

## WOMEN AND WAR

### Female Spies of World War II

#### Facts:

- Female spies received many decorations in WWII including the Distinguished Service Cross and the British George Cross
- A female Australian spy was the most decorated woman in WWII
- A female British spy was shot by the Gestapo and an American spying for the Russians Allies was guillotined

#### Before the Readings:

- List some famous spies, male or female, fictional or real. What qualities do these spies exhibit?
- There's espionage and counter-espionage. What is the difference?
- Are there still spies today? Who do you think would train them, where and what would they learn?
- During World War I, the spy Mata Hari used her female charms. What weapons do you think the female spies of WWII used?

#### Reading: Female Spies

##### Virginia Hall

American Virginia Hall was in Paris when WWII began. As she had a wooden leg from a hunting accident, Virginia drove ambulances for the French Army—that is until the Germans invaded Paris. Once she'd escaped to England, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) recruited her. Miss Hall learned weaponry and communications to help the SOE organize French resistance. Working as a free-lance reporter to cover her spying activities, she made valuable contacts with the French underground and helped Allied prisoners escape back to England.

When the Germans discovered that the "Limping Lady" was one of the most dangerous agents in France, Miss Hill escaped over the Pyrenees during the winter.

Back in England, she transferred to the American OSS, from whom she learned radio operations and parachuting. Several weeks before the Normandy landings Virginia parachuted into France to help establish drop zones for

Allied parachutists on D-Day. That task accomplished, she re-established her underground contacts so that she could transmit information to London Headquarters by radio. In disguise as a farm worker with goats, she reported German troop movements and organized Resistance groups that helped drive the Germans out of France. Virginia Hall was the only female civilian in WWII to receive the Distinguished Service Cross.

##### Mildred Fish

Mildred Fish grew up in Wisconsin to eventually become an instructor of English Literature at the University of Wisconsin. After her marriage to the German Dr. Arvid Harnack, the couple moved to Berlin where both Drs Harnack taught at the university.

During WWII the Harnacks opposed Hitler as members of a resistance movement that published a bi-weekly underground paper, *The Inner Front*. They also worked as part of a spy network that gathered German army intelligence to broadcast to the Russian Allies. The group had a series of illegal radio transmitters. Each radio in the network was called a piano. The Germans called the secret group of pianos undermining them "The Red Orchestra".

Through a series of misadventures, the "Red Orchestra" was exposed. The Gestapo rounded up 118 people of whom 75 were tried. A vindictive Hitler wanted the conspirators hanged even though beheading was then the method of execution. The Gestapo rigged up meat hooks and strangled Arvid Harnack and the other male Red Orchestra spies on Christmas Eve 1942.

Although Mildred was sentenced to four years of hard labour in a concentration camp, she did not go. Hitler personally order the court to 'reconsider' her sentence; as a result she was summarily sentenced to death. Mildred spent the last month of her life translating works of Goethe in her cell. She was guillotined February 16, 1943, a date of honour now observed by Wisconsin school children.

Mildred Fish Harnack was the only female American executed as a spy in Germany.

### **Violette Szabo**

Violette Szabo, a 20 year old French-English woman volunteered for the SOE shortly after her husband was killed in North Africa. In spite of having a young daughter, Violette underwent intense combat and espionage training. In 1944 she was flown into France to help the underground. After she was arrested twice by the French police, Violette prudently awaited reassignment in England working as a nurse in a field hospital.

One day after the Normandy landings, the SOE dropped Violette into Limoges by parachute to help sabotage German intelligence. Shortly after landing, Violette became ensnared in a gun battle with the enemy. Using a Sten gun Violette gave cover to a French resistance leader until her ammunition was exhausted and she was captured. She was brutally tortured during interrogation and sent to the concentration camp Ravensbruck. In August 1945, shortly before the end of the war, the Gestapo shot Violette along with three other SOE agents and disposed of her body in the crematoria. A Ravensbruck survivor described Violette as outstanding among thousands of women.

In 1946 the King of England presented the George Cross to four year old Tanya Szabo, on behalf of her mother's patriotic and courageous spirit.

### **Nancy Wake**

Nancy Wake lived in Australia until she was 20 when she made her way independently to Paris to live a colourful life as a journalist. She married a wealthy industrialist in 1939 and once the Germans had invaded France, she persuaded him to purchase an ambulance so that she could shuttle food and clothing to French soldiers and refugees. Wake next began assisting British Officers interned in Fort Saint-Jean. She ended up helping 1,037 men escape from German capture. She did this by working as a courier travelling around France to gather information about escape routes, contacts and safe houses.

When the Gestapo eventually became suspicious of 'The White Mouse' as Wake was called, she headed towards Spain. She was captured in Toulouse and beaten but escaped with the help of a comrade in the Resistance.

When the Germans were tipped off that Wake was escaping on a train to Spain she jumped from the moving train amid machine gun fire. She later made her way to Spain's border in a coal truck. Wake elected the most treacherous Pyrenees route to throw off the enemy. She was underway for 47 continuous hours through perils that included blizzards and a brief capture. Safe in Madrid, Wake went via Gibraltar by boat to London.

Not yet done with her spy work, Wake signed up for the SOE who made her a captain of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry group called FANY for short. As FANY's "nurses", were trained saboteurs. Wake was sent to spy school to learn explosives, weapons, killing techniques, unarmed combat, Morse code and parachuting. Thus readied, the SOE dropped Wake back into France disguised by wearing silk stockings, high heels and civilian clothes under her parachute overalls.

Wake went to work to organize and arm the Resistance fighters called Maquis who lived in the forests in central France. She was the link between 7,000 Resistance fighters and their headquarters in London. She controlled supplies and funds; she organized, trained and armed the fighters whose mission was to weaken the German army before Allied attack.

Wake led the Maquis by example. As a fearless fighter, she shot her way out of German roadblocks and ambushed convoys with homemade bombs. One of her Maquis comrades described her as very feminine—until the fighting began. Then she appeared to be five men. During a raid on a gun factory, Wake killed a sentry with her bare hands.

After the war at a wreath-laying ceremony, 27 year old Nancy Wake learned that the Gestapo had tortured and killed her husband for refusing to reveal her whereabouts.

Nancy Wake was the most decorated female veteran of WWII.

Adapted from "Spy, Saboteur and Socialite" The Women of Action Network

## After the Reading:

- List all the female stereotypes that these female spies break?
- Mata Hari in WWI was executed because of suspicions that she was involved in counter-espionage. Mildred Harnack was for many years suspected of counter-espionage. What made both women suspect for these allegations?
- Where are today's outlets for men and women with the natural risk-taking that these women exhibited in WWII?

## Extensions:

- The following books deal with the stories of the spies in the above reading. Try to locate one of the books to read from for November 9:
  - *Between Silk and Cyanide: The Story of the SOE's Code War*, Leo Marks, Harper Collins
  - *Resisting Hitler: Mildred Harnack and the Red Orchestra*, Shareen Brysac, Oxford University
  - *The Autobiography of the Woman the Gestapo Called the White Mouse*, Nancy Wake, MacMillan
- Jazz singer/dancer Josephine Baker was a spy in WWII. Research what she did and how to read out to your classmates.
- Write the speech that would be part of the Medal Presentation Ceremony for any one of these women.