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CASE STUDY: OPERATION MINCEMEAT

by

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Abstract

Ewen Montagu and his team of deceivers achieved in Operation MINCEMEAT what all deceivers endeavor to achieve upon commencing an operation: complete success. By adhering to the six principles of Military Deception (focus, objective, centralized control, security, timeliness, and integration), Montagu duped the Germans into altering their strategic plans; thereby enabling the Allies to achieve theirs.

During World War II, no less than 40 major military deception operations were conducted.¹ This paper will dissect only one, MINCEMEAT, but before doing so, will outline a brief history of its inception. In 1943, Operation BARCLAY was the overall Allied deception plan conducted against the Germans to divert attention from the real target, Sicily (Operation HUSKY). The objective of BARCLAY was to gain the greatest surprise for HUSKY.² To accomplish this task, Operation MINCEMEAT was devised. The premise of this operation was that the body of an officer (Major Martin), who had apparently perished in a plane crash at sea, would float onto Spanish shores, conspicuously bearing Allied documents that suggested (from very credible sources) the invasion of Sardinia and Greece. While only one part of BARCLAY, MINCEMEAT was a notable success.³ This case study will examine Operation MINCEMEAT and assess how successfully its planners were able to achieve the six principles of Military Deception: focus, objective, centralized control, security, timeliness, and integration.

In attempting to achieve the first principle, focus, the deceiver must determine to what degree s/he can influence the adversary decision maker in “taking or directing the desired action.”⁴ Ewen Montagu, one of the British deceivers who orchestrated MINCEMEAT addresses this principle in his book, *The Man Who Never Was*, as he cautions future deceivers, “one has to put oneself into the mind of the enemy and to try to assume *his* degree of general knowledge...”⁵ In so stating, Montagu affirms that something that might be improbable to you (the deceiver) might be completely plausible to an adversary based on his frame of reference. Since “Hitler’s personal conviction” led him to believe that the Allied threat stemmed from the Peloponnese area, it was more likely that he would accept (and react to) a deception that verified his preconceived notion.⁶ The fact that Montagu’s own leadership saw Sicily as “a clear probability” at the time was irrelevant.⁷

After determining if an adversary *can be* deceived, the next step is to outline a clearly defined objective. After all the “objective is NOT just to make [the adversary] believe certain things” but rather to make him “take (or not take) a specific action.”⁸ In this case, the ultimate objective was to make Hitler do both; increase the divisions and quantities of ships in the Balkans and Greece, while also decreasing the speed of defense reinforcements in Sicily.⁹ Two specific examples lay out how Montagu achieved both objectives. In getting the Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff (General Nye), to write a personal letter to General Alexander, who commanded an army under General Eisenhower, he conveniently describes how “(Field Marshal) Jumbo Wilson had proposed to select Sicily as a cover target for ‘HUSKY,’” but it was “already chosen...as a cover for...‘BRIMSTONE.’”¹⁰ In the letter it is evident “that there will be an eastern Mediterranean operation with a landing in Greece,” and “that [the Allies] *want* the Germans to think that the western...operation will be in Sicily (so *that* obviously *can’t* be the real target).”¹¹ In another letter, generated to explain why a Royal Marine officer would be aboard an aircraft carrying sensitive documents, Montagu has the Chief of Combined Operations (Lord Mountbatten) write to the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean (Admiral Sir Cunningham) including a joke that upon Major Martin’s return, he should “bring some sardines with him—they are ‘on points’ here!”¹² By using this “frightfully laboured [*sic*]” joke, he is able to hint at the supposed western target, Sardinia.

A subordinate, yet no less important, objective was to get the German agent in Spain to forward the pilfered documents to his headquarters staff. To achieve this feat, Montagu had to present the body (Major Martin) and the documents in such a manner that their authenticity were not questioned. *The Man Who Never Was* goes into acute detail regarding the measures he took to bring Major Martin to life (including well-read letters and a photo from his fiancée, letters

from his father, an overdraft letter from his bank, ticket stubs from a play he and his affianced attended just before he departed, a bill for an engagement ring, and his identification card, just to name a few items).¹³ Further, the documents, as described above, were penned by such high officials that they had to be genuine, thus worthy of elevation. The deception was so well-received that even after the Sicilian invasion; Hitler and consequently his Naval High Command still harbored suspicions that Greece was an objective. This view is expressed in a response to the Naval Commander-in-Chief, stating that the defense of Greece “could take second place ‘for the time being.’”¹⁴

Once deception planning is underway, it is imperative to maintain strict centralized control. “A deception operation must be directed and controlled by a single element 1) to avoid information fratricide 2) to ensure all elements are following the same story 3) to avoid conflict with other operational objectives.”¹⁵ Here again, a few examples outline how Montagu successfully achieved this principle. In the previous section, this paper describes how Sicily was identified in one of the letters as a possible cover. Besides playing a psychological game with the Germans, “we *want* you to think the target is Sicily, so it *must* be somewhere else,” this notation served as a cover just in case “there were any actual leakages of [the] real plans, the Germans would think [it] was...the cover that they had read about in the letter.”¹⁶

To address the second element of centralized control, Alan Stripp, in the introduction to *The Man Who Never Was*, clarifies how a body was obtained for the deception and special precautions had to be made to avoid a post-mortem examination. The body that was used for the deception had actually died from “eating phosphorous rat poison,” which was inconsistent with the official story of an officer dying at sea. To mitigate this discrepancy and consequently reinforce the plausibility of the body being a “serving officer,” the planners made the officer a

Roman Catholic, encouraging the Spaniards to not veer from “their traditional religious objections to post-mortem examinations.”¹⁷ Furthermore, if in fact Major Martin had existed and was carrying sensitive documents when he disappeared, inquiries would have been made about the documents. Montagu and his team did a great job anticipating those types of details. “Any doubts anyone may have had were dispelled by the signals enquiring about ‘Major Martin’s whereabouts.’”¹⁸ To tie it all together and to avoid conflicts with other operational objectives, Montagu coordinated through the Chiefs of Staff. On a smaller scale, his ability to achieve the previously mentioned principle of centralized control enabled him to quell inquiries from other affected agencies, such as the Naval Wills Department and the Medical Director-General’s Department.¹⁹

Any publicized red flags from those departments could have threatened the overall operation, for “if the enemy [had learned] about the deception, it [would have failed]. Successful deception requires strict security and need-to-know criteria applied both to the whole operation and to each individual part.”²⁰ As Montagu realized early on in the planning stages, he “could not hope to prevent the Germans knowing that there was an operation afoot. What [he] could hope to do was to prevent the vital information of ‘When?’ and ‘Where?’ leaking.”²¹ To maintain the required level of security, Montagu and his deceivers proceeded with extreme caution. While planning the deception, they gathered information from varied sources, crafting cover stories to gain their cooperation and reduce unwanted questions and leaks. Even the submarine captain, attempting to limit the members of his crew who were “in the know,” used a cover story; telling the rest that the canister containing Major Martin was actually a “secret weather-reporting buoy” that the Spaniards would remove if discovered.²²

Despite attaining the aforementioned principles, if timeliness is not considered and achieved, a deception still cannot succeed. To accomplish a deception, “sufficient time [must be allowed] for friendly planning, getting the message across, and letting it be received and understood by the adversary.” Then most importantly, time must be allowed “for [the adversary] to react and...for you to get feedback that [the adversary] understood and is reacting.”²³ By virtue of the following passage, it is evident that Montagu understood this principle well.

We simply had to get the letter to Spain by the beginning of May if the operation was to be of any value; we had to give the German Intelligence Service time to get the information, convince themselves of its genuineness by any checkup that they might want, and then to “appreciate” it and pass the result on to the operational staff. The latter would then need time to make their arrangements and to send their forces to the wrong places.²⁴

In fact, Montagu understood the principle so well that while the Chiefs of Staff deliberated on whether or not they wanted to proceed with the operation, he and his team continued working out details so that there would be no delays once the final approval came.²⁵

The final principle of military deception, integration binds the entire operation to the overall objective. “Each deception must be fully integrated with the basic operation it is supporting. Deception planning should occur simultaneously with operational planning and it MUST support the commander’s overall objectives.”²⁶ As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, MINCEMEAT “with all its thrill and ‘glamour,’ was just an integral part of the planning of...” BARCLAY.²⁷ “...By posing credible threats [to Greece and Sardinia] which would pin down enemy forces in the south of France and the Balkan peninsula; [weakening] the garrison of Sicily and [retarding] its reinforcements, especially by German troops, and [reducing] to a minimum air and naval attacks on the shipping being assembled for the assault on Sicily from Britain, north Africa and Egypt,” BARCLAY aimed to “secure the greatest possible surprise for

HUSKY”²⁸ HUSKY, in turn, was just one operation (the invasion of Sicily), within a greater scheme, the strategic plan for the Allies to win World War II.

MINCEMEAT, therefore, was not “an isolated episode but...part of a long methodical policy of strategic deception.”²⁹ Furthermore, as Michael Howard notes (as quoted in Haufler’s book, *The Spies Who Never Were*) the successes were not entirely to the credit of the deceivers or the double agents. Hitler, himself, played a starring role in the deception, “reluctant to commit troops to Sicily in the face of rampant rumors that Italy was about to withdraw from the conflict.”³⁰ Thus aided by Hitler’s convictions, Ewen Montagu and his team of deceivers achieved what all deceivers endeavor to achieve upon commencing an operation: complete success. By adhering to the six principles of Military Deception (focus, objective, centralized control, security, timeliness, and integration), Montagu duped the Germans into altering their strategic plans; thereby enabling the Allies to achieve theirs.

Endnotes

- ¹ Maj Earl J. Boyce, "Cover and Deception in World War II – Its Lessons and Doctrine Implications," 51-54.
- ² Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co, Inc., 1990); 85.
- ³ Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War* (New York: Scribner, 2004); 829.
- ⁴ MilDec, ACSC.
- ⁵ Ewen Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); 117.
- ⁶ Michael Dewar, *The Art of Deception in Warfare* (Devon, England: Davis and Charles Publishers, 1989); 67
- ⁷ Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*, 21.
- ⁸ MilDec, ACSC.
- ⁹ Hervie Haufler, *The Spies Who Never Were: The True Story of the Nazi Spies Who Were Actually Allied Double Agents* (New York: New American Library, Penguin Group Inc., January 2006); 144.
- ¹⁰ Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*, 47.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 49.
- ¹² Ibid., 58.
- ¹³ Ibid., 83.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 133.
- ¹⁵ MilDec, ACSC.
- ¹⁶ Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*, 45.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 7.
- ¹⁸ Dewar, *The Art of Deception in Warfare*, 68
- ¹⁹ Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*, 107.
- ²⁰ MilDec, ACSC.
- ²¹ Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*, 19.
- ²² Ibid., 89.
- ²³ MilDec, ACSC.
- ²⁴ Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*, 79.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 79.
- ²⁶ MilDec, ACSC.
- ²⁷ Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*, Envoi.
- ²⁸ Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War*, 85.
- ²⁹ Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was*, 5.
- ³⁰ Haufler, *The Spies Who Never Were*, 146.

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