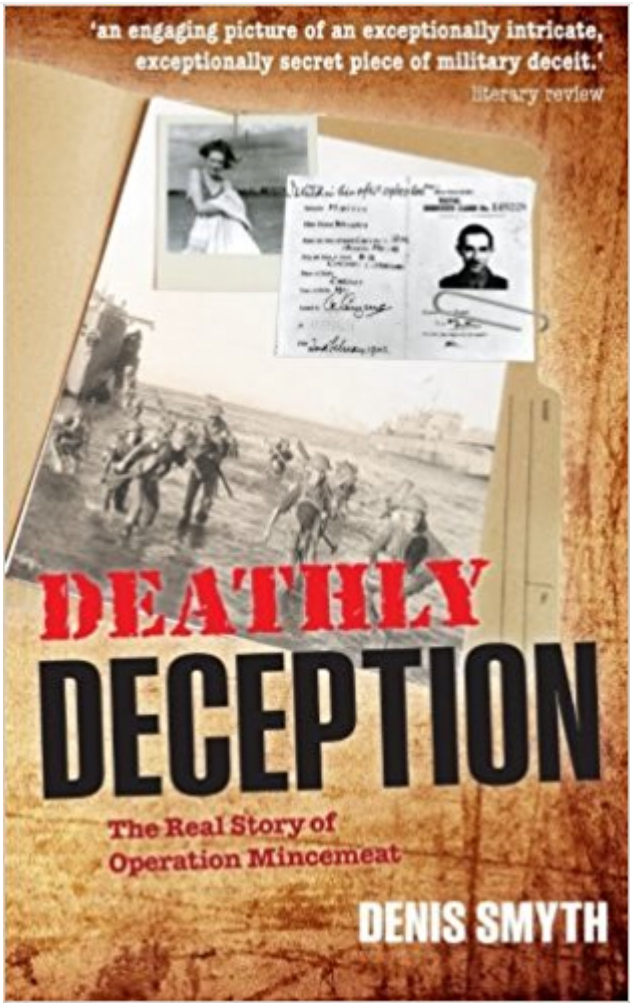
{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat



Volume 44 (2011)

Reviewed Work(s)

Deathly Deception: the Real Story of Operation Mincemeat. By Denis Smyth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Pp. 367. Hardcover, $29.95.

Deathly Deception is a political-military study of espionage, hinged on retelling a macabre narrative of a cloak-and-dagger operation while simultaneously disentangling a broader story of military intelligence in the Mediterranean prior to 1944. Denis Smyth focuses upon Operation Mincemeat, the Second World War British plan to hoodwink German strategic planners through a clever *ruse de guerre* involving a dead body, fake documents, and a false identity. The operation took place in early 1943 when the war in North Africa had reached its endgame in Tunisia, and both Allied and Axis commands planned for further moves in the Mediterranean theatre. Allied forces conceived a plan to place false documents on a dead body dressed as a Naval Officer and have the body wash up on the Spanish shore, where the 'neutral' Spanish officials would certainly pass any documents to their fascist brethren in Germany. The mischievous operation depended upon directing Axis forces away from the real intended target – Sicily. To do so, the Allies exploited Axis expectations of imminent invasion of Greece and planted the idea that Sardinia served as a western target. As such, documents and personal effects were planted on the fictitious Major William Martin – in reality an impoverished Welsh labourer Glyndwr Michael who had committed suicide – indicating these targets in supposed high-level correspondence between Allied Generals. Upon receipt of the documents, the Spanish officials acted as predicted, passed the documents to the German intelligence service, who then successfully advised the High Command to reposition forces to repel the expected assaults on Sardinia and southern Greece. Smyth convincingly argues that Mincemeat was a resounding success in deflecting the German strategic gaze from the western Mediterranean. As a result of this strategic deception, the actual Allied amphibious assault on Sicily met little resistance and cost far fewer casualties then would have been the case if Mincemeat had not convinced Axis command to redeploy its forces.

Smyth's stated goal of the book is twofold: retell the precise story of Mincemeat in its 'exotic and poignant detail' (xi), and properly situate the Mincemeat story within the broader strategic picture of the Mediterranean in 1943. Smyth succeeds on both accounts, crafting a spectacularly detailed narrative in all its gruesome detail. For example, Smyth retells how in dressing the corpse as an officer of the Royal Marines, the operation's personnel had to thaw a frozen Glyndwr's feet in order to fit into his boots. Though often macabre, Smyth's detailed narrative is sophisticated in nature, incorporating appropriate medical information so as to properly contextualize the grisly elements. In other matters, such as the precise design of the documents, the nature of the key characters involved, and in general, the outstanding amount of detail available to the reader, Smyth demonstrates the sheer volumes of research undertaken. As for the goal of situating the narrative within a strategic framework, Smyth also succeeds. He does well to demonstrate the real, practical value of dressing up a corpse in military garb and transmitting false documents to the enemy.

Methodologically, Smyth approaches the topic with a thorough study of German, English, and Spanish archival material. Smyth also mentions interviewing those involved or their descendents. As Mincemeat has been retold in a number of previous works, Smyth's book distinguishes itself with its use of 'newly released documents' to provide a fuller picture than in previous works.

Deathly Deception is quite useful in connecting the history of Allied intelligence efforts – namely Double Cross (the fake spy ring established by the British "Twenty Committee" to feed misinformation to the German High Command) and ULTRA (the information gleaned from decrypting German transmissions that were encoded by the Enigma machine) – to a precise event, showing how the different branches of military intelligence cooperated and clashed on practical issues. Smyth does very well to explain the mechanics of deception and to show the importance of exploiting the predispositions of the enemy rather than implanting unconditioned misinformation. Moreover, as a study of the seemingly Byzantine bureaucracies of wartime British and American military command and intelligence services, this book succeeds in conveying the frustrations of rigid command hierarchies and overlapping jurisdictions.

Smyth's work is an extension of the Hinsley-inspired school of post-ULTRA revelation intelligence studies. However, Smyth fails to elucidate his position within this historiography – somewhat startling considering the volumes of writing on Mincemeat.[1]As such, non-experts of military intelligence history may find themselves somewhat lost. Though predicated upon the use of "new materials," and containing a thorough bibliography of archival materials, the book does not distinguish the new materials from the old, nor explain and how they add to the narrative. Additionally, Smyth demonstrates remarkable narrative ability yet occasionally fails to fully analyse certain events. For example, though Smyth does hint at the controversy of the Mincemeat planners' grave-robbing activities in procuring 'Major Martin' and the possible improprieties in securing the body (41), Smyth does not extend his analysis further. This section could have benefited from a modicum of class analysis, as the story of Oxbridge military officers requisitioning an impoverished Welsh labourer's body for use has obvious class connotations.

Regardless of some minor flaws, this study demonstrates the great value in academic historians persisting in the study of military history and not requisitioning the subject to savants or journalists. *Deathly Deception* demonstrates the quality of work produced by a scholarly mind in the wedding of fascinating narrative and broader geo-political considerations. This work is very useful for scholars and students of military history, strategic studies, and intelligence issues.

Brian MacDowall

York University

[1] The subject of Mincemeat has received scholarly attention in the form of the recent publications Ben Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat: How a Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory,* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010) and in Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, (London: Alan Lane, 2009). The story of Mincemeat was originally revealed in Montague's account, Ewan Montague, *The Man Who Never Was*, (New York: J.P. Lippincott Company, 1954). Additionally, as Smyth

notes, Major Reed's son has stated his intentions to publish a book on his father's work (ix).

Published by

View all posts by

Book Reviews

Africa, England, Europe, Military, Politics, World War II

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

» WordPress.org