

D-Day Deception: Operation Fortitude and the First United States Army Group

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There is a wide range of objectives that the military may be attempting to achieve when engaging in deception. Ultimately, deception is part of a security plan designed to protect military secrets that are vital to success. These may include one's current location, forces, weaponry, knowledge of the enemy and most importantly any plans for further operations. These secrets are integral to effective military strategy and any compromise of such information drastically endangers the success rate. Deception is the attempt to generate false understanding in the opposition's mind of any military secrets.¹

The Allies' Operation Fortitude in World War II was a scheme designed to deceive the Germans that the Continental Europe invasion was not going to take place at Normandy, and that such action would be a minor part in a much larger strategy.² General Dwight D Eisenhower echoed the sentiments of Chinese General Sun Tzu, famous for *The Art of War* and its emphasis on military deception stating: "The success or failure of coming operations depends upon whether the enemy can obtain advance information of an accurate nature."³ While the landings of D-Day were tremendously successful due to the courageous and valiant soldiers, equally as important yet often forgotten is Operation Fortitude and the First United States Army Group's role in fooling German High Command that rendered Normandy a viable target. Without General George S. Patton and his false front at Dover, the Allied landings on June 6, 1944 would have been much less successful.

Both the Allies and Axis knew that an invasion of continental Europe was necessary in order to topple Hitler's regime. As such, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel spent months developing his

¹ R.V. Jones quoted in Hy Rothstein; Barton, Whaley, "The Art and Science of Military" Deception. Norwood: Artech House, 2013.

² Mark Mazzetti, "The D Is For Deception." U.S. News & World Report (August 26, 2002): 3.

³ Eisenhower quoted in Stephen E Ambrose, *D-Day: June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 83.

famed Atlantic Wall defense from the northwest coast of France up to western shores of Norway designed specifically to prevent any Allied invasion. From the Allied perspective, they needed to develop a plan that could go as undetected as possible in order to face as little resistance as possible. The obvious location for attack was the Pas-de-Calais region of northern France due to its proximity to British shores. The Strait of Dover between France and Britain is the shortest span of water between England and France making it an extremely viable invasion plan for the Allied Forces. Knowing that this was an obvious fact from both sides, the Allies opted to use Pas-de-Calais as a military bluff. The First United States Army Group was positioned as a false front to fool the Axis command using their own confirmation bias against them. The Germans expected an invasion there and thus the Allies gave them the force they were looking for. In doing so, the Allies protected their true plan at Normandy from scrutiny.

The physical makeup of the First United States Army Group was a mixture of both real and illegitimate forces. The largest group was the U.S. Third Army which while a real combat unit, was stationed primarily in America in early 1944. While the Canadian First Army was completely legitimate and was in fact stationed in Europe the British Fourth Army – a key component of the First United States Army Group—was entirely made up. They were not the only fake aspects as the 108th, 110th, 141st Infantry Divisions, 18th, 21st, 35th Airborne Divisions and the full 14th Army were each imaginary as well. Every single division both phony and real had specific patches designed in order to maintain cover and protect the deception from any German spies located in London.⁴ The effort taken to manufacture hundreds of apparels for illegitimate forces is an extreme step to take but also a necessary one. Deception cannot be done

⁴ Dan Blottenberger, “D-Day Deception: Coca-Cola, Hollywood, and Bigbobs,” United States European Command, June 4, 2014.

half-heartedly; it must be convincing in every single way. The First United States Army Group is a perfect example of deception down to minute details and the Allies reaped the rewards from their initiatives.

Along with mere clothing and appearance of forces, the Allies needed something that could truly legitimize their Dover front. To those ends, they employed the superstar military commander of the era: George S. Patton as leader of the First United States Army Group. Patton was a fierce warrior coming from 1943 campaigns in the Mediterranean theater. Here, he led the Seventh Army in the invasion of Sicily, Italy. Recognized by the Germans as the strongest commander that the Allies had to offer, his presence immediately legitimized the new forces and drew the eyes of Rommel.⁵ While the appointment of Patton was extremely effective, it was truly the result of circumstances stemming from controversial behavior from the General. Patton was an extremely fiery and aggressive leader which fueled his passionate and effective combat. Unfortunately, his tendencies also caused him to be reckless and arrogant which led him to commit legal and public blunders. These flaws ultimately drove him away from a true command position on D-Day but rather to the First United State Army Group.

Near the end of his invasion, Patton was cited as being both physically and verbally abusive towards two of his privates suffering from early PTSD; He went as far as slapping the men. The story was eventually leaked to journalists in the United States, and Patton was blasted by members of Congress. In the end, Eisenhower intervened and ordered Patton apologize.⁶ Furthermore, in two separate incidents deemed the Biscari Massacre, Patton's soldiers executed

⁵ Stephen E Ambrose, *D-Day: June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2016, 82.

⁶ Joseph Sabino Mistick. "Knowing the 'Soldier's Heart'; In a Well-Known Encounter from World War II, Gen. George S. Patton Slapped a Soldier at a Military Hospital Because the Young Man Had No Visible Wounds and Was Suffering from Bad 'Nerves.'" *Pittsburgh Tribune - Review*. Greensburg, Pa: October 8, 2016, 1.

Axis prisoners of war in a clear breach of international law. The soldiers claimed in court that they had done so on their commander's orders. They quoted him as saying : "We will show [the enemy] no mercy. He has killed thousands of your comrades, and he must die. If you company officers in leading your men against the enemy find him shooting at you and, when you get within two hundred yards of him and he wishes to surrender, oh no! That bastard will die! You will kill him".⁷ While the court ruled that Patton's comments made before combat could not be considered as an order and that he did not commit a crime himself, it remained a stain on his ledger and further complicated his role as a high ranking American officer.⁸

The final straw that forced Eisenhower to take action on one of his strongest assets was an incident in April of 1944 where he announced to a women's club in Knutsford, England that the United States and Britain would dominate the world after the war. Congress was not happy, and members denounced the remarks as irresponsible. Rep. Jessie Summer of Illinois went as far as to say the comments were "as balmy as Hitler's."⁹ The mixture of reckless leadership in Italy as well as drunkenly disruptive public tendencies almost resulted in Patton's removal from World War II entirely. But, because Eisenhower was a shrewd leader that knew Patton's battle prowess was invaluable, he opted to shutter Patton away from true military command and into his false leadership role. Placed on a proverbial probation, he was shepherded into command of the decoy First United States Army Group helping to create one of the greatest military smokescreens of all time.

⁷ James Weingartner, "Massacre at Biscari: Patton and an American War Crime." *Historian* (November 1, 1989): 30.

⁸ Weingartner, 32.

⁹ By Cable to The New York Times. "Patton Forsees British-U.S. Rule." *New York Times*, April 26, 1944.

The allies made their appointment public on the front pages of newspapers with the headline: Patton Gets Post to Invasion. The article cited the 58-year old commander as being “the senior lieutenant general in [the European] theatre” and even went the extra mile to state that “it would be odd if the greatest enterprise on which the United States Army has ever embarked did not include the soldier who whatever his faults was a steady “ground gainer” in Tunisia and Sicily.”¹⁰ Such direct prose served as a blaring broadcast to the world that the United States was throwing its “big guns” into the invasion with Patton leading the charge. Everyone “knew” that the Allied hero was going to be leading the invasion forces into Continental Europe and thus all eyes followed him. Anything he said, anywhere he went, and anything he did was intensely monitored by both sides and thus his activity as related to the First United States Army Group was a main focal point for German defense planning. In hindsight, this brilliant announcement was strategic in nature and a clear diversionary tactic to not only put Patton in Rommel’s head, but also to add legitimacy to the false front across from Pas-de-Calais.

While the existence of the First United States Army Group was innately effective in deceiving the Germans, it was hardly enough. Even with a legendary leader such as Patton, an army’s existence does not mean anything related to military action. Without any military activity or operation there is no reason to consider them a true threat or important piece regardless of how renowned their commanding officer is. That is why an integral aspect of Operation Fortitude was the generation of waves of false activity in order to deceive German High Command. One of their primary tactics was the use of the Double Cross System, which turned German spies in their favor. Using double agents, the Allies were able to feed their enemies false

¹⁰ Drew Middleton, “Patton Gets Post Linked To Invasion.” New York Times, April 22, 1944. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/106880359>.

information about the First United States Army Group that further legitimized their fake forces. Another one of tactics the Allies used was to conduct actual military operations on the Pas-de-Calais coast to draw more attention to it, making it appear as a real target.

The Allies ran upwards of twice the number of planes over the false target as they did Normandy. They conducted heavy bombing raids upon the Pas-de-Calais coast specifically targeting the German V1 rockets —among their most heavy artillery.¹¹ The aerial assaults were interpreted as softening blows meant to clear the path for the soon to come invasion. Of course, this was once again a tactical deception on the part of the Allied forces. They did everything in their power to make the front—as presented by the First United States Army Group—as threatening and tangible as possible. Along with physical breaches of German territory, the Allies devised dummy threats that could be observed yet misinterpreted by the enemy. They constructed hundreds of “Bigbobs” — false landing crafts that gave an authentic appearance of a military apparatus. They were actually being made of oil drums and canvas.¹² These decoys were placed in harbors around the Dover coastline making them easy for Germans to observe and anticipate. The use of false technology helped to trick the enemy into overestimating the power of the First United States Army Group and thus overestimate its legitimacy as a threat. Coupled with the actual bombing raids conducted on the Pas-de-Calais coast, the German High Command concluded that an imminent invasion was in the works. The German High Command’s deception shows the strength and ingenuity of Operation Fortitude and the First United States Army Group.

¹¹ Cody K. Carlson, “Week in History: Operation Fortitude Fools Hitler.” Deseret News. Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Digital Media, June 4, 2015, 2.

¹² Rick Atkinson, “The Road to D-Day: Behind the Battle That Won the War.” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2013): 70.

There was no question that the Allies invested significant time and resources into the Operation Fortitude and the First United States Army, but even they had no idea how successful their ruse would be. History shows that the deceptive initiatives taken to protect the Allied invasion of Continental Europe were in truth a massive success that achieved spectacular results. German military maps of the time show that there was a severe discrepancy between their interpretation of Allied Forces and their actual locations. They believed there to be a significantly larger concentration in the southwest region of the country than there was. In truth, there were a great number of forces still located in the center who had yet to move down in to attack position. They ended up being more centered and across from Normandy. Most notable however, was the fact that German High Command grossly overestimated the sheer number of forces at the disposal of the Allies. The German maps indicate roughly 33% more Allied troops than the British do.¹³ Statistical evidence has shown that the Germans in fact believed there to be 89 divisions located in Great Britain when only a mere 47 truly existed.¹⁴

General misunderstanding of opposing forces can deeply disturb military strategies, and Operation Fortitude greatly highlights an example of this. By appearing larger in numbers, the German defense was planning for a stronger invasion force than was ever feasible. This misinterpretation had a negative impact on German strategy because they invested resources preparing for attacks that would never come. The *Fifteenth Army* was set to defend Pas-de-Calais, and even after the D-Day invasions, the German Command, led by Hitler, kept them there. He understood Normandy to be a smaller skirmish meant to detract from the real threat at Pas-de-Calais. He waited for the true invasion of the First United States Army Group, but such

¹³ Ambrose, 83.

¹⁴ Mazzetti, 2.

forces did not exist. Instead, the elite German unit held position at Pas-de-Calais until July 19th at which point the first armored division was mobilized to Normandy, but it was far too late.¹⁵

Had the *Fifteenth Army* been present in Normandy on June 6th 1944, they would have provided much needed support to the Atlantic Wall. Instead, the Allies and the placement of the First United States Army Group fooled them long enough rendering them useless. It is impossible to say that the *Fifteenth Army* would have changed the outcome of the D-Day landings, but one would be foolish to reject the impact they would have made. The unit was designated to repel the primary Allied attack and thus at the very least, their presence would have provided Rommel with his strongest defensive forces. Instead, the First United States Army Group's mere presence held the *Fifteenth Army* at bay and completely removed Germany's defensive taskforce from the equation.

In totality, the German delusion of a second and primary attack on Pas-de-Calais remained up until July 27, 1944. It became evident to them that there was no second frontal invasion when the First United States Army Group was reorganized into the 12th Army Group. It was this reformed unit (which held the Third U.S. Army) that Patton led into France most notably participating in the Battle of the Bulge. After the Allies held secure positioning within France, the need for deception had passed and the legendary military leader was needed on the battlefield. In response, the Germans moved their forces from Pas-de-Calais back towards the heart of Paris, but the damage had been done. Some of the best units that Hitler had under his

¹⁵ Forrest C Pogue, "The Supreme Command" Washington, D.C: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1989, 193.

command sat out on the sidelines for two months while the Allies had breached his Atlantic Wall and penetrated the French borders on their way to Paris then Berlin.¹⁶

In addition to the First United States Army Group and the overall Fortitude South plan which focused on France, there was also a Fortitude North scheme in place. This portion was designed to convince the Germans that the invasion would come through Norway ignoring France entirely. The Allies could never be sure what lies would be picked up and believed and thus they created as many as they could. Ultimately both parts—North and South—were co-existing cogs in the larger Operation Fortitude being to deceive the German military regarding invasion strategies. Together they proved truly effective; on June 6, 1944, roughly 17 German divisions stood in Norway, 19 in Pas-de-Calais, and a mere six were located at the true target of Normandy.¹⁷

The First United States Army Group never saw a second of battle and yet the damage they dealt to the Third Reich cannot be understated. The façade that they produced was enough to neutralize some of the strongest defenses Rommel had to offer and increased the success of the D-Day landings exponentially. Helmed by General George Patton, the phantom army of the Allied Expeditionary Forces composed of fake ships, uniforms and entire divisions, serve as one of the most successful deceptive operations in military history. There was no bloodshed, but Operation Fortitude and the First United States Army Group dealt a devastating blow to the Axis Powers and played a truly instrumental role in World War II.

¹⁶ Pogue, “The Supreme Command”, 201.

¹⁷ Pogue, “The Supreme Command”, 203.

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