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Nancy Wake

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## Nancy Wake

### The White Mouse

Nancy Wake was the Allies' most decorated servicewoman of WWII, and the Gestapo's most-wanted person. They code-named her 'The White Mouse' because of her ability to elude capture. When war broke out she was a young woman married to a wealthy Frenchman living a life of luxury in cosmopolitan Marseilles. She became a saboteur, organiser and Resistance fighter who led an army of 7,000 Maquis troops in guerrilla warfare to sabotage the Nazis. Her

Story by Paul Stanley Ward

*Quite*

st. One of daring, courage and optimism in the face of impossible odds.

With a roar that makes both her name and nickname seem quaintly ironic this is Nancy at 89: "Somebody once asked me, 'Have you ever been afraid?' ... Hah! I've never been afraid in my life." The Sunday Times (South Africa) describes her as a real-life Charlotte Gray "whose exploits with the French Resistance make Sebastian Faulks's fictional Charlotte Gray – read like an Enid Blyton girls' school frolic."



Nancy Wake, the White Mouse, 1943 Permission Nine Network, Australia.

### Young Rebel

Nancy Wake was born on the gusty heights of Roseneath, Wellington, New Zealand, on 30 August 1912 to Charles Augustus and Ella Rosieur Wake. She was the youngest of six children. Her biography, *Nancy Wake* by Australian journalist and rugby personality Peter Fitzsimons, strongly records her edge lineage:

"Ella Rosieur Wake came from an interesting ethnic mix, her genetic pool bubbling with material from the Huguenots, the French Protestants who had famously fled France so they could pursue their religion freely, and Maori, as her English great-grandmother had been a Maori maiden by name Pourewa. She had been the first of her race to marry a white man, in the person of her English great-grandfather Charles Cossell, and they were wed by the Reverend William Hall at the Waimate Mission Station on 26 October, 1836. Legend has it that the great Maori

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Nancy's French Identity Card

Her missions with the Resistance meant her life was in constant danger. She became a suspect and was watched. The Gestapo tapped her phone and opened her mail. She took many identities and was so good at evading the Gestapo they nicknamed her the "White Mouse". By 1943, Wake was No.1 on the Gestapo's most wanted list and there was a five million-franc price on her head. It was too risky for Wake to stay in France and the Resistance decided she should go back to Britain.

"Henri said 'You have to leave', and I remember going out the door saying I'd do some shopping, that I'd be back soon. And I left and I never saw him again."

Escape was not easy. She made six attempts to get out of France by crossing the Pyrenees into Spain. On one of these attempts she was captured by the French Milice (Vichy militia) in Toulouse and interrogated for four days. She held out, refusing to give the Milice any information, and with the help of the legendary 'Scarlet Pimpernel of WWII', Patrick O'Leary, tricked her captors into releasing her.

Finally, Wake got across the Pyrenees and from there to Britain. She was on safer ground, but had no news of her husband, who worked separately.

## Back to the Fighting

Nancy Wake, then 31, became one of 39 women and 430 men in the French Section of the British Special Operations Executive which worked with local resistance groups to sabotage the Germans in the occupied territories. She was trained at a British Ministry of Defense camp in Scotland in survival skills, silent killing, codes and radio operation, night parachuting, plastic explosives, Sten guns, rifles, pistols and grenades. She and the other women recruited by the SOE were officially assigned to the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry and the true nature of their work remained a closely guarded secret until after the war.

made their move on the 7,000 Maquis. Through bitter battle and then escape, Nancy and her army had cause to be satisfied: 1,400 German troops lay dead on the plateau, 100 of their own men.

Nancy continued her war: she personally led a raid on Gestapo headquarters in Montucon, and killed a sentry with her bare hands to keep him from alerting the guard during a raid on a German gun factory. She had to shoot her way out roadblocks; and execute a German female spy.

## Victory and Sadness



Sketch of Nancy Wake c. 1944  
The Carpelbagger Archives

On June 6, 1944, D-Day, allied troops began to force the German army out of France. On 25 August 1944, Paris was liberated and Wake led her troops into Vichy to celebrate. However her joy at the liberation of Paris was mixed with a tragedy she had secretly anticipated: in Vichy she learned that her beloved husband Henri was dead. A year after Nancy had left France in 1943, the Germans had captured Henri, tortured and executed him, because he refused to give them any information about the whereabouts of his wife.

Within a year Germany was defeated. 375 of the 469 SOE operatives in the French Section survived the war. Twelve of the 39 women operatives were killed by the Germans and three who returned had survived imprisonment and torture at Ravensbruck concentration camp. In all 600,000 French people were killed during World War II, 240,000 of them in prisons and concentration camps.

## Post War

Nancy Wake continued to work with the SOE after the war, working at the British Air Ministry in the Intelligence Department. In 1960 she married a former prisoner of war, Englishman John Forward, and returned to Australia to live.

After the war her achievements were heralded by medals and awards: the George Medal from Britain for her leadership and bravery under fire, the Resistance Medal, Officer of the Legion d'Honneur and Croix de Guerre with two bronze palms and a silver star from France, and the Medal of Freedom from America.

However, for many years she was never awarded a medal by the Australian government. When the Australian Returned Services League recommended that Wake be awarded a medal, they were turned down. The *Sydney Morning Herald* (April 28th, 2000) surmised that she was turned down for a medal because she was born in New Zealand and was considered a New Zealand citizen. In 1994 she refused to donate her medals to the Museum of Australia and proclaimed to the New Zealand Press Association in Sydney (*Evening Post*, April 30, 1994) that she was still a New Zealander and reminded the press that she had kept her New Zealand passport, despite her 80 year absence from the country.

In 2004 Nancy Wake was, at long last, awarded the Companion of the Order of Australia. In 2006 Nancy received the NZ Returned Services Association's highest honour, the RSA Badge in Gold, as well as life membership for her work with the French resistance during the war.

## Recognition

Wake's dramatic life story and her feisty, courageous personality made her the ideal subject for documentaries and dramatisations. She tells her own story with interviews, reconstructions, stills and film footage in the video *Nancy Wake – Code Name: The White Mouse*.

In 1987 a television mini-series was made about her life. However the subject was marred by historical liberties that were taken with her life story, such as showing her having an affair while working for the Resistance in Auvergne:

“What do you think my bosses in England would have thought, all those thousands of pounds to train me and for me to go and have an affair. Really!

“The mini-series was well-acted but in parts it was extremely stupid. At one stage they had me cooking eggs and bacon to feed the men. For goodness sake did the Allies parachute me into France to fry eggs and bacon for the men? There wasn't an egg to be had for love nor money, and even if there had been why would I be frying it when I had men to do that sort of thing?”

Nancy Wake's comrade Henri Tardivat perhaps best characterised the guerrilla chieftain: