

British Military Deception before James Bond



by Michael Curtis

Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive. There are more clouds of gray than any Chekhov play can guarantee.

Deception is the act of trying to persuade people to believe information that is not true, through lies or trickery, cunning and deceit. As entertainment, the magician and performer Harry Houdini illustrated tricks of the mind and sleights of hand that deceived witnesses. In military matters, the objective is to mislead the enemy by disinformation, psychological operations, and visual deceptions. The practice was told by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* that all warfare is based on deception, when a party which is able to attack pretends to be weak, or to be ignorant when it is informed.

History, as well as fiction, resounds with examples of deception. Homer tells us of the Trojan Horse used by the

Greeks to enter Troy and win the war. Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, mastered the art when he trapped and defeated a larger Roman army in Cannae in 216 B.C. One of the great historical deceptions was that in World War II, the deceit of timing and location of the Allied D Day landings in Normandy in June 1944 to convince the Germans that the main allied landings would be in the Pas de Calais, not Normandy. The elaborate deception included the creation of a fake First U.S. army group under the flamboyant General George S. Patton, and with fake tank and inflatable transport dummies opposite the area of the Pas de Calais where the German forces were located.

A new film, *Operation Mincemeat*, starring Colin Firth, tells the true, if seemingly highly improbable, story of the essentially British plot to deceive the Germans by planting false documents on a dead body dressed as a Royal Marine officer. The success of the plot depended largely on acceptance by the enemy that the falsified documents had come from a senior British military official. Not all senior military officials approved the plot, but Winston Churchill, who wanted the German military not to be able to anticipate the Allied landing in 1943 would be in Sicily, did.

After the defeat of German and Italian forces in the North African campaign, November 1942- May 1943, the Allies, U.S. and UK, decided to move against Italy, and remove it, which Churchill called "the soft underbelly of Europe," from the war. The stepping-stone and natural route to Italy was Sicily, and a campaign, originally called Trojan Horse and then Operation Husky, led by General George S. Patton and General Bernard L Montgomery, began on June 11, 1943, with the largest amphibious assault in history and 150,000 Allied troops, 3,000 ships, and 4,000 aircraft.

The campaign lasting 38 day drove the Axis troops out of the island of Sicily. It also led the fall of Benito Mussolini who was deposed and arrested, and to the formation of an

Italian government under Marshal Pietro Badoglio who began secret negotiations with the Allies about an armistice. It was not a complete victory for the Allies since the Germans were able to withdraw 100,000 men and their vehicles, supplies, and ammunition to the Italian mainland. Nevertheless, it was a significant victory and because of the British deception, the Allies suffered fewer casualties than they might otherwise have done.

The story of the British deception, a fascinating story of Allied subterfuge, is now told in the film *Operation Mincemeat*. It is a remarkable and seemingly highly improbable story of a plan of Allied intelligence to deceive Hitler and misdirect German intelligence. Indeed, it is one of the best examples in history of military deception.

The concept of a plan starts with the Trout Memo, officially written in 1939 by Admiral John Godfrey, director of Naval Intelligence, but almost certainly written by his subordinate Lieutenant Commander Ian Fleming, not yet dreaming of 007, about the deception of an army in war time by fly fishing. Many ideas were suggested, including sending out tins of explosives disguised as food so that hungry sailors would pick them up. One idea, number 28 on the list, almost certainly the thought of Fleming who thought of elaborate deception options, was to use a dead body dressed as an airman dropped from a parachute that had failed and carrying false papers, and drop it where the Germans would find it and be deceived by it.

The deception was planned by a group, the Twenty Committee, XX, headed by Lieutenant Commander RNVR, Ewen Montagu, Cambridge, Harvard, a naval intelligence officer and prominent Jewish lawyer, who later became a judge, together with an RAF officer Squadron Leader Charles Cholmondeley. Montagu later wrote an account of the affair in a book, *The Man who Never Was*, 1953. The memory of the event is also simply commemorated in a mortuary in Hackney in East London where the body that was used in the plot is buried. In a rather unkind but

truthful remark Montagu said of the man who was used, "The only worthwhile thing he ever did, he did after his death."

The main deception in the plot was a personal letter purported to be from General Sir Archibald Nye to General Sir Harold Alexander, starting, "My dear Alex." Nye 's letter contained details of sensitive topics, and of a new commander of the Guards brigade, and U.S. service medal awards. He also referred to Operation Husky, an imminent Allied invasion of Greece, that the Germans had been reinforcing and strengthening their defenses in Greece and Crete, and therefore the chief of the Imperial General Staff felt that the Allied troops planned for the assault were insufficient.

Thus, it was agreed by the chiefs of staff that the 5th division should be reinforced by one brigade group for the assault on the beach south of Cape Araxos and that similar reinforcement should be made for the 56th division at Kalamata. The letter was a clever double bluff. Nye wrote that "we stand a very good chance of making the Germans think we will go for Sicily, it is an obvious objective and one about which they must be nervous." To confuse Hitler, he therefore suggested the Allies would invade Sicily.

It is interesting but not surprising that a key figure in the deception appears to have been Ian Fleming, Mr. James Bond, who had written of methods to confuse the enemy, and was crucial to the Trout Memo.

The plot developed. After some difficulty a suitable body was found by a London coroner and kept on ice for few months. It was Glyndwr Michael, 34, homeless Welsh laborer, penniless, with mental health problems, who had died after ingesting himself with rat poison in a London warehouse. He was transformed into Major William Martin, of the Royal Marines whose body contained love letters from a non-existent fiancé named Pam, a jewelry bill for an engagement ring, ticket stubs, religious medal, a copy of a letter marked "personal

and most secret," and above all the false Nye letter. The body had to look as if it had died in an air crash, but floated ashore and he had died at sea. Major Martin, his body wrapped in a life jacket, and with a black attaché case chained to his wrist, was found on April 30, 1943, by a Spanish fisherman off the coast of Huelva.

It was crucial that Hitler was deceived. According to German documents the information on Major Martin was seen by Hitler who then decided to divert German troops to Sardinia, Corsica, and Greece. The result was that the Sicily landing led to fewer British and Allied casualties than it might otherwise have done.

And it makes one think more highly of the 007 stories.