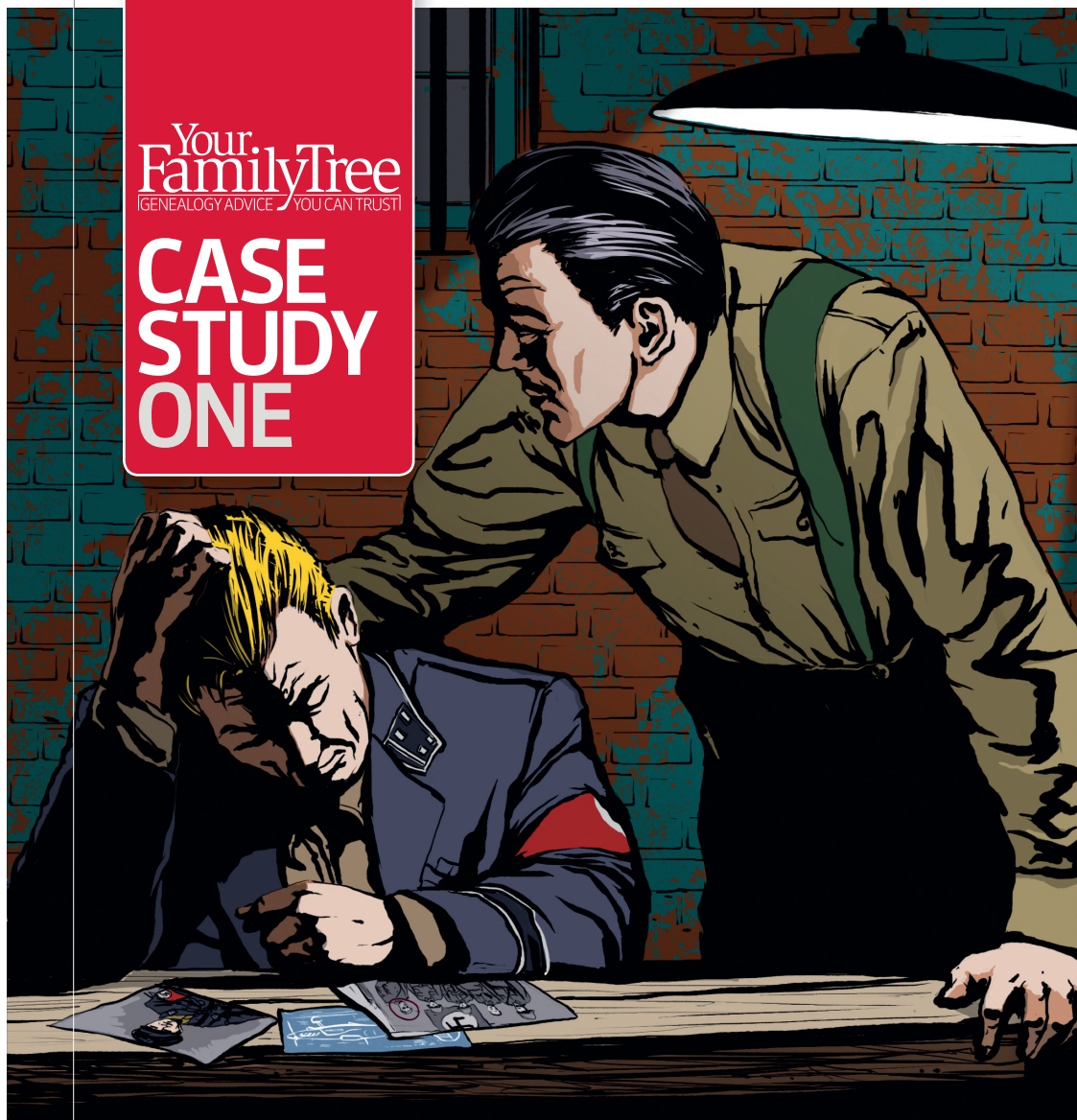


# CASE STUDY ONE



# My dad the Nazi-hunter

How a chance find helped our reader discover her father's amazing heroics during World War II

By **Judith Field**



Judith is interested in military history, particularly involving unconventional weapons or covert operations.

**M**y father never told us much about what he did during World War II other than that he was in the Royal Engineers. However, a chance find led me to discover the amazing story of how he secretly hunted down Nazis, often behind enemy lines.

Unfortunately we knew all about the effect the War had on my dad, Merton Fink: this would now be called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or Combat Stress. He had a hair-trigger reaction to any sort of sudden noise or movement and would lash out – it was second nature that we didn't give him any sort of fright. It cast a shadow over life when I was a child.

Earlier this year I had a complete clear-out of his desk and among the old bank statements and receipts I found

## THREAT

### Chemical warfare

Though both sides had chemical weapons during WWII, it wasn't used during the conflict. As Allied armies penetrated Germany, they discovered weapons containing the new and highly toxic organophosphorous

something that took my breath away: a *Wehrpapi*, a wartime German army service book with his name on it.

I asked him to explain and he revealed that the pass was part his cover when he worked in prisoner of war camps. He also showed me the Iron Cross medal and foreign currency inside the pages of the book recording his fake service in Norway and the Channel Islands. He told me "because I spoke German I was sent in as a fake prisoner, to get information from the others."

My dad spoke German because his grandparents were Jewish immigrants from East Prussia. To escape from racism they came to England between 1871 and 1881 (they are listed in the 1881 Census but not 1871), settling in Manchester and later moving to Liverpool.

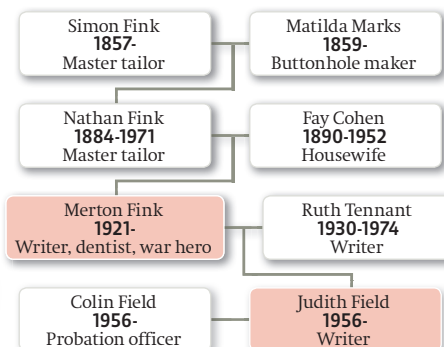
## Going undercover

My father volunteered for the Army in July 1942 at the age of 21 and, because he had been studying chemistry at university, he was sent to a chemical warfare division.

Next, he joined the Royal Engineers as a sapper, but when he trained as an officer he was asked to be an interpreter and

*“Among the confiscated photos was one taken of Hitler standing in the middle of a group of Nazi party members”*

### THE FINK FAMILY TREE



enlisting, he knew only members of the Nazi party were allowed to do that. Sometimes extreme measures were needed – he once threatened to shoot a man who wouldn't

They'd been confiscated from the prisoners and the people with circles round their faces were the ones he had to try to look out for. He recruited 'agents' among the prisoners, who would feed information back to their British captors.

Sometimes he'd interrogate prisoners while they were still on the beach-heads in France during commando raids. He would even fly to airstrips inside Europe, to carry out interrogations on the spot or to escort the person of interest back to England. My father said that one of these people was Admiral Canaris, who was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

### Commando raid

My father gave me a copy of a memo dated February 1944 he'd

remove his shirt, so that he could look for the blood group tattoo that all members of the Waffen-SS had. The die-hard Nazis were sent to the special camp at Comrie, Scotland but those thought to be useful were sent to one of the interrogation facilities, most likely the 'London Cage' run by MI19.

The photos inside the service book included one taken in 1936 of Hitler standing in the middle of a group of party members.

### SPY

#### Wilhelm Canaris

Admiral Canaris was the man behind the Nazi Abwehr spy network, secretly revealing German strategies to the Allies. He joined other high-ranking German officers in a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler in 1944. He was executed in 1945

**Hunting** (Clockwise from top) Merton's fake German documents; Merton in 1944; a Nazi suspect poses with Adolph Hitler; finding the Nazi among these troops

decoy because he could speak German. I requested a copy of his service record from the MOD, which confirmed his postings as interpreter to PoW camps.

He was sent wherever translation was needed. He told me that "when the entire German U-boat fleet surrendered at Loch Eriboll on the north coast of Scotland, I had to go onto the subs and see if there was anything we might be interested in, once the crew had been taken off."

As well as going undercover at the PoW camps my father also ran interrogations, trying to pick out Nazis. Some admitted it but he had to catch others out. For instance, if they said they'd owned a business in Germany before

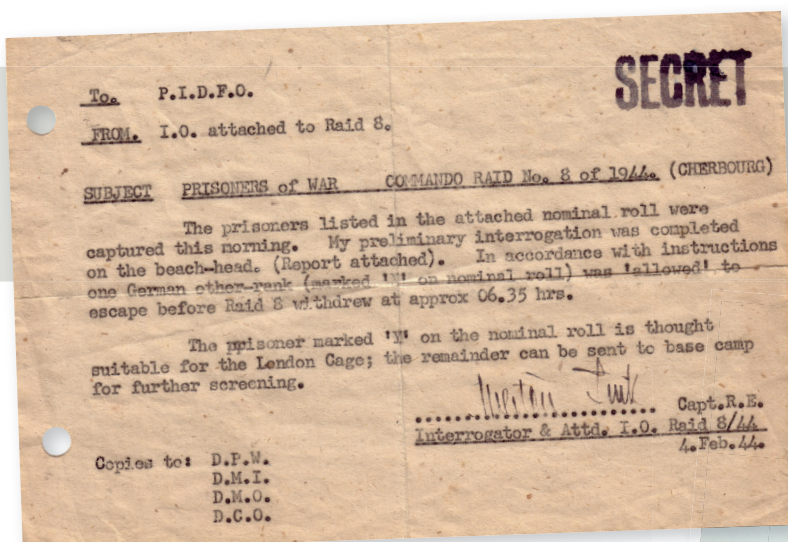


## Jewish servicemen

*How this persecuted group rose to the challenge*

Many of the Jews who resettled in England in the 17th century entered the armed forces. In 1803, with the anticipated arrival of a French invasion, a patriotic wave swept the country. The Chief Rabbi at the time preached on the moral duty to defend the country and over 200 served during the Napoleonic Wars – Wellington claimed that 15 Jewish officers served under him at Waterloo.

Some 6,000 Jews served during the Boer War. In WWI some 50,000 served, and more volunteered than were conscripted. Nearly 10,000 were killed or injured, 1,596 were decorated, including six who received the Victoria Cross. During WWII, 60,000 Jewish men and women served in the armed forces, the Merchant Navy and the Nursing Service, out of a total of 5 million under arms. This was greater than the proportion of Jews in the general population.



**Secret** Merton's report of the Commando raid on Cherbourg, France in 1944

sent to the Political Intelligence Dept at the Foreign Office setting out the results of a commando raid on Cherbourg in which he'd taken part. This was part of Operation Bodyguard, a complex deception plan to make the Germans think that the upcoming invasion of Europe was going to happen in Calais instead of Normandy, including feeding the Germans disinformation about the allied plans.

The Germans thought the Allies needed to capture a port, and the only ones in Normandy were Cherbourg and Le Havre. To carry on the deception, the Engineers had to cross the Channel at night to survey the German-occupied beaches nearby. The danger to all of them is obvious, but my father is Jewish. How much more perilous would it have been for him, if he were captured?

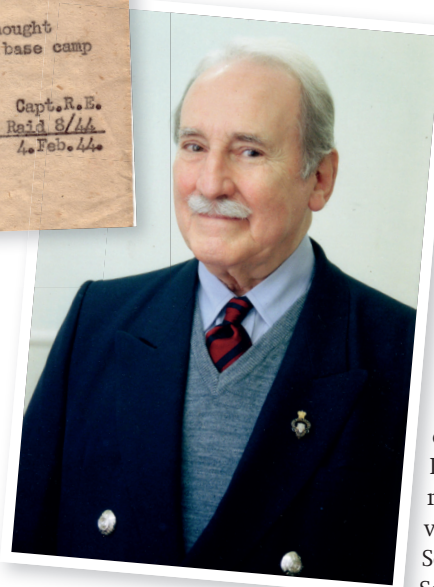
The beaches were heavily defended. They would cross the Channel in small boats and "as we splashed ashore, bullets

would be cracking besides our heads and there'd be shells bursting among us, flinging us flat onto the sand... Some would move on but others would be lying still."

I wanted to know more about the decoy work and about the operations in occupied Europe. My father's memories have faded and I believe he has repressed many. He couldn't tell me which organisations he'd been working for, and I didn't know where to search for information.

### Secrets still lie

According to his service record, he'd been transferred to clerical, back office work in 1943. This didn't fit with the fact that the Cherbourg document places him in Europe at the time – was the desk job a cover story? I have written to the MOD with a copy of that document asking if there's anything they can tell me about the operation.



**Catcher** WWII veteran Merton Fink, who did his part by rooting out Nazis

*"The Engineers had to cross the Channel at night to survey the enemy beaches"*

The Archivist at the Jewish Military Museum told me that my father would have either worked for the Intelligence Corps, as part of a Field Security Section attached to Combined Operations, or for the Special Operations Executive (SOE).

Following his advice, I've contacted the Chairman of the Historical Subcommittee of the Special Forces Club in London, which consists of retired secret agents, SAS veterans, and former Security Service, Secret Intelligence Service and CIA officers. I have also written to the Intelligence Corps Museum, the SOE specialist at The National Archive and to the Imperial War Museum asking for information.

So, this story is something of a 'work in progress' and I hope to be able to report back when I have the complete tale. I feel it's vital to record the full detail of my father's heroic but secret wartime service. I am proud of what he did, and want everyone to know how brave he was. ■

### VOLUNTEER

#### Special Ops

The Special Operations Executive was a new volunteer fighting force hastily improvised in July 1940 to wage a secret war against Hitler's armies, and their mission was sabotage and subversion behind enemy lines

## Armed forces service records

*If you have a World War II veteran to track down, you'll have to write to disclosures*

World War II service records aren't yet open to the public, and to access them, you have to fill in a form, available at the Veterans Agency website ([www.veterans-uk.info](http://www.veterans-uk.info)). For British Army service records, you can write to The Army Personnel Centre Historical Disclosures Section, which holds documents for officers whose service ended after April 1922 and soldiers whose service ended after January 1921. There's not as much detail held on Army personnel files as you might think. They're

administrative records that follow the career of the individual. In most cases, they make little mention of theatres of operation or action seen.

The Royal Navy Disclosure Cell holds Service records for Commissioned and non-commissioned officers (both Royal Navy and Merchant Navy) from 1924 onwards. If you're looking for RAF service records, the division's Disclosures section holds the paperwork for non-commissioned and commissioned RAF personnel dating back to 1920.

### CONTACTS

#### Army Personnel Records

Army Personnel Centre, Historic Disclosures, Mailpoint 400, Kentigern House, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow, G2 8EX  
t. 0845 600 9663

#### Imperial War Museum London

Lambeth Road, London, SE1 6HZ  
e. [mail@iwm.org.uk](mailto:mail@iwm.org.uk)

#### Jewish Military Museum

Shield House, Harmony Way, Off Victoria Road, London, NW4 2BZ  
w. [www.ajex.org.uk/museum](http://www.ajex.org.uk/museum)

#### Military Intelligence Museum

Chicksands, Shefford, Bedfordshire, SG17 5PR  
w. [www.army.mod.uk/intelligence/museum.aspx](http://www.army.mod.uk/intelligence/museum.aspx)  
e. [dint@armymail.mod.uk](mailto:dint@armymail.mod.uk)

#### Navy Historical Disclosures

NPP Accounts 1, AFPA, Centurion Building, Grange Road, Gosport, Hampshire, PO13 9XA

#### RAF Disclosures

Room 221b, Trenchard Hall, RAF Cranwell, Sleaford, Lincs, NG34 8HB