The forgotten Australian heroine of the French Resistance

From rugged mountains to sleepy villages, a journey through France's Auvergne region reveals the extraordinary wartime story of Nancy Wake

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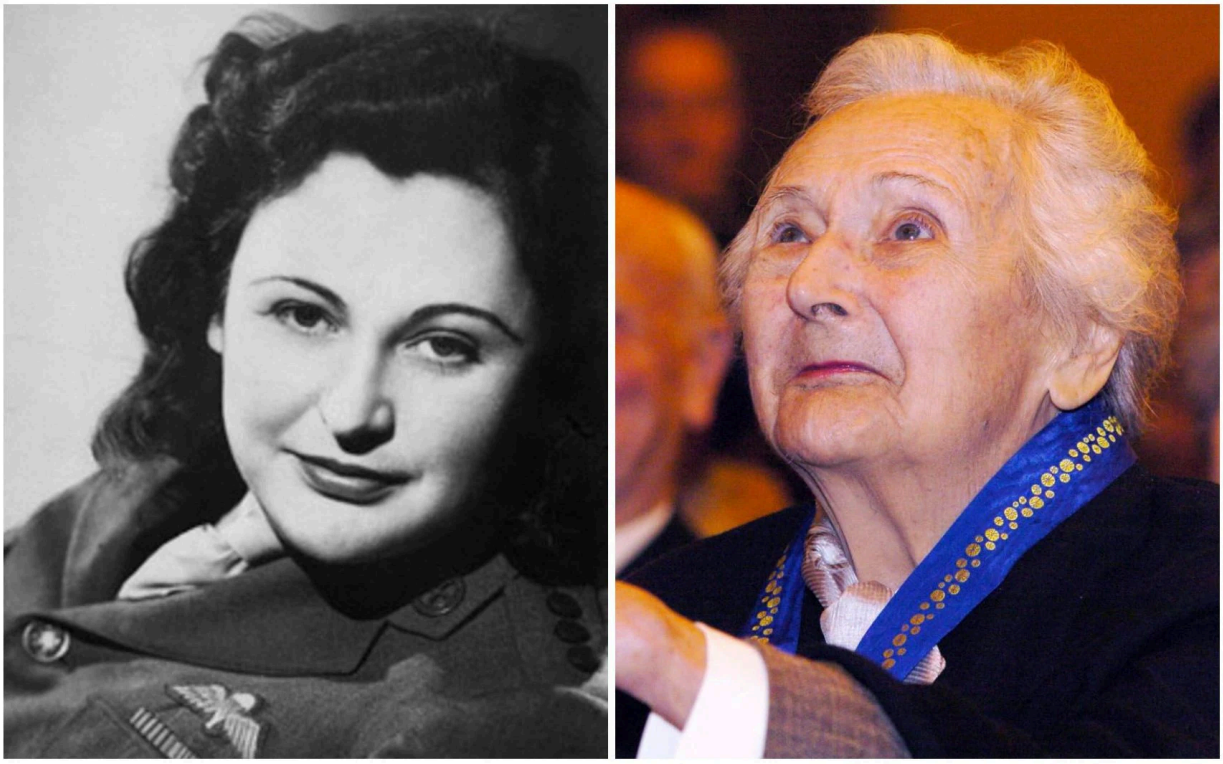

Australian Nancy Wake fought with the Resistance through the spring and summer of 1944 Credit: Alamy / PA Images



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Show biography

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The plaque on the rock before the *mairie* of Verneix reads: "In memory of Nancy Wake… great Australian heroine of the Second World War." Well, it reads it in French, obviously. We are in a 600-strong settlement in the Auvergne, north of Montluçon. Not far from Clermont-Ferrand. Things come at you in French round here. Even when they are Australian – as Nancy Wake very much was.

The Verneix stele recognises an extraordinary Aussie who was among the most decorated women of the war. Right here, and in the surrounding Massif Central region, she fought with the Resistance through the spring and summer of 1944, outdrank them after battle, and was rarely without her Chanel lipstick.

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Following her around is easier now than it was in 1944, and whisks you through remote landscapes wild and rustic enough for most tastes. Also towns and villages you may not otherwise have considered. I've just done this, and highly recommend it.

Wake survived the war, died in Kingston-upon-Thames in 2011, aged 98, and, two years later, had her ashes scattered in the grounds of a château at Verneix. British military figures and the Australian ambassador to France attended. The Wake story is arresting. It is told in at least three books, including an autobiography. These, though, come with varying degrees of accuracy. As Auvergne historian Christophe Grégoire puts it: "There are elements of over-romanticising in the accounts; it is difficult to winnow fact from fiction."



Nancy Wake received many awards for her bravery, including the Légion d'Honneur Credit: Getty/Patrick Riviere

Which is a pity, for the unadorned story is outstanding enough. The exaggerations – which occasionally portray her leading Resistance men to the fight as a beautiful, fast-shooting, brandy-swilling Joan of Arc – obscure what truly are astonishing achievements. There's no doubt that her mission for Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) – essentially, organising the parachuting in, and distribution of, munitions and money – was carried out with aplomb, enterprise and courage beyond the imagination of most.

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Also panache. As Vera Atkins, deputy director of the SOE's France section, said: "[She was] a real Australian bombshell. Tremendous vitality, flashing eyes. Everything she did, she did well."

This included handling Sten guns and explosives, sabotage, killing at least one German sentinel with her bare hands and, most crucially, keeping hundreds of Resistance fighters armed via reception of perilous parachute drops.

Wake was born in New Zealand in 1912, then raised in Australia. She soon left her strict religious mother, ultimately travelling to London and then Paris as a journalist for the Hearst organisation. Having married a rich Marseille businessman, after war broke out she became a key element in the Pat O'Leary Resistance escape line in southern France. Her ability to avoid detection had her nicknamed the "White Mouse". By 1943, though, she needed to escape herself, over the Pyrenees and back to London.

There, she joined the SOE, did the necessary training and – apparently queasy from having earlier eaten too many Spam sandwiches – was parachuted into the Auvergne, not far from Verneix. She landed in a tree. "I hope all the trees in France bear such beautiful fruit this year," said the Resistance man detailed to welcome her. "Cut the French bulls---, and get me down," she cried.



Nancy Wake was known as the 'White Mouse' because of her ability to elude capture Credit: Getty/Keystone/Hulton Archive

In a mission dubbed "Freelance", she had, along with Capt John Hind Farmer, jumped into what was prime Resistance territory: mountainous with ridges and forests in which you could hide a nation, tiny back roads and villages where Germans showed up irregularly. The key job was to assess and arm different Resistance groups – now mainly united under the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur (FFI) banner – so that the French Resistance Maquisards might keep German forces occupied post-D-Day. Organising parachute drops was Wake's forte.

It's difficult to do a "Nancy Wake trip" chronologically because her Resistance groups dodged back and forth amid the wooded uplands, for obvious reasons. But we don't have to evade the SS, so we'll start in Montluçon.

A birthday banquet

Check into the Hôtel de l'Univers – it was once Gestapo HQ – and drive the few miles north to Verneix. Just outside the farming village, the then-unoccupied Château de Fragne was taken over by Wake and Resistance men in late August 1944. They could emerge from their forest camps for, by now, the Germans were on the run. Here she celebrated her 32nd birthday – with a banquet involving squads of local Maquisards. And, it was in the grounds some seven decades later – on

March 10 2013 – that her ashes were scattered. The 18th-century pile may not be visited, so nip into Verneix for the stele – and a decent lunch at the Le Verneix restaurant opposite.

A little farther on, between the villages of Hérisson and Cérilly, is where Wake had earlier landed (on April 30 1944) bearing hand-embroidered nightdresses, fashionable shoes, a million francs in cash and a cyanide-filled cuff button. She and Capt Farmer were whisked to nearby Cosne-d'Allier where, above an electrician's shop, they were briefed by local Resistance leader Jean Villenchon and SOE regional boss Maurice Southgate.

Southgate later returned to his Montluçon base where, devastatingly, SS agents were waiting. He ended up in Buchenwald, but survived. Meanwhile, Wake, Farmer and their host Villenchon apparently drank brandy through to 4am to seal their understanding. The house is now a storage spot (though it's signed "Laverie"), next door to Le Grand Café on Rue de la République.



Clermont-Ferrand is a historic city in southern France Credit: tolgaildun

Back in Montluçon, you might stroll the terrific medieval centre, up to the dominating Château of the Dukes of Bourbon (a long story) and back down to what is France's only museum of popular music. I would be able to tell you more about this had it been open on Sundays. That said, Montluçon is an engaging place, with Dunlop-Goodyear at the core of an industrial story whose working-class traditions fuelled Resistance resolution. Its Resistance museum is presently closed – a storm destroyed the roof in 2023 – but the website is rewarding. And volunteers are on hand to greet you on site on Wednesdays. I met them. They are as welcoming as they are erudite.

Slaughter on the heights

From the Montluçon district, Wake and Farmer were taken to Mont Mouchet, 150 miles south and nearly 5,000ft up. You might do the same. It's a stirring drive – upwards, onwards and increasingly remote – from Langeac. "Mont Mouchet" is a name ringing through Resistance history as either a great act of wartime defiance or a catastrophe, depending on whom you listen to.

Wake and Farmer arrived in May, just as hundreds of Maquisards from across the Auvergne were rallying to the Mont Mouchet district. Ultimately, they numbered 2,700, with 2,000 others in nearby redoubts. The aim, approved by London and agreed by regional FFI leader Emile Coulaudon, was to create "a solid Maquisard bastion" to stall German troops in the region. Wake, and others, apparently thought this ill-advised, the Resistance's strength being quick in-and-out attacks, not pitched battles.

It's not entirely clear who was right. The Maquis did indeed bottle up thousands of German troops in early June – but were then, from June 9-11, overrun. The result was dozens of deaths, the destruction of flanking farms and villages (Clavières, Ruynes-en-Margeride), villagers murdered and farm animals slaughtered. That said, most defenders managed to get away – running into criticism from other Resistance leaders that the concentration of fighters at Mont Mouchet had been "a monumental error". When the Germans finally took Coulaudon's *maison forestière* HQ, incidentally, they discovered the Maquisards had left behind vast quantities of cheese.

The episode is covered well at the Mont Mouchet museum – at once rugged and contemporary – on the site of the HQ. There's also a memorial to the Resistance. The on-site auberge provides lunch.



The National Resistance Memorial at Mont Mouchet in Auvergne Credit: Hemis/Alamy

Evicting the Germans

In the following days, most of the fleeing Resistance headed some 90 miles south-west to the Truyère redoubt (near the Garabit Viaduct, Gustave Eiffel's second most famous French project). There, on June 20, an estimated 20,000 enemy troops attacked, with air and artillery support. Wake was apparently at the heart of the fighting, but the Germans overpowered them again. Resistants scattered, Wake's group travelling for days to Saint Santin and, later, back up to the Montluçon district.

By now, her status had risen. Even recalcitrant Resistant leaders recognised that parachute drops organised by her were their most significant source of munitions and money. This has led English-language authors to suggest that she was de facto leader of the Auvergne Resistance. The claim raised the eyebrows of every Resistance expert I met in the region, including those of historian Christophe Grégoire.

None, though, disputed Wake's valour or the importance of her mission. Both were exemplified when her group's radio proved unusable. Thus, communication with London – and the parachute drops – were impossible. It was known that there was a Resistance radio operator in Châteauroux, some 150 miles away via back

roads. Wake stole a bike, did the return trip in 72 hours and brought back the necessary radio elements. Though she collapsed exhausted for three days, her operations were back on.

As many as four parachute drops a week fuelled sabotage, hit-and-run attacks on German convoys and the destruction of anything of use to the Germans. Wake was reported to have said: "We were flat out, buggering up everything we could [...] We were blowing up things all day and all night – bridges, railway lines, roads... It was a positive joy."

By the time of her 32nd birthday at the Château de Fragne and following the Allied landings in Provence, the FFI's Maquisards had largely evicted the Germans from the Auvergne. Wake's celebrations were, though, muted, for she now learnt that her husband, back in Marseille, had been betrayed to, and executed by, the Germans more than a year earlier.

She returned to London and, post-war, bagged government desk jobs in Paris and Prague, before shuttling between Britain and Australia (where she twice stood, unsuccessfully, as a Liberal Party parliamentary candidate). By 2001, she was in London for good, a full-time resident at the luxury Stafford Hotel on St James's Place, largely at the hotel's expense. She was apparently early into the bar most mornings for a G&T. She ended her life in a retirement home for ex-service personnel.



Nancy Wake attends the launch party of Russell Braddon's biography of her, held at the Stafford Hotel in London in November 1956 Credit: Getty/Ron Burton/Keystone/Hulton Archive

Decorations stacked up, from the French Croix de Guerre and Légion-d'Honneur to the British George Medal and US Medal of Freedom. But it might be that the accolade that pleased her most came from Resistance leader Henri Tardivat: "She is," he apparently said, "the most feminine woman I know – until the fighting starts. Then she is like five men."

Follow in Nancy Wake's footsteps

Drive to Clermont-Ferrand; you'll need the car for this trip. It's around eight hours non-stop from Calais.

It would be crazy to be in the region and not explore Clermont itself. Check into the four-star, literary-themed, all-smiling Hotel Alexandre Vialatte (special offer double room-only deals from £70). It's presently my favourite mid-range hotel in France.

Eat at Le Devant or maybe the Bistrot Honoré. In Montluçon, the Hotel l'Univers will bed you down very reasonably, from £50 a room-only double.

Dine across the square at the Hotel des Bourbons – either its posh restaurant or its cheaper Pub 47 brasserie.

For the Mont Mouchet, I'd base myself 70 minutes away in Le Puy-en-Velay, a town which merits exploration in its own right. Check into the Ibis Styles, B&B doubles from £73. Dine nearby at La Fabrique Des Etoiles.

The best book about the heroine is *Nancy Wake* by Peter Fitzsimmons (HarperCollins). If you read French and wish to know more about Mont Mouchet, Christophe Grégoire's recently published *Le Mont Mouchet* is the best coverage yet (Editions Deborée).

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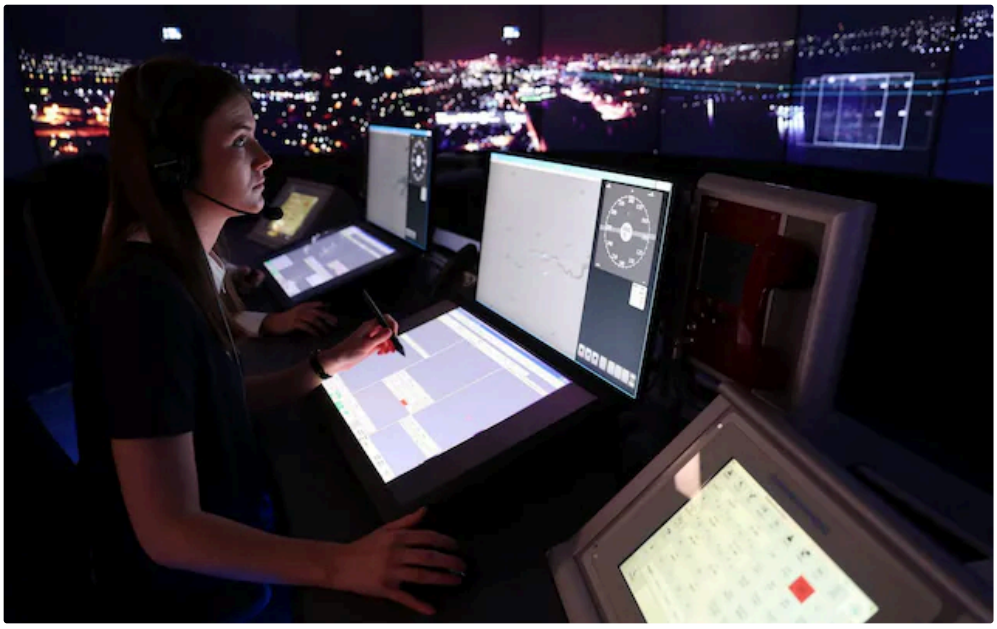

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