



FIG. 28. Nancy Wake 802. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 58 x 58 x 2 inches; 2015.

### Nancy Wake (1912–2011)

After the fall of France in 1940, Wake became a courier for several escape networks. Then, serving as an agent of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) she became a leading figure in the maquis groups of the French resistance and was one of the Allies' most decorated service women of the war. Born: New Zealand, lived in Australia. During Holocaust: France.

NANCY WAKE

## *The Feminine/Masculine “White Mouse”*

Kathryn J. Atwood

Many combatants and resisters, attempting to defeat the brutal Axis Powers during World War II, privately feared the irrevocable alteration of their personalities. Nancy Wake, a fierce combatant against the Nazi regime, shared this concern. That she succeeded in retaining her multi-faceted persona not only attests to her strength of character but, at one point, proved invaluable in her battle against the Nazis.

Born in New Zealand, Nancy Wake’s resistance work began shortly after France was defeated, and only months after her marriage to the wealthy Marseille industrialist Henri Fiocca. Shortages caused by the German occupation placed a crimp on her pre-war lifestyle, but the gregarious Nancy socialized nearly as much after the June 1940 invasion; only now she exercised more caution. The German occupation created an edgy split in French society, more gaping than the nation’s sharp pre-war political divide. Everyone fell into three general categories: some, following the lead of Philippe Pétain – the World War I hero who headed the French collaborationist government at Vichy – became eager collaborators with the Germans. Others remained cautiously neutral, watching, waiting, and surviving. Still others would bring an unequivocal new meaning to an old word: Resistance.

“For me,” Nancy Wake said, years later, “there was never the slightest question of collaborating with the Germans. I had seen what they had done in Vienna and Berlin . . . I wanted to have nothing to do with anything other than trying to stop them.”<sup>1</sup>

What she had seen in Vienna and Berlin was the horrific reality of second-hand reports. In 1933, while working in Paris as a journalist, Nancy met several German intellectuals in the bistros she frequented with her large circle of friends. One of them explained Paris’s sudden flood of mostly Jewish-German refugees as the work of Adolph Hitler, head of the Nazi party and Germany’s new leader. Horrible, unbelievable things were happening in Austria and Germany.

Not content to form an opinion based on someone else’s word, Nancy joined some of her fellow-journalists on a trip to Vienna and Berlin in 1934. In Vienna’s main square, she witnessed Jewish men chained to enormous wheels. Pushing the wheels and whipping the chained men were Hitler’s SA squads, the infamous Storm Troopers, the Brownshirts. In

Berlin she saw more brutal anti-Semitic activity: Brownshirts whipping Jewish shopkeepers and destroying the contents of their shops in bonfires.

These images determined Nancy's guiding principle for the next decade: "I resolved there and then that if I ever had the chance, I would do anything, however big or small, stupid or dangerous, to try and make things more difficult for their rotten party."<sup>2</sup>

She took a brief, active role during the Battle of France driving an ambulance. But more dangerous than coming under enemy fire was what she did shortly after France's fall to Germany. She accepted a risky mission from a relative stranger. While socializing in Marseille, Nancy and her husband met a French Army officer named Busch. They realized he was involved with the resistance, and when he learned that they were traveling to Cannes, he asked if they would carry an envelope there for him. Nancy didn't know what the envelope contained but she knew the implications of accepting a mission from someone involved in the resistance. If caught, she would certainly be questioned, possibly imprisoned or worse. She accepted the mission without hesitation. It may have been "small, stupid or dangerous" but she saw it as her chance to work against the Nazis.

The envelope led to subsequent work and Nancy soon became a regular courier for several escape lines geared towards rescuing Allied soldiers trapped in France. The oft-solitary inactivity intrinsic to courier work - waiting, waiting, and more waiting - grated on this woman whose pre-war joie de vivre lifestyle had been filled with socializing and drinking. She longed for action. "I used to wish I could meet someone who would give me a less boring task," she wrote later. "I was at the stage when I longed to do something really constructive against our enemy."<sup>3</sup> But she endured the tedium. She knew that each package she delivered, every serviceman she helped escape would throw a wrench, no matter how small, into the Nazi war machine. And her success as a courier of packages and men forced her into a new opportunity, the active resistance she longed for.

The Gestapo issued a 5-million-franc award for the "White Mouse," the woman helping Allied



servicemen escape occupied France, who, like a quick little rodent, kept evading their grasp. When Nancy's phone line was tapped and her mail opened, she knew the Gestapo was closing in. She bade farewell to her Marseille life and escaped.

After an arduous, lengthy journey, Nancy arrived in London where she soon attracted the notice of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the British wartime organization designed to foster resistance from within Nazi-occupied countries. Along with two male agents, Nancy was trained to work with the maquis, guerilla fighters who had escaped forced labor in Germany and banded together in the woods of southern France to fight the Germans. The SOE strategy was to organize them for the approaching D-Day invasion of occupied France. The thousands of maquisards who eventually found themselves in Nancy's orbit were eager to fight the Germans but needed her help.

How could this pretty woman convince these

hardened men, raised in France's patriarchal society, that she was their equal and deserved their respect? Instead of cursing the darkness of their male chauvinism, Nancy, in a manner of speaking, lit a candle. And poured a drink. Her former partying skills now proved useful. "Whenever I visited a new maquis group and was invited to drink with them," she wrote later, "I always accepted and made a point of going drink for drink with the leader."<sup>4</sup> She drank the men under the table every time. Or, the bushes, in this case, as they were all living together out of doors. She was accepted as one of them.

But was she becoming one of them? A female German spy was discovered in the woods. Nancy ordered her execution. As the young woman walked to her death, she spat at Nancy and screamed "Heil Hitler!" with her final breath. The fact that Nancy felt no pity unnerved her. "How had I become so aggressive?" she wrote.<sup>5</sup> The answer wasn't necessarily the constant presence of men. It was also German brutality. She had recently witnessed a German reprisal against French resistance: a pregnant woman tied to a stake, bayoneted, and left to die in front of her screaming two year old. "The enemy had made me tough," she explained. "I had no pity for them."<sup>6</sup> She could never muster sympathy for anyone loyal to Hitler when, always, she wrote, "I remembered Vienna, Berlin, and the Jews."<sup>7</sup>

If lacking pity for a brutal enemy was mannish, so be it. But Nancy was determined to retain a vestige of her femininity. "No matter how tired I was, after a day in the male world wearing trousers," she wrote later, "I'd change into a frilly nightie to sleep."<sup>8</sup> And whenever an ammunition drop arrived from London, it always included a small package for Nancy consisting of tea, makeup and perfume. She clung to these treasures.

She sometimes clung to them quite tightly, waging her own private war against encroaching masculinity. In June 1944, immediately after D-Day, the Germans launched a major attack against the maquis in her area. As she drove away in the mass exodus, a German plane broke formation and singled her out. After outwitting the strafing pilot by suddenly braking, Nancy ran out of the car and into the woods with another maquisard. The German pilot turned around

and was heading back, seemingly determined to destroy the empty car. Suddenly Nancy rushed out of the woods, beat the pilot to the car, grabbed something out of the back seat, then raced back to the woods just before the car exploded. "Forgot these,"<sup>9</sup> she explained to her dumbstruck companion. She had rescued a saucepan, a jar of face cream, some tea and a red satin cushion.

If her affinity for feminine things nearly cost Nancy her life in this instance, it would soon save the work of all the maquis in her area. During the retreat, Nancy's panicked radio operator had buried his radio. The surviving maquisards were regrouping for another fight but without London radio contact, there could be no ammunition drops, no further fighting. The only solution was for someone to bicycle hundreds of kilometers through German controlled territory to the nearest radio operator. It was out of the question for any of the men to attempt it. Their gender would immediately give them away. This was a job for a woman. A womanly woman.

Nancy obtained suitable clothes. Then she hopped on a bike and demurred her way past unavoidable checkpoints, smiling at every German she encountered while cursing them under her breath.

Her 72-hour journey totaled 500 kilometers. She couldn't move for days afterwards. But a new radio was dropped, and contact with London reestablished. The fight against the Germans continued and Nancy's personal battle to retain her femininity was more than justified.

Which aspect of this woman's persona made her one of the most highly decorated women of World War II? Was it the drinker and fighter who would later lob grenades into a room full of German officers and kill a German sentry with her bare hands? Or was it the woman who slept in a frilly nightgown, risked her life for face cream and a satin pillow, and easily passed for a pretty French housewife during her indispensable bike ride? It was both. Nancy Wake used everything in her arsenal - her beauty, her tolerance for alcohol, and her willingness to take a life . . . or a bike ride - to fight the regime whose virulent anti-Semitism had aroused within her a fierce determination to wage war. ■