Operation Mincemeat: How a Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory[1]

Reviewed by *Major Richard E. Gorini*[*]

Deception story development is an art and a science. It combines intelligence on adversary information collection, processing, and dissemination; how adversary preconceptions are likely to influence the deception target's conclusions; and how the target makes decisions.[2]

Introduction

In Operation Mincemeat ("Mincemeat"), Ben Macintyre[3] colorfully describes the full history of Operation Mincemeat, a military deception operation that sprung from the plot of a second rate mystery novel: plant misleading information on a corpse dressed as a British officer to trick the German intelligence network into believing that the Allies were planning to attack Sardinia and Greece instead of Sicily.[4] Macintyre's narrative uses recently recovered primary sources and newly unclassified information[5] to fully describe how Lieutenant Charles Cholmondeley and Lieutenant Commander Ewen Montagu created and executed Mincemeat; their "bizarre plan" which supplemented Operation Barclay; and the Allied deception effort in support of the invasion of Sicily. For military planners, Macintyre's novel is an excellent case study in the art and science of planning a military deception. For judge advocates, the novel highlights the need to have a critical eye when evaluating evidence, whether as a member of a military staff or when preparing for a court martial. For everyone else, the novel is an entertaining history lesson hidden within a spy adventure, with minor flaws that do not detract from an otherwise engaging story.

The Oldest (Deception) Trick in the Book

Sun Tzu considered deception such an important part of military operations that it was one of the first subjects he covered in *The Art of War*;[6] planting misleading information for the enemy to "accidentally" find has been a timeless form of deception. According to ancient mythology, the Greeks planted soldiers inside a wooden horse to trick the Trojans into allowing them into the city of Troy.[7] In modern lore, the British allowed a haversack with false war plans to fall into the hands of the enemy Turks.[8] In Mincemeat, Macintyre describes this purposeful planting of misinformation as "deeply embedded in intelligence folklore . . . but there was precious little proof that it ever actually worked."[9] While the Trojan horse story is a myth and the Haversack ruse was ineffective,[10] events off the Spanish coast in 1942 would provide an opportunity for the Haversack ruse to prove its worth.

In September 1942, Allied intelligence officers became worried that German intelligence had discovered the date of a planned North Africa invasion.[11] A British plane that crashed near the coast of Spain contained a passenger list that included Lieutenant Turner, a Royal Navy courier carrying letters identifying the target date of the invasion, and Louis Daniélou, an intelligence officer with the Free French Forces carrying a notebook that also contained sensitive information about the North African plan.[12] Spanish authorities recovered the bodies and "assured Britain that Turner's corpse had 'not been tampered with.'"[13] However, the British discovered that the Germans eventually

[*] Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Student, 59th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

[1] BEN MACINTYRE, OPERATION MINCEMEAT: HOW A DEAD MAN AND A BIZARRE PLAN FOOLED THE NAZIS AND ASSURED AN ALLIED VICTORY (2009).

[2] U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-13, INFORMATION OPERATIONS: DOCTRINE, TACTICS, TECHNIQUES, AND PROCEDURES para. 4-76 (28 Nov 2003) [hereinafter FM 3-13].

[3] Ben Macintyre is a British author and an associate editor of the *Times of London*. He has authored other historical, non-fiction books including *Agent Zigzag, The Man Who Would Be King, The Englishman's Daughter, The Napoleon of Crime*, and *Forgotten Fatherland*. MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, about the author.

[4] *Id.* at 12.

[5] In researching this book, Macintyre visited Ewan Montagu's son, Jeremy, in 2007. Jeremy Montague provided Macintyre access to an old trunk that contained Ewan Montagu's collection of top secret documents regarding the operation. *See* MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 4-5. *See also* Security Service, MI5, *History: World War II*, https://www.mit.gov.uk/output/world-war-2.html (last visited May 24, 2011) (describing the release of MI5 World War II records to the British National Archives over the past ten years).

[6] SUN TZU, THE ART OF WAR 12 (Thomas Cleary trans., Shambhala Publ'ns 2005).

[7] In classical mythology, the Trojan horse was a trick where Greek soldiers hid inside a wooden horse which was brought within the city walls of Troy. Under cover of darkness, Greek soldiers opened the gates of Troy to the waiting Greek army. EDITH HAMILTON, MYTHOLOGY: TIMELESS TALES OF GODS AND HEROES 206–07 (Warner Books 1999).

[8] MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 20. This became known as the Haversack ruse. A haversack is a small sturdy bag that soldiers used to carry equipment, much like a backpack.

[9] *Id.* at 22.

[10] BRIAN GARFIELD, THE MEINERTZHAGEN MYSTERY: THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF A COLOSSAL FRAUD 27 (2007); MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 21.

[11] MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 14.

[12] *Id.* at 14–15.

[13] *Id.* at 15.

received a copy of a notebook Daniélou had been carrying.[14] Luckily, the Germans discounted the information and the incident did not compromise the invasion.[15]

The Haversack Ruse in Action

Cholmondeley, armed with the knowledge about the fate of Daniélou's notebook, convinced British leadership to authorize a Haversack ruse style military deception plan, later known as "Operation Mincemeat."[16] With Montagu taking creative lead, the two intelligence officers planned this operation to reinforce Operation Barclay, a deception operation supporting the Allied invasion of Sicily, already underway in the Mediterranean theater.[17] Montagu's concept for Operation Mincemeat was a deception story that centered on Major Bill Martin, a fictitious staff officer on the Allied Combined Operation staff who was traveling by air when his plane crashed off the coast of Spain.[18] Major Martin would be carrying classified documents that would wash up on the Spanish shore.[19] Subsequently, the Spanish government, some members of whom were sympathetic to the Nazis, would leak the documents to the Germans.[20] Within the framework of this deception, Montagu and Cholmondeley's primary focus was ensuring that Martin's life, death, and classified documents would survive a skeptical enemy's examination.

In his book, Macintyre often points out that a cursory investigation into the circumstances of Bill Martin could have readily exposed the deception.[21] Nevertheless, Mincemeat succeeded because the deception plan followed important and fundamental principles of military deception. Analyzing Mincemeat by comparing it to current U.S. Army doctrine on military deception operations provides an excellent case study on how to create a successful deception plan.[22] While the operation is worthy of an analysis using all the military deception principles, this review will highlight two principles in particular: focusing on the deception target, and exploiting the deception target's bias.[23]

---

[14] *Id.* at 16.

[15] *Id.*

[16] *Id.* at 18.

[17] *Id.* at 187.

[18] *Id.* at 59.

[19] *Id.*

[20] *Id.*

[21] *See id.* at 83-84, 201, 243.

[22] *See* FM 3-13, *supra* note 2

[23] *Id.* para. 4-13.

Focus on the Deception Target

In military deception doctrine, "the deception target is the adversary decisionmaker with the authority to make the decision that will achieve the deception objective."[24] For example, Adolf Hitler was making the strategic military decisions for the German Army, so he was the person whom Allied deception plans had to convince. Once the target is identified, planners should design a deception scheme which takes advantage of the target's information collection system and how he reacts to different forms of information.[25] This principle allows military planners to either apply limited resources effectively, or mitigate the risk of an operation by narrowly tailoring a deception plan for a specific audience.

For Montagu and Cholmondeley, Hitler was Mincemeat's primary deception target, and the Nazi spy network in Spain was the intended means to get Martin's documents into Hitler's possession.[26] Initially, the Mincemeat planners understood that only Hitler could make a decision regarding German troop movements to Sicily. Based on this, the first step was to ensure that Martin's documents received Hitler's personal attention. To achieve this goal, Montagu drafted the deception documents to mimic personal correspondence between well-known and high-ranking Allied military generals.[27] Montagu had to mimic such high ranking officers to ensure that Hitler would take personal interest into the documents.

The Mincemeat planners then had to choose how to get Martin's documents into the Nazi spy network. Because of their knowledge of the Daniélou incident, the Mincemeat planners knew they could rely on Nazi supporters in the Spanish government to allow Martin's documents to fall into German hands. With British intelligence providing refined information about the German spy network in Spain, Mincemeat planners were able to target a specific Nazi spy, Adolf Clauss, as bait. Clauss's operation was so efficient that the Mincemeat planners could be confident that anything that washed up on the Spanish coast would be reported to him. Allowing Clauss to "find" the information in the fake documents would also give the documents legitimacy because of Clauss's reputation. Thus, by focusing on Hitler and Clauss, the Mincemeat planners maximized the probability of success for Martin's documents to arrive on Hitler's desk with a full endorsement

---

[24] *Id.* para. 4-12.

[25] *Id.* paras. 4-12, 4-13.

[26] MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 39, 110.

[27] *Id.* at 119–22 (Letter from General Nye, Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to General Alexander, Army Commander under General Eisenhower); *id.* at 123–24 (Letter from Lord Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations, to Admiral Cunningham, Commander in Chief in the Mediterranean); *id.* at 125–26 (Letter from Lord Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations, to General Eisenhower).

from German intelligence.[28]

Exploit the Deception Target's Bias

To exploit a deception target's pre-existing bias, a successful deception plan is simple and provides the deception target with an opportunity to confirm a preconceived notion.[29] For example, if an enemy believes that the U.S. Army always uses helicopters in an attack, a deception plan can include flying helicopters away from the location of the true attack. Additionally, because military decision makers always operate without complete information, their personal biases inevitably affect how they compensate for missing information in order to make a decision.[30] Ideally, a deception story leverages a pre-existing bias of the deception target, and removes the ability for him to make an objective decision.[31] Further, this exploitation of bias is most effective if the advisors to a deception target share the deception target's bias, or are somehow dissuaded from disagreeing with the deception target.[32] In this case, the advisors are likely to blindly accept a well crafted and plausible deception story because it is safer to agree with their leader, rather than present a position contrary to the leader's preconceived notion.

While Hitler suspected that the most likely Allied target was Sicily, he lost sleep at night because of his fear of an Allied attack on Germany's strategic resources in Greece.[33] Supplementing the Operation Barclay deception story, the Mincemeat planners successfully exploited Hitler's fears, as MacIntyre explains that "The lie went as follows: the British Twelfth Army (which did not exist) would invade the Balkans in the summer of 1943, starting in Crete and the Peloponnese, bringing Turkey into the war against the Axis powers."[34] Then American troops would attack Corsica and Sardinia, while the British Eighth Army would invade southern France; all Allied forces would bypass Sicily.[35] Martin's fake documents described portions of this plausible plan, and even identified Sicily as the Allied force's false target.[36] In an unforeseen stroke of good luck, the Spanish leaked the content of Martin's documents to other sources, who then all raced to present Hitler with this seemingly independent and valuable information of the impending Allied attack on Greece and Crete.[37] As a result, Hitler

ordered the Nazi's focus changed from defending the strategically obvious target of Sicily to defending a less likely two-pronged assault on Greece and Sardinia.[38] Because the reports were specifically designed to exploit Hitler's pre-existing fears of an Allied attack on his strategic resources in Greece, Hitler eventually believed that Allied forces were not going to attack Sicily, and made his decisions accordingly.[39]

A True Spy Story Ian Fleming Would Enjoy

Besides providing valuable examples to military deception planners, Operation Mincemeat is an easy-to-read book with only a few minor flaws that do not detract from an entertaining and enjoyable story. While Macintyre's underlying thesis is declared in the book's subtitle—how a dead man and a bizarre plan fooled the Nazis and assured an Allied victory—his primary purpose is to provide a true to life spy novel based on newly uncovered information. While Macintyre's account of Operation Mincemeat is not the first time that this story has been told, it is probably the most complete because it incorporates declassified information recently released by the British government in the past ten years. Not only is Macintyre able to fully explore the history of Mincemeat after obtaining these declassified documents, but a trip to Montagu's son's home provided Macintyre with direct access to the entire top secret Mincemeat file.[40]

Macintyre relies on many of these primary sources for his book, especially the actual Mincemeat file and Montagu's personal papers. He also references many original documents, intelligence reports, telegrams and photographs that he obtained during his research in the British National Archives.[41] The number and quality of these sources give readers confidence in the historical accuracy of the book. While many of these documents are included as exhibits in the book, the addition of a map that clearly depicts the Mincemeat deception plan would have been helpful in assisting the reader's understanding of why the deception story was strategically sound.

While a map is a slight omission, Macintyre's prose incorporates his thorough research by providing the reader with background information on both the minor characters and the primary British, Spanish and German individuals

---

[28] *Id.* at 238.

[29] FM 3-13, *supra* note 2, paras. 4-42, 4-43.

[30] *Id.* para. 4-34.

[31] *Id.* para. 4-43.

[32] *Id.*

[33] MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 39, 252.

[34] *Id.* at 39.

[35] *Id.*

[36] *Id.* at 120.

---

[37] *Id.* at 39.

[38] *Id.* at 238.

[39] *Id.* at 253–54. Someone in the Spanish government passed the information to the Italians. Other members of German intelligence unwittingly believed they had independent confirmation of the information in the documents, which was nothing more than gossip about the original documents.

[40] *Id.* at 4.

[41] *Id.* at 4, 5.

that were part of the deception ruse. Macintyre successfully weaves together this story using the colorful personalities of Montagu and Cholmondeley; submarine captain Lieutenant Bill Jewell; butterfly collector and Nazi spy Adolf Clauss; and Jewish-Nazi Intelligence Officer Major Karl-Erich Kühlenthal. Engrossed in the lives of these colorful characters, the reader is left cheering for their success—or rooting for their failure.

The book, while good, has a few noticeable flaws. For example, one source Macintyre did not consult was the register of the Black Lion Hotel, which was the hotel where Bill Martin's father supposedly stayed the week before Martin's death. As part of the deception ruse, Martin's father wrote a letter on hotel letterhead that was included on his son's corpse.[42] Macintyre states that "A glance at the hotel register for the Black Lion Hotel would show that no Mr. J.C. Martin had stayed there on the night of April 13."[43] However, after Mincemeat was published, it was discovered that the hotel register did have an entry for a Mr. J.C. Martin—although the entry seems to have been added as an afterthought.[44]

Additionally, Macintyre did not fully research the Haversack ruse. While Macintyre credits Richard Meinertzhagen with creating the Haversack ruse, this idea is challenged in Brian Garfield's book *The Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of a Colossal Fraud.*[45] Garfield argues the actual author of the ruse was James D. Belgrave.[46] Further, while Macintyre only questions whether the ruse actually worked, Garfield provides evidence that the enemy Turks believed that the documents were planted and therefore the ruse was unsuccessful.[47] This information would have added to Macintyre's conclusion that the Haversack ruse was not a successful means to execute a deception operation, but was instead nothing more than anecdotes friends told each other at cocktail parties.[48]

Finally, Macintyre spent a considerable amount of time describing Montagu's brother Ivor. While Ivor Montagu, a table tennis fanatic and Soviet spy, was a very interesting and colorful character, he had no direct impact on the Mincemeat operation. Overall, Macintyre does very well integrating the lives of the other characters into the main thesis, but Ivor's story was incongruous.

Throughout the book, Macintyre dramatically identifies flaws in the deception story that could have exposed not only the Mincemeat operation, but also compromised the entire Sicily deception operation. Despite this, Macintyre successfully convinces the reader that these flaws were overcome by quick thinking, hard work, or plain dumb luck. Macintyre ultimately concludes that Operation Mincemeat was successful because the Allies were hard pressed to take Sicily even though they outnumbered the German forces seven to one, and that a stronger German force would have completely repelled the assault.[49]

Conclusion

Operation Mincemeat is an excellent discussion tool for military planners not only because of the well written story of a successful deception ruse, but also because of the lesson it implicitly teaches on the enormous magnitude of the consequences of failure. If Mincemeat had backfired and reinforced the Axis belief that the Allies would next invade Sicily, the result of that battle could easily have changed history. Military planners could effectively utilize Macintyre's book and his critique of Operation Mincemeat as a valuable discussion tool in professional development settings. For judge advocates, it is a reminder that evidence must be thoroughly examined to determine its credibility. Finally, for those who are merely spy story buffs, Macintyre gives his readers an engrossing story of a modern day spy plot, despite outward appearances of an implausible tall tale.

---

[42] *Id.* at 71.

[43] *Id.* at 84.

[44] Ben Macintyre, Amazon Exclusive Essay: When Spycraft is Not Crafty Enough, http://www.amazon.com/Operation-Mincemeat-Bizarre-Assured-Victory/dp/0307453278/ref=pd_rhf_p_t_3#reader_0307453278 (last visited Sept. 14, 2010). Macintyre argues in the essay that the entry was the effort of Cholmondeley to tighten up the facts surrounding Bill Martin. He further argues that the clearly forged entry would bring more scrutiny from curious German agents than the omission of a name from the register.

[45] GARFIELD, *supra* note 10.

[46] *Id.* at 27.

[47] *Id.* at 28–29.

[48] MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 22.

[49] *Id.* at 292.