



# Operational Deception

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Jeremy Lock)

## in the Information Age

By MILAN N. VEGO

**D**eception is as old as warfare. It can magnify strength for both attackers and defenders. It is among the least expensive military activities in terms of forces and assets. Yet for all its proven value, it generates little enthusiasm in the U.S. military. No operational deception plan was prepared for the Kosovo conflict of 1999, nor has one been evident for operations in Afghanistan. A popular view in today's information era is that deception is outdated: a stronger force need not deceive an enemy to win while a weaker party

cannot deceive a sophisticated enemy that has information superiority. Yet new information technologies offer both sides more, not fewer, opportunities for deception.

The lack of peacetime interest is hard to remedy once war begins. Deception skills must then be learned by trial and error and at great cost. Yet they can facilitate the element of surprise, which multiplies chances for a quick and conclusive success while minimizing personnel and material losses. Deception can cause an enemy to waste assets defending unimportant areas, disperse its forces, or reduce its readiness. Any strength, no matter how overwhelming, risks stagnation or decline if it is not accompanied by stratagems and deceptions. Even the strongest military should systematically undertake them.

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## Why Deceive?

Designed to mislead by distorting, manipulating, or falsifying information available to it, deception can induce an enemy to do something contrary to its interests. Joint Pub 3-58, *Joint Doctrine for Military Deception*, defines it as “those actions executed to deliberately mislead adversary military decisionmakers as to friendly military capabilities, intentions, and operations, thereby causing the adversary to take specific actions that will contribute to the accomplishment of the friendly mission.” It is also understood to include planned measures for conveying true or false information pertaining to one’s strategic plans, strength, dispositions, operations, or tactics to cause an enemy to reach false estimates and act on them.

Deception can be designed to delude an enemy about the time and place of an attack. The Germans gained operational surprise through deception in their attack through the Ardennes in May 1940 and again in December 1944. They

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achieved both strategic and operational surprise in the invasion of Russia in June 1941. Likewise, the Japanese used deception to gain strategic, operational, and tactical surprise in attacking Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Deception can create an illusion of strength where weakness exists or weakness where there is strength. It can induce an enemy to focus forces in the wrong place and thereby violate the principle of concentration. It can also cause it to concentrate forces at the wrong time against nonexistent objectives.

In addition, deception can mislead an enemy about friendly capabilities, type of forces, or location of centers of gravity. Moreover, it can overload collection and analytical capabilities or block information, thus denying an accurate and timely picture of the operational or strategic situation. Deception can introduce noise into the collection and analysis of intelligence and weaken the clarity of signals. It thus makes sense to use it on any level of planning, if for no other purpose than to insert continuous uncertainty into the minds of enemy commanders about the value of the intelligence received. Once victimized, an enemy will be suspicious of future information. Deception, like surprise, should thus be considered a vital part of one’s intelligence activity.

Efforts differ in objective, area, duration, forces, and assets. *Strategic deception* is planned

and executed on the national or alliance/coalition level and is conducted both in peace and war. It could be designed to hide military or economic weaknesses, exaggerate strength in peacetime, or conceal preparations to open hostilities. It can trick an enemy into opening a new front or initiating a new campaign. It encompasses measures from political, diplomatic, and informational to the threat or use of force.

One of the most successful strategic deceptions of World War II was Allied Plan Bodyguard, adopted in January 1944 to mislead Hitler and the German Supreme Command about the place and time of the invasion of Normandy. This deception campaign contained several military and diplomatic plans: Fortitude to move the threat of the Allied landing from the French Atlantic coast to northern Norway; Zeppelin to prevent the Germans from moving timely reinforcements from the eastern Mediterranean to northern France; Vendetta to tie German forces to southern France by presenting a plausible threat of an Allied attack in that area shortly after the Normandy landing; Copperhead to convince the Germans that there was no immediate threat of invasion of northwestern France; and Ironside to simulate an attack against Bordeaux to commit the Germans to southwestern France. In addition, the Allies executed deceptions Graffham and Royal Flush to support Plan Bodyguard by exploiting German fears that Sweden, Spain, and Turkey might abandon their nominal neutrality and cooperate with the Allies.

*Theater-strategic deception* is a subset of national or coalition/alliance strategic deception aimed at misleading enemy leadership and theater commanders on the objectives, place, and time of an initial major operation in a new campaign. It is usually conducted in two or more theaters of operation or a major part of the theater of war. Deception plan Fortitude South was aimed at convincing the Germans to keep their Fifteenth Army deployed in the Pas de Calais area both prior to and after the Normandy landing. Creating a large fictitious force deployed in southeastern England helped accomplish this objective. The Allies convinced the Germans that the landings in Normandy were a diversion to force the Germans to commit their reserves before the main landing at Pas de Calais 45 days later.

In strict terms, *operational deception* pertains to actions and measures to deceive an enemy as to time, place, and details of the planned major operation conducted as a part of a campaign or major joint or combined operation with a strategic objective. Such a deception is normally multi-service and can require multinational assets. It must target enemy commanders with the authority and assets to react in the desired manner; and

**an enemy must not have the capability to observe and evaluate the real situation**

it must arrive through enemy intelligence systems. Deception plans should be designed so an enemy will collect carefully planted information, some false, some true, which appears logical and causes decisionmakers to reach the desired conclusion. Planning, preparation, and execution of operational deception is the responsibility of the joint force commanders and their staffs. Because centralized command and control works best, planning should be directed through a single organization that also directs implementation, seeing that all measures are coordinated toward the common objective. Deception plans should protect the operational commander's intent from hostile intelligence-gathering sources and reinforce expectations and preconceptions about one's own forces and future actions.

*Tactical deception* is intended to mislead opposing tactical commanders in terms of time, place, and details of a tactical action. In planning the combined amphibious landing in Normandy, Operation Neptune, the Allies prepared three naval and four airborne diversions integrated with the overall Fortitude South deception plan.

Efforts on all levels of war must be complementary; the success or failure of one affects the others. The main and subordinate deception plans should all accomplish their assigned objectives for optimal success. A failure on the strategic level usually dooms all secondary plans. Yet tactical or sometimes even operational plans can fail but still allow success if the strategic deception influences enemy strategic leadership.

**HUMINT and SIGINT**

Operational deception is normally a joint and often a combined effort. Relatively large assets are required. An enemy must be convinced that substantial multiservice forces are arrayed against it in the theater. The effort needed to realistically simulate activities on that scale—corps, naval or air fleets, or task forces—could discourage deception efforts as could the fact that it is difficult to conceal forces and their movements nowadays.

Operational commanders should not usually dedicate any part of their forces solely to deception. Plans that rely entirely on bluffing often fail. The optimal solution seems to be involving real forces only temporarily or establishing notional headquarters and forces or using the real and notional forces in combination. Therefore a key prerequisite is that an enemy must not have the capability to observe and evaluate the real situation.

Deception cannot succeed in wartime without developing theory and doctrine in peacetime. Preparation of assets must likewise start in peacetime and be continuous. Preparedness is crucial because there must be time to develop the concepts and allow planners and implementers to paint the deception picture. Planners must know how long a measure will take to affect the deception target and for the target to react.

Planners rely on intelligence to construct a plausible story aimed at the fears of enemy commanders and preconceptions of the opposing forces and situation. The theater must be seen through their eyes so the deception can be based on their concept of what friendly forces will do. Intelligence continues to be used to identify the parts of an enemy collection and evaluation structure the deception will target. After parts of the story are leaked, intelligence must assess their effect. Critical is predicting how the opposing commander will react. Planners then use intelligence to adjust both the deception and operation. The process requires continuous feedback from the targets about what an enemy does or doesn't know.

Operational intelligence relies more on human intelligence (HUMINT) and sophisticated signals intelligence (SIGINT) than on other sources in assessing enemy situations and intentions. Feeding certain signals to HUMINT and SIGINT collectors prepares the deception story for enemy consumption, while hiding the indicators of one's own disposition and strength conceals one's true intentions.

Success also requires understanding an enemy intelligence-gathering processes and decision cycle as well as the soundness of its operational and tactical doctrine. Because deception plans use hostile intelligence collection systems, they must identify their modes of collection, timeliness of reporting, relative weight of data received through each channel, and how that data enters the decision cycle to ensure that proper information is provided by appropriate means at the right time.

Deception is applied through passive and active methods. The passive mode is primarily based on secrecy and camouflage—concealing one's intentions and capabilities. Active deception normally involves a calculated attempt at disclosing half-truths supported by appropriate proofs, signals, or other material evidence. Enemy intelligence must discover planted evidence and become convinced of its authenticity and significance. Active deception normally depends on the success of passive deception.

**Means and Ends**

The larger the objective, the more diverse and complex the methods used. In tactical deception, ruses or feints could be sufficient, while on



Standing guard, Osan  
air base, Korea.



1st Combat Camera Squadron (Sarayuth Pinthong)

the operational level, both military and nonmilitary measures may be needed. Methods range from spreading rumors and feeding false information to combat actions. On the highest level, diplomatic, political, economic, and informational instruments of national power are used to achieve strategic deception. Information plants and controlled enemy agents are often employed. Ruses, feints, demonstrations, and displays can tie down enemy forces in certain areas to ease resistance in the main sector.

The most common method of deception is misrepresenting one's intentions or capabilities through operational secrecy or more elaborate active deception that diverts attention. This approach was successful in the European theater in World War II because the Allies broke the German codes and played on Axis fears and preconceptions of Allied intentions. The key contribution of intelligence was creating a false order of battle for the deception plan. Otherwise the Allies could not have caused the Germans to react operationally because no actual forces were available for such purposes.

Strength can be misrepresented by concealing the location and type of one's forces, headquarters, and logistic elements. Such deception could create either an exaggerated or reduced evaluation of friendly capabilities. The perception of inflated strength can be reinforced

through a mix of real and fictitious forces or by inventing a completely notional order of battle in a locale an enemy considers critical, to include bogus headquarters and forces, communications networks and radio traffic, supply depots and other logistic elements, water facilities, pipelines, telephone and telegraph lines, and railroads and railheads. Dummy guns, tanks, trucks, and heavy engineering equipment can be concentrated, and practice target ranges and tank maneuver areas can be built. Troops or naval and air forces can be moved into attacking positions under the pretext of large-scale maneuvers. Operational security can be enhanced by denying information on the true purposes of such movements even to friendly forces.

On the strategic level, it is difficult to deceive an enemy as to real strength at the outbreak of hostilities because both sides have an accurate picture of the other's overall strength. It becomes easier as the war progresses. The Allies succeeded in creating notional forces during preparation for the Normandy landing and in many Mediterranean operations because the Germans had little ability to obtain or confirm an accurate picture. Excessive exaggeration of strength in individual theaters, however, may tip an enemy off.

Attackers can achieve surprise if their sectors of main effort are concealed by carrying out massive air strikes against secondary sectors, then suddenly shifting them to forces deployed in front of the main sector. The successful German offensive in the west in May 1940 was due in large measure to an elaborate deception plan. The Germans concealed their sector of main attack by employing their feared bombers and *Stukas* against targets in Belgium and The Netherlands until almost the moment of their operational penetration at Sedan.

### Keeping Up Appearances

Deception measures can conceal one's real center of gravity. In a major operation (*Trappenjagd*-Bustard Hunt) in May 1942, General Erich von Manstein, commander of 11<sup>th</sup> Army, used extensive measures to deceive his Soviet counterpart regarding where his most capable forces were deployed. The German attack unexpectedly came from the south. Von Manstein recaptured the Kerch Peninsula. The Crimean Front lost 176,000 men while only 120,000 escaped the trap.

Another ploy is creating the impression of routine activities by conditioning an enemy to a pattern. The Germans used this method in preparing operational redeployment of two battle cruisers and one heavy cruiser from Brest through the English Channel in February 1942 during Operation Cerberus. They increased the intensity of their radar jamming over

### actions must appear normal to enemy intelligence agencies

time. The British became so acclimatized to the jamming that they did not realize their radar had become almost useless.

Secret channels are one of the most effective factors in any deception or cover plan. The channels must thus always be under the close control of the officer responsible for theater deception. In all physical deception, actions must appear normal to enemy intelligence agencies, including radio intercept and monitoring, ground and air reconnaissance, and especially secret agents.

Electronic manipulation and simulation are highly effective. Manipulation involves altering one's own electronic order of battle or creating false levels of traffic or controlled security breaches. Electronic manipulation contributes to security. Simulation, in contrast, paints a fictional order of battle or inaccurate location of a genuine order.

Rumors can support the deception story, falsely indicating force movements or one's strength in a locale. Rumors are usually rampant before a major operation or campaign. They must be used with care since they can baffle friend and enemy alike; but their deliberate planting can create confusion over one's cover objective and

timing. They should not be initiated except in accordance with an approved plan.

Psychological operations (PSYOP) can aid operational deceptions even though their objectives are fundamentally at odds. PSYOP can promote the acceptance of a deceptive message by communicating only what one wants an enemy to hear, real or false, and then replacing it with something else.

The growing power of computers and global network connectivity has created an enormous capacity to process and distribute information. That, in turn, has increased the effectiveness and diversity of deception methods on all levels. The growth in the volume of information could saturate enemy processing and evaluation capabilities. It also drastically reduces the time the intelligence apparatus has to process, analyze, and disseminate its findings. Since the deceiver can saturate the target with useless data, a direct information attack need not rely exclusively on enemy ability to perceive or interpret it. Such an attack can aim at planting spurious information in a database, such as a false order of battle. The key is determining what fictions are desired. The attacker can also use *logic bombs* to incapacitate the opposing information system. These can lie dormant until activated by a date or random number and then damage the information system.

Another method is conventional attack against an information system such as computer network server farms or telephone switching facilities. The array of targets is enormous, and the more an enemy relies on information technology the greater its vulnerability. Hence the weaker side can also plan and execute deception because sophisticated technology is inherently vulnerable to even the most basic camouflage and concealment. Simple deceptions can be effective against some types of information attack while more advanced methods are needed to counter sophisticated efforts.

### Plausibility, Security, and Coordination

Deception is always a supporting plan; an operational plan should never depend on it exclusively. A deception plan introduces a risk to the basic plan. Operational commanders and their staffs should evaluate that risk during planning, considering not only how the operation or campaign achieves the operational or strategic objective, but how deception fits into the overall military, political, and diplomatic scheme.

When both a primary and alternate plan are considered, they must be separated geographically to increase plausibility and decrease susceptibility to counterdeception. Allied strategic deception plan Fortitude encompassed two theaters,

Counter-infiltration  
exercise, Korea.



U.S. Navy (Stacy Young)

northern and western Europe. Likewise, the operational deception plan for the invasion of Sicily in July 1943 involved the central and western Mediterranean. In contrast, the plan for the Normandy landing encompassed only the sea and coastal area from Pas de Calais in the north to Brest in the south.

Time must be available not only for planning but for evidence to be manufactured and received,

**planners must ensure that each element of the scheme fits logically into the overall operational or strategic scenario**

processed, and evaluated by the target and for a hostile operational commander to make a decision and take the desired actions, especially when a deception envisages enemy forces changing

location. Measures that cannot be concealed should be sequenced to generate an estimate of friendly capabilities and intentions that coincides with those in the deception plan. Finally, timing of the deception story should allow for desired actions to be initiated, transmitted to hostile intelligence, and analyzed by it before an enemy reacts.

Plausibility, security, and coordination are the key components. Plausibility is the most important. A plan cannot succeed if the target does not believe the story and consider it a logical

course of action. Plausibility helps preserve the integrity of the operation despite possible security breaches. Planners must ensure that each element of the scheme fits logically into the overall operational or strategic scenario. The deception story—often the best alternative course of action in the opposing commander's estimate—should focus on enemy expectations, preconceptions, and fears. This is difficult on the operational level because of the sheer size of the forces and area involved.

Plausibility depends on many factors. The enemy commander may not accept deception quickly; many signals might be required over time to convince him that his first impressions were wrong. He is more likely to accept a story that conforms to his preconceptions and biases. Moreover, the story must correspond with operational and strategic realities.

It is generally easier to maintain an existing belief than to change it. This makes it more critical to have a detailed and accurate knowledge of enemy perceptions, actions, doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures. The most effective deception stories are often those that do not cause an enemy to change anything.

Operations security (OPSEC) uses passive measures to conceal a deception and its elements. It is the defensive side of operational deception. Generally, the larger the deception, the more complex its plan and the longer its duration. The operational commander must thus balance time and space because the supporting plan must be maintained for weeks or months. The risk of discovery grows with time and the consequences can be devastating. The Japanese experienced a compromised plan in their Operation MI, which led to the Battle of Midway, when American cryptographers decoded the real purpose of their feint toward the Aleutians.

False information, selected leaks, half-truths, and misinterpretation help keep one's plan secure. The greatest problem for an enemy is generally deliberate leaks that might be insignificant individually but whose collective importance develops over time. Intentional and sometimes unintentional breaches of one's security can increase ambiguity for an enemy. A dozen German security breaches revealed Hitler's intentions in the weeks preceding the invasion of Soviet Russia in June 1941. Yet Stalin remained convinced that the massive German deployment in the east was a cover for the invasion of Britain.

A way to enhance OPSEC is to limit the personnel involved by creating a small, specialized planning section within a large headquarters and combining that with centralized direction and execution. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of Africa Corps and Axis forces in North



Africa, knew the need for OPSEC. He informed neither his staff nor the supreme command of his intentions. He especially distrusted the Italians because they were loose with security. Likewise, in their great surprise counteroffensive in the Ardennes in December 1944, the Germans limited the number of commanders who knew of the plan. Chiefs of staff of two participating army groups signed a pledge of secrecy and were under penalty of death if they leaked information.

### The Ring of Truth

Deception security is often enhanced by misleading one's high commanders and their subordinates. Not informing one's forces enhances prospects for the entire plan because the troops are better motivated for the coming action if convinced that their efforts are real. In the Ardennes counteroffensive, German front commanders were convinced that massing supplies and withdrawing front line divisions were necessary to provide fresh troops for defending the Ruhr and the Palatinate. One way of enhancing a plan's security is by surrounding it with truth.

plan never stands alone but supports the campaign or major operation plan, therefore the plans must be coordinated. Commanders must ensure that plans prepared by their superiors and subordinates do not conflict with their own. A strategic deception plan can involve assets assigned to an operational commander who is not aware of the plan. Operational and tactical deception must also be synchronized. In addition, operational deception plans should be integrated into a strategic deception plan. Diplomatic, political, economic, and media elements must be coordinated on the strategic and operational levels.

Deception plans may use not only notional forces, but real forces, which might endanger the real plan if those forces interfere with the sector of main effort or accidentally reveal the true objective. Thus it is necessary to disentangle the deception from the real scheme during planning. These efforts should continue throughout a major operation or campaign.

Operational deception often requires moving large and diverse forces. Because it is unlikely that there will be separate forces for both the real and the deception plans, both should be executed simultaneously with the same forces. Congruence is ensured through coordinated planning. The operational commander should also be able to modify or cancel the entire deception.

A large-scale deception cannot be limited to individual elements. Military, political, economic, and informational activities may be needed. All must be harmonized with the overall scenario to mislead an enemy. Operational deception therefore depends on sequenced and synchronized employment of large and diverse forces and assets controlled by the operational commander in terms of time, space, forces, and objective.

Deception can be a force multiplier as well as a critical part of campaign planning. Operational commanders and their staffs must understand and apply its principles. New information technologies and techniques increase rather than reduce opportunities for deception, allowing both attackers and defenders greater choice of methods. Technology, no matter how sophisticated and available, cannot erase the need for wider awareness of the usefulness of deception on all levels of military activity. Deception should be integral to any major operation or campaign. **JFQ**



Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Kevin H. Tierney)

Inflatable boat on patrol.

Excessive security hinders coordination; thus there should be a balance between protection and effectiveness. An enemy is always alert for indications and warnings, hence perfect security does not exist. Commanders, knowing that their deception plans could be compromised, should use any security breaches to their advantage.

Operational commanders should reconcile differences between deception objectives and the methods their staffs recommend. This is ensured by coordination throughout the chain of command. Because planning is conducted concurrently and in various staff sections, inconsistencies must be resolved. An operational deception