



2014-084

Whitney T. Bendeck, *"A" Force: The Origins of British Deception during the Second World War*. Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2013. Pp. x, 259. ISBN 978-1-61251-233-4.

Review by Melissa Jordine, California State University-Fresno (mjordine@csufresno.edu).

British intelligence has been the focus of a growing number of works since memoirs published in the 1970s revealed the code-breaking operations at Bletchley Park that succeeded in cracking the German Enigma code. Much of this scholarship emphasizes activities such as the Ultra decipherment efforts centered in or directed from London, thus giving the impression that all intelligence activities were initiated and coordinated by officials in that city. In *"A" Force*,¹ Whitney Bendeck (Florida State Univ.) aims to correct this mistaken notion and demonstrate that the first significant British deception efforts were carried out by Gen. Archibald P. Wavell and Lt. Col. (later Brigadier) Dudley Wrangel Clarke in North Africa *before* the creation of a central organization in London to manage all deception operations. She argues further that the London Controlling Section was formed at the urging of Wavell and Clarke to prevent deception activities in one area from accidentally compromising those in another.

Bendeck argues that the British resorted to deception in the Second World War because of their completely untenable position in the Mediterranean after the Italian declaration of war and the fall of France in 1940. Lacking the necessary troop strength, armaments, and matériel to counter first the Italians and then the combined German and Italian forces in Africa, they turned to deception. Initially, Bendeck writes, this involved defensive measures meant to deter attacks by making British forces appear more formidable than they actually were. Having learned valuable lessons from both painful failures and occasional successes, the British then implemented large-scale offensive deceptions from mid-1942 through the war's end.

The author has conducted extensive research at the British Imperial War Museum and the National Archives at Kew and utilized the volumes of the "A" Force War Diary that became available in 1991 as well as papers and memoirs by leading figures like Clarke and Winston Churchill. She aims at a broader audience than fellow scholars in the field, as is made clear by her inclusion of considerable background to accommodate nonspecialists.

The book comprises seven chapters. The first two detail the British situation in the interwar years and in the precarious circumstances of 1940. Chapters 3-7 concern the origins of "A" Force and its contributions to the British war effort and especially the victory over Axis forces in North Africa. She concludes that major deceptions like Operation Bodyguard, implemented to deceive the Germans about the Normandy landings, gained from what had been learned in the deserts of Africa. She attributes the accomplishments of "A" Force to the personalities and special abilities of Wavell and, in particular, Clarke, who,

when [he] accepted his assignment to coordinate deception in the Middle East Theater, ... took on an enormous responsibility. At its most basic level, his job was to mislead the enemy into making decisions detrimental to the enemy's war effort. That in and of itself was much easier said than done. In addition, he tackled the task of artificially strengthening the British forces, thereby compensating for Britain's extreme deficiencies in troops, equipment, and supplies. But no one was better suited for the post. Clarke was a man of great intelligence, creativity, and ingenuity who possessed a certain mischievousness that made him the ideal candidate for the job....

Clarke was an enigma in the British military. Although he was an officer trained in the conventions of the day, his outlook on warfare was anything but conventional. Moreover, his thought process in general was uncommon, if not perplexing, to those who made his acquaintance. David Mure, who served as a deception officer under Clarke but knew him only by his code name, Galveston, described him as "artful, baffling, devious. When you met him he was none of these things. He was however inscrutable. Superficially he looked rather

1. The book is a continuation of the author's Florida State University doctoral dissertation.

like somebody's butler.... Beneath his bland rather old world exterior it was impossible to guess what he was thinking, and what he said nearly always came as a surprise. He was certainly the most unusual Intelligence officer of his time, very likely of all time. His mind worked quite differently from anyone else's and far quicker; he looked out on the world through the eyes of his opponents." As Mure pointed out, Clarke had the unique ability to evaluate a situation and innately grasp how the enemy high command would perceive it. Clarke's capacity to understand the enemy's mind-set, reasoning, and predisposition allowed him to excel at deception. (54-55)

Bendeck demonstrates that innovative thinking was essential to the success of British operations, which included disinformation about entirely notional units that existed only on paper or involved a few men carrying out actions simulating those of a battalion or division. She offers ample evidence of the value of such activities by using the "A" Force narrative diary, other archival documents, and the private papers and memoirs of key British officials.

Several factors, Bendeck writes, initially prevented British deception operations from having the desired effect on Gen. Erwin Rommel after the Germans dispatched a blocking force to North Africa in February 1941 to prevent the utter defeat of the Italian forces already in theater. Meticulously planted British misinformation had little impact, because Rommel was skeptical of intelligence that did not reflect the situation actually observed by his air and ground reconnaissance. Bendeck stresses that Clarke often lacked the time to carry out his deceptions. It was vital to slowly feed the enemy bits of information through various channels in order to fabricate an entirely false picture over time. This slow, deliberate process allayed suspicion and increased the chances of success. By its very nature, however, it could not be achieved within the time constraints of the North African campaign in 1941.

Particular strengths of the book are its sharp picture of British deception operations and its clarification of how these changed with experience gained, the progress of the war, and the arrival of massive US Lend-Lease assistance. At the outset, Clarke could conduct intelligence at a strategic level only by seeding inaccurate information, since he had not the resources to implement actual physical deceptions. For a time, "A" forces were removed from Clarke's supervision. Only after Gen. Claude Auchinleck (who later succeeded Wavell as Commander in the Middle East in July 1941) restored his authority in February 1941 did Clarke receive the staff and resources needed to carry out both the planting of information and actual tactical deceptions. Under Clarke, "A" Force manufactured and deployed hundreds of dummy tanks and units and devised ever more sophisticated ways to camouflage real troops and supplies (136-37).

After analyzing the lessons Clarke learned from each operation, successful or not, Bendeck turns to the largest and most effective deception operation of the entire campaign, which dissembled the true location and timing of the British offensive at El Alamein.

What emerged from the entire effort was a perfect blueprint for deception that served as the foundation and model for all future deceptions. According to Mure, "It was the complete blueprint of all the plans that were to come. Here the ingredients of strategic deception—bogus order of battle, double agents' reports, misleading W/T [wireless telegraphy] traffic, concentrations of bogus landing craft were to be combined for the first time with the tactical measures—camouflage, dummy tank and artillery formations, sonic devices; and, combined for the first time, they worked like clockwork." The El Alamein deception campaign was the most comprehensive, integrated, and successful of "A" Force's deceptions up to that point in the war. Furthermore, the ability to achieve surprise on such a narrow front as existed at El Alamein clearly demonstrated the worth of deception for any skeptics and ensured that it would remain an integral part of the military's strategy after the war moved beyond North Africa. (201)

One weakness of the work is Bendeck's exaggeration of Dudley Clarke's originality of thought and responsibility for the achievements of "A" Force. Admittedly, Clarke carried out significant deceptions far beyond any previous British efforts, but the author downplays the number of failed operations (blamed on factors beyond Clarke's control) and the importance of increasingly accurate intelligence based on decryption of German messages as well as of the American provision of critical resources. Further, Bendeck alludes only offhandedly to Rommel's conduct of large-scale deception operations that were similar to those carried

out by Clarke and the British at about the same time. She also omits any mention of the workshops near Tripoli where the Germans made large numbers of dummy tanks to cause the British to believe Rommel's newly arrived forces were larger and stronger than they were.² Of more significance is the fact that she undercuts her own case for the innovation of the British by stating that they simulated the existence of 150 tanks specifically by modifying one of Rommel's own deception tactics (137).

Despite these flaws, however, Whitney Bendeck's book is by far the most thorough evaluation of "A" Force currently available. She also does readers a valuable service by providing crucial information on central figures as well as on the ways that Dudley Clarke's unusual personality enabled him to design and conduct highly successful deceptions. Finally, Bendeck's extensive use of previously classified materials and relevant personal papers and documents allows her to describe the deceptive activities of "A" Force in far greater detail than previous works. Despite her unconcealed admiration for Clarke and "A" Force, she both objectively elucidates the deceptive actions of the British in North Africa and shows that better known deceptions like Operation Bodyguard benefited from the precedents they set.

2. See B.H. Liddell Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 103. An unfortunate error, perhaps of proofreading, occurs in Bendeck's quotation (98) of this work, to the effect that Rommel stated that "the slow speed of the bulk of his [Auchinleck's] armour was his soft spot, which we could seek to exploit tactfully [read *tactically*]" (*Rommel Papers*, 146).