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Operation Mincemeat: The Impact and Influence of WWII's Most Daring Intelligence Operation

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The word “operation” carries the magnitude and weight of immense responsibility and consequence. It is selective, dangerous, and possibly destructive. When operations are carried out in military espionage settings, there are lives, victories, and countries on the line. The Second World War was packed with high-stakes operations that aimed to overpower the enemy through surprise, force, intelligence, and combat tactics. However, throughout the entire war, there was one successful *false-intelligence* mission:[1] one that used a single lie and dead body to deceive the enemy and directly impact the outcome of the war. It would have been impossible for the masterminds behind this mission to know that their plan would also alter the future of espionage. In the spring of 1943, the British military attempted a new and revolutionary intelligence mission that would turn the tide of the war and change espionage forever. Operation Mincemeat signified an emergence of previously unprecedented espionage tactics, solidified the possibility of false intelligence as a tool of modern warfare, influenced a newfound public acceptance for the use of deceit in military conflict, and impacted the contemporary use of misleading information as a combative ploy.

On the morning of April 30, 1943, at half-past four in the morning, the dead body of a man in his early thirties was released from HMS Seraph submarine, 1,600 yards off the south-west coast of Spain.[2] A few hours later, a Spanish fisherman found the body dressed in a British Marine uniform with a leather briefcase chained to it.[3] Spain’s claimed neutrality during WWII meant that the corpse and briefcase should have been turned in to British authorities as soon as possible. The body was instead returned the next day, only after being studied and

[1] An espionage tactic where false information is disguised as applicable intelligence in order to deceive the enemy into taking misinformed action.
[2] “Operation Mincemeat: The Man Who Never Was,” The History Press, accessed January 2, 2021, https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/operation-mincemeat-the-man-who-never-was/.
[3] Klaus Gottlieb, “The Mincemeat Postmortem: Forensic Aspects of World War II's Boldest Counterintelligence Operation,” *Military Medicine* 174, no. 1 (January 2009), 94.

searched by Spanish officials.[4] Additionally, the briefcase was reported two weeks after the return of the corpse.[5] During these two weeks, the Spanish government sent the briefcase to the German Intelligence Service in Berlin where its contents were carefully studied. They concluded that the body belonged to Major William Martin[6] of the Royal Marines who had likely perished in a plane crash.[7] In the briefcase, they found two letters that would prompt a complete shift in their military strategy.[8] The first letter was addressed to the British General in Tunisia and was signed by the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff. The second was from the Chief of Combined Operations in London, and was addressed to the commander of the Mediterranean Fleet.[9] The content of these letters made it clear that the Allies were planning two simultaneous attacks, one through Sardinia and the other through southern Greece.[10] [11] However, this information was entirely false. The Allies' real target was Sicily, but this was also the most obvious place to attack.[12] Therefore, it was decided that a false intelligence campaign would be needed to try and trick the Germans into thinking the attack would be on Greece, not Sicily.[13] This tactic of deception would prove revolutionary.

Because "Major Martin" never existed, there is still speculation as to whose body was used in the operation. The most accepted theory is that the body was Glyndwr Michael's,[14] a thirty-four-year-old Welsh transient who had consumed bread laced with rat poison and died of

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[4] Jonathan D. Beard, "Operation Mincemeat: How A Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory," *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 6 (March 2013), 923-924.
[5] Ibid.
[6] See Appendix, Image A.
[7] Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 98.
[8] Ewen Montagu, *Man Who Never Was* (J.B. Lippincott, 1953), 32.
[9] Operation Mincemeat: The Man Who Never Was," The History Press, accessed January 2, 2021, https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/operation-mincemeat-the-man-who-never-was/.
[10] Ibid.
[11] See Appendix, Image B.
[12] Ben Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat: The True Spy Story That Changed the Course of World War II* (London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 19.
[13] Ibid.
[14] See Appendix, Image C.

internal injuries two days later. After finding out the man had no friends or family, the head of Operation Mincemeat, Ewen Montagu, decided to use the body in the operation.[15] But many experts have another theory. In his article "The Mincemeat Postmortem: Forensic Aspects of World War II's Boldest Counterintelligence Operation," scientist Klaus Gottlieb writes:

> After Operation Mincemeat had been approved in principle, Montagu needed to find a corpse that would fulfill the following requirements: (1) permission obtainable from relatives or competent authority, (2) fresh or only minimally decomposed, (3) no secrecy violations, and (4) fit the expectations of the German and Spanish authorities. The crucial question was: "What would a pathologist expect to find and what would he expect not to find in the body of a man who had drifted ashore after an aircraft had been lost at sea"? The ideal body would of course have been a victim of drowning. In his book "The Man Who Never Was," Montagu goes into elaborate detail to explain that the body of an actual drowning victim was really not necessary. We think, on the contrary, that a drowning victim was indeed used but that Montagu had reasons to make his readers believe otherwise.[16]

Gottlieb is highlighting the incongruence between what the operation needed in a corpse and who Glyndwr Michael was. The notion of using Glyndwr Michael, whose teeth were probably badly rotten and body in poor physical condition meant any trained pathologist would discount him as an upper-class military officer.[17] Moreover, rat poisoning causes death by liver failure, not pneumonia, and certainly not drowning.[18] Therefore, actually using Glyndwr Michael's body for this extremely crucial mission would have been immensely risky.

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[15] *Operation Mincemeat*, *HISTORY This Week* (A+E Networks, 2021).
[16] Klaus Gottlieb, "The Mincemeat Postmortem: Forensic Aspects of World War II's Boldest Counterintelligence Operation," *Military Medicine* 174, no. 1 (January 2009), 95.
[17] Ibid, 96.
[18] Ibid.

On March 27, 1943, HMS Dasher, an auxiliary aircraft carrier, blew up and sank within eight minutes. There were 379 casualties but only twenty-four burials and 255 bodies were never accounted for.[19] Gottlieb explains that "the Dasher tragedy was not announced in the press; there was no casualty list. The survivors and their families were sworn to secrecy and the loss of the carrier would not be acknowledged until after the war."[20] On August 13, 2002, *The Daily Telegraph* wrote that in 1943, a young submarine pilot had been instructed to secretly transfer a corpse from the mortuary holding casualties of the HMS Dasher to the Hackney mortuary.[21] The HMS Seraph submarine reportedly stopped by this mortuary on its way to Spain, which did not make navigational sense. Many scholars believe that the HMS Seraph picked up the drowned body of an actual naval officer to use in their operation. This body would have perfectly matched the expectations of pathologists, but would not be accepted by the general public. Therefore, there is a high probability that a body was stolen from the HMS Dasher tragedy to be used in the mission, but Glyndwr Michael's body was reportedly used to appease the public.

While the true identity of Major Martin is still curiously mysterious, there are other details that demonstrate the operation's significance, success, and impact. Operation Mincemeat was a revolutionary attempt of false intelligence that was innovative and unprecedented. In his book *Strategic Deception in the Second World War*, historian Micheal Howard outlines that surprise, a type of 'security,' is a classical principle of war, but few commanders have attempted to *deceive* their enemy.[22] He writes: "to make a sufficiently accurate assessment of enemy capabilities and intentions to impose a deception plausible enough to affect his actions is so

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[19] Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 43.
[20] Klaus Gottlieb, "The Mincemeat Postmortem: Forensic Aspects of World War II's Boldest Counterintelligence Operation," *Military Medicine* 174, no. 1 (January 2009): pp. 093-099, 97.
[21] Operation Mincemeat: The Man Who Never Was," The History Press, accessed January 2, 2021, https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/operation-mincemeat-the-man-who-never-was/.
[22] Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (London, England: Norton & Company, 1995), 2.

difficult that it has seldom ever been attempted."[23] Howard is pointing to the ambition and organization needed to deceive using a complex false intelligence operation. In the case of Operation Mincemeat, in order for the British spies and military commanders to be confident the mission would succeed, they needed information on Hitler's intentions. Interception and breaking of Axis code revealed that Hitler already anticipated an attack on Greece.[24] This meant that deceiving him to believe this suspicion was true, would only confirm his supposition. As a result, Hitler would be less likely to question its validity.[25] This encouraged the MI5[26] to start concretely designing and enacting their plan. Although they had reason to maintain their confidence, Historian Denis Smyth highlights the significance of the mission these men attempted in his book *Deathly Deception.* He explains that through this operation they were aiming to "succeed where so many of their predecessors in the long history of attempts to mislead an opponent in war had failed."[27] While there were many reasons why the ruse in Operation Mincemeat was predicted to work, there were numerous risks involved. Similar risks prevented past militaries from attempting false intelligence operations. Those who did attempt them had often failed.[28] If the Spanish did not turn the briefcase over to Germany and instead returned it unopened, the mission would have been a waste of time, resources, and effort. It would also fail if any mistakes lead the enemy to believe the identity of the body or the contents of the briefcase were fabricated. At the time, commanders and their respective nations were still

[23] Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (London, England: Norton & Company, 1995), 72.
[24] Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.
[25] Ibid, 41.
[26] The United Kingdom's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency.
[27] Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.
[28] Ibid, 25.

coming out of an age where there was both "gentlemanly" and "ungentlemanly" warfare.[29] Deception fell into the latter category, meaning that not only was Operation Mincemeat risky, it also was socially unacceptable. The people of Britain wanted to support a war that aligned with their values which assumingly did not include "ungentlemanly" warfare.[30] Although these realities made the operation more difficult, they added to its surprise and unanticipated effect, consequently impacting its success: one that brought the Allies closer to winning the war.

While many events impacted the victory of the Allied Powers during WWII, the achievement of Operation Mincemeat saved thousands of lives while allowing the Allies a significant upper hand, thus impacting the outcome of the war. In preparation for the expected invasion of Greece, Hitler ordered some of his strongest troops from France, two torpedo boats, and seven German divisions to leave their own conflict zones and defend Greece.[31] Sardinia's troop strength was quickly doubled.[32] This enormous redistribution of German military strength meant that Sardinia, Greece was heavily armed, but Sicily, Italy was not. This demonstrated that Operation Mincemeat had effectively convinced high ranking German officials to relax Sicily's defenses and shift their attention. Therefore, the Allied invasion of Sicily on July 10th caught the Germans entirely unprepared.[33] Most of Sicily's original defense forces had been moved to defend Greece, leaving it extremely vulnerable. Despite its exposure, the German High Command insisted on considering the attack on Sicily a feint[34] even after the invasion was in full

[29] Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (London, England: Norton & Company, 1995), 77.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Jonathan D. Beard, "Operation Mincemeat: How A Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory," *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 6, 923-924.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Carlo D'Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily, 1943* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), 56.
[34] A type of offensive military deception involving combat. It acts to deceive the enemy as to the location of a military's main effort.

swing.[35] Thirteen days after the initial attack on Sicily, Hitler himself appointed his most trusted general, Erwin Rommel, to defend Greece. He believed a greater attack on Greece was still to come, but on the 17th of August, Sicily fell to the Allies.[36] The invasion was expected to take ninety days, but due to limited opposition, it only took thirty-eight. The reduced conflict meant that of the predicted ten-thousand British casualties, only 1400 were wounded or injured.[37] The swift capture of Sicily not only saved lives, it also led to the downfall of Benito Mussolini. The Italian people already felt they were losing the war and were tired of Mussalini's poor economic and military planning.[38] The Allied Invasion of Italy was the turning point for Mussolini's own government officials. During the battle, on July 25, 1943, the Italian Grand Council voted to restrict Mussolini's power and hand control of the Italian armed forces over to King Victor Emmanuel III.[39] The next day, the king dismissed Mussolini as prime minister and the former dictator was imprisoned. He was killed the following day. A new Italian government then took power and began siding with the Allies.[40] Because Hitler had transferred many of his troops out of conflict zones on the eastern front to protect Greece, he was losing battles against the powerful Soviets.[41] In *Deathly Deception*, Denis Smyth argues that once the Germans lost the upper hand to the Soviets, they never regained it.[42] The Allied Invasion of Italy and its aftermath marked a clear juncture in the war where the Germans lost their power in Italy and their advantage against the Soviets. Operation Mincemeat's success made this turning point possible

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[35] Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 97.
[36] Carlo D'Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily, 1943* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), 57.
[37] Ibid.
[38] David T. Zabecki, *World War II in Europe: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 6 (New York: Garland Pub., 1999), 672.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 214.
[42] Ibid, 215.

and gave the Allies leverage that would eventually lead to their victory.[43] For this reason, Operation Mincemeat is accepted by many as the most successful military espionage operation of the entire war.[44] While its triumph had large military influence, its legacy additionally instigated a pop culture shift and greater interest in military deception and espionage.

The success of Operation Mincemeat ignited public interest in the details of espionage. Its intrigue introduced a new acceptance for false intelligence operations and prompted a lasting cultural enthusiasm for deception in warfare. The existence and specifics of Operation Mincemeat were meant to be kept strictly confidential, but details of the story began to leak. Five years after the end of the war, Duff Cooper, the British Ambassador of France, published a roman à clef[45] titled *Operation Heartbreak* where he romantically recounted the Operation Mincemeat narrative.[46] It is assumed that Churchill[47] himself let the story slip at a dinner party.[48] The public began to speculate on whether or not the novel's enticing espionage operation carried factual merit. In order to rectify the public stirrings, the government commissioned Ewen Montagu to write a semi-official version of the event. It was published under the title *The Man Who Never Was* in 1953 after it was approved by the Ministry of Defense.[49] The book became extremely popular, selling two million copies and being adapted into a 1956 film. It inspired comic books and related creative stories. Ian Flemming, who had brainstormed the original idea for Operation Mincemeat, would go on to write the iconic James Bond novels, packed with espionage, deception, and intrigue. These types of works influenced public perception of

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[43] John S. Craig, *Peculiar Liaisons: In War, Espionage, and Terrorism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005), 246.
[44] Jonathan D. Beard, "Operation Mincemeat: How A Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory," *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 6, 923-924.
[45] A novel in which real people or events appear with invented names.
[46]Operation Mincemeat: The Man Who Never Was," The History Press, accessed January 2, 2021, https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/operation-mincemeat-the-man-who-never-was/.
[47] Winston Churchill was the Prime Minister who led Britain to victory in the Second World War.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

deception and made a form of espionage once viewed as unhonorable now interpreted as exciting, useful, and patriotic. *The Man Who Never Was* confirmed that the British had not only enacted a false intelligence mission but had succeeded in doing so. The pop culture intrigue that resulted from this helped deconstruct the notion of "gentlemanly"[50] warfare and allowed other governments and militaries an opportunity to deliberate the possibility of using false intelligence in their own pursuits.[51] Operation Mincemeat's success and narrative influenced cultural awareness of deception in warfare and shaped the way citizens viewed modern espionage tactics.

The great success of Operation Mincemeat led to an expansion of acceptance and use of false intelligence operations in military and political settings, permanently changing espionage. Operation Mincemeat was unlike previous deception tactics in the way it planted information instead of distracting or misleading the enemy with infantry and troops. After the success of Operation Mincemeat, it was theorized that both tactics could be used together to create a crucial and reliable deception.[52] In their preparations for D-Day, the Allies developed a deception plan to draw the Germans away from Normandy. They used dummy tanks,[53] parachutes, and landing crafts to mimic an invasion of the Pas de Calais in northern France.[54] This type of tactic had been used before, but because of Operation Mincemeat's success at planting misleading information, they used false radio transmissions and double agents to further convince the German military of an attack on Pas de Calais.[55] It was highly successful and greatly contributed to success during the renowned Allied invasion of Normandy.[56] After World War II, with a rise in tracking

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[50] Created in 1977, Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions agrees not to engage in any deceitful action where one side promises to act in good faith with malicious intent. For example: waving a white flag and then opening fire. Other types of deceit are legal.
[51] Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (London, England: Norton & Company, 1995), 89.
[52] Ibid, 103.
[53] See Appendix, Image D.
[54] Ibid, 105.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Jon Latimer, *Deception in War* (London, England: Thistle Publishing, 2016), 98.

technologies used in combat and espionage, it became increasingly difficult to initiate surprise attacks without deceiving the enemy. The United States organized Operation El Paso during the Vietnam War which shares some similarities with Operation Mincemeat.[57] The U.S. deliberately exposed information about a planned resupply of engineering equipment, anticipating the North Vietnamese military would plan an ambush when they discovered this. The opponents responded as predicted, and the U.S organized air assault operations at the most likely ambush sites. When North Vietnam attempted an ambush, the U.S. attacked them from the air resulting in a great number of casualties.[58] False intelligence operations were scarcely attempted before Operation Mincemeat, but after, there was a large increase in the use of this tactic.

Today, technology makes releasing false information both more convenient and complex. Hackers can manipulate tracking and imagery systems to hide attacks from the enemy or create the illusion of a false threat. This type of deception is referred to as virtual deception and is defined as the "use of manipulating network communication systems to shape the enemy's view of the battlefield by deliberately altering, distorting, blocking, or destroying the information processed by sensor systems with the intent of deception."[59] While this modern technology was unavailable to the creators of Operation Mincemeat, their radical mission to mislead the enemy using available technology and trickery is still being used today. Without Operation Mincemeat, the value of complex false intelligence missions may not have been fully recognized. Most scholars agree that it was only after WWII that deception became a popular military tactic and some would argue that this is a direct result of the war's successful operations. Regardless of whether or not espionage would look the same today without Operation Mincemeat, it was still

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[57] John S. Craig, *Peculiar Liaisons: In War, Espionage, and Terrorism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005), 118.
[58] Jack H Spencer, "Deception Integration in the U.S. Army," (*Defense Technical Information Center* 1990), 90.
[59] W. Pasanen, "The Implications of Virtual Deception," *The Implications of Virtual Deception*, 3.

one of the most daring and outstanding missions of WWII, arguably the first successful false intelligence operation, and an event that changed the course of the war and the future of espionage.

While most scholars agree that Operation Mincemeat had a significant and lasting impact on espionage, warfare, and society, some suggest that the traditional narrative of the operation contains critical flaws. In his book *Deception in War,* Jon Latimer argues that the relatively easy capture of Sicily was not entirely because of Mincemeat but was instead more related to Hitler's distrust of the Italians and his unwillingness to risk German troops to defend Italy. Latimer's claim, however, ignores the great redistribution of troops that was ordered due to the belief that the British would attack Greece. This weakened not only the German defense on Sicily, it also removed troops from other conflict zones in France in the Soviet Union. This movement proved to be detrimental to the Axis' cause and would not have been attempted unless Hitler feared real threat. Other scholars doubt the validity of the British government's released accounts of Operation Mincemeat. It is possible they could be exaggerating the mission's effect. Despite the controversy and mystery relating to whose body was used in the operation, there is very little evidence to suggest any of the information released by the British government was fabricated. Instead, the government's attempt to produce a factual account in response to the *Operation Heartbreak* novel suggests a willingness to share truth regarding the mission. While it is understandable to be skeptical of biased government accounts, men who worked on the operation detailed their own narratives in interviews and books that align with the story depicted in *The Man Who Never Was*.[60] While Operation Mincemeat is considered one of the first effective false

[60] Ben Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat: The True Spy Story That Changed the Course of World War II* (London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 192.

intelligence operations, during The War of 1812[61] British Major General Isaac Brock and Indigionus chief Tecumseh used misleading letters to fool their enemy. They allowed letters exaggerating the size of their forces be intercepted and after reading them, the U.S. commander, Brigadier General William Hull feared a morbid defeat and surrendered.[62] Although this strategy seems relatively simple when compared to the complexity of Operation Mincemeat, it is one of the first recordings of effective false intelligence usage in espionage, demonstrating both the existence and rarity of the tactic before Operation Mincemeat. While some doubt the revolutionary and effective qualities of Operation Mincemeat, the majority of scholars emphasize its innovative significance.

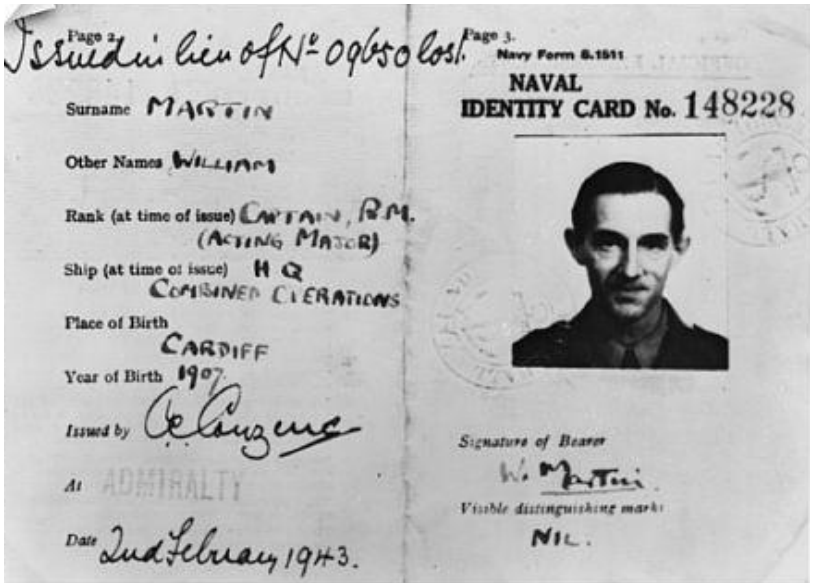
In *Strategic Deception in the Second World War,* Michael Howard epitomizes the advantages Britain gained from Operation Mincemeat writing: "One would be rash to assume that we or indeed anyone else could ever possess [the advantages] in comparable measure again."[63] Through illustrating just how momentous the operation was, Howard is stressing the importance of recognising the impact and history of the mission. Operation Mincemeat introduced modern, intricate, and effective false intelligence operations to the world. It advanced modern warfare by demonstrating and proving the crucial uses of trickery in military conflicts while forwarding public acceptance of deceit in war - influencing modern views of espionage and culture. The masterminds behind Operation Mincemeat took a risk by planting a dead body with a fabricated identity two miles off the coast of Spain hoping it would be found and turned over to German officials. The fact that their seemingly outlandish plan worked is notable and the reality of Operation Mincmeat's lasting repercussions is even more significant. False intelligence

[61] A conflict fought in North America by the United States of America and its indigenous allies against Great Britain.
[62] Benson John Lossing and William Barritt, *The American Revolution and the War of 1812* (New York, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875), 284.
[63] Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (London, England: Norton & Company, 1995), 4.

operations are now a modern, technologically advanced, and commonly used tactic that was catalyzed by Operation Mincemeat. Thousands of lives were saved during the British invasion of Sicily because of it, and culture has been permanently changed by the stories that emerged from its history. Operation Mincemeat's existence, accomplishments, and lasting impact ensured an evolution in modern warfare and because of it, espionage has never never been the same.

Appendix

Image A



Fake identity card that linked the body to William Martin, a fictional navy officer.

"Operation Mincemeat: The Man Who Never Was." The History Press. Accessed January 2, 2021. https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/operationmincemeat-the-man-who-never-was.

Image B

Map showing Southern Greece, Sicily, and Sardinia.

Public Domain, Google Images.

Image C

Corpse of Glyndwr Michael.

Gottlieb, Klaus. “The Mincemeat Postmortem: Forensic Aspects of World War II's Boldest Counterintelligence Operation.” *Military Medicine* 174, no. 1 (January 2009): 093–99. https://doi.org/10.7205/milmed-d-02-4007.

Image D

A dummy tank.

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