



Second World War British Military Camouflage: Designing Deception

by Isla Forsyth.

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In *Second World War British Military Camouflage*,¹ geographer Isla Forsyth (Univ. of Nottingham) describes in five chapters the evolution of camouflage from passive-defensive in the First World War to a more aggressive paradigm in the context of Second World War offensive warfare. She makes good use of a range of biographical and archival materials to clarify the interdisciplinary and creative nature of camouflage technology, as it was advanced by key, influential camoufleurs.

Chapter 1 concerns three prominent First World War camoufleurs: Abbot Thayer, who pioneered natural camouflage and hypothesized the principle of countershading; John Graham Kerr, a zoologist who explored how to paint naval ships to confuse the eye; and Salomon J. Salomon, the best known artist and senior camouflage practitioner of the British Army during the Great War.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to Dr. Hugh Cott, a Cambridge zoologist and artist who served as an innovative and multitalented camoufleur during the Second World War:

in the field Cott was simultaneously a scientist, an artist and also at times a soldier, all components of his self which contributed towards how he observed, recorded, understood and disseminated scientific research... Cott reveals that understanding camouflage in nature and in war is a truly hybrid practice and knowledge, born of diverse disciplines, skills and approaches. (66)

Chapter 3 describes Cott's involvement with the Camouflage Advisory Panel (CAP), a team of diverse professionals whom the military brought together in hopes of advancing camouflage techniques as the threat of aerial attacks by the Luftwaffe became more imminent. The project failed owing to the irreconcilability of the biology-based and the artistic strands of camouflage theory. CAP was nevertheless an intriguing first attempt to recruit a network of military personnel and civilian experts to research camouflage.

Chapter 4 follows Cott to the much more successful Camouflage Development Training Center at Farnham Castle:

Farnham can be seen to have provided a space for dialogue between the diverse range of camouflage trainees, and for the blurring and transformation of knowledge in the experimentation and design of camouflage technology... [It] began to undermine the mysterious and comical image of camouflage. (100, 117)

Farnham also instituted camouflage as a discipline requiring the expertise of specialists to be efficient. The Center's group of inventive and diverse camouflage officers—including even stage performers like Japsner Maskelyne—exerted a decisive influence on the conduct of the Desert War in North Africa. The biographies of these figures are the highlight of the chapter.

1. Orig. "From Dazzle to the Desert: A Cultural-historical Geography of Camouflage" (diss. Univ. of Glasgow, 2012).

The fifth and final chapter concerns the work of camoufleurs during the Desert War, when, the author maintains, camouflage first became an offensive tool, as deception supplanted the “classical” camouflage so ill-suited to desert conditions. Forsyth singles out the dummy railhead designed during Operation Crusader (Oct. 1941) as one of the most notable early deception schemes in the desert: it “awoke the military to the potential offensive use of deceiving camouflage, the benefits of including it in the forming of battle plans and more broadly, the new science of camouflage” (135). The volume ends with an interesting account of the effects of the war on the life and work of Cott and many other artists involved in the camouflage enterprise.

The book’s shortcomings include an overemphasis on the Desert War as the birthplace of “offensive camouflage.” Cécile Coutin,² for one, has convincingly shown that offensive camouflage was deployed as early as the First World War, specifically in another desert—in Palestine—during the third battle of Gaza and the battle of Megiddo. The book also disappoints by stopping with the Desert War, given the expectations raised by its title. One wishes the author had discussed further developments in British camouflage, in particular during Operation Overlord.

These reservations aside, Isla Forsyth deserves our gratitude for having written a book filled with valuable new insights into the development of British military camouflage in the Second World War.

2. In *Tromper l'ennemi: L'invention du camouflage moderne en 1914–1918* (Paris: Éd. Pierre de Taillac, 2015).