



A train derailed by the French Resistance on 9 June 1944.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF
THE ALLIED 21ST ARMY GROUP
D-DAY, 6 JUNE 1944

THE GREATEST SEABORNE INVASION THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN

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PART SEVEN – THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

In June 1940 the French President, Albert Lebrun, appointed Marshal Phillippe Pétain as Premier and it was his cabinet that agreed to end the war and signed an Armistice with Germany on 22 June 1940. On 10 July 1940 the French Third Republic was dissolved, and the National Assembly granted Marshal Pétain full powers which led to the establishment of an authoritarian regime.

German forces occupied northern France and Marshal Pétain's government left Paris and moved to Vichy in the unoccupied southern zone that led to it becoming known as Vichy France. The Vichy government maintained nominal sovereignty over the whole of French territory, but in effect only had full sovereignty in the unoccupied southern zone, which included French Algeria. It had limited and only civil authority in the northern zones under military occupation.

The collaborationist approach of the Vichy government did not, however, sit well with all Frenchmen and several disaffected men and women gravitated to the remote mountainous regions of France where they began to form rural guerrilla bands of French Resistance fighters, called maquisards. Most maquisards operated in the remote or mountainous areas of Brittany and southern France, especially in the Alps and in Limousin. The Maquis, as these guerrilla bands became collectively known, relied on some degree of sympathy or cooperation from the local populace.

They employed guerrilla tactics to harass the Vichy Government Paramilitary Force [MILICE] created to combat the Maquis on 30 January 1943 by the Vichy government, and German occupation troops. They also played a significant role aiding the escape of downed Allied airmen, Jews and others pursued by the Vichy and German authorities.

In July 1940 the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced the formation of the Special Operations Executive [SOE]. This organisation conducted operations that include espionage, sabotage, and resistance. Winston Churchill's instruction to his new organisation was for them to "*Set Europe Ablaze*".

One department of the SOE concentrated on liaison with the Maquis to organise and direct them in a way which would suit the progress of the War as directed from London. In the early days, the Maquis was fragmented and, while acting with good intentions, was prone to betrayal. Vicious reprisals were often carried out by the German and Vichy regimes against the civilian population in areas where the Maquis was active to suppress this resistance. As time progressed, however, the SOE was able to better organise and supply the Maquis. This led to their activities becoming more effective and directed towards the common war aims of the Allies. Communications were established and SOE personnel were dropped into occupied territory to assist resistance coordination.



A group of Maquis, French Resistance fighters.

The role of the Maquis in the lead up to the invasion, on D-Day and during the Battle of Normandy should never be underestimated. As part of the preparation for Operation OVERLORD, the Allies sought to slow down the sending of reinforcements to the landing beaches after D-Day by all possible means.

The Maquis received most of their instruction via the BBC's French service transmitted from London, which would regularly send hundreds of personal messages. Only a few of these were significant and one was transmitted a few days before D-Day. It was the first line of Verlaine's poem, *Chanson d'Automne*, "*Les sanglots longs des violins de l'automne*" (Long sobs of autumn violins), which told the commanders of the Maquis that the 'day of the invasion' was imminent. When the second line "*blesse mon coeur d'une langueur monotone*" (wound my heart with a monotonous languor) was heard, the Maquis knew that the invasion would take place within 48 hours. These two messages transmitted by the BBC told the Maquis that it was time to go about their respective pre-assigned missions which included destroying selected water towers, telephone lines, roads, and railways.



A reenactment of a Maquis group in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais sabotaging a railway line. [Maquis de l'Ace de Cœur (Metrailllette group)]

These tasks were designed to disrupt German communications and hinder their ability to get reinforcements to the invasion area. The Maquis blew up railroad tracks and repeatedly attacked German Army equipment and garrison trains on their way to the Atlantic coast.

An example of the work of the Maquis is the group that was led by Nancy Wake.

Nancy Wake was born in Roseneath, Wellington, New Zealand, on 30 August 1912 to Charles Augustus and Ella Rosieur Wake and was the youngest of six children. Her family moved to Sydney, Australia when Nancy was just 20 months old, and it was there that she grew up.

Nancy was strongly independent and chaffed against her mother's strict religious beliefs. She was raised without affection by her embittered mother after her father had walked out on them. *"I adored my father,"* Nancy told the Sunday Times in an interview. *"He was very good-looking. But he was a bastard. He went to New Zealand to make a movie about the Maoris, and he never came back. He sold our house from under us, and we were kicked out."*



Nancy Grace Augusta Wake.

At the age of 16 Nancy ran away from home and found work as a nurse. In 1932 an Aunt sent her the princely sum of £200.00, a windfall that enabled her to leave Australia for Europe. Nancy travelled initially to London but settled in Paris where she got a job as a journalist working for the Hearst group. She felt entirely at home among the swinging, cosmopolitan set of independent and carefree young people of Paris. It was a glamorous life of parties and travel, and she lived it to the full. *"I've always got on very well with the French, perhaps because I'm very natural."*

Throughout the 1930's Nancy watched as German Fascism rose to power and this formed the basis of many of her stories. In 1935 she visited Vienna and Berlin where she witnessed firsthand the overt and violent anti-Semitism. In Vienna she watched on as Jews chained to massive wheels were rolled around the streets and whipped by Nazi supporters in a city square. This fuelled in her a hatred of Nazism and a desire to oppose it whenever she had the opportunity.

In November 1939 Nancy married Henri Fiocca, a wealthy French industrialist, in Marseilles. Nancy said in her interview that *"He was the love of my life."* Together Nancy and Henri had a charmed and sophisticated life of travel, dinner parties, champagne, and caviar, residing in a luxury apartment on a hill overlooking Marseilles and its harbour.

Six months later Germany invaded France. Slowly but surely Nancy and Henri were drawn into the fight. In 1940, after France capitulated, they joined the fledgling resistance movement and Nancy crossed over the line between silently watching and acting. Initially she was a courier, smuggling messages, and food to underground groups in Southern France. She then bought an ambulance and used it to help refugees fleeing the German advance. Being the beautiful wife of a wealthy businessman, she had an ability to travel that few others could only contemplate. She obtained false papers that allowed her to stay and work in the Vichy zone in occupied France and became deeply involved in helping to spirit a thousand or more escaped prisoners of war and downed Allied airmen out of France through to Spain.

These missions meant constant danger and as time went by, she became a suspect and was watched closely by the Gestapo. They tapped her phone and opened her mail. Nancy avoided capture by taking on many different identities and became so good at evading the Gestapo that they nicknamed her the *'White Mouse'*. By 1943, Nancy Wake was Number 1 on the Gestapo's most wanted list with a five-million-franc reward on her head. It had become too risky for her to stay in France and the Resistance decided she should go back to Britain. *"Henri said 'You have to leave', and I remember going out the door saying I'd do some shopping, that I'd be back soon. And I left and I never saw him again."*

Escape was not easy, and she made six attempts to get out of France by crossing the Pyrenees into Spain. On one of these attempts, she was captured by the MILICE in Toulouse and interrogated for four days. She held out, refusing to give them any information and, with the help of Major General Comte Albert-Marie Edmond Guérisse the legendary *'Scarlet Pimpernel of WWII'* aka Captain Patrick O'Leary, she tricked her captors into releasing her. On her sixth attempt Nancy finally made it across the Pyrenees and into Spain from where she was able to make her way to Britain.

In June 1943 Nancy Wake reached England where she joined the French Section of the SOE. In April 1944, after a period of training, she and Major John Farmer, another SOE operative, were parachuted into the Auvergne region of central France with orders to locate and organise the bands of the Auvergne Maquis, arrange nightly parachute drops to establish ammunition and arms caches, and establish radio communications with England in preparation for the D-Day invasion.

Initially there were around 3,000 to 4,000 members in the Auvergne Maquis. Under Nancy's leadership this number had risen to around 7,000 by D-Day. She led these men in a guerrilla war against the occupying German forces, inflicting severe damage on their facilities and significant casualties among the German troops. Nancy collected and distributed the weapons from the parachute drops and ensured that her radio operators maintained contact with the SOE in Britain. It was an extremely tough assignment that meant a life constantly on the move, often hiding in the forests, and travelling from one band of the Maquis to another to train and motivate them, as well as plan and co-ordinate their actions. There were numerous violent engagements with the Germans who began a vicious period of reprisals against the local population.

No other group sector gave the occupying German authorities more cause for fury than that of the Auvergne Maquis led by Nancy Wake. Consequently, the SS made plans and prepared to destroy this group whose stronghold was the

plateau above Chaudes-Aiguwes. German troops were moved into the region and massed in towns around the plateau. On 20 June 1944, 22,000 German soldiers advanced towards the plateau and Nancy's 7,000 Maquis. The resulting clash was ferocious and by the end of the battle 1,400 German troops lay dead on the plateau for a cost of just 100 of the Auvergne Maquis. Nancy and the remainder made good their escape and continued their war.

Nancy later led a raid on the Gestapo headquarters in Montucon; she killed a sentry with her bare hands to keep him from alerting the guard during a raid on a German gun factory; she had to shoot her way out of roadblocks; and had to execute a German female spy.

On 25 August 1944, Paris was liberated, and Nancy Wake led her Auvergne Maquis into Vichy to celebrate. Her joy at the liberation of Paris, however, was mixed with a tragedy as she learnt that her beloved husband Henri Fiocca was dead. A year after Nancy had left France in 1943, the Germans had captured Henri, tortured, and executed him because he refused to give them any information about the whereabouts of his wife. In September 1944 Nancy left her Auvergne Maquis and went to SOE Headquarters in Paris, and then to London in mid-October. After the war she was decorated by Britain, France, and the United States becoming one of the Allies' most decorated servicewomen.

The contribution of the Maquis to the Allied landings made a significant difference. They tied down enemy resources, destroyed infrastructure and cause delays to reinforcing troops that gave the invading Allies time to come ashore, establish their beachhead, gather their strength and subsequently breakout to liberate Paris. 375 of the 469 operatives in the French Section of the SOE survived the war. Twelve of the 39 women operatives were killed by the Germans and three who returned had survived imprisonment and torture at Ravensbruck concentration camp. In all 600,000 French people were killed during World War II, 240,000 of them in prisons and concentration camps.

Look Forward

In Part Eight of D-Day, 6 June 1944 – The Greatest Seaborne Invasion The World Has Ever Known, I begin talking about the landings on D-Day by discussing the very first action; the airborne coup de main assault at Bénouville to capture the Caen Canal and River Orne bridges intact.

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