

THE GREATEST MAGIC TRICK IN HISTORY?

The turning point of the desert campaign was the Battle of Alamein. Montgomery's massive offensive was planned for the evening of October 23rd, 1942. His sacrificial pawns, the hordes of infantrymen spearheading the attack in front of the main armour, would need to carve their way through extensive minefields. To minimise casualties, Montgomery was determined to fool the Germans over the date and the launching point of the attack.

According to Fisher, Montgomery met with Dudley Clarke, Geoffrey Barkas, Tony Ayrton and Jasper Maskelyne. He authorised them to develop a deception plan. Their task was to create the illusion of a second army gathering to the south and to hide the main army assembling to the north.

If Maskelyne could somehow conjure up a phantom army and simultaneously vanish the genuine juggernaut, he would pull off "*the greatest magic trick in history.*" Maskelyne, according to Fisher, translated the challenge into conjuring terms: "*It's a trick, that's all ... the situation absolutely begs for a classic misdirection. What we intend to do is make something that is in one place appear to be in another place ...*."

The deception operation, code-named Bertram, was as follows:

On the eve of battle, transport vehicles (in actuality, tanks) would assemble in the north; armoured vehicles and tanks (in actuality, dummies) would apparently gather in the south.

Fuel stockpiles for the main army to the north were hidden in old slit-trenches.

Fake stores of fuel, ammunition and food were assembled in the south.

A dummy water pipeline, snaking south, was constructed from flattened fuel cans. German reconnaissance planes studying the pipeline's progress would calculate that it could not possibly be operational until November.

'Martello' the rectangle to the north, from where the disguised armour would eventually launch the attack, was occupied initially by a combination of 4,000 real trucks and 722 dummy trucks or 'sunshields'. These 'hides' were empty shells at this stage. Only on the night of the 'switch' would they house their designated tank.

The artillery pieces were disguised as trucks. The method of concealment was nicknamed 'cannibal' because the dummy trucks swallowed up the genuine guns.

These interlinked schemes were designed to fool the Germans into thinking the attack would occur in November and be launched from the south.

During the night of October 18th and the daylight of October 19th, the British armour, deliberately uncamouflaged, moved into preliminary position on the southern flank. It was hoped that German aerial reconnaissance would spot this large scale manoeuvring.

October 20th was the date of the transposition or switch. The armoured formations secretly moved by night from the south to the north and were replaced by dummy tanks and dummy artillery.

The Allied attack on the northern front, late in the night on October 23rd, was preceded by a massive artillery barrage. The British infantry then advanced by moonlight into the enemy minefields. At the same time, diversionary attacks were made to the south.

NO PLAN SURVIVES CONTACT

What happened in the opening phase? The British advance soon encountered delays. These setbacks partly neutralised the surprise advantage gained by the deception scheme. Montgomery had underestimated the impenetrability of the minefields. His battle plan now produced chaos and congestion. Tanks became gridlocked. In the early hours of October 25th, several of Montgomery's generals wanted to break off the attack because of the high casualty rate and the lack of progress.

Rommel's army put up ferocious resistance for several days. Montgomery was forced to change his strategy and develop a second line of attack called 'Supercharge'. This unflinching offensive eventually broke through the enemy lines on November 2nd.

More than sixty years later, how do we judge Plan Bertram?

After the battle, the captured general von Thuma confirmed that the Afrika Korps had expected the attack to come from the south. This candid admission is usually cited as conclusive evidence that the deception plan worked.

Churchill's speech in Parliament on November 11th is also frequently quoted: "*By a marvellous system of camouflage, complete tactical surprise was achieved in the desert. The enemy suspected—indeed, knew—that an attack was impending, but when and where and how it was coming was hidden from him.*"

However, modern research has uncovered a mixed picture. The New Zealand Archives contain a captured document, dated October 1st, written by Kircher, a German Intelligence Officer. He accurately predicted the British were ready to attack from mid-October onwards. He correctly worked out the methods they would use and the direction from which they would come (the North). He even warned that sham attacks would be made elsewhere.

In contrast, one week later, a German reconnaissance unit to the south predicted that the attack would take place near the Himeimat Ridge (the South).

At the same time, another report sent to the German High Command correctly guessed the direction of the offensive but not the timing.

So Bertram did not completely fool the Axis forces, but it certainly masked the British intentions and added to the enemy's confusion and uncertainty.

Even successful deception plans have short-life spans. Stephen Bungay, author of *Alamein*, advised me: "*When Rommel turned up, he decided pretty quickly to move 21st Panzer north. It was a judgement call, but prisoners had by then revealed that the main effort would be there, so by 26th October at the latest, the deception plan had become redundant.*"

Another author, McKee, also says that Rommel quickly worked out where the main attack was coming from: "*In spite of the order to medical units to remove their Red Crosses and ... concentrate medical resources obviously in the south, the give-away was the enormous concourse of vehicles which built up in the north, all in full view of the heights still held by the Germans.*"

In regard to Fisher's magic trick analogy, I would query whether the big switch just before the battle had any impact. The final moves in Plan Bertram relied on fake concentrations and sham movements being spotted by enemy reconnaissance. However, on the eve of battle the German Air Force was unable to mount reconnaissance flights. *The Official History of British Intelligence* states: "*Thanks to the RAF, the enemy was denied any aerial observation of the British forces between 18 and 22 October, when Eighth Army took up its final positions, and during 23 October, immediately before Eighth Army's advance; as was confirmed in the Enigma decrypts, no GAF aircraft succeeded in over-flying the British area of concentration.*"

It could be argued that the temporary positioning of British forces to the south on the 18th and 19th of October and the switching back on the 20th had no effect on the German command, whose aerial reconnaissance by this stage was so impoverished as to be non-existent.

The conjuring trick (Bertram) in its final clever moves may have been wasted on an enemy audience who were too distracted by internal problems and were not paying attention at the critical time.

My argument is based on the complete absence of overflights. However, it is possible German observers on the Himeimat Ridge (an elevated position to the south) spotted, and were fooled by, the sham manoeuvring of British armour on October 19th.

BRUTE FORCE, NOT MAGIC TRICKS

Did magic tricks win at Alamein?

Deception and camouflage played a role, but other important elements contributed to the victory:

Rommel, faced with insurmountable logistical pressures, had 'stretched his elastic' to the maximum

and was now vulnerable to counter-attack.

By October 1942, the German air force was outnumbered and exhausted. Their leading fighter pilots were dying at an unsustainable rate. Even their high altitude reconnaissance planes were being shot down by specially modified Spitfires. The last German JU 86 flight was September 15th, five weeks before the battle.

Ultra intelligence gave the British precise information about Rommel's troop and tank strengths and also helped track and sink vital fuel and ammunition supplies.

Montgomery's Y Service, which intercepted battlefield communications, was also coming into prominence. In contrast, Rommel's intelligence unit was now severely handicapped. Seebohm, Rommel's SIGINT specialist, had been killed by Australian troops three months earlier.

Brute force won at Alamein. It was a case of classic attrition, not classic misdirection. The Afrika Korps were slowly battered to death. The British won because of overwhelming numerical superiority in men, tanks, artillery, supplies, fuel, ammunition and aerial support. They had twice the number of men and twice the number of tanks, and were fully aware of this advantage because of the Enigma decrypts.

As Rommel ruefully wrote "*The battle is fought and decided by the Quartermaster before the shooting begins.*"

The camoufleurs' clever schemes, scams and feints did not decide the outcome. Barkas' book, *The Camouflage Story* shrewdly recognised this: "*Though none of us was so foolish as to think that it had been won by conjuring tricks with stick, string and canvas, we could at least feel that we had earned our keep. It was good to feel that camouflage had helped to put the fighting men into battle on more favourable terms, and to purchase victory at a lower price in blood.*"

Copyright© Richard Stokes 2005