A dummy tank being erected in 1942 at the Middle East School of Camouflage in Cairo. (Photo by Capt. Gerald Leet, British Army, via Imperial War Museum, HU 59574)

Weaving the Tangled Web

Military Deception in Large-Scale Combat Operations

Christopher M. Rein, PhD

LSCO

Throughout the recorded history of warfare, military planners and commanders have sought to deceive their adversary as to the size, timing, or location of an attack in order to gain a decisive advantage. From the famous Trojan Horse to modern efforts to use the electromagnetic spectrum to "spoof" or jam sensors, deception in some form remains an essential component of military operations. Whether attacking an unsuspecting enemy on Christmas morning, as Washington did at Trenton, or emplacing "Quaker guns" (logs painted black to resemble cannons) to provide the impression of strength, U.S. forces have successfully built on a long legacy of military deception (MILDEC) in order to prevail in the Nation's wars. While technology continues to advance at a dizzying pace, threatening to render previous lessons obsolete, MILDEC operations have successfully withstood previous developments and even incorporated new technologies to continue to form an important part of combat operations. While in some cases MILDEC is potentially capable of enabling military forces to prevail without a fight, as the theorist Sun Tzu postulated, more often it confers an advantage that helps the side that successfully harnesses it prevail, often at a much lower cost than it would have otherwise.[1] Thus, MILDEC, and its long and successful history, remain an important, even vital, tool for any future leader.

Given the voluminous and excellent body of literature currently available on military deception, it is certainly worth asking why we need another volume on the topic.[2] *Weaving the Tangled Web: Military Deception in Large-Scale Combat Operations* is not intended to displace, even if it could, the deeply-researched and lengthy treatises on the long history of military deception operations. Rather, it is intended as a primer and a thought piece for how strategists, operational planners, staff officers and, ultimately, commanders have historically integrated military deception into large-scale combat operations, focusing on the last one hundred years of conflict. The individual chapters, while certainly excellent stand-alone treatments of the deception aspects of the operations and campaigns considered, likewise are of insufficient length to become the definitive works on their individual topics. Instead, they build upon the extensive secondary literature and, in several cases, primary sources in order to provide a comprehensive but accessible understanding of how military deception has successfully enabled victory on the battlefield.

If principles of war can be sifted out of military history, as the master, Carl von Clausewitz, attempted to do with Napoleon's campaigns, then these twelve case studies also ought to provide us with some "universal truths" regarding deception operations.[3] Admittedly, considering successful deception operations primarily involving the U.S. Army and its principal allies and antagonists may omit a number of relevant examples. But, these cases are sufficient to provide several enduring threads of continuity in successful operations that, most importantly, remain relevant for current and future practitioners.

One of the first is the importance of coordination in deception campaigns, especially since the addition of warfare in the third dimension (air warfare), which coincides with the beginning of this book. Many thought that the airplane, and later radar and satellite imagery, marked the end of successful deception by pulling back the veil that had shielded terrestrial armies for millennia. Instead, deception remained a key, if significantly more complicated aspect of many campaigns. While previously deception had to be coordinated between the military and political instruments of national power, now it also had to be practiced in multiple domains simultaneously. In what could be labeled multi-domain deception, these plans required close and careful coordination across the warfighting domains to ensure that lapses in one area did not undo efforts in other areas. A heavy bombing campaign focused exclusively on Normandy would have undone the ruse of an Allied landing at Pas-de-Calais, just as belligerent rhetoric from Egyptian political leaders would have undermined efforts to "lull" the Israelis to sleep prior to the 1973 Yom Kippur/6 October War. With the proliferation of warfare into space and cyberspace, the difficulty of coordinating a

Christopher M. Rein, PhD, is a historian with the Combat Studies Institute, Army University Press, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He earned his doctorate in history in 2011 from the University of Kansas and is the author of one book, *The North African Air Campaign*, published by the University Press of Kansas in 2012, as well as several articles. He is a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel and served as a navigator aboard the E-8C Joint STARS during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

successful deception campaign has expanded exponentially and greatly complicated the efforts of its architects, but it has not made their task impossible.

Also emerging from the narrative is the "Magruder Principle," the idea that it is easier to convince an adversary to hold onto a preexisting belief than to convince him or her of a new one.[4] This obviously depends heavily on both intelligence collection to understand an opposing commander's estimate of the situation, and cultural competency to understand what key assumptions commanders, militaries, and nations are likely to hold most dear. Once planners have accurately divined an enemy's strongly held beliefs, they can then use this knowledge to achieve their goals. Just as a practitioner of the Japanese martial art of jiu-jitsu uses the momentum of an opponent's punch or lunge to continue movement in a certain direction but well past the intended point, deception campaigners can use adversaries' assumptions against them by reinforcing those beliefs while simultaneously planning an unexpected operation that catches an adversary off balance or out of position. While difficult to successfully accomplish, this remains the closest thing to an enduring principle in military deception operations, and it forces planners

to "mirror image" themselves and ask what preconceived notions they have that an adversary might turn against them. One of the most famous of the humorous "Murphy's Rules of War" postulates that "The enemy diversion you are ignoring is his main attack," which accurately characterizes the initial German response to the successful Operation Overlord invasion of Normandy.[5]

Careful readers of the accounts in this book will notice that weaker powers tend to favor the use of deception to overcome a stronger opponent. Just as jiu-jitsu enables a smaller fighter to use a larger or more powerful adversary's strength against him or her, successful deception operations can enable a weaker force or nation to prevail against a stronger one by dispersing effort or creating a tempo of operations to which a less agile opponent is unable to respond. Thus, smaller nations, or those with smaller manpower reserves such as the United Kingdom, have historically been the most successful developers and employers of deception in order to achieve decisive effects. Additionally, deception might also enable the forces of politically fragile, casualty-averse nations to succeed at a much lower cost, preventing an adversary from using attrition to achieve strategic aims. In any event, through long experience, some nations and cultures, from China to Russia to the United Kingdom, have become especially skilled at military deception and thus offer a wealth of talent and insights for potential allies or warnings for adversaries. Stronger nations that have typically relied

Ghost Army insignia, circa 1944. The Ghost Army was a 1,100-person unit established during World War II to deceive German intelligence as to the size, identity, location, and capabilities of Allied military units, especially as forces were massing in Great Britain for the invasion of Europe. The unit recruited members who could contribute to these deceptions from a variety of backgrounds such as artists, actors and set designers from theater groups, radio broadcasters, design engineers, and architects. The unit successfully misled German forces in a coordinated effort that included the creation of fake units, complete with shoulder insignia; the use of decoy tanks, trucks, artillery, and aircraft made of rubber; employment of large speakers to mimic the sounds of personnel and equipment; construction of fake motor pools and other buildings; the broadcast of fake radio transmissions; and the distribution of fake documents. (Image courtesy of the Institute of Heraldry, U.S. Army)

Previous page: A soldier from the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, also known as the Ghost Army, uncovers speakers mounted on a half-track that were used as a form of sonic deception during World War II. Sounds that were recorded and mixed to fit specific situations to help deceive the enemy could be heard fifteen miles away. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives via Princeton Architectural Press)

Australian troops carry a dummy tank 17 September 1918 that was built to mislead the Germans during the following day's attack on Le Verguier and the Hindenburg Outpost Line by the 1st and 4th Divisions. (Photo courtesy of the Australian War Memorial collections database, E04934)

on overwhelming force or less-sophisticated assaults to achieve military objectives through brute attrition would do well to leverage this expertise in their own campaigns and operations.

But, these observations are not the sum total of insights within these pages. Readers may identify concepts that escaped the authors or editors, or find new inspiration from the efforts of earlier campaigns. While the speed, range, lethality, and scale of warfare are constantly increasing, military theorists argue that its fundamental nature is not, though they often engage in spirited debate on what exactly comprises the nature of war. Future practitioners must study their craft in order to first gain and then share their own insights, and the authors hope this book will provide a useful roadmap for the journey.

The book begins with the U.S. Army's first successful deception operation in a major conflict. As Mark Grotelueschen convincingly argues, the "Belfort Ruse" successfully enabled American, and therefore Allied, battlefield success in the First World War by influencing German troop dispositions in

France. While relying heavily on its European allies, the U.S. Army demonstrated it was a quick study and incorporated deception operations in almost all of its subsequent combat operations. Brian Drohan continues the focus on the First World War by examining British forces in Palestine that leveraged deception operations to first outflank Ottoman dispositions on a weakened flank and then used their adversary's tendency to expect a repeat of this tactic to drive through a weakly held coastal sector. The two operations at Beersheeba and Megiddo remind planners that, like poker players and baseball pitchers, they develop their own "tells" and tendencies, and, by identifying these and then varying their plans, they can successfully catch their opponent off guard.

A worker inflates a model of a Russian T-72B tank next to an inflatable dummy of a SU-27 fighter jet 8 April 2009 at the compound of the RusBal balloon manufacturer outside Moscow. The small firm produces infrared- and radar-reflective inflatable dummy targets in 1:1 ratio that are designed for the Russian military and the international defense market. (Photo by Thomas Peter, Reuters)

Gary Linhart keeps our focus on the shores of the Mediterranean but shifts forward in time to examine the intricate British deception campaign at the Battle of El Alamein that enabled Montgomery's defeat of Rommel's vaunted Afrika Korps during World War II. While exploring in detail the technical aspects of the campaign, Linhart's analysis of Operation Bertram also reveals British efforts to use Rommel's tendencies against him. Knowing that the "Desert Fox" would both use, and therefore expect, a flank attack through the desert, Montgomery fed this belief while developing a strong attack on the most likely avenue of approach that enabled him to break the Axis cordon. The episode reveals the continued British expertise in deception that significantly enabled the Allied victory in the west. Greg Hospodor extends this analysis to subsequent campaigns in the Mediterranean, demonstrating how an elaborate, theater-level deception enabled construction of a fictitious order of battle that far exceeded in scale the forces actually available, forcing the Axis powers to distribute forces all along their threatened shore and ensuring that a strong landing at any one point had a much better chance of success. While the famous, if macabre, efforts of "The Man Who Never

Was," inspired books and motion pictures, Hospodor reminds us that it succeeded only because it was part of a layered, detailed, and well-coordinated deception campaign that continually evolved to maintain a position of relative advantage for the western Allies.[6]

Alan Donohue shifts our focus to the Eastern Front, one of the most significant theaters of ground combat in World War II. By successfully reinforcing Soviet perceptions that Moscow remained the focus of German attacks in 1942, *Fall Kreml* (Operation Kremlin) facilitated a German drive that extended well into the Caucasus and might have cut off Soviet oil supplies had Hitler not become first distracted by, and later obsessed with, the city of Stalingrad. Kyle Vautrinot's analysis of that detailed operation demonstrates that tactical, operational, and strategic

deception played an important role in the counterattack that rescued the city and destroyed Germany's offensive capability for the remainder of the war.

Soviet deception, known as *maskirovka*, continued to evolve through the remainder of the war; most significantly, as Curt King points out, in Operation Bagration, when successive and overlapping deception operations kept the Germans constantly off guard and unable to respond to sequential Soviet thrusts. This resulted in the destruction of the German Army Group Center and the liberation of Soviet territory taken by the Germans in 1941. But Scott Farquhar's analysis of the D-Day deception plans reveals that the Soviets were not the only masters of deception in the Second World War. By 1944, the Allies had developed the staff and, most importantly, the expertise, to successfully execute an intricate and large-scale campaign that ensured the safety of the Normandy landings and the following breakout and liberation of France. During the course of the war, Germany went from deceiver to deceived, largely as a result of deficiencies in its intelligence apparatus and its vulnerability to codebreaking, demonstrating the enduring importance of superiority in the information domain to enable ground combat.

In chapter 9, Geoff Babb welcomingly provides both an example from an "Eastern" adversary and a case in which a Western coalition succumbed to deception with catastrophic consequences. Babb's account of Chinese deception on the Korean peninsula offers a stark warning for future commanders of how their preexisting beliefs and notions, if unchallenged, can lead them to disaster.

Tal Tovy follows with another successful case of deception, one that spanned the military and diplomatic arenas, delayed Israeli awareness of an impending Arab attack, and impacted Israel's response—though, fortunately, without disastrous consequences. It also offers a connection to previous chapters, demonstrating how Soviet sponsors successfully exported *maskirovka* to client states, and how they successfully used a massive training exercise as cover for an invasion, a still-favored tactic in the post-Soviet world.

Steven Paget's account of the British liberation of the Falkland Islands brings the study forward into a compelling case of multi-domain operations requiring both a high degree of coordination among the military domains as well as synchronization with the media and other instruments of national power. Operating in an environment with a ubiquitous media presence, some of which may be hostile, presents a new challenge for military commanders, whether those media are state-based or "nationless" entities such as WikiLeaks, which has collected and published sensitive military information electronically.[7] Maintaining a successful deception campaign may require the active support of sympathetic media and exclusion of hostile media, presenting a further challenge in democracies where freedom of the press has been enshrined in their founding documents. Don Wright's account of the First Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm, brings the book into the current operating environment,
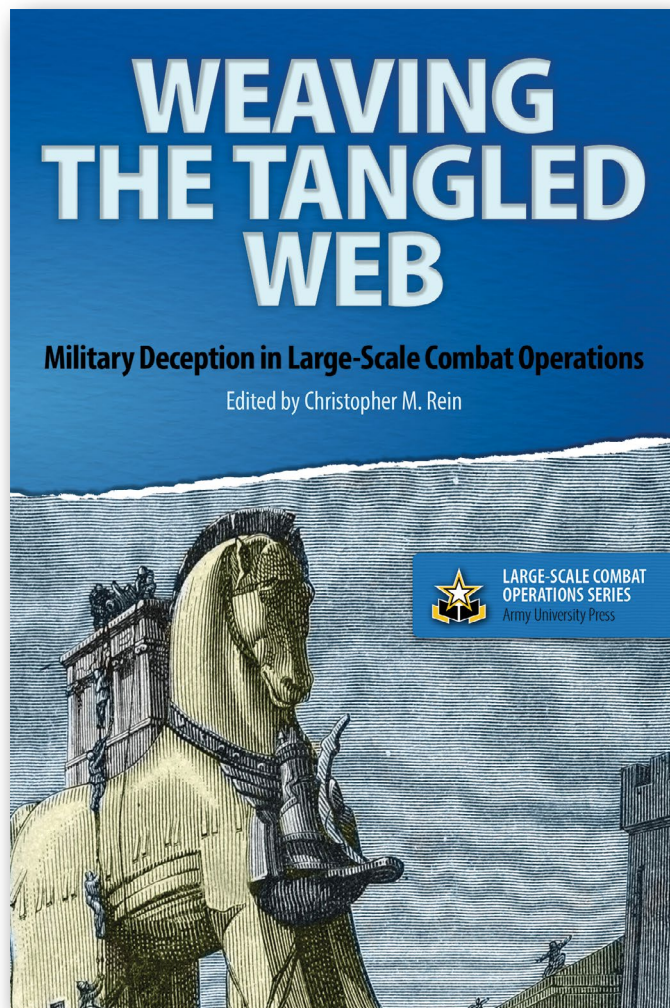
highlighting how air, land, and naval forces successfully cooperated to conceal, or at least delay, recognition of the bold coalition strategy to liberate Kuwait. While the coalition was certainly strong enough to overwhelm Iraqi forces in a frontal assault, the deception plan's key contribution was to spare coalition lives, thus maintaining popular support.

In his conclusion, Conrad Crane reminds us that much has transpired in the quarter century since Desert Storm, including leaps forward in technological capabilities that significantly increase the difficulty of a deception planner's mission. Seemingly innocuous advances in personal electronics now have the ability to reveal the location of clandestine military operating sites.[8] Coordination challenges have increased exponentially, while the proliferation of social media makes it difficult to control a popular narrative, and therefore public and global opinion. At the same time, commanders and staffs have become highly reliant on systems subject to denial or, worse, false injects, leading to the potential for paralysis or

action based on false information, potentially easing the deceiver's task. He makes clear that military deception will continue to be a vital part of military operations and an essential area of study for leaders at all levels.

This collection of essays seeks to highlight current thinking and areas of doctrinal development to stimulate the study and development of military deception operations. The authors and editor hope that *Weaving the Tangled Web: Military Deception in Large-Scale Combat Operations* will provide a jumping-off point for professionals new to the topic and a resource for instructors seeking to educate and train the next generation of practitioners of military deception. While not a comprehensive treatment of the subject, the twelve excellent essays and thought-provoking conclusion provide ample grist for the mills for those who design military deception efforts and a reminder of the importance of critical thinking for all who guard against the many would-be deceivers weaving their tangled webs. ■

Notes

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 41, 66, 77. The master wrote, "All warfare is based on deception," and "to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."

2. Examples include Mark Lloyd, *The Art of Military Deception* (London: Pen and Sword, 1999); Barton Whaley, *Practise to Deceive: Learning Curves of Military Deception Planners* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016); Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004).

3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

4. Office of Research and Development, Central Intelligence Agency, *Deception Maxims: Fact and Folklore* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1980), 5, accessed 25 June 2018,

http://www.governmentattic.org/18docs/CIAdeceptionMaxims-FactFolklore_1980.pdf.

5. "Murphy's Rules of Combat," The S2 Company, accessed 25 June 2018, http://www.s2company.com/files/readings/murphy.htm.

6. For example, see Ewan Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was: World War II's Boldest Counterintelligence Operation* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001); Ronald Neame, director, *The Man Who Never Was* (1956; UK: Odeon Entertainment, 2012), DVD.

7. "WikiLeaks Website Publishes Classified Military Documents from Iraq," CNN, 25 October 2010, accessed 25 June 2018, http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/10/22/wikileaks.iraq/index.html.

8. Joshua Berlinger and Maegan Vazquez, "US Military Reviewing Security Practices after Fitness App Reveals Sensitive Info," CNN, 29 January 2018, accessed 25 June 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/28/politics/strava-military-bases-location/index.html.