



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— ANCIENT HISTORY —

Deception in Teutoburg Forest

by Robert M. Clark

Intelligence and deception are inevitably intertwined. Intelligence collection – especially HUMINT – depends on deception for its success. In turn, a profitable deception operation depends on good intelligence about the opponent. And the key to success in military operations across history has often been the result of deception. In few cases has that been better illustrated than in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9 C.E. between Roman legions and opposing German tribes.

As the Roman Empire expanded into what is now Germany, frequently there were set-piece battles where the ill-equipped German tribes faced the highly trained and disciplined Roman legions. These engagements had a fairly predictable outcome: a slaughter. The Germans opposing Rome had to find an asymmetric response that would negate Roman military superiority, and they found it by virtue of superior intelligence. They got it because of the personal relationship between two men; one Roman, one German.

Publius Quinctilius Varus

Varus had risen through the Roman aristocracy as an effective administrator and was appointed governor of the Roman province of Africa in 8 BCE. Two years later he became governor of Syria, where he demonstrated the primary reasons for his effectiveness: heavy taxes and a direct, brutal approach to dealing with dissent. During the aftermath of an insurrection in 4 BCE, he had occupied Jerusalem and crucified 2,000 Jewish rebels, causing a major increase in anti-Roman sentiment there. He then returned to Rome and remained there until 6 CE.

In the interim, Varus' ally Tiberius conducted a series of campaigns that expanded Rome's control of Germania, east of the Rhine. When he declared Ger-

mania pacified in 6 CE, Emperor Augustus appointed Varus to govern Germania. Varus apparently continued to use the harsh tactics that had worked in Syria, with much the same result: the Germanic tribes that had grudgingly accepted Roman dominion developed an intense hatred for their masters.

Varus was an administrator, not a trained soldier. But he had a trusted advisor who knew both German and Roman military tactics and had a superior knowledge of the local terrain.

Arminius

Arminius had been born a prince of a German tribe, but had grown up as a hostage in Rome, served with distinction in Rome's military, and had been awarded Roman citizenship. After Varus' appointment as governor of Germania, Arminius was dispatched to assist him in pacifying the German tribes.

Arminius, though, had a different agenda, and he saw in Varus a perfect tool to execute it. Arminius' ambition was to become king of his Cherusci tribe and to expel Rome from its territory. If he could lead the Cherusci to a victory over the Roman legions, that just might be possible. He began to secretly communicate with the normally disorganized Germanic tribes and encourage them to unite against their common enemy.

Well placed and trusted, Arminius was able to craft a deception that fit well with Varus' inclination to deal quickly and harshly with rebellion and his lack of military expertise. Arminius also was perfectly positioned to see that it was properly executed.

The Deception

Deceptions depend on timing for success, and in 9 CE the timing was right. The Romans had transferred eight of the eleven legions in Germania to deal with a rebellion in the Balkans, leaving the region lightly defended.

Deceptions also succeed when the deceiver has a good understanding of what a leader is likely to do in a given situation. Arminius had that understanding, thanks to having the perfect HUMINT source – himself. He undoubtedly was aware of Varus' history in handling revolt, and he crafted a story to fit that scenario.

Arminius told Varus that some tribes located in northern Germany were in rebellion. He persuaded Varus to send his remaining three legions north to deal with the rebels. The route would take the legions two day's march through unfamiliar territory and directly through the Teutoburg forest.

All deceptions have their vulnerable points, and Arminius' plan had a big one; but luck was with him. A pro-Roman Germanic military leader named Segestes bore Arminius a grudge because of a family dispute. He learned of the plan and warned Varus not to trust Arminius. But because of his known hostility to Arminius, his warning lacked credibility, and Varus ignored it. Instead, Arminius got the assignment to march ahead and rally his Germanic allies to support the Roman legions.

The Ambush

In Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, he describes six types of terrain that must be dealt with in combat. One type he calls "entangling ground." The side that occupies it first has a definite advantage. Not much is left of Teutoburg forest today, but in 9 CE it was a perfect example of entangling ground. It was a dense wood, not easily traversed even in good weather. And the Autumn of 9 CE was a rainy one. The Roman legions entered the forest northeast of Osnabrück, on a road that was narrow and muddy. The legions were forced out of battle formation into a line that extended for 15-20 km, and Varus – possibly relying on Arminius to scout ahead – failed to send reconnaissance parties ahead of his forces.

Varus and his legions marched directly into the trap that Arminius had set for them near what is now Kalkriese. The Germanic forces attacked the dispersed legions from all sides with javelins and short spears. Despite taking heavy losses, the Romans were able to gather and create fortifications to hold off the Germans for the night. The next day the legions broke out of the encircling enemy but took on more losses

as their movements were hampered by continuing heavy rains.

The fight continued over the next two days and ended in another trap that Arminius had prepared next to Kalkriese Hill. The Roman escape route through a narrow area between the hill and a bog was blocked by trenches and an earthen wall, fortified by the Germans. A Roman attempt to storm the wall failed.¹ Varus, seeing no possibility of escape, fell on his sword in the approved manner, and many of his commanders did the same. (Military historians have long puzzled as to why Roman tradition would demand that their commanders deprive their troops of leadership in desperate situations, just when it is most needed.) The three legions were almost completely wiped out. Only a few survivors escaped into the forest and made their way back to Roman lines. An asymmetric attack, enabled by a well-crafted deception based on superior intelligence, effectively ended the Roman conquest of Germany.

Robert M. Clark is the author of several books on intelligence. His latest is *Deception: Counterdeception and Counterintelligence* with William L. Mitchell, CQ Press, 2019.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or any other U.S. Government agency. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying U.S. Government authentication of information or CIA endorsement of the author's views. This material has been reviewed by the CIA to prevent the disclosure of classified information.

1. Fergus M. Bordewich, "The Ambush That Changed History," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2006, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-ambush-that-changed-history-72636736/>.