



When Intelligence Made a Difference

<<< WORLD WAR II >>>

The 'Man Who Never Was'

Operation Mincemeat

by David T. Zabecki

When the campaign in North Africa was drawing to a successful close, the Allies' next strategic target was painfully obvious to anyone who could read a map. "Everyone but a bloody fool would know it's Sicily," said Winston Churchill. Sitting in the middle of the choke point of the Mediterranean, Sicily was the shortest route from North Africa to Adolf Hitler's Europe. It was also the base from which the Luftwaffe had pounded Malta for many months, as well as any convoy that tried to reach the beleaguered island. Sicily had to be taken, but rough terrain favored the defender. Any attack against a well-entrenched force would be very costly, or might even fail. If the enemy only could be misled as to where the Allies intended to strike next, the attacking force might encounter something less than a fully manned defense. But how were the German general staff and intelligence service to be duped on such a grand scale?

The solution to that problem came from two relatively junior British officers: Lt. Cmdr. Ewen Montagu, a reservist who represented naval intelligence on the interservice XX Committee (XX for double cross), and Squadron Leader Sir Archibald Cholmondley, Montagu's Air Ministry counterpart. It was Cholmondley who first suggested planting false Allied documents on a dead body and letting it fall into German hands. The XX Committee was initially skeptical of the bizarre plan, but in the end, Montagu made it work.

Before the war Montagu had been a successful barrister, and after the war he would become judge advocate of the fleet and one of England's greatest jurists. In the early months of 1943, he used his lawyer skills to blend an intricate and massive hoax into one

of the most phenomenally successful deception operations in the history of modern warfare.

The basic stratagem was simple enough; making it believable was another thing entirely. In the first place, the massive buildup required for the Sicily invasion (Operation Husky) would be impossible to conceal. And then there were the consequences of failure. If the German high command saw through the ruse, they might easily read the evidence in reverse as conclusive proof the Allies were going for Sicily. Looking back on the operation, Montagu noted that convincing the Allied chiefs it would work was more difficult than convincing their German counterparts it was for real.

It was a complex undertaking. First there was the problem of how to deliver a body to the Germans. The plotters originally considered something involving a partially opened parachute. They quickly abandoned that scheme for a number of reasons. For one thing, an Allied agent or air crewman would not be carrying the sort of high-level documents necessary to make the whole thing believable. The body could not be passed off as an Allied courier either, because couriers were not allowed to fly over enemy-held territory. Finally, there was the problem that even the most cursory autopsy would detect that the body had been dead long before it hit the ground. A body floating in the sea, on the other hand, could easily be expected to have been dead for several days before its recovery. A delivery from the sea would also eliminate the problem with transporting allegedly high-level documents over enemy territory.

With that, Montagu's team decided their body would be an Allied courier who had died in a plane crash at sea and whose corpse had washed ashore. For the actual means of delivery, they favored a submarine because it could deposit the body closer in without being detected as could a ship or a flying boat. Spain was selected as the point of delivery because of the efficient Abwehr (German military intelligence) network in place there, and the confidence Allied intelligence had in the Spanish government's willingness to cooperate with the Germans.

Then came the problem of finding a body. There was no shortage of dead bodies in wartime London, of course, but the difficulty was finding one of the right age, appearance and cause of death. Their search had to be very low-key to avoid arousing gossip. Securing permission to use a body from the next of kin with little or no explanation would also be a bit ticklish. Montagu's team was almost ready to give up on the whole thing when they learned about a man in his

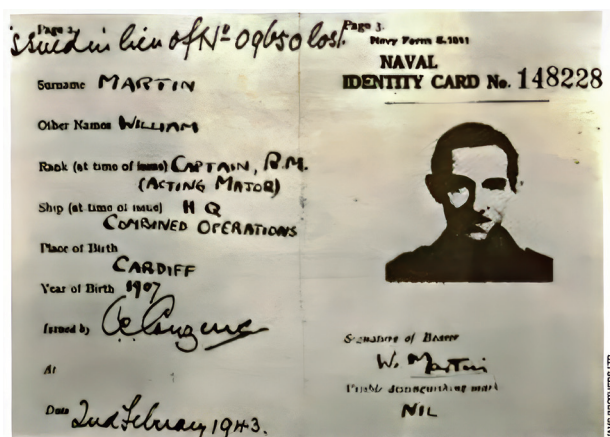
early 30s who had just died of pneumonia. The cause of death was just about right, and the fluid in the body's lungs might help reinforce the notion that it had been floating at sea for several days. Montagu quickly consulted Sir Bernard Spillsbury, a noted pathologist, for verification.

To Montagu's relief, he learned there would be very little difference between the fluid already in the body's lungs and what could be expected to accumulate there from several days of floating in a Mae West in rough seas. Spillsbury said, "You have nothing to fear from a Spanish postmortem; to detect that this young man had not died after an aircraft had been lost at sea would require a pathologist of my experience—and there aren't any in Spain."

Montagu then very discreetly contacted the dead man's family. He assured them the body was needed for a worthy cause and that it would eventually receive a proper burial, although under another name. The family consented on the condition that the corpse's true identity never be divulged. Since the operation now appeared to be a viable one, it needed a code name. In a streak of typically macabre British humor, Montagu selected "Mince meat."

Next came the problem of building an identity for their courier. At first Montagu's team wanted to make him an army officer. But the army's system of communications routing made it impossible to head off a casualty report before it got into official channels, and the report of the death of a nonexistent officer was bound to cause unwanted gossip. They could not put their courier in the navy, either, because naval officers did not wear battle dress at that time, and getting a dead body measured for a tailor-made uniform was out of the question. So, the corpse joined the Royal Marines. The main problem with that cover was that the man who previously inhabited the body had been in poor health for a long time before his death, and it showed. When one of the team's superiors raised the point, Montagu responded, "He doesn't have to look like an officer—only like a staff officer."

There was still an element of risk in the whole thing. The Royal Marines were, even in wartime, a small and closely-knit service where everyone knew everyone else. So, the corpse became Captain (acting Major) William Martin because that was one of the most common names on the Navy List. When the death of a Major Martin was listed in the newspapers—a necessary follow-through because the Abwehr was sure to check—the dead man might easily be mistaken for any of the other William Martins.



The identity card of Royal Marine Captain William Martin—or so the British hoped it would seem to whoever found his body. The photograph was of a member of Lt. Cmdr. Ewen Montagu's staff, who only slightly resembled "Martin."

Once they had a name and a service, Montagu's team then had to go through the painstaking process of building a believable identity for Major Martin and turning him into a real person. The plotters provided their phantom major with a fiancée, complete with a picture and love letters, all of which were supplied by secretaries in Montagu's office. As a bit of corroborating detail for a genuine personality, the team decided to make Major Martin somewhat on the careless side in the management of his personal affairs. Hence, they produced some overdue bills and a stern letter from the Major's father. They also assembled a collection of keys, matches, coins, theater ticket stubs and all the other junk that accumulates in a man's pockets. The dates on the ticket stubs, bills and letters were all carefully coordinated to present an interlocking picture of Major Martin's activities in the days just prior to his departure from England. Finally, the team found a living person whose appearance was reasonably similar to the dead man's to pose for an official ID card photo. To reinforce the careless side of Martin's personality, Montagu supplied him with a replacement ID card, issued "in lieu of No. 09650 lost." The serial number of the supposed original was that of Montagu's own naval ID card.

Lying in cold storage, Major Martin was almost ready to go to war. The only things he needed now were the false documents that were the purpose of the entire operation. With the impossibility of concealing the massive buildup for the Husky invasion, the XX Committee decided they would have to try to convince the Germans that those preparations were actually part of an elaborate cover for an attack on another target. They felt they had the best chance of making them believe the Allies would go for Sardinia first and then use that island to mount a follow-up

attack against Sicily from two directions. They also decided to indicate a second major Allied thrust at Greece and the Balkans. In a beautiful bit of logic, the plotters reasoned that Hitler would not be able to resist the temptation to believe Churchill was behind such a strategy as part of his “soft underbelly” theory—and also as a way of vindicating himself for the Gallipoli debacle of World War I.



General Sir Archibald Nye wrote the deception letter

Rather than attempting something as clumsy as feeding the Germans a bogus operations plan, the plotters decided on the more subtle approach of using an unofficial personal letter between two top-ranking officers. The letter would only talk around what they wanted the Germans to believe, but it had to be done in such a way that no one could fail to interpret the meaning. For the key false letter, Montagu got General Sir Archibald Nye, vice chief of the Imperial General Staff, to write to General Sir Harold Alexander, the British commander in North Africa under American General Dwight D. Eisenhower. In the letter, Nye explained to Alexander why Eisenhower’s request for a cover operation centered on the eastern Greek islands was being denied. That cover was already assigned to the operation scheduled to be launched from Egypt by Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, the commander in chief in the Middle East. Eisenhower, therefore,

would have to make do with Sicily as a cover for his own operation.

The phony letter did two things. It suggested two operations would be launched in the Mediterranean (one in the east and one in the west). It also clearly identified Sicily as the cover for the true target in the west. That only left Sardinia in the west, and strongly suggested the Greek mainland and the Balkans for the target in the east.

To corroborate the letter from Nye, Major Martin also carried a second letter from Lord Louis Mountbatten, chief of Combined Operations, to Admiral Andrew Cunningham, British naval commander in the Mediterranean.



Vice Admiral Louis Mountbatten, Martin's superior commanding officer

That letter established the purpose for Martin’s trip; he was an expert on landing craft on loan from Mountbatten’s staff for the planning of the Mediterranean operations. By way of introducing Martin, Mountbatten noted he had been right about the Dieppe raid when most of the Combined Operations staff had been wrong. Since this was the first admission by the British that Dieppe had been something less than a success, it gave the entire ruse an additional shot of credibility. The Mountbatten letter also contained a side comment about sardines being rationed in England. It was a crude joke by British standards, but Montagu correctly guessed the Germans would not be able to resist that piece of bait either.

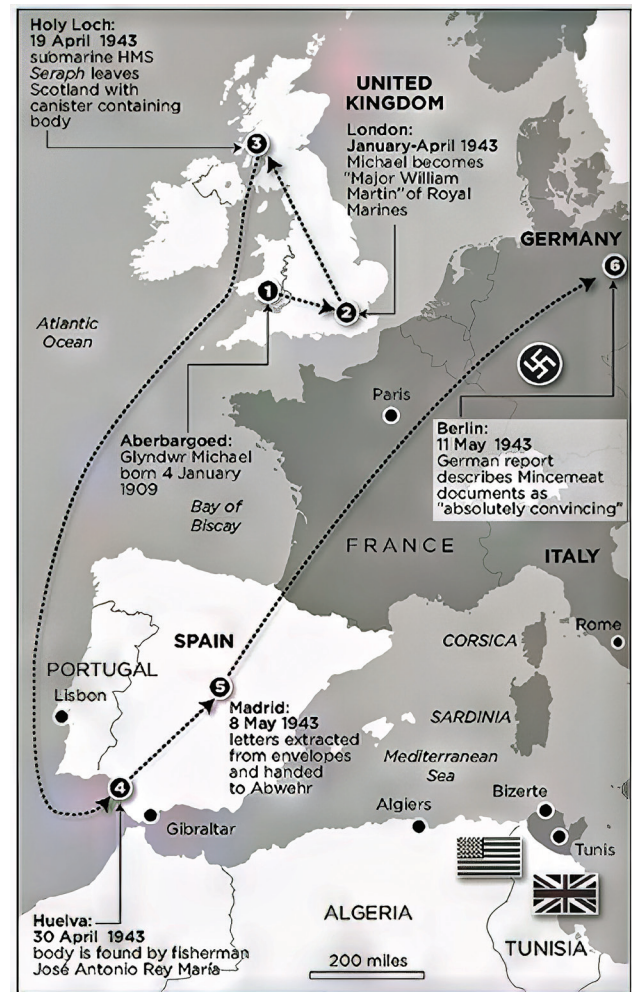


Major Martin

Major Martin left England for the last time on April 19, 1943. He traveled in a special canister packed with dry ice aboard the submarine HMS Seraph, commanded by Lt. Cmdr. (later Admiral) N.A. Jewell. Several days out, the operation almost ended in disaster when Seraph was mistakenly attacked by RAF aircraft while on the surface. Just before dawn on the 30th, Seraph surfaced about a mile off the Spanish coast near Huelva. After crewmen brought the canister up on deck, Jewell sent them back down into the boat, leaving only the officers topside. Up to that point only Jewell knew what the canister contained. He quickly briefed his officers, and then they prepared the body for launch. They blew up the major's Mae West and made sure the briefcase was securely attached to its chain. Then Jewell said a short prayer from the Navy Burial Service, and they slipped Major Martin over the side.

The wash from the submarine's screws pushed the body toward shore. A few hours later a fishing boat picked up the dead marine and brought him into port. The local Abwehr agent did the rest.

After some delay and diplomatic shuffling, the Spanish government eventually returned Martin's briefcase, apparently unopened. Once the documents returned to London, however, microscopic examination of the paper revealed they had indeed been opened, and presumably photocopied. The body,



"Mince meat Digested," Military History, Erenow, p. 19 (<https://erenow.net/ww/operation-mince meat/19.php>)

meanwhile, received a quick postmortem that confirmed Spillsbury's predictions. Major Martin was buried a few days later in Huelva with full military honors, surrounded by floral tributes from his heartbroken fiancée and family. Back in London, the June 4 edition of *The Times* noted Martin's death in the casualty lists. The Abwehr, of course, took note of all this.

The German intelligence services bought Mince meat whole. "The authenticity of the captured documents is beyond doubt," they reported. The German general staff bought it, too. When it finally got to Hitler, he played his part perfectly. On May 12, 1943, he issued an order summarizing his estimate of the situation in the Mediterranean. The order concluded, "Measures regarding Sardinia and the Peloponnese take precedence over everything else." Hitler ordered the strengthening of fortifications on Sardinia and Corsica, and he sent an additional Waffen SS brigade to Sardinia. He sent his favorite commander, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, to Athens to form an army group. He sent one panzer division to Greece all the

way from France. Perhaps most damaging to the German situation, he ordered two additional panzer divisions to prepare to move to Greece from Russia—at the same time the Germans were getting ready for history’s greatest tank showdown at Kursk.

The ‘man who never was’ pulled off one of the greatest deceptions in military history – after his death.

When the Allies stormed ashore on Sicily, they caught the German and Italian defenders almost completely flatfooted. On July 7, 1943, only two days before the start of the landings, the war diary of the German high command did not even have an entry for the western end of the Mediterranean. The Allies assaulted the southern tip of Sicily, but the bulk of the island’s defenses were oriented along the north coast, facing Sardinia. Many of the Italian divisions in Sicily

folded immediately. The Germans, under Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, put up a determined resistance and conducted a classic withdrawal to Messina. By August 17, however, General George S. Patton’s Seventh and Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery’s Eighth armies had taken the island. Operation Mincemeat had been an unqualified success.

Over the last 40 years there has been a great deal of speculation as to who “the man who never was” really was; but Ewen Montagu stuck to his end of the agreement with the family. Writing in 1977, Montagu did go so far as to say: “He was a bit of a ne’er-do-well, and... the only worthwhile thing that he ever did he did after his death.”

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