



Ambassador's Activities

2013

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the inauguration of the commemorative plaque
in honour of Nancy Wake

Stafford Hotel, 24 May 2013

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

It is an honour for me to be speaking to you today, as we commemorate together the memory of Nancy Wake, that courageous, exemplary woman who, with so many others, helped change the course of our history.

As we prepare to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Normandy Landings next year, this plaque reminds everyone of the sacrifices made by men and women who fought for our freedom in France and elsewhere.

It reminds us that resistance to the Nazi occupation was a collective venture. In the British Special Operations Executive's French section alone, 91 men and 13 women gave their lives to this struggle.

The tribute we are paying Nancy Wake today confirms her as a figure symbolizing their combat and sacrifice.

Born in 1912, this great Australian maintained very close relations with France, becoming, in Paris in 1932, the Europe correspondent for the American group Hearst Newspapers, for which she interviewed Adolf Hitler in Austria the following year.

It was also in France, in the summer of 1939, that she married French industrialist Henri Fiocca, whom she met in 1936 while holidaying in Juan-les-Pins.

Perhaps it was – to quote Malraux – the “invincible accents of fraternity” that made Nancy Wake, along with her husband, a Resistance fighter from the very outset. From there she went on to become a heroine of the *Armée des Ombres*, the “army in the shadows”. When war was declared on 3 September 1939, she abandoned a holiday in England to return to France. Immediately after the 1940 armistice, the couple joined the Resistance, helping more than 1,000 British soldiers get back to the United Kingdom via Spain.

Her unwavering commitment to the internal French Resistance commanded admiration. Working as a courier for Ian Garrow and Albert Guérisse’s Pat Line, an Allied escape network, she helped Garrow escape after he was sentenced to 10 years’ detention. By managing to avoid the clutches of the Gestapo on several occasions she became known as the “White Mouse”. Arrested in Toulouse by the Milice in 1943, she managed – after several weeks on the run – to return to England, where she became an agent for the Special Operations Executive, training in espionage and sabotage, and joined John Hind Farmer’s Freelance Circuit.

On the night of 29 April 1944, Nancy Wake was parachuted into the Auvergne region. Assuming the name of Madame Andrée, she organized the delivery of weapons to 7,000 Maquis Resistance fighters in preparation for the D-Day invasion. She set up a radio communications system. When Nancy’s group lost its transmitting radio in a raid by German troops, there was no stopping the White Mouse, who cycled several hundred kilometres in 72 hours to go and find another, passing several German checkpoints on the way. With characteristic modesty, she liked to say that it was easier for women to travel around without arousing suspicion from the Germans.

Henri Tardivat, the leader of Nancy Wake's unit when she joined the Maquis, was full of admiration: "She is the most feminine woman I know, until the fighting starts. Then she is like five men".

Yet the Liberation's wave of mass euphoria was tinged with personal tragedy. Nancy Wake learned that the Germans had tortured her husband to death, without him ever informing on her. "I will go to my grave regretting that", she said. May this commemoration also pay tribute to Henri Fiocca, the other hero in the shadows.

The French nation officially recognized Nancy Wake as one of its sisters-in-arms by raising her to the rank of *officier* in the *Légion d'honneur* and decorating her with the *Croix de Guerre* – three times – and the *Médaille de la Résistance*. I very much hope that the young generations remember Nancy Wake's lesson of commitment. "Freedom is the only thing worth living for", she said. "I hate wars and violence, but if they come I don't see why we women should just wave our men a proud goodbye and then knit them balaclavas."

Nancy Wake is a lesson in humility, determination and bravery. And it's worth noting that, after the war, the White Mouse never really found any work which could absorb her boundless energy. After returning in the 1960s to live in Australia, the country which had seen her grow up, she spent her last years in London – two in this hotel and the remainder in the Royal Star and Garter Home for ex-service men and women in Richmond, until her death on 7 August 2011.

In March of this year, in accordance with her wishes, her ashes were scattered in Verneix, where she undertook several missions in 1944 and fought with her brothers-in-arms. Every

spring, the trees of Verneix will blossom and the memory of what she accomplished for our country will live on.

This plaque honours the memory of a woman who helped save thousands of lives and liberate France. All of us here owe her an eternal debt of gratitude.

Thank you./.