

Voices of War Life Story

Nancy Grace Augusta Wake
1912 - 1988





Name: Nancy Grace Augusta Wake

Other names/aliases: Hélène (SOE), White Mouse (Gestapo), alias in France Madame Andrée, code name WITCH

Date of Birth: 30th August 1912

Place of birth: Roseneath, Wellington, New Zealand

Nationality: New Zealander, Australian

Date of Death: 7th August 2011

Place of death: London, UK

Burial or memorials:

Unit(s): First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, Special Operations Executive

Networks: FREELANCE (SOE)

Service No:

Rank: Captain

Medals and Awards: Companion of the Order of Australia, George Medal, Officer of the Legion of Honour (France), Croix de guerre (France), Médaille de la Résistance (France), Medal of Freedom (United States), RSA Badge in Gold (New Zealand)

Education: North Sydney Household Arts (Home Science) School



Life Story

A formidable Second World War spy and the most decorated woman in the Commonwealth by the end of it, Nancy Grace August Wake was born in Wellington, New Zealand in 1912. She grew up in Sydney, Australia after the family moved there in 1914 and was the youngest of six children. She was part Māori through her great-grandmother Pourewa, believed to be of the Ngāti Māhanga iwi, and reportedly one of the first Māori women to marry a European. When she was just four her father abandoned her family to return to New Zealand, which devastated Nancy. She attended the North Sydney Household Arts School, but there were early signs of her rebellious nature. At the age of 16, she ran away from home and worked as a nurse before using a £200 inheritance to up sticks and move to London (via New York) in order to study journalism. In the 1930s she moved to Paris where she worked for the Hearst newspaper and fell in love, marrying her first husband Henri Fiocca, a wealthy French industrialist, on 30th November 1939.

Due to her journalism work, she witnessed the rise of Adolf Hitler, interviewing him in 1933 and attending the mass rallies. She wrote with disgust about the Nazi attacks on Jewish people in Vienna.

Nancy was living with Henri in Marseilles when France fell to the Nazi's. The couple could have lived an easy life, cushioned as



Nancy with her husband Henri and Ian Garrow, commander of the O'Leary Line.



they were by their money, but Nancy very quickly joined the Resistance, becoming a courier for the Pat O’Leary escape line in 1940 after an encounter with a British POW in a the bar of Hotel du Louvre in Marseilles led her into resistance work. This line was established to help Allied airmen who found themselves behind enemy lines escape to neutral Spain. Nancy would act as a courier and Henri provided funds to support. Their flat in Marseilles was initially used to house escapee’s but when this became too dangerous, Nancy set up another flat for the sole use of the Resistance for evaders and also as a base for arms, ammunition and stores.

“I’d see a German officer on the train or somewhere, sometimes dressed in civvies, but you could pick ‘em. So, instead of raising suspicions I’d flirt with them, ask for a light and say my lighter was out of fuel,” she recalled. She told how she would get beautifully dressed and hang around making dates with Germans to get information. “A little powder and a little drink on the way, and I’d pass their posts and wink and say, ‘Do you want to search me?’ God, what a flirtatious little bastard I was.”

The Resistance were keen to protect their asset and knew that the Gestapo were suspicious of her, tapping her phone and intercepting her mail. The Gestapo called her ‘la Souris Blanche,’ which translated as ‘the White Mouse,’ because every time they thought they had her cornered, she vanished. They also placed a reward of 5 million francs on her head, one of the

highest rewards for an agent.

After Vichy France was occupied by the Wehrmacht troops in November 1942, life became considerably more perilous for Nancy. Her network was betrayed, and despite all precautions, in early 1943 she got wind that the Gestapo were moving against her. So, she had no choice but to follow in the footsteps of those she had previously helped, crossing



the Pyrenees into Spain. Nancy credited her escape from France on her ability to flirt with the Germans she encountered, but even this wasn't fail-proof. She was picked up as part of a group arrested in Toulouse during her escape, but was released four days later. It was Pat O'Leary who intervened, and using a fake ID card of a French Millice was able to persuade the Germans that she was his mistress and they were trying to hide this from her husband. The lie was accepted and she was released.

After five failed attempts to cross the Pyrenees, Nancy finally made her way to Perpignan by train along with other allied evaders. The train was halted and a railway official informed them it was a train check. Nancy immediately jumped from the train window, with gunfire from the now alert Germans following her. Nancy had to leave her handbag on the train with her ID cards and jewellery, as well as her walking boots. Luckily she still had money so she boarded a train to Nice and the safe-house of Mme Sainson - a risky choice as there were generally airmen and soldiers their waiting to escape, over thirty at any one time. The household was well used to checks though - on a previous raid of the house, the twelve-year-old daughter took the incriminating radio transmitter from the house, placed it in a box of rubbish and took it outside to the bin right under the nose of the Gestapo agents.¹

Nancy finally escaped, crossed the Pyrenees after two days of constant hard climbing, and returned to London in 1943. Tragically she was never to see her husband again - he was questioned by the Gestapo after she fled, and as he refused to give her up, he

1 WWII Escape Lines Society website, accessed 24th February 2024.



was tortured and executed. Nancy only found this out during a victory celebration.

From Spain, Nancy made her way back to the UK. Initially she contacted the Free French in London but was rejected as they refused to put women into active service. This led to some suspicions from the British Secret Intelligence Service, so a friend then suggested that she contact Maurice Buckmaster, the head of 'F' (French) Section of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). This as to prove fruitful and Nancy was accepted, being given the code name "Hélène" and going to the selection board in early December 1943. There was an incident noted in her record that she arrived drunk before her party left for training and she was withdrawn but she was obviously reinstated, possible after intervention from her old O'Leary line commander Captain Ian Garrow. Here she excelled in training and apparently put the men to shame. She was an excellent shot and performed well in fieldcraft. She is described as:

A woman of good average intelligence and plenty of common sense. A good mixer with a cheerful and persuasive personality. Attracted by adventure and excitement and at times appears to lack a proper sense of seriousness and responsibility. She is, however, essentially loyal and reliable, and has a marked sense of humour. Persistent and determined, she has abundant energy. Might be suitable for courier, and with experience possibly a more responsible post.²

She was now ready for active service. On the night of 29–30 April 1944, Nancy parachuted into the Auvergne area of central occupied

2 The National Archives HS 9/1545



France. She was one part of a three-person SOE team code-named FREELANCE, Her role was to liaise between the SOE and the Maquis groups in the Auvergne region, which were loosely overseen by Émile Coulaudon (code name “Gaspard”) and consisted of some 7000 men.

Her landing was not entirely successful and she was found by Resistance leader Henri Tardivat hanging from a tree in the silk stockings and high heels she had dropped in.. Struck by her looks, he made a smart remark about French trees bearing beautiful fruit, to which Nancy replied in her typical style *“Cut out that bullshit and get me out of this tree!”*.³ Later when working with the Maquis she insisted that amongst the weapons and ammunition dropped to her were silk stockings and Elizabeth Arden face cream, and she also tried to ensure every night she was able to change into a nightdress. This attention to her appearance made it harder for the Nazi’s to find her, as they could not believe someone as elegant as Nancy would endure living in the countryside on the run in terrible conditions.

The relationship with Gaspard and Nancy’s FREELANCE network was strained at the outset. Although keen for supplies and money, Gaspard had to be persuaded by the French Forces of the Interior (FFI) in London to cooperate with the team, and he resented working under a woman. Apparently at one point he was plotting to kill Nancy, forcing her to flee. She insisted however that she would not distribute the much needed supplies unless the leaders listened to her and respected her decisions. SOE then began to send large amounts of arms, equipment, and money to support the marquis. Nancy supervised the parachute drops of these vital supplies and then allocate them to the marquis

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groups, including the vital wage payments to soldiers. Nancy also had responsibility for the list of the targets the maquis were to destroy before the invasion of France in June 44. The destruction of these targets was to ensure the Germans could not mount an effective response to the Allied invasion.

On 20th May 1944 a general mobilization of resistance fighters was called for in preparation, resulting in some 7,000 men that were then divided into three groups. His objective was to demonstrate that the resistance was able to liberate areas from the Germans with its own forces. On the 2nd June, the Germans launched a probing attack on the resistance base at Mont Mouchet, followed by a larger attack on the 10th June. The Maquis convened a planning meeting and were prepared to fight to the death. Nancy convinced them that it was better to live to fight another day. Finally on the 20th June, the position was completely encircled and heavy casualties taken, with the remaining men forced to flee. Her radio operator, Denis Rake took a message from London for Nancy with orders for a fighting withdrawal under the cover of darkness. During the fighting Nancy visited each group individually to deliver ammunition and much needed reassurance as well as relay orders. On several occasions, while travelling between sectors, her car came under attack from enemy aircraft but she persisted in her task, undeterred. The Maquis had a difficult withdrawal and took many casualties. They lost 107 dead and about the same number wounded.

Nancy later described having cycled 500 km in the aftermath of this battle in order to send a situation report to SOE back in London. This apparently took her 71 hours and was vital to get fresh drops of weapons and other supplies. In a later interview she recounts: *"I got there and*



they said: 'How are you?' I cried. I couldn't stand up, I couldn't sit down. I couldn't do anything. I just cried," ⁴

Meanwhile, in the days following D-Day, the Maquis carried out raids and sabotage attacks on Nancy's target list - German installations, rail lines, telephone communications and any other targets they could find in order to hamper the German response. By now they had also recruited Spanish resistance troops who had a good knowledge of explosives so they assisted them in effectively taking out bridges across the main rivers.

One of the chosen targets was the local Gestapo headquarters at Montlucon and Nancy was apparently instrumental in the planning of this raid. She chose 1225hrs as the time for the raid, knowing the Gestapo would sit down for lunch at exactly 12.30hrs. At 1225 Nancy, together with French and Spanish maquis, screeched up in four cars, ran into the building and rapidly cleared each room with grenades and machine-gun fire. They were in and out in under a minute, leaving heavy German casualties.

By the end of September 1944, the war was effectively at an end for Nancy and her men, with the Germans in retreat across Europe and the liberation of France. Many of the men who fought under her were offered the opportunity to join the army and fight in uniform.

Nancy, having learnt of the death of her husband by now, returned to Marseilles to deal with the estate. Like many she found most of her possessions had been stolen by the Gestapo including all of the

⁴ Obituary in the Guardian, 8th August 2011. Accessed 23rd February 2024.



expensive furniture. Although she was promised reparations of over F5,000,000, Nancy received almost nothing, just £70. Soon after VE Day the news reached her that Pat O'Leary was on his way to Paris from Dachau where he had been imprisoned. He was severely ill from the torture and mistreatment and so Nancy took in on herself to meet with him in Paris and nurse him back to health as best she could. He had been severely tortured and suffered from malnutrition and mistreatment in the prisons and concentration camp. Nancy then worked with O'Leary on the Awards Bureau and together they were able to discover the identity of the man who had betrayed the Line, and O'Leary himself. They did not need to take their own retribution as he was already dead, having himself been executed by her Maquis soldiers.

Post War: After the war Nancy returned to Australia and unsuccessfully stood as a Liberal candidate in the 1949 and 1951 elections for the Sydney seat of Barton. Both times she narrowly lost to H. V. Evatt, who would later become the leader of the Australian Labour Party.

Nancy left Australia after the 1951 election failure and returned to London. Here she went on to work for the British Air Ministry intelligence department at the Paris and Prague embassies, resigning in 1957 following marriage to an RAF officer, John Forward. Together they returned to Sydney, retiring to Port Macquarie in 1969, further north in New South Wales. After his death Nancy sold her medals and again returned to London. Here she had a number of friends from her war days including fellow spy Sonia d'Artois. she enjoyed regaling bar companions with war stories whilst sipping a gin and tonic.



Medals and Awards:

Nancy Wake was one of, if not the most, highly decorated woman on the Allied side in the Second World War, certainly of the Commonwealth. Following D-Day and the actions in the Auvergne she was promoted to Ensign, and she would later be promoted to the ranks of Lieutenant and Captain.

She received the George Medal from the United Kingdom in 1945 (citation below), the Medal of Freedom from the United States (with bronze palm), the Légion d'Honneur (Knight and then Officer), the Croix de Guerre (3 times) and the Medaille de la Resistance from France, the Companion of the Order of Australia from Australia and the Badge in Gold from New Zealand.

Shortly after the war, she was recommended for decorations in Australia but was turned down. Years later, the Australian government offered her the medals but she refused in her typical style, saying:

“The last time there was a suggestion of that I told the government they could stick their medals where the monkey stuck his nuts. The thing is if they gave me a



George Medal Citation:

During the attack following ALONCE's and SAMSON's arrival, HELENE behaved in a most outstanding manner. She herself led a section of 10 men, after their leader had lost his head, resulting in the death of 4 of them. Under her command were ALONCE and SAMSON. She led the section to within face of the enemy, ordered the fire, and withdrew them in good order, which showed an exceptional courage and coolness in face of enemy fire. Her action definitely contributed to the safety of these two American officers, who were very new to the work, and rather "lost".



medal now, it wouldn't be love so I don't want anything from them."

Her medals are now on display in the Second World War gallery at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

Nancy died of a chest infection on 7th August 2011 at Kingston Hospital at the age of 98. She had left instructions that stated:

When I die, I want my ashes scattered over the hills where I fought with brave men.

Her funeral was only attended by ten people at her express wish, and her coffin was draped with a union jack, a simple poppy wreath and three white sugar mice in honour of her *nom de guerre*. Her ashes, as per her wishes, were scattered in the woods surrounding the Château de Fragne (below) near Montluçon, which had served as Nancy's HQ with the Maquis in 1944.





Nancy had a fearsome reputation. She could apparently swear in the coarsest of French and gained the trust of the Maquis by showing them she could drink as well as any man. She would flirt to get through checkpoints, even getting guards to escort her through. She would cycle for miles in order to collect codes or pass on messages and during these trips she had to deceive the numerous patrols and checkpoints she passed through which took nerves of steel, and possibly a drink and touch of lipstick. Henri Tardivat described her as: *“the most feminine woman I know, until the fighting starts. Then, she is like five men.”*

She was not afraid of any aspect of her role, including killing when necessary. In her own words: *“I have only one thing to say: I killed a lot of Germans, and I am only sorry I didn’t kill more.”*⁵

⁵ BBC obituary 8th August 2011. Accessed 3rd February 2024.

On one occasion, as her group were about to attack a German gun factory, they came across a security guard who saw them and was about to raise alarm, Nancy reputedly killed the man with her bare hands. On another occasion they had captured a female German spy. Nancy had noticed three girls were being held by the Marquis, possibly as prostitutes so she engineered their release, getting them washed and properly clothed. Nancy set two of the girls free, but she suspected that a third was a German spy. After interrogating and exposing her, Nancy gave orders to shoot the informer. Initially the men refused, but when Nancy said she would do it herself, they capitulated. Nancy later recounted that the accused girl spat and stripped naked in front of her before facing the firing squad.

Finally, her own account of her return to France in April 1944 sums up her spirit and determination:

“Over civilian clothes, silk-stockinged and high-heeled, I wore overalls, carried revolvers in the pockets, and topped the lot with a bulky camel-haired coat, webbing harness, parachute and tin hat. Even more incongruous was the matronly handbag, full of cash and secret instructions for D-day. My ankles were bandaged for support when I hit the ground.

But I'd spent years in France working as an escape courier. I'd walked out across the Pyrenees and joined the Special Operations Executive in England, and I was desperate to return to France and continue working against Hitler. Neither airsickness nor looking like a clumsily wrapped parcel was going to deter me...”



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