

## Operation Mincemeat:

### How a Corpse Saved Thousands of Lives in World War II

*By Robert W. Martin*

In the spring of 1943, with the campaign in North Africa coming to a successful conclusion, the Allies began to consider options for the invasion of Hitler's "Fortress Europe." Everyone agreed that the most beneficial target was Sicily. Strategically located in the Mediterranean, Sicily not only would provide a springboard for the invasion of the European mainland, but would also eliminate the [Luftwaffe's](#) presence and make the Mediterranean safe for allied shipping. However, three major obstacles faced the Allied command. First, Sicily is a mountainous island which heavily favored the defenders. Secondly, the Axis knew that the invasion of Sicily was logically the Allies next move and therefore they could augment the already staunch defenses even more. Finally, the actual invasion of Sicily, code named Operation Husky, would require a massive arms build up which would most certainly be detected by the Germans. In order for the invasion to be a success, the German high command would have to be deceived.

#### *The Deception*

Squadron Leader Sir Archibald Cholmondley, of the British Intelligence [interservice XX Committee](#) (XX for double cross) first conceived the idea to plant false military documents on a dead man and let them fall into the hands of the Germans. This concept was passed along to naval intelligence Lt. Cmdr. Ewen Montagu who immediately began the daunting task of drafting the details of the ruse. At first, Montagu's team wanted to create the deception that the man was a victim of an unopened parachute. However, the major problem with this idea was that the German *Abwehr* (German Military Intelligence) were fully aware that it was the policy of the Allies never to send sensitive documents through enemy territory. In addition, an autopsy of the dead man would quickly reveal that the individual was dead long before the incident occurred. Montagu and his team finally decided to make the soldier a victim of a plane crash at sea. This would eliminate both concerns as a dead man would be expected to be floating in the sea for several days and the sensitive documents would not have been originally over enemy territory.

The next problem was to find a body of a certain age, appearance, and cause of death. Once this person was found, his next of kin would have to be briefed on the operation and sworn to secrecy. In London, they discovered a 30 year old pneumonia victim had recently died. The fluid in his lungs would support that he had been at sea for an extended period. They contacted the man's family and they agreed to the committee's terms. In return, they wanted his name to be forever withheld from the public. From here, Montagu and his staff realized that the operation was now close to becoming a reality. In a morbid twist, Montagu decided to call the operation "Mincemeat."

With the committee procuring a corpse, the man needed to be assigned a branch of service and a new identity. After much deliberation, Montague's team decided upon the Royal Marines and named the dead man Captain and acting Major William Martin. To make his identity more credible, Montagu's team established that the Major was born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1907 and supplied him with a fiancée named Pam, complete with a picture and love letters. Couple this with a sundry of other items such as keys, coins, and theater ticket stubs and the identity of Major Martin took shape. The committee also decided to enhance his identity by insinuating that he was careless in his personal affairs. This was achieved by creating several overdue bills, a stern letter from his father, and a replacement naval I.D. card in lieu of the one that he lost. Although this did create an added element to the careless side of Major Martin, it was somewhat of a risk. For if the *Abwehr* began to question the legitimacy of a careless individual possessing such sensitive military documents, the entire plot would be uncovered.

While this identity creating was taking place, the XX Committee also needed to create the confidential documents. Since it would be impossible to conceal the 160,000 men, 3,000 vessels, and 3,700 planes which would be utilized for Operation Husky, the committee decided they would have to fabricate a plan

which would deceive the Germans into thinking that the invasion force was a cover for another operation. They developed the scenario that the Allies would attack Sardinia first. Once the invasion was complete, the island would be used in conjunction with forces from Tunisia for a two-pronged assault on Sicily. In addition to the Sardinian invasion, the scenario called for a second major Allied thrust at Greece and the Balkans. This was considered because it would insinuate that the invasion plan was conceived by Churchill himself, for the British Prime Minister was a proponent of attacking the "soft underbelly" of Europe. All in all, it was finally decided that rather than creating fake operation plans, this ruse would be suggested in a personal letter between two high ranking officers. In a false letter from General Sir Archibald Nye, vice chief of the Imperial General Staff, to General Sir Harold Alexander, the British commander in North Africa, the deception took shape.

### *The Departure*

On April 30, 1943, the submarine H.M.S. *Seraph*, under the command of Lt. Cmdr. N.A. Jewell, surfaced about a mile off the Spanish coast near Huelva. The committee had decided that the best place for the body to be deposited would be off the coast of Spain for, at this time, the German *Abwehr* was particularly active in the area and the nation was closely aligned with the Axis cause.

Major Martin, who was encased in a special container with dry ice, was brought up on deck by the crew. Claiming that the canister held a top secret weather device, Jewell ordered everyone below with the exception of his officers. After briefing them on the situation, Jewell had Major Martin fitted with a life jacket, secured his briefcase, read the 39th Psalm, and the gently pushed the body into the sea where the tide pushed it towards shore. A few hours later, a fishing boat picked up the dead marine, brought him into port, and quickly reported this discovery to the local *Abwehr*. The result was one of the most successful deceptions in military history.

The *Abwehr* and the German General Staff were completely fooled by Major Martin's documents. This confidential information quickly reached Hitler who, on May 12, 1943, demanded that "measures regarding Sardinia and the Peloponnese take precedence over everything else." To achieve this, Hitler ordered the fortifications on Sardinia and Corsica to be reinforced and he sent [Field Marshal Erwin Rommel](#) to Athens to form an army group. But perhaps the greatest blow to the German cause came when Hitler ordered two additional panzer divisions to move from the Russian Front to Greece. Shortly thereafter, the Germans and Russians would clash in the greatest tank battle in history at [Kursk](#).

Following a month long bombardment of Axis bases in Sardinia, Sicily, and Southern Italy, [Operation Husky](#) commenced on July 9, 1943 with the Allies attacking the southern tip of Sicily. Here, Montgomery's British Eighth Army and Patton's U.S. Seventh Army met limited resistance not only due to the inclement weather, but also due to the fact that the majority of the island's defenses were situated along the north coast, facing Sardinia. By the time the Axis forces regrouped, the battle for Sicily was all but decided. Many of the Italian divisions surrendered immediately while the Germans, under Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, withdrew to Messina. By August 17th, Patton and Montgomery had taken the island -- thanks in no small part to a man who died several weeks prior.