

EUROPE

# Nancy Wake, Proud Spy and Nazi Foe, Dies at 98

By PAUL VITELLO AUG. 13, 2011

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.”

Ms. Wake, a onetime freelance journalist whose life careered along a path that Hemingway might have sketched, from impoverished childhood to high-society hostess in the south of France to decorated heroine of the French Resistance during World War II, died last Sunday in London. She was 98.

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.

She helped establish communication lines between the British military and the French Resistance in 1944 that were deemed crucial to weakening German strength in France in advance of the Allied invasion.

By her own account she once killed a German sentry with her bare hands, and ordered the execution of a woman she believed to be a German spy.

“I was not a very nice person,” Ms. Wake told an Australian newspaper in 2001. “And it didn’t put me off my breakfast.”

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Ms. Wake received so many medals for her wartime service, she said, that she lived out her old age on the proceeds from their sale.

She was given the George Medal, Britain's second-highest civilian honor, and the Medal of Freedom, the United States' second-highest. France gave her the Legion d'Honneur, the highest military honor it bestows.

She once described herself — as a young woman — as someone who loved nothing more than “a good drink” and handsome men, “especially French men.”

The German military described her as “la souris blanche,” or “the white mouse,” for her ability to elude capture.

Between 1940 and 1944 she had close calls but always managed to give her pursuers the slip, her biographer, Peter FitzSimons, said Monday in a radio interview in Australia.

In film documentaries and in her 1985 autobiography, “The White Mouse,” Ms. Wake said she underwent a kind of personal metamorphosis during the war, from the fun-loving girl of her youth to the Resistance fighter she became.

It began, she said, with a visit to Vienna in the mid-1930s as a freelance journalist. There, she saw roving Nazi gangs randomly beating Jewish men and women in the streets.

Those attacks made her promise herself that “if ever the opportunity arose, I would do everything I could” to stop the Nazi movement, she said. “My hatred of the Nazis was very, very deep.”

The opportunity arose.

Nancy Grace Augusta Wake was born Aug. 30, 1912, in Wellington, New Zealand, the youngest of six children. Her father, a journalist, left the family shortly after moving them to Sydney, Australia.

Ms. Wake left home at 16, worked briefly as a nurse, and managed with the help of a small inheritance from an aunt to leave Australia at age 20. She traveled to London, New York and Paris, and decided Paris was the place that suited her best. She found work as a freelance journalist, and managed at the same time to live “Parisian nightlife to the full,” according to Mr. FitzSimons.

In 1936, she met a Marseilles industrialist named Henri Fiocca, whom she married and settled with in Marseilles three years later.

With the German invasion of France, Ms. Wake's wealth and social standing gave her a certain cover as she began helping members of local Resistance groups.

She 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."

In 1943, when occupation authorities became aware of her activities, she fled France. Her husband, who stayed behind, was later arrested and executed.

Ms. Wake found her way to England and was accepted for training by the British Special Operations Executive, or S.O.E., an intelligence group working with the French Resistance. In April 1944, when she was 31, she was among 39 women and 430 men who were parachuted into France to help with preparations for D-Day.

There she collected night parachute drops of weapons and ammunition and hid them in storage caches for the advancing allied armies, set up wireless communication with England and harassed the enemy.

"I was never afraid," she said. "I was too busy to be afraid."

By most accounts, Ms. 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.

She worked briefly for the British government, then returned to Australia and ran unsuccessfully for public office in the early 1950s. She married a retired Royal Air Force pilot, John Forward, in 1957. He died in 1997.

Ms. Wake returned to London in 2001.

Film and television producers have used Ms. Wake's early life as the basis for various works, and she generally approved of them, except for those suggesting

that she had love affairs during the war.

She did not have affairs, she insisted in a 1987 Australian documentary.

“And in my old age, I regret it,” she said. “But you see, if I had accommodated one man, the word would have spread around, and I would have had to accommodate the whole damn lot!”

***Correction: August 21, 2011***

An obituary last Sunday about Nancy Wake, a British agent who worked with the French Resistance during World War II, referred incorrectly to two of the honors she received. She was given the George Medal, Britain’s second-highest civilian honor, and the Medal of Freedom, the United States’ second-highest. Britain and the United States did not award her “their highest civilian honors.”

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