

The drag queen who helped defeat Hitler

Gay musical comedy performer Major Denis Rake was recruited by the secret services to spy on the Nazis during World War II.

The need for discretion was absolute – so he became a drag queen entertaining German officers in a nightclub in occupied Paris.

Such was his courage, surviving capture and brutal interrogation before escaping to freedom with the help of a priest, that Major Rake was awarded the Military Cross.

This little-known true story is being brought to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (as part of this year's Army@TheFringe) in *For Queen and Country*, where it will be performed by Neil Summerville ("A wonderfully nuanced performer," *WhatsOnStage*).

The play, which brings Denis to life through comedy, drama and song, is set around 1960 towards the end of remarkable career.

Despite his injuries Rake had returned to France in 1944, working alongside fellow Special Operations Executive (SOE) operative Nancy Wake to help the French resistance pin down huge numbers of German troops – preventing them from opposing the D-Day landings.

Later Rake became valet to Hollywood actor Douglas Fairbanks Jr before returning to the stage, often as an entertainer on cruise liners.

Writer Paul Stone, himself a former drag queen, said: “For some people the idea of going on stage is terrifying, and I know myself that appearing alone on stage as a drag queen feels especially isolating. But going out there in front of a room filled with Nazi officers would take stage fright to a whole new level.

“Denis Rake was an incredibly brave man – his story shines a light made on the contribution made by the LGBT community to victory over the Nazis in World War II.”

- Army@TheFringe, Hepburn House, East Claremont Street, 5-14 August, tickets [here](#).

