

NANCY WAKE

MEMORIES and ANECDOTES

COLLATED BY JAMES 'JIM' COWLEY

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FORWARD

It was simply a case of being at the right place at the right time. No, I didn't win Lotto. But I did win the friendship of a most amazing person.

She was amazing despite having probably as many detractors as she had admirers. You really had to be exceptional to have lived the life she had. But it never bothered Nancy Wake, and she was more than just exceptional. She was unique.

If anyone could grab hold of life and shake it to the extreme it was Nancy. It was either full steam ahead celebrating life in its fullest or struck down by haunting memories of the war years and why she was so lucky to be a survivor.

She paid a heavy price for her involvement in both facets of her life. Obviously each shared a role in her story.

I kept track of her until she passed away quietly in 2011. She was still commanding an audience at a nursing home in England where she was a few days short of her 99th birthday.

Memories and anecdotes concerning Nancy were in abundance during the years of our friendship. For me it began in Port Macquarie in 1995 and lasted until 2001 when she left Australia to spend her last years in England. While she dallied at a hotel in London we still kept in touch. Our correspondence became scarce once she took up residence in a nursing home.

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My recollections cover these years and some are at odds with those generally held. I found many reports in newspapers to be quite fanciful. Many readers will be surprised to find a different Nancy than what they expected.

I strongly believe once you accept Nancy was an incorrigible warrior, you will see her life differently than what repetitive public scrutiny would have you believe.

Jim Cowley February 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Some people just love stealing the limelight. They are not necessarily politicians, preachers or actors. Nancy Wake enjoyed nothing more than a good old-fashioned argument. She wallowed in always being right and having the last say. She reasoned she had special dispensation because of her celebrity. After all she was Australia's most celebrated war heroine from the days of the Second World War.

Like many others she was unable to cope with peace-time after experiencing war-time full on. A malaise affected many veterans who could not rid themselves of horrendous memories.

The realisation that her husband Henri Fiocca had been captured, tortured and executed by the Gestapo scarred Nancy for life. Added to the magnitude of her exploits, it is easy to see she would have to live with horrifying memories. Fortunately there are others who managed to contain their problems and move on with life. Sadly Nancy was not one of those so fortunate.

She thrived on reliving her war-time experiences, especially to a large audience. Without a stimulus to confront her demons she would spend her time despondent and bored. It eventually led her to leave post-war London to return to Australia permanently. Then decades later she wanted to return to London. It seemed the passing of her second husband hastened her desire to return to Britain for what was her last time.

Her popularity and significance to Australians was such that it led Nancy to attempt to forge a career in politics. She was to spend

some 4 years to twice go close to winning a seat in federal parliament for the Liberals. The disappointment was enough to have her pondering a return to England. She could see herself renewing old acquaintances and return to her rollicking ways and hijinks in London.

It was in England in the mid 1950's that Nancy found a second chance. The catalyst was Australian author Russell Braddon's 'biography' of Nancy and her war-time exploits. Not only was it a springboard to better things for her but it consolidated Braddon as a popular author.

Today we call Braddon's top seller dated and a typical Second World War story.. It conjured up memories of school library war stories, but it definitely wasn't intended for children. In 1956 it was a must-read story for a peace-time Britain that still wanted more. It did not matter that the war ended some 11 years earlier. Yet even today it is enthralling. Braddon detailed her exploits sensationally and it quickly fell into the 'can't put down' category.

Australia now had a new hero to celebrate as well. The same firebrand who wanted to become a politician was now dignified as a true Australian war heroine.

Her name was soon installed alongside household heroes such as Don Bradman and Charles Kingsford-Smith. It should have meant being able to live comfortably for the rest of her life. Nancy and her new husband John Forward looked perfect to fit into Australian life. She would always be in demand as a guest

speaker and she would enjoy doing what she loved the best. But unfortunately it wasn't to be.

Our idols have always been expected to carry themselves with aplomb and dignity. A knighted Governor General once officiated at the Melbourne Cup when hopelessly drunk, and his aberration sent condemnation through the country. A famous Olympic swimming champion paid heavily for her prank of 'borrowing' the Emperor of Japan's flag from its post in his palace.

Australians seem to have an insatiable appetite for publicly humiliating celebrities who display incorrect behaviour. Nancy obliged with scandalous activities for more than 50 years. She demonstrated an amazing resilience after each such occasion, but her indiscretions became more frequent and offensive. Clearly, she simply didn't care about the ramifications.

She soon became somewhat marginalised. Never did she seem to be bothered by it during the times I spent with her. She was the stereotyped charming, intelligent and joy to converse with until she began to drink her favourite gin and tonic. Then the charm would start to wane. The intelligence would become illogical and the joy of the occasion would vanish.

The biggest hurt was to see Nancy ridicule herself after drinking too much gin. It tore at the heart watching her antics and attempts to be funny. She never realised she was simply torturing herself further. She lived some 65 out of her 98 years cursed by an unrelenting sadness that never abated.

As the years passed, she had skirmishes with former PMs Bob Hawke and John Howard, the RSL, Legacy and Duntroon Military College. There was TV show Sixty Minutes, Qantas, Air France and Port Macquarie Hotel. Also on the list were a landlord, a caring local doctor and the Stafford Hotel in London. I could go on and on. No doubt every one of them would have seen Nancy at her worst.

She was to write her autobiography in 1986. It was still in print some 14 years later, when Sydney journalist Peter FitzSimons wrote another biography. She told me she had given up the drink until her book was written. She wanted to be certain she made no mistakes. She also had a list of items she wanted to include, once she had found the appropriate place for them.

I was to read her gift of my autographed copy of ‘The White Mouse’ prior to reading Braddon’s story. It left me wanting more. From the beginning I found I was skipping a page or two. But the slow beginning ended suddenly. She moved on and it became absolutely fascinating to read.

I quickly snapped up Braddon’s work and found it equally as enthralling. Braddon’s story added to Nancy’s version resulted in a fascinating combination.

In the late 1990’s, Nancy distinctly wanted to leave Australia. She spoke of England and France; of how she loved them as well as Australia. She was nearly broke and a minor miracle was needed to get her wish.

Peter FitzSimons was that minor miracle. His Nancy Wake resurrected her to a new generation of readers and his work

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became a runaway best seller. He had the perfect formula for huge sales that saved the day for Nancy. It consolidated his career with the Sydney Morning Herald and she was his stepping stone to his blossoming career. No doubt he has never looked back.

Her proceeds would finance her return to England. She expected to spend her last days there awaiting her 100th birthday and to receive that special telegram from Her Majesty. There would be a lot to entertain her in the meantime.

At first glance, it is easy to think Nancy was one of several guides who escorted escapees from the Nazis across the Pyrenees. To her it was just a modest contribution. In reality it was more than that. FitzSimons wrote she was actively involved with the successful escape of at least a thousand displaced people.

Ironically, it was necessary for Nancy herself to follow the same route to escape to England. Her circumstances had deteriorated and her farewell to her husband Henri, who thought it best to remain in France, was the most memorable and poignant episode in her life.

After her arrival in England, the Special Operations Executive (SOE) soon became aware of her escapades. They apparently had observed her talents in France and could see her value within their clandestine networks.

The story of the SOE will always remain a legend of typical British ingenuity. With a charter and name devised by former PM Neville Chamberlain, the SOE organisation was made a priority by Winston Churchill in July 1940. There is nothing to match the expertise of this covert organization in the annals of

war-time intelligence. It was a brilliant collusion of extremely intelligent minds. Their operations provided a substantial contribution to undermine German occupation in France and in other countries.

The SOE-F Section, 'F' for France, was the division most appropriate for Nancy Wake's talents. The head of that division was the brilliant Maurice Buckmaster, who had assumed control in the English summer of 1941. Section-F was reserved for women only. This was deliberate once it was realised the Germans regarded women as unsuitable for sabotage or resistance work. Women would have raised little suspicion in delivering messages and explosives, often while only riding push bikes.

Her recruitment was soon approved and her settling-in period was more than just a rocky road. She was definitely of a different ilk than her fellow students. Their roots were mostly from Britain and other European countries. They had to have a good grasp of the French language and be familiar with French idiosyncrasies. They would become Britain's highly trained secret women in France, and Nancy Wake was the only Australian to gain the honour. But it was soon taken off her in disgrace.

Her intensive training was hampered by her lack of enthusiasm to master the necessary skills. She would be late for classes or not turn up at all. She loathed obstacle courses and parachuting lessons. She very quickly became offside with her instructors by treating her assignments frivolously. Naturally she soon became unpopular with her associates and she was to become dismissed from the group in disgrace.

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The sobering effect of being humiliated must have had the desired impact. After some weeks she won a reprieve orchestrated by Buckmaster. His assistant Vera Atkins disliked Nancy's frivolous nature and had little faith in her suitability. She strongly doubted Nancy could fit into the mould expected of an SOE F agent.

While usually in agreement with most opinions his assistant expressed, Buckmaster saw Nancy as a typical unrestrained Australian tomboy. Her daring and eagerness had caught his eye. Her possession of strong leadership qualities were exactly what he was looking for. Unlike other students, she was unregimented and very innovative. Buckmaster saw these qualities as invaluable for their type of work.

However, most of her associates remained unconvinced of her value and concentrated on their own performance.

Nancy hardly dwelt on her days with the SOE. The organisation was such a crucial player in her mission in France and I thought she would have had a lot to say about it.

Nancy had a spectacular return to France by parachute only weeks before D-Day in 1944. It was the culmination of her training and was the commencement of further amazing exploits. Her mission was to hook up with some 7000 Marquisards and disrupt the German war effort. Losing a radio meant a search for a replacement and Nancy's successful bicycle trip meant contact with London was made possible. The latest intelligence was then made available to them.

My curiosity led me to find out more about the SOE-F. Without a doubt the source I found is a gem. ‘The Heroines of SOE F Section’ by Squadron Leader Beryl E Escott is an exceptional reference book.

While providing all the necessary background of the executive, brief narratives are detailed of the 40 or so members who participated in the war via the F division. It is inspirational and has the impetus to encourage every reader to assess the magnificence of all those heroic women.

I realised just surviving the war was miraculous for every one of those heroines. How they coped doing their assignments is well beyond me. I can only try to imagine the sadness of their reunions and their remembrance ceremonies. But I can understand the burden they carried to lead a semblance of a normal life. I can also understand any discomfort they might feel in talking about their experience. Perhaps Nancy was in the last category. But I wouldn’t rule it out that she would be the loudest voice at any function she attended.

In 2001-2 Nancy arrived uninvited at the Stafford Hotel in London. She announced to the British she was back. The ‘White Mouse’ as named by Russell Braddon in his story 40 years prior had come to ‘rule the roost’ with old acquaintances. She cashed in on it for a while; lapping it up to the extent that her finances quickly dwindled.

The Australian government stepped in to rescue their now identified national treasure. She had returned to being headline material. The PM was seen as a generous benefactor and Nancy’s

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rescue was good politics. A nursing home for veterans would be seen as the ideal choice for Nancy's needs. Getting her to be convinced apparently wasn't difficult.

As Nancy refused to grow old, the number of former comrades in the war gradually dwindled. A silence from those who could understand and still admire her fell to a trickle. At the time of her passing, she was only a few days shy of her 99 years. For Nancy, this was the day she ceased fighting the Second World War.

Some eighteen months later her ashes were returned to France. With a minimum of fuss, some easily forgotten and trivial words were spoken at a modest service.

So what is there to know about Nancy Wake that hasn't already been news for the last 50 years?

How much is fact and how much was manufactured to benefit the newspapers?

Is she remembered as a heroine who regularly put her life on the line to fight to save others without a second thought?

Is she remembered as nothing better than a hopeless drunk, hiding behind pity to insult anyone and everyone who dared express an opinion she cared nothing for?

Is she remembered as a tortured soul never to recover from the loss of her beloved husband Henri Fiocca and always supported with a stiff drink in her hand regardless of the time of day?