

Willsher, 2011



Farewell to Nancy Wake, the mouse who ran rings around the Nazis

The WW2 resistance heroine, who has died aged 98, was 'a force of nature' who topped the Gestapo's most-wanted list

Kim Willsher in Paris

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She was known as the White Mouse for her uncanny ability to run rings around the Gestapo in occupied France, in spite of a 5m franc price on her head.

But the nickname the Nazis gave Nancy Wake - one of Churchill's most highly decorated special agents, who has died aged 98 - belied her fearlessness and bravery.

With her coiffured hair and red lipstick, Wake was the epitome of glamour, but when she was dropped into occupied France she became a fighting force.

Even without a weapon, she could be deadly. During one raid she reportedly killed an SS guard with her bare hands to prevent him raising the alarm. "She is the most feminine woman I know until the fighting starts. Then she is like five men," one of her French colleagues recalled.

As a leading figure of the French resistance, credited with helping hundreds of allied soldiers escape after she was parachuted into France, Wake was among the allies' most decorated servicewomen.

The war ended in personal tragedy, however. On returning to her Marseille home after the liberation, she discovered her husband, French businessman Henri Fiocca, had been tortured and killed by the Gestapo for refusing to give her up.

Afterwards she would declare: "In my opinion, the only good German was a dead German, and the deader, the better. I killed a lot of Germans, and I am only sorry I didn't kill more." Little wonder she topped the Gestapo's most-wanted list.

Author Peter FitzSimons said after writing his book *Nancy Wake: A Biography of Our Greatest War Heroine*, published in 2001: "We both came to the conclusion that she was 10 times the man I would ever be." Her story inspired the 1999 novel by Sebastian Faulks, *Charlotte Gray*, later made into a film with Wake played by Australian actor Cate Blanchett.

Wake, born on 30 August 1912 in New Zealand, the youngest of six children, was raised in Australia, but was devastated when, at the age of four, her father abandoned the family - an event believed to have sparked her rebellious nature and fearsome temper.

At 16 she used a £200 inheritance from an aunt to travel to London, where she studied journalism before moving to Paris. In 1938 she married Fiocca, a wealthy French industrialist. They were living in Marseille when France fell.

Although wealthy enough to cocoon herself from the hardships of war, Wake chose to become a courier for the resistance. One day, warned that the Gestapo was on its way to arrest her, she kissed her husband for the last time and fled.

Wake made her way across the Pyrenees into Spain and returned to Britain where she joined the Special Operations Executive, a clandestine body formed by Churchill to train agents in guerrilla warfare against the Nazis and to bolster local resistance groups in occupied France.

On the night of 29 April 1944, Wake was parachuted into the Auvergne region where she coordinated a 7,000-strong resistance group and headed successful attacks on German forces in the area.

Wake believed the most useful of her wartime exploits was the time she cycled 500km over 71 hours, passing through several German checkpoints, to replace vital codes her wireless operator had been forced to destroy in a Gestapo raid. Without the codes there could be no fresh orders or drops of weapons and supplies.

"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," she said.

After the war, Britain awarded Wake the George medal, the United States gave her the Medal of Freedom and France honoured her with the Médaille de la Résistance, the Croix de Guerre - three times - and the Légion d'Honneur. In 1957, Wake married John Melvin Forward, a former RAF fighter pilot.

She returned several times to live in Australia, making unsuccessful attempts to get elected to parliament, but had an uneasy relationship with the country of her childhood, feeling unrecognised and underappreciated. This led her to refuse decorations from the Australian government; with characteristic bluntness, she said they could "stick their medals where the monkey stuck his nuts". In February 2004, she relented and was made a Companion of the Order of Australia.

Wake found post-war life uneventful. "It's all been so exciting ... and then it all fizzled out. I had a very happy war," she said. FitzSimons told Australian radio: "She was a woman who was always a hair-trigger from being in a rage ... and that rage within her was wonderful during the war, [but] it could be problematic when the war was over. She was a force of nature."

Her husband died in 1997 and Wake settled for a final time in London. She died on Sunday after being taken to hospital with a chest infection.

In an interview a decade ago, at the age of 89, Wake appeared to have lost none of her fighting spirit. "Somebody once asked me: 'Have you ever been afraid?' Hah! I've never been afraid in my life," she said.

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