
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the February session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is Rick Beyer, author of *Ghost Army*. He will reveal how the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops used deception to fool the enemy about the strength of US Forces.

Deception in warfare certainly dates back further than Sun Tzu, who twenty-five centuries ago in his classic *The Art of War* postulated that "All warfare is based on deception." Indeed, the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff in their publication on the subject (*Military Deception*, Joint Publications 3-13.4 2012) identified the purposes of deliberately misleading or beguiling your opponent in the following terms:

- Causing ambiguity, confusion, or misunderstanding in adversary perceptions of friendly critical information.
- Causing the adversary to misallocate personnel, fiscal, and material resources in ways that are advantageous to the friendly force.
- Causing the adversary to reveal strengths, dispositions, and future intentions.
- Conditioning the adversary to particular patterns of friendly behavior to induce adversary perceptions that can be exploited by the joint force.
- Causing the adversary to waste combat power with inappropriate or delayed actions.

Examples of these strategies in action are abundant in the history of warfare. The impregnable walls of Troy penetrated by Odysseus' famous Trojan Horse concealing Bronze Age Greek commandos. On the battlefield, feigned retreat to lure the opponent into a trap was used by Hannibal in his classic double envelopment of a Roman Army twice the size of his in the spectacular victory at Cannae in the Second Punic War. Genghis Khan was legendary for using the same tactic, and both he and Napoleon Bonaparte mislead their enemies by having numerous staged campfires burning at night, visible to the enemy, to disguise the real size and location of their forces.

To mislead an opponent on a tactical level, we have many clever stratagems from tricks and improvisations like Union officers creating an "Ironclad" warship out of an old

barge with wooden cannon and wood plank armor in order to successfully raid the Confederates repairing a real ironclad, the *Indianola*; to Rommel mounting aircraft engines on trucks to blow large dust clouds in the desert to convince the British armored spearheads were moving in the distance. The famous Q Ships of England in World War I were heavily armed ships, to all appearances unarmed freighters, that would suddenly unleash their concealed firepower upon German U-Boats which had surfaced to sink an "easy target" with their deck guns.

On a more strategic level, to deceive the German decision makers in World War II into misallocating their forces, or anticipating attacks in the wrong direction altogether, many elaborate hoaxes were undertaken as part of much larger operations. To conceal *OPERATION URANUS*, surrounding and trapping the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad, the Soviets strove to keep the Germans focus on the city of Stalingrad itself, as if that was the entirety of the battle. The huge buildup of Red Army troops on the exposed and understrength flanks fifty or more miles from the city was carefully hidden, until it fell on the Axis like a thunderbolt. To deceive the Nazis over which island in the Mediterranean the Allies intended to invade, they planted a corpse carrying "important secrets," the "Man Who Never Was," that misdirected the Germans into thinking Sardinia or Corsica were the objectives, not the actual target of Sicily.

The Nazis themselves initiated the war by a strategic deception. *OPERATION HIMMLER* was a series of staged 'provocations' to serve German propaganda in the days leading up to the outbreak of war on 1 September 1939. The day before, August 31, at a major radio station in the then German city of Gleiwitz, SS operatives dressed in Polish Army uniforms staged a cross-border attack, using Jews delivered there from Dachau Concentration Camp and then shot them. German propaganda claimed the Poles fired across the border, and the bodies of the Jews were shown to the press as 'evidence' of this "Polish attack" on Germany. The next day, Hitler cited this attack before the Reichstag to justify the "defensive" nature of the German invasion of Poland, thus igniting the War in Europe. How convincing this deception may have had on the Allies is clear (it did not work), but it may have affected German public opinion positively. The Nazis also adopted sinister subterfuges to conceal the nature of the Final Solution to its many victims.

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

However, one of the most elaborate ruses employed by any side in World War II was the multifaceted effort to conceal the actual target of the Invasion of France in Normandy. The challenge was not only to hide the extent and specifics of the Allied build up in England but to hide their actual goal of Normandy. There was also a determined effort convince the Germans that the actual invasion target was Pas de Calais, in order to throw them off the scent and also to mislead them into entirely misplaced preparations and troop depositions.

The Germans knew an invasion of France was coming—but they did not know where and when. To fool them into thinking that the blow would fall on Calais, the Allied forces created the “Ghost Army”— the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops. The company had under command the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion, the 244th Signals Company, the 3132nd Signal Service Company, and the 404th Combat Engineer Company, all commanded by Col. Harry Reeder. This was a simulation of a real army, designed to mislead German intelligence by specially scripted radio communications, personnel announcements and publicity (including making General George Patton, the general the Germans feared most, the commander of imaginary units) and most famously creating a large number of rubber balloon fake tanks, artillery, trucks, and support vehicles and empty tents and ammo dumps. These fake units were stationed in apparently busy bases on various “operations” that the German air reconnaissance photographic analysts would find convincing “proof” that the weight of Allied strength was positioned for a strike at Calais. Loudspeakers would broadcast the sounds of trucks and tanks on the move, and orders being barked out—Morse code and other communications traffic would be intercepted by the Germans and convince them of the size and status of this imaginary force. And this deception worked—the best German forces were either at Calais or held in reserve, not waiting at Normandy to repel OPERATION OVERLORD.

After the invasion, the 1,100 men of the 23rd – in civilian life, artists, architects, set designers and communications specialists – continued their deceptive activities in support of the Allied drive from Normandy to the Rhine. It was called in the official US Army History of the unit “more theatrical than military” “a travelling road show that went up and down the front lines impersonating the real fighting units.”

FURTHER READINGS:

Rick Beyer & Elizabeth Sayles, *The Ghost Army of World War II* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2023).

Jonathan Gawne, *Ghosts of the ETO: American Tactical Deceptions Units in the European*

Theater, 1944-1945 (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2014).

Philip Gerard, *Secret Soldiers: The Story of World War II's Heroic Army of Deception* (New York: Dutton Publishing, 2002).

Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War* (New York: Scribner Publishing 2004).

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 18 Feb.

2025, *Battle of Chickamauga* – www.tccwrt.com

– e-mail: info@tccwrt.com

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345.

320-616-6050. <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>.

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, 2nd & 4th Wednesdays at 1100.

<https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show – TBA 2025 – 320-564-6644

<http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie –TBA 2025

- Flying Cloud Airport - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org

Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - www.afmns.org

Friends of the National WW II Memorial –

<http://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org.US>

Pittsburg Veterans Breakfast Club

- <http://www.vbcphg.org>.

Western Naval Historical Association –

info@wnha.net

WWII Discussion Forum – [wwiidf.org](http://www.wwiidf.org)

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 -

www.cafmn.org

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 -

jkyser45@gmail.com

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2024–2025

11 Mar. Women at War in WWII

25 Mar. Pacific Naval Strategy

8 Apr. 11th Airborne Division

13 May Patton’s Tactician: War and Occupation

The Round Table is a 501(c)3 nonprofit.

We would greatly appreciate your supporting the HCDWW2HRT.



3132 SigSerCo



603rd infalted tank



Inflated L-5 reconnaissance plane, border of Germany 1945



Infalttable dummies -OPERATION VIERSEN- Rhine March 45