around edge with recipient's details.
Summary	Nancy Grace Augusta Wake was born to Charles Augustus and Ella Rosieur Wake at Wellington, New Zealand on 30 August 1913 though the family moved to Sydney when she was an infant. Following her education at North Sydney Girl's High School, Wake spent time nursing near Mudgee before returning to Sydney where she received an unexpected financial windfall, allowing her to indulge her urge to see the world. In late 1932 and barely 21 years old, Wake moved to London and then Paris, working as a journalist. In 1934 she travelled to Vienna and Berlin, and observed firsthand the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism. Her alarm turned quickly to a loathing of Adolph Hitler's new world order. Returning to Paris she witnessed the rising flood of German refugees, particularly Jews, coming through France as Nazi policies left them little choice but to leave their home. During this period she met wealthy French industrialist, Henri Fiocca, who she married soon after the outbreak of the Second World War. Despite her new husband's concerns, Wake was adamant that she should contribute to the war effort. In the early months of the war she drove an ambulance, assisting refugees and then the wounded as the war crept closer to home. After the fall of France, Wake acted as a courier for the fledgling resistance movement. Following a chance meeting with a British officer, she began putting Fiocca's considerable resources to work developing an escape network for Allied soldiers and civilians fleeing persecution. By 1943 the Germans were aware of the activities of an unknown woman they had dubbed 'the White Mouse', for her ability to elude capture. Suspicion landed on Wake and it was obvious that she needed to leave France quickly. Using the underground network she had helped to develop, Wake, after six eventful attempts, finally escaped over the Pyrenees to Spain and then to England, arriving in June 1943. Unaware of what had become of her husband and tiring of her life in London, she soon wanted to be doing her bit back in France. Wake was eventually accepted as an operative in the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), enlisting under the guise of a nurse in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY). The SOE was charged with supporting resistance groups in enemy held territories. In France, assistance was given in training and equipping the 'Maquis', partisan groups that had sprung up in response to the pro-German government at Vichy. Sixteen weeks of intensive training in weapons, munitions, radio operations, sabotage, hand to hand combat and parachute instruction followed. Finally Wake, code named Madame Andree, was parachuted into France in late April of 1944, together with a British officer, for a rendezvous with the Maquis d'Auvergne. They were later joined by a radio operator. At first treated with suspicion, Wake's small group soon proved themselves to be adept fighters and tacticians. In addition, the Maquis were, for the first time, being properly armed and financed by parachute drops from England, organised by Wake as the 'chef du parachutage'. As the Maquis became more successful as fighting units, they also came under much greater scrutiny from the Germans. In late May, thousands of German soldiers were sent in to destroy one of Wake's groups who had mistakenly massed all their troops in one small area. After inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, the 3000 strong Maquis were themselves forced into a disorderly withdrawal at great cost. Furious at their complacency, Wake imposed a firm condition that any further SOE assistance would be dependant on detailed strategic planning, including escape routes. Apart from their daily harassment of German troops, the Maquis were trained and organised into first rate saboteurs ready to help cripple the German war machine at a moment's notice of an Allied invasion. On the evening of 5 June 1944, SOE operatives and resistance leaders across France received coded messages warning them of an imminent attack. The following morning - 'D' Day - Operation Overlord commenced on the beaches of Normandy. During the day, as the Germans rushed forward to reinforce their lines, the Maquis set about delaying their advance at every opportunity. Hundreds of pre-determined targets were destroyed - communication lines, bridges, railways, roads, factories, power stations. Over the coming days and weeks reprisals were severe as thousands of German troops, complete with air and artillery support were deployed to destroy the Maquis. At one stage a group of Wake's Maquis, almost completely surrounded and facing certain annihilation, were ordered to withdraw. Their escape route had been so expertly planned that by the time the Germans reached their position not a single Maquisard remained. During one of the encounters, the group's radio and code words were destroyed so that they would not fall into enemy hands. This was a huge blow to an organisation whose very existence as an effective fighting force depended on communication with London. Wake immediately volunteered to organise a replacement though it meant travelling hundreds of kilometres across enemy held territory by bicycle. By the time she returned, exhausted, she estimated that she had covered over 400 kilometres in 72 hours. By mid 1944 Wake's reputation had grown enormously among the Maquis although not all partisans were favourably disposed toward her. As confidence in an Allied victory grew, so did the political posturing among the many partisan groups as they moved to secure their place in a post-war France. At one time Wake survived an assassination attempt by a member of a group not thought by her to be deserving of London's largesse. From that point on she was always accompanied by a large security detail. The Allied push continued and by August the Germans were withdrawing in haste from the south of the country. The Maquis continued to harass them in retreat and at the same time slow their withdrawal to give the Allied forces time to engage. To help stall the enemy, it was decided that the bridges over the Allier River near Cosne-d'Allier were to be destroyed. Wake accompanied a small team of experienced Maquisard demolition

experts to the village to set the charges. Not long after arriving, to the delight of the local villagers, the shattered bridges fell into the river.
Wake later related that it was not until one of her final missions that she had to use her bare hands to kill an enemy for the first time. After disturbing a munitions factory guard she was forced to close in quickly and snap his neck before he could bring his gun to bear. In the encounter Wake received a deep bayonet wound to the arm.
It was during the celebrations of the liberation of Vichy France in September that Wake first learned that her husband, Fiocca, had been killed. He had been arrested by the Gestapo in May 1943 and had endured five months of torture to force him to reveal his wife's whereabouts. He revealed nothing and was executed on 16 October 1943. Soon after the liberation of Vichy France, Wake flew to England before returning the Marseille to find out exactly what had happened to Fiocca and to put her affairs in order. In October 1944 she returned to London, her active service over.
Following the war the governments of France, Britain and America were quick to recognise her courage and contribution. France awarded her the Croix de Guerre with Palm and bronze star, and the Medaille de la Resistance. In 1947 she was awarded the American Medal of Freedom with Bronze Palm and the following year was presented with the British George Medal.
The recommendation for the George Medal reads:
'This officer was parachuted into France on the 1st March 1944 as assistant to an organiser who was taking over the direction of an important circuit in Central France. The day after their arrival she and her chief found themselves stranded and without directions, through the arrest of their contact, but ultimately reached their rendezvous by their own initiative.
Ensign Wake worked for several months helping to train and instruct Maquis groups. She took part in several engagements with the enemy, and showed the utmost bravery under fire. During a German attack, due to the arrival by parachute of two American officers to help in the Maquis, Ensign Wake personally took command of a section of ten men whose leader was demoralised. She led them to within point-blank range of the enemy, directed their fire, rescued the two American officers and withdrew in good order. She showed exceptional courage and coolness in the face of enemy fire.
When the Maquis group with which she was working was broken up by large-scale German attacks, and W/T contact was lost, Ensign Wake went alone to find a wireless operator through whom she could contact London. She covered some 200 kilometres. On foot, and by remarkable steadfastness and perseverance succeeded in getting a message through to London, giving the particulars of a ground where a new W/T plan and further stores could be dropped. It was largely due to these efforts that the circuit was able to work again.
Ensign Wake's organising ability, endurance, courage and complete disregard for her safety earned her the respect and admiration of all with whom she came in contact. The Maquis troop, most of them rough and difficult to handle, accepted orders from her, and treated her as one of their own male officers. Ensign Wake contributed in a large degree to the success of the groups with which she worked, and it is strongly recommended that she be awarded the George Medal.
Wake returned to Paris soon after the Armistice and worked in the British Passport Control Office before transferring briefly to the British Embassy in Prague. Her experience in Prague turned her into a passionate anti-communist. Back in Paris and unsure what to do next she finally returned to Australia, arriving in early 1949 and almost immediately entered the political fray.
Her first attempt to unseat the popular Dr Herbert Evatt in the Federal seat of Barton in 1949 failed though she did reduce his margin of over 11000 votes considerably. In 1951, incensed by what she perceived as Evatt's pro-communist stance in his contest of the Communist Party Dissolution Act in the High Court, Wake decided to stand again. This time she failed by a mere 127 votes but by now she had had enough of the petty bickering of politics. 'The most stupid thing I ever did', wrote Wake many years later in her autobiography, '[was to] become involved in politics.'
She returned to London in 1952 and joined the Air Ministry where she stayed for five years lecturing on evasion and escape techniques and reporting on Prisoners of War following the Korean War truce agreement. During her time at the ministry she also completed the 'Manual of Combat Survival' for aircrews. In 1957 she married John Forward, a former bomber pilot and POW in Germany during the war, and left the ministry. The couple later returned to live in Port Macquarie, New South Wales.
In 1970 she was awarded the Chevalier (5th class) de la Legion d'Honneur from the French Government followed in 1988 by the Officier (4th class) de la Legion d'Honneur. Wake was widowed again in 1997 and in 2001 returned to live in England. In 2004 the Australian Government awarded her the Companion of the Order of Australia. Wake died in London on 8 August 2011, aged 98.

Location Main Bld: World War 2 Gallery: Gallery 2: Against G