

D-Day's Bodyguard of Lies: Intelligence and Deception in Normandy

Description

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The heroes who stormed the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944, eighty years ago today, faced a rainstorm of gunfire as they disembarked from their landing crafts. Over 4,000 lost their lives in the initial landings, which nevertheless succeeded in establishing an Allied beachhead in Adolf Hitler's Atlantic Wall.

The toll could have been even worse had safer passage not been ensured by a secretive army of spies and decoys that, beginning in 1943, wove an elaborate deception to convince their Axis adversaries that the landing would be later and further north. In the words of Winston Churchill, the front-line soldiers were protected by a "Bodyguard of Lies" that carefully protected the true location and intentions of the landings at five beaches in Normandy.

The D-Day deception operation stands as a powerful example of the essential blend of irregular warfare methods with conventional tactics. As we witness brutal combat in Ukraine and anticipate potential future conflict in the Indo-Pacific, the lessons from June 1944 are more pertinent than ever. Integrating tactical and strategic deception to support traditional warfare, involving civilians alongside the military, and the critical importance of avoiding large-scale conventional war due to its immense costs are lessons that continue to resonate today.

The D-Day Deception

As the Second World War approached its turning point, an inevitable Allied assault on occupied Europe, Allied leaders gathered at Tehran to devise their strategy. The odds appeared against them: despite Germany's forces being spread thin across 2,600 kilometers of Atlantic coastline, the Axis held a force advantage, outnumbering the landing force in France by an estimated 60 divisions to 37. Cunning and misdirection would need to complement the brute force of men and armor that would be hurled against Hitler's European fortress. In the words of Jon Latimer, "Deception would play a crucial role in producing a ratio of forces necessary for Allied victory in the battle of the build-up and permitting a break-out."

Operation Bodyguard was established in 1943 as the overall deception strategy to mislead the German High Command about the timing and location of the inevitable Allied invasion of Europe. Under this overarching plan, the main thrust was Operation Fortitude, which was itself divided into two smaller campaigns: Fortitude North, which would feint at Norway, and Fortitude South, which promised an attack at the Pas-de-Calais in northern France. Fortitude combined both physical deception and signals intelligence to construct the ruse. For example, the Allies invented out of thin air the United States First Army Group, commanded by General Patton, and mustered the paper command in southeast England, supporting the idea that the invasion would strike directly across the English Channel at Calais. Dummy inflatable military hardware was spread across the area, hoping to attract spy planes, while the infamous [Ghost Army](#) created fake shoulder patches to accompany and announce the arrival of the phantom units.

The deception was furthered by British intelligence's exemplary Double Cross system, masterfully recounted in Ben MacIntyre's [Double Cross: The True Story of the D-Day Spies](#). By 1944, British counterintelligence confidently believed it controlled every German spy in the United Kingdom. Fortitude put this network of double agents to work, steadily feeding handlers in Berlin a diet of false reports that contributed to incorrect beliefs about the Allied order of battle. In one case, double agents [Mutt](#) and [Jeff](#) transmitted false reports about a fictitious British Army amassing in Scotland to join the Soviets in an invasion of Norway. The trick worked, with Hitler sending one of his divisions to Scandinavia just weeks before D-Day. The intelligence network was so extensive that stories still emerge today—like the [women codebreakers stationed at the US Foreign Service Institute](#), who stole Japanese diplomatic messages describing German defenses on the French coast, further contributing to the deception's success.

The deception plans were joint operations involving multiple branches of the Allies' armed forces. [Operation Glimmer](#), [Taxable](#), and Big Drum formed the naval component of Operation Bodyguard. Like Fortitude South and the Double Cross system, these efforts aimed to deceive the German forces about the invasion beaches in France. Small fleets, equipped with radar-reflecting balloons and devices simulating large convoys, maneuvered off Cap Antifer and Pas-de-Calais to create the illusion of impending naval assaults northeast of Normandy. Confused by the feint, the Germans in Calais reported an invasion fleet and even sent airplanes to investigate.

Civilians also played a significant role in Allied deception and intelligence operations. By 1944, the French Resistance numbered an estimated [500,000 members](#) in many different groups, most of whom came under the umbrella of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI). Operating in small groups called Maquis, resistance fighters engaged in sabotage, targeting Nazi supply routes and reinforcements. The FFI's intelligence-gathering efforts also provided the Allies with invaluable information about

German troop movements and fortifications, directly supporting the impending landings. In one case, as recounted in Cornelius Ryan's classic [The Longest Day](#), an FFI sector chief identified an artillery piece sited for Utah Beach and managed to transmit a message to London about the potential threat. On the morning of D-Day, he was overjoyed when an Allied destroyer arrived off the coast and blasted the artillery piece with a precise bombardment. "They got the message!" he cried.

The Maquis coordinated closely with Allied strategy. On June 5, the BBC broadcasted [coded messages](#) to alert the French Resistance about the imminent invasion, setting off [plans](#) to sabotage railways (the Green Plan), main roads (the Tortoise Plan), and telecommunication networks (the Purple Plan), along with launching guerilla attacks against German troops. More than 90 three-man [Jedburgh teams](#), comprising American, British, and Free French operatives, parachuted into France throughout 1944 to facilitate this coordination on the ground. The first team, codenamed ["Hugh"](#) dropped in on the evening of 5/6 June and linked up with the head of the resistance in the Indre area, near Châteauroux. In [June and July](#), the "Jeds" helped disrupt German communications in Normandy. By [August](#), teams worked with the British Special Air Service in Brittany, orchestrating guerrilla attacks and providing intelligence that hastened the Allied advance. These Jedburgh teams, the [forerunners](#) of modern special operations forces, provided leadership, training, and communications support, amplifying the impact of the Resistance's efforts.

Once the invasion began, the Allies relied on tactical deception to further confuse the German defenders. As part of Operation Titanic, another subcomponent of Operation Bodyguard, the British Royal Air Force and Special Air Service dropped hundreds of [dummy parachutists](#) far from the actual landing areas in Normandy. Known as "Ruperts" to the British and "Oscars" to the Americans, these decoys were equipped with noise makers and explosives to simulate an actual airborne assault. British commandos even jumped with some of the dummies and played recordings of gunfire and men shouting to sell the ruse further. The plan had the intended effect, with the Germans sending a division reserve away from Omaha and Gold beaches and the 101st drop zones to search for the suspected paratroopers. When members of the German 7th Army discovered the dummies, General Hans Speidel ordered a decreased level of alert for his soldiers, leaving them less prepared for the actual invasion.

Perhaps the most challenging—and, in turn, impressive—aspect was that the deception could not end when the invasion began. It had to continue, convincing the enemy the true invasion was, in fact, a feint and the initial (deceptive) intelligence remained accurate. Three days after the invasion, Spaniard Juan Pujol García (Agent Garbo) [transmitted to his handlers](#) that most companies had stayed behind in England, expanding upon the lie that the main thrust of the assault would cross the Strait of Dover and hit Calais. The Ultra intercepts, made possible by the codebreakers at Bletchley Park breaking the

Enigma code, [offered invaluable proof](#) that the Germans continued to believe the Fortitude ruse instead of the catastrophic and physical evidence that the invasion was already underway. It would take [seven weeks](#) for the German High Command to redeploy resources from Calais to Normandy. By then, the Allied beachhead was secure. Germany's delay was the ultimate success of Operation Bodyguard. If the element of surprise is essential in war, then the ability to maintain and even extend the element of surprise is perhaps the most impressive triumph.

Although [debates endure](#) about the importance of Bodyguard and Fortitude, largely over skepticism that the inflatable hardware was ever actually seen and insistence that German espionage incompetence was the ultimate culprit, there is little doubt that the deception at least contributed to the tremendous success of the D-Day landings. In the immediate aftermath of Fortitude, the German High Command awarded (Double) Agent Garbo the Iron Cross for his efforts. If nothing else, as Lt. Jason Carminati [writes](#), "Although the Nazi regime had unique institutions that contributed to the operation's success, the Allies' planning and execution of various deception techniques were more impactful to the success at Normandy because German weaknesses were discovered and exploited."

Deception Today and Tomorrow

Deception, of course, remains an integral part of warfare, deployed by both friends and foes. During the first months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, echoing the Rupert dolls of World War II, Ukrainian defenders employed mannequins from local stores to confuse Russian forces. [Drone footage](#) captured Russians wasting valuable artillery on a trench system manned only by these decoys. As the war progressed, Kyiv expanded its deception efforts, with civilian companies like [Inflatech](#) and [Metinvest](#) creating realistic decoys of Ukrainian weapons and vehicles, complete with multispectral signatures, causing further Russian munitions to be squandered on fake targets.

When preparing for the initial counteroffensive in Kharkiv in September 2022, Kyiv aimed to convince its adversaries that the counteroffensive would target Kherson in the south. Using media leaks, encouraging popular resistance as "shaping" operations, and amassing troops in the south, [Ukrainian military planners succeeded in drawing](#) Russian forces to defend Kherson, leaving the Kharkiv salient largely unprotected. The eventual offensive shattered Russian lines, liberating some 12,000 square kilometers, including the strategic crossroads at Iziium. (Impressively, Ukrainian forces also liberated Kherson two months later.)

In contrast, the failed Ukrainian offensive in the summer of 2023 highlighted the challenges of deception. The Ukrainian military failed to mislead Moscow about their intention to penetrate Russian lines protecting Melitopol and the Azov coast. Despite shaping operations along the Russian defensive

line, particularly in Bakhmut, the Ukrainian government's insistence in early June that [Plans love silence](#) and warnings against rumors did not materially weaken the entrenched Russian defenses.

Just as the French Resistance played a central role in the success of D-Day through deception and intelligence operations, Ukrainian citizens have become crucial to their country's current conflict. Early in the war, the Territorial Defense Forces, made up of citizen volunteers, were [instrumental](#) in repelling the initial Russian assault on Kyiv. As the war progressed, Ukrainian civilians took on various wartime responsibilities, from raising funds for the Ministry of Defense to [crowdsourcing](#) military gear and weapons to developing [targeting](#) and intelligence for the armed forces. Remarkably, the Ukrainian government even launched an [app](#), Diia, allowing citizens to report on Russian troop movements and defenses directly.

Deception can also be deployed at the strategic level and is often weaponized by non-state actors. Just four months before Hamas's October 7 [Einsatzgruppen-like](#) thunder run across the Gaza border, a former Knesset member had [written](#) that Hamas and Israel enjoyed a "strategic *d'Ã©tente*" and that "Hamas doesn't seem to be eager to change the existing equation in order to challenge Israel." Hamas's strategic deception contributed to the total failure of the Israel Defense Forces to protect the borderlands near the Gaza strip—they were unable to access many of the kibbutzim until [hours after](#) the initial attack. After the fact, deception can reveal not just cunning and secrecy on the part of the deceiver but also complacency and [ineptitude among the deceived](#).

However, the lessons for modern warfare might apply even more strongly to strategic competition. As the US escalates its saber-rattling with China, it fences with an enemy that makes deception a core concept of its strategy, using tactics such as decoy targets and disguising military equipment as civilian vehicles to mislead adversaries and protect assets. Beijing even employs local militia forces to provide camouflage support for important potential targets. And yet, ironically, "American dominance in conventional warfare has contributed to perceptions that deception is unnecessary, or is a technique for weaker powers," as Fabian Villalobos and Scott Savitz [observe](#). "But successful deception activities enhance force protection, preserve combat power, and add complexity for the adversary" facts that are often underappreciated.

D-Day stands as a stark reminder of the cost of traditional warfare and the importance of avoiding it whenever possible. As the US inevitably [ramps up its industrial capability](#) to prepare for total warfare with China, it should also pay equal attention to the range of irregular capabilities—from espionage and intelligence to information warfare and cyberoperations—that will better prepare it to deceive and avoid being deceived by the enemy. As Seth Jones writes in [Three Dangerous Men](#), "Chinese military strategy generally aims to *avoid* a conventional war. China's goal is to weaken and surpass the United States without fighting."

US success in the coming years will not be defined by victories in conventional military battles with China, Russia, or any other adversary but by avoiding such confrontations through cunning, creativity, and deception.

Correction (June 7, 2024): In the article, it was previously stated that more than 90 three-man Jedburgh teams parachuted into France on the night of June 5/6. The correct information is that these teams parachuted into France throughout 1944. The corrected sentences now read: “More than 90 three-man Jedburgh teams, comprising American, British, and Free French operatives, parachuted into France throughout 1944 to facilitate this coordination on the ground. The first team, codenamed “Hugh,” dropped in on the evening of 5/6 June and linked up with the head of the resistance in the Indre area, near Châteauroux.”

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Views expressed in this article solely reflect those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University’s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower and Omar Bradley talk with a young member of the French resistance in the American sector during the liberation of Lower Normandy in the summer of 1944. (Photo via [Picryl.com](#))

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