



Nancy Wake

Peter FitzSimons

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'Freedom is the only thing worth living for. While I was doing that work I used to think that it didn't matter if I died, because without freedom there was no point in living'.

Nancy Wake

In the early 1930's, Nancy Wake was a young woman enjoying a bohemian life in Paris. By the end of the Second World War she was the Gestapo's most wanted person.

As a naive, young journalist, Nancy Wake witnessed a horrific scene of Nazi violence in a Viennese street. From that moment, she declared that she would do everything in her power to rid Europe of the Nazi presence. What began as a courier job here and there, became a highly successful escape network for Allied soldiers, perfectly camouflaged by Nancy's high-society life in Marseille. Her network was soon so successful - and so notorious - that he had to flee France to escape the Gestapo who had dubbed her 'the white mouse' for her knack of slipping through its traps.

But Nancy was a passionate enemy of the Nazis and refused to stay away. She trained with the British Special Operations Executive and parachuted back into France behind enemy lines. Again, this singular woman rallied to the cause, helping to lead a powerful underground fighting force, the Maquis. Supplying weapons and training the civilian Maquis, organising Allied parachute drops, cycling four hundred kilometres across a mountain range to find a new transmitting radio - nothing seemed too difficult in her fight against the Nazis.

Peter FitzSimons reveals Nancy Wake's compelling story, a tale of an ordinary woman doing extraordinary things.

Nancy Wake Details

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From Reader Review Nancy Wake for online ebook

Natalie says

Fantastic book about a fantastic woman!

Finally someone exploring her humour and wit as well as her stoic and pragmatic way of "blinking" things to speak in Gladwellian terms...

My personal favourite in all the Wake Bio's, not written by herself, I've read.

And I can definitively not understand those who would have preferred a Bio by a Nancy hater! And loathed this book because it was written by an enthusiast who loves what he's doing and who he writes about!

Steph says

Peter FitzSimons spins a good yarn. Unfortunately, this is the good and bad thing about this book. Good because it makes what could be quite dry material very readable, and bad because one is never quite sure how much of the story is being exaggerated for effect - not really an ideal situation for a biography! I've given this four stars, however, because Nancy Wake was an awesome human being.

Stephanie says

I enjoyed this book so much at the start (I listened to the audible.com version), but about 3/4 of the way through, I found myself getting irritated and by the end I had pretty much lost interest. I'm not sure what I was expecting. Clearly Nancy Wake was a remarkable woman, but somehow in the telling she came across as just a little too cute and a little too clever.

David says

Nancy died today. She was a remarkable woman. I was very fortunate to meet her once; how lucky am I! RIP Nancy.

Sher says

Ever heard of Nancy Wake? Well, you probably should have. She was an incredible WWII heroine. What guts this woman had. She was a native Australian who became an undercover agent and explosives expert. She did not seem to flinch at facing the most terrifying of circumstances in order to do what needed to be done. She was responsible for helping countless people get out of France before they could be taken by the Germans. She herself was caught at one point, but she never gave up, and after regaining her freedom, went right back to putting it to the Germans.

I was amazed at the courage and determination of this woman, and wonder why I had never heard of her

before.

Kiwiflora says

On August 7 this year, one of the most amazing women of our times passed away at the grand old age of 98. Nancy Wake has been claimed by both New Zealand and Australia as one of their own - by New Zealand because she was of Maori descent, born there and retained close ties with her extended family; and by Australia because she lived there from early childhood, grew up there and lived for a period of time after the war there. But she could equally be considered French for her service to France during the war, and also British because her war service was under British command, and she lived much of her later life in England. Above all however, as becomes apparent almost from the beginning of this book, she was her own person with enormous courage, enormous self-belief and enormous determination.

Peter Fitzsimons is a highly respected journalist from Australia and has written what is probably considered the definitive account of Nancy's life. I very much like the fact that one of her fellow countrymen took it upon himself to tell her story. His style is light and easy to read, and gives plenty of background to what made her the person she became. For example he goes right back to the beginning, to her birth, when the Maori midwife noticed a 'thin veil of skin which covered the top part of the infant's head, known in English as a caul.' The midwife tells Nancy's mother that it 'means the baby will always be lucky. Wherever she goes, whatever she does, the gods will look after her'. And what an omen that turned out to be.

Nancy was a very feisty child, very independent and strong willed. Not easy characteristics for her mother to deal with but major shapers of the adult she was to become. By the time she ended up in Paris in the 1930s, still only in her mid-20s, as a correspondent for Hearst Newspapers, she already had quite a life story to tell. A trip to Vienna in 1935 with some other journalists, however, became the defining moment for how the rest of Nancy's life was to turn out. After witnessing the most horrific atrocities to the local Jewish population she developed a very deep seated hatred for the Nazis, Hitler and everything they stood for. Once the war started, and France was taken over by Germany Nancy set about doing everything she could to hinder Nazi activities in France, to such an extent she ended up on Hitler's most wanted list. She was, in a word, relentless. And that is all I will say about her war exploits here, because you need to read it for yourself to fully appreciate the person Nancy was. I couldn't possibly give her story justice by 'reviewing' it, and I wouldn't dream of trying.

There are many heroes and heroines during times of war, and we also know that many do not make it, dying under extreme torture, betrayal, deprivation and atrocious circumstances. Such stories need to be told, and told regularly. In our consumer and celebrity driven society there are very few heroes/heroines for our young people to look up to, to learn from and to follow the example of. This is one such person we would all be a little richer for knowing more about.

KateNZ says

Born in New Zealand and raised in Australia, Nancy Wake gravitated to France as a young woman. There, she became a major player in the French Resistance during World War II. At the time the Germans invaded France, she was married to Henri Fiocca, a wealthy French businessman in Marseille. She used her society position and reputation as a cover for her work in the local escape network, organising for Allied servicemen to pass through a series of safehouses and be guided out of France over the Pyrenees. Her ability to maintain her cover for so long and disappear whenever the Germans thought they were getting close to identifying her

led to her Gestapo nickname of "The White Mouse".

Eventually, though, the Gestapo were throwing so many resources at capturing her that Henri persuaded her to avoid the inevitable and use her own escape route to get to Britain. Once there, though, it was obvious that a quiet life was not for her while there was still a war to fight. She joined the British Special Operations Executive as an agent and parachuted back into France to join the Maquis. There, she liaised with London, organising parachute drops that supplied the Maquis with the arms and supplies to sabotage Nazi targets, training the Maquis fighters to use the weapons, and passing on information about priority targets. Never a person to stay out of the action, Nancy was often at the forefront of the sabotage and fighting efforts - she was one of the SOE's most successful agents.

It's obvious from this book that Nancy was a truly extraordinary woman: straight-talking, hard-drinking, a highly competent fighter, a leader, a person who got things done and who took no crap from anyone. She was also beautiful, and as one of her Maquis colleagues recalled, 'the most feminine woman [he] knew, until the fighting started ... then she was like five men.' She was justifiably and extensively honoured by Britain, France and the United States - though, bizarrely, never by her own country of Australia.

The book focuses on her wartime activities for obvious reasons, though it also describes her early life and briefly covers her post-war years. The author, Sydney journalist Peter FitzSimons, talked extensively with Nancy over the years before her death at the age of 98 in 2011.

While Nancy's story is amazing, and it was a treat to read about her life, the style of the book grated with me at times. It's a bit like a cross between a weekend entertainment section newspaper article and a "Boys Own" story. That has its own charm - the author knew Nancy so well and was able to show her in a fresh way - but there are too many jarring notes for real reading satisfaction. It should really be 3 and a half stars book but I can't quite bring myself to round it up.

Jean says

"Nancy Wake: A Biography of our Greatest War Heroine" by Peter FitzSimons was published in 2010. FitzSimons is an Australian journalist. Nancy Wake was the most decorated women from World War II. FitzSimons' well-paced and compelling biography is well-documented. FitzSimons drew his research from earlier biographies such as Russell Braddon's "Nancy Wake: the Story of a Very Brave Woman" published in 1956 and Wake's autobiography "The White Mouse" published in 1985. FitzSimons also had many interviews with Nancy Wake as well as fellow agents, resistance fighters and Colonel Buckmaster. Buckmaster was head of the British Special operations (BSO).

Wake was born in Wellington, New Zealand in 1912. The book covers her early childhood in New Zealand and Australia. After she finished school she moved to England where she learned to be a journalist. She obtained a job as a European correspondent for the Hearst Newspaper and was stationed in Paris. In the 1930's she witnessed the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi movement. She reports seeing roving Nazi gangs beat Jewish men and women in the streets of Vienna.

In 1937 Wake married wealthy French industrialist Henri Edmond Fiocca (1898-1943). They were living in Marseille, France when Germany invaded. Nancy became a courier for the French Resistance, then help set up the escape network to help escaping allied soldiers and Jews. The Gestapo called her "The White Mouse". She became the most wanted person by the Gestapo with a reward for her capture. She had to escape to Britain herself where she was recruited by Colonel Buckmaster. She was trained by the British Special Operations and parachuted into Auvergne, France in 1944. She led over 7000 Maquis, equipping them with the latest arms from England, training them and leading them on assigned (BSO) attacks against the Germans. At the end of the war Wake learned her husband was tortured and killed by the Gestapo because he

would not reveal her whereabouts.

FitzSimons' narrative authentically captures the tone and atmosphere of Wake's hazardous life. He breathtakingly describes her escapades against the Germans. Wake died in a Veterans home in England on 7 August 2011. For those of you who read German, I understand German author Michael Jurgs wrote a biography of Wake called "Nancy Wake and her fight against the Gestapo in France". It was published October 2012. I read this as an audio book downloaded from Audible. Stephanie Daniels did a good job narrating the book and pronouncing all the French names. If you are interested in history and women in war you will enjoy this book.

Eileen says

The author begins with a quote from Anne of Green Gables, and goes on to say that it ranks with Anne of the Island as Nancy Wake's two favorite books. Since "Anne" is very high on my list as well, I was instantly intrigued. I had read a review of Nancy Wake in which the writer complained that the author's writing skills were lacking. I disagree, and the audio version is particularly fascinating as the narrator does a great job with the various accents! This is the biography of an Australian resistance fighter who found herself at the top of the Gestapo's most wanted list. Nancy was living a bohemian existence, working as a journalist in Paris during the years leading up to the war. After France was occupied by the Germans she became an integral leader of the French Resistance. It's difficult to do justice to this beautiful, hard drinking, strong minded, outspoken, fearless creature! I was mesmerized throughout, perhaps partly because her exploits were so very far beyond anything I could ever imagine undertaking.

Laurent says

A book so saccharin, it leaves you bitter by the conclusion

If you absolutely loved this book or Nancy Wake then you're not going to like this review - so move on!

Before I now go off on my rant, I will strongly emphasise here that my review is not intended to judge nor discredit Nancy Wake or her accomplishments. I am reviewing the book, its content and my (unfavourable) reaction to it.

It goes without saying that beyond the hype and mythology surrounding Nancy Wake, she must clearly have been a fairly remarkable and unique person. Her apparent total commitment to justice, freedom and fighting the Nazis, all while risking her life are truly commendable.

But...

As you may guess from the title of my review that's about as much enthusiasm can muster for the whole story. No doubt NW did some remarkable things. But reading Peter FitzSimons' account of her life is about as subtle as an elephant in a China shop and as much fun as going to the dentist.

So I'm probably being a little harsh but this book is so incredibly 'pro-Nancy' that I found myself loathing her by the end of the novel.

Now I'm sure some readers will be thinking I'm heartless and unappreciative but consider my argument.

Imagine a superwoman who can do no wrong, is right about everything, everyone agrees with everything she says. She's beautiful, wise, extremely brave and can drink (booze) everyone under the table.

So the general narrative is '... and then Nancy did this splendidly amazing thing, before drinking a horse under the table and killing a hundred armed Nazi with her bare hands for fun'.

Now multiply that same narrative by a thousand times and you pretty well have this book covered. At times I literally started muttering to myself sarcastic retorts to the story, such as 'oh of course she did', whenever another exploit had been achieved, all thanks to Nancy, or 'oh thank god saint Nancy saved the war'. Furthermore, the first half of the book (all pre-war) doesn't add enough to the story to really justify its length and I found this part fairly boring.

Again, I emphasise the fact that this is my opinion of the book, NOT Nancy Wake herself or what she achieved. Regrettably enough for me, this book was so over-the-top in its praise of Nancy that I now personally have some doubts about the authenticity of the stories. Although it's probably sacrilege to say it I really feel no-one can possibly be that amazing at everything and I wonder if some of the exploits have been exaggerated.

So overall I cannot recommend the Peter FitzSimons version of the Nancy Wake tale. Numerous other books have been written about Nancy Wake so perhaps you might want to try them. I'd imagine her autobiography, *The White Mouse* might make for better reading.

As a final confession, I did go through this book as an audio-book and the narrator's style just didn't gel with me; I found her really annoying; so perhaps that also had a lot to do with my dislike for the book.

Jen says

Interesting biography, but not very well written. Nancy Wake's life certainly was eventful. She left Australia well before the war and was established in France with a French husband by the time the Germans invaded. She joined the maquis in the south of France and did some amazing things. However, the writing of this biography left me wondering - evil Nazis - yes we know that the Nazis did some horrendous things, but the emotive language does a huge dis-service to Nancy's life story. Just how objective was this version

Merrilyn says

Fascinating story that was so badly written that I felt no connection with character or place. I can't believe that this so called author churns out so many books and sells!

Stuart says

I'm a sucker for WWII history and picked up this book without knowing about Nancy Wake. It turned out to be a fascinating book about an independent young woman who left Australia and ended up married to a rich French businessman in pre-war France. If the story had ended here, I would still be recommending the book for the insights into the way of life and emerging history of the time.

However, the reason for Nancy Wake's fame is that she became a member and a leader of a French Resistance group and almost instantly her life was changed from being a lady of leisure to a hardened street fighting woman. It's amazing to think that this change took place in months through daily life or death struggle.

I have to say that this was one of the most shocking books I have ever read. My jaw dropped when reading about the atrocities of the Germans occupying France. The resistance didn't hold back either in their fight to regain their country. I don't think I have ever been so traumatised by text.

The most important lessons for me were the description of the rise of Fascism. Nancy Wake saw it first hand in pre-war Germany and then as it invaded her adopted home country. I think we British think we had it bad, with the "The Blitz" but half of the French were occupied and under the rule of ever watchful Gestapo and their collaborators. Communities split and the danger if you thought out of line. Scary stuff. I had so much empathy for French that I shed a tear at the "news" of the liberation of Paris.

Tammi Doyle says

This is a four star read because Nancy Wake was a 5 star woman and her story was written by a 3 star author.

Anne says

Very interesting and readable biography about a woman who became a heroine of the French Resistance during WW11. There are plenty of reviews which go into details about this book, so I won't do that here. I will mention one quibble with the writing. It sometimes falls into buffoonery. This occurs mostly at segues in the story and can be funny, but considering the topic (WW11 in occupied France) it didn't always feel appropriate - it's the kind of thing you would find in a children's book. I think the author's intention was to present a style fitting to his subject's personality: No matter what obstacles came her way she managed to overcome them with a sense of humor and/or stoicism. She was a great one for laughter and partying with her men ("because tomorrow we could be dead"). She was able to drink any of them under the table. This, and her courage and skills, won her the respect of thousands of the men in her charge. She was quite a character.

One other issue with the book is that the only research done for it seems to be interviews with Nancy and reading of Nancy's own memoir. There was no independent research which would have made for a more rounded view of Nancy Wake.

In the end, this book is a celebration of a heroine of the French Resistance. It's easy enough to recommend. The facts of Nancy's life and work make any book about her a page-turner
