



# the GHOST ARMY

## This Month In NCO History: June 14, 1944 — The Ghost Army Begins Its Scare Campaign

*By Pablo Villa – NCO Journal*

**S**gt. Victor Dowd was riding his bicycle late June 13, 1944, to his camp in the British countryside when he was surprised by a light on in his tent.

Dowd was in an area near Stratford-upon-Avon where he was camped as part of the 603rd Camouflage Engineers. Once inside his tent, he was informed he would be part of a 15-man platoon from the 603rd leaving the following morning for Omaha Beach in France to carry out a mission of such an uncharted magnitude that it was kept secret for nearly 40 years after the war.

The 603rd was the visual deception arm of the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops. Along with the 406th Combat Engineers, the 3132 Signal Service Company and the Signal Company Special, the 1,100-man unit was given a unique mission during World War II — to impersonate other U.S. Army units to deceive the Germans. The Army recruited painters, actors and sound technicians who would go on to become some of the nation's most prominent artists and designers. They included such notable NCOs as Sgt. Bill Blass, a famed fashion designer and Sgt. Ellsworth Kelly, a pioneer of hard-edge painting, among other creative luminaries.

From a few weeks after the June 6 Allied landings on Normandy to the end of the war, the Ghost Army utilized inflatable tanks, sound trucks and fake radio transmissions to stage more than 20 missions of battle-field deception, often operating close to the front lines. The unit and its story were kept secret for decades until it was declassified in 1996.

Dowd, who died in May 2010, was one of several former Soldiers of the unit who were interviewed for the PBS documentary *The Ghost Army*, which was released in 2013. His small platoon, which was headed to Normandy, was the Ghost Army's opening salvo and was to demonstrate whether the unit could really deceive the Germans.

The platoon, under the command of Lt. Bernie Mason, worked closely with the commander of the 980th Artillery Battalion, the first American heavy artillery unit to come ashore on France after D-Day. The platoon was to mimic the movements and activities of the 980th, using rubber inflatable howitzers. They stayed about a mile ahead of the 980th's actual position as it began its march to Germany.



An inflatable tank used by the Ghost Army during World War II. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)

unit that most were unaware of until recently. Dowd parlayed his creative talent into a career as an illustrator, including a stint with Stan Lee at Marvel Comics.

Two weeks after D-Day, the rest of the Ghost Army arrived in France. The Soldiers moved east with the rest of the Army, taking part in missions of deception on famed battlegrounds including the Maginot Line, the Hürtgen Forest and the Rhine River.

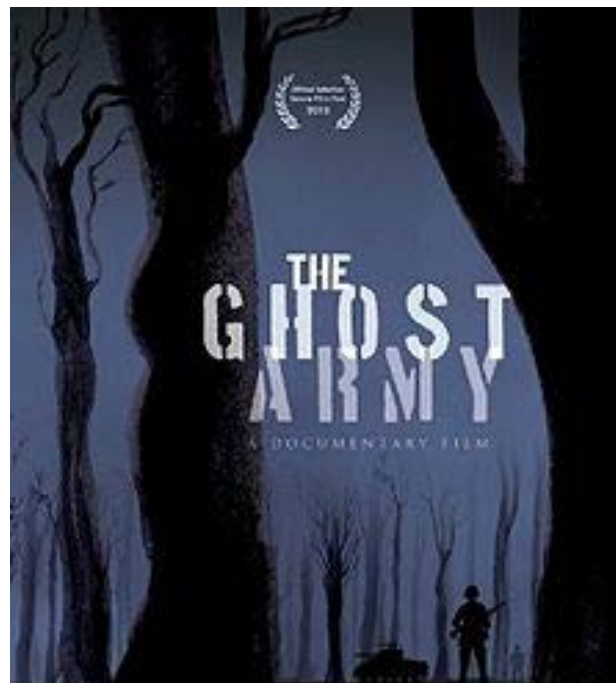
By the time the Ghost Army left Europe in March 1945, it was credited with saving the lives of 10,000 to 40,000 fellow Soldiers. ■

“I can remember the wild difference between last night when I was in the lovely, quiet, serene countryside and the grim reality of today, where I could still hear machine-gun fire,” Dowd said in the PBS documentary, *The Ghost Army*, which was released in 2013. “So the fighting was within earshot, certainly, and there were dead German soldiers all over the ground.”

The ruse was successful. Task Force Mason worked with the 980th for 28 days. By the end of its stint, the phony guns had been shelled thoroughly while the 980th moved relatively unscathed through key French positions behind the ghosts. Just as important, the platoon suffered no casualties, proving its mettle and instilling the Army’s faith in its innovative creation.

“We did what we were supposed to do, but we didn’t really believe the big picture, until we got fired at and shot when reality struck,” Dowd said.

In addition to being a part of the Ghost Army’s first effort in World War II, Dowd was also notable for being one of several Soldiers who created hundreds of drawings and paintings that depicted the unit’s movement through Europe. Many of those works have since become part of exhibits about the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, offering a glimpse into the activities of an Army



A promotional poster for *The Ghost Army* documentary released by PBS in 2013. The film is currently available on Netflix.

**NCO JOURNAL**

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

