

PEOPLE PROFILES Nancy Grace

Augusta Wake AC, GM (the White Mouse)

The most decorated female servicewoman in WWII



Like many European settler families Nancy Wake, born in New Zealand in 1912 came from a genetic melting pot. Her family's origins were French Huguenot, English and Maori.

When she was a small child, her family moved to Sydney, Australia, and at 16 she ran away from home to train as a nurse. An aunt died and left her £200, and she used this money to travel the world, finally training as a journalist in London. By 1935 she was working in Europe and witnessed first hand the violent protests against the Jews and gypsies by the Nazis.

Having now married French industrialist Henri Fiocca, she lived in Marseilles when France was invaded by the Germans in 1939. Nancy joined the French Resistance and worked as a courier. She was perceived as a massive threat by the Germans, who tapped her telephone, intercepted her mail and gave her the code name 'White Mouse.'

Her life was in constant danger, and by 1943 she was the Gestapo's most wanted person. They offered 5 million francs to anyone who could hand her over. By year end, Nancy had to flee Marseilles, leaving her husband behind who was later captured, tortured and killed by the Germans. He had refused to

give any information about his wife to his captors, and he died because of it.

After several dangerous attempts to cross the Pyrenees mountains into Spain, Nancy finally made it and went to Britain to join the SOE.

She became one of 39 women and 430 men in the French Section of the SOE whose job was to work with French resistance groups and to find ways to stop the Germans. Her training with SOE included survival skills, silent killing, codes, radio operation and night parachuting. She often had to work with plastic explosives, Sten guns, rifles, pistols and grenades. Her official cover story was that she was part of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry.

In April 1944 Nancy Wake parachuted into Auvergne where she remained until the liberation of France.

She was the liaison between London and the local Maquis resistance group. Always brave with a proud fighting spirit, she coordinated resistance activity, recruited more members and also

Nancy Wake's great grandmother Pourewa was the first Maori to marry a white man, in 1836.

led attacks on German operations. She even killed an SS Sentry with her bare hands to stop him from raising the alarm.

One of her crowning achievements came when Nancy cycled 500km in just 71 hours through several German checkpoints to replace codes her wireless operator had been forced to destroy during a German raid. Without the codes they could not order supplies or weapon drops. She made the journey almost non-stop through mountains and countryside. After the war her achievements were formally recognised with medals and awards.

Nancy Wake received the George Medal from Britain for leadership and bravery under fire, the US Medal of Freedom,

the Médaille de la Résistance and the Croix de Guerre with two bronze palms and a silver star from France.

She wrote her autobiography in 1988 entitled 'The White Mouse.' After working for the Intelligence Department for the British Air Ministry, she returned to Australia in 1960 and stood as Liberal political candidate. In 1988 she received the French title of Chevalier of the Legion of Honour.

In 2004 she was made a Companion of the Order of Australia and in 2006 she was awarded the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services Association's highest honour - the RSA Badge in Gold. She now she lives in a nursing home for veterans in London.

Project: For your eyes only



Wake was one of thirty nine women and four hundred and thirty men in the French section of the SOE. Her heritage is a mixture of English, French and Maori. Do you think she may have experienced any prejudice or discrimination in her life or wartime service? Do you think her appearance would have helped or hindered her work as a secret agent?

SPECIAL UNIT

SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE (SOE)

Code Names:
Baker Street Irregulars

Churchill's Secret Army

The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare

SOE was established by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Minister of Economic Warfare Hugh Dalton in July 1940 to conduct warfare by means other than direct fighting.

As a British resistance movement, its mission was to place spies behind enemy lines.

A variety of people from all backgrounds, ethnicities and social classes served in the movement. Indeed SOE turned a blind eye to those who were known homosexuals, had criminal records or bad (military) conduct records, were Communist or even anti-British.

The key attribute for agents was a deep knowledge and language skills of the country in which the agent had to operate, so they could pass as a native of the country. The SOE was officially dissolved after the war in January 1946.