

# OPERATION MINCEMEAT

The Story of the 'Man Who Never Was'



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## The Stakes of War

The year is 1943. The Second World War rages across Europe and beyond. The Allied forces are turning the tide, but the Axis powers, under the iron grip of Nazi Germany, still hold vast swathes of territory. The next major strategic objective for the Allies in the European theatre is the invasion of Sicily, codenamed Operation Husky.

Control of this Mediterranean island would be a crucial stepping stone, opening the way for an advance into mainland Italy and putting further pressure on the Axis forces. However, the success of Operation Husky hinged on one critical element: surprise.

The geography of Sicily meant that the Axis command would be anticipating a landing. Heavily fortified coastal defences and significant troop deployments awaited any Allied assault. A direct and predictable attack would likely result in heavy casualties and could jeopardise the entire campaign.

Therefore, the need for a large-scale deception to mislead the enemy about the true target of the invasion became paramount. The Allied strategists needed a way to convince the Germans that their main attack would come elsewhere, drawing their forces away from Sicily and creating the element of surprise that was so vital for success.

Against this backdrop of high stakes and the urgent need for a credible deception, a most extraordinary and audacious plan began to take shape – an operation so improbable that it would enter the annals of wartime history as **Operation Mincemeat**.

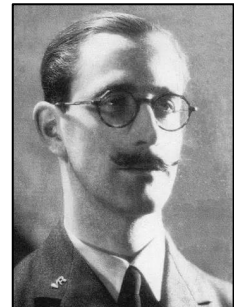
## The Masterminds

The audacious deception that became Operation Mincemeat was not the brainchild of high-ranking generals or seasoned field operatives, but rather two relatively unconventional officers within British Naval Intelligence: Ewen Montagu and Charles Cholmondeley.



**Ewen Montagu**, a barrister by trade before the war, possessed a sharp intellect and a flair for imaginative problem-solving. His legal background likely honed his ability to construct intricate narratives and pay close attention to detail – skills that would prove invaluable in crafting the believable fiction surrounding "Major William Martin." Montagu was known for his somewhat eccentric nature and his willingness to explore unorthodox ideas, qualities that made him receptive to a plan as outlandish as Mincemeat.

**Charles Cholmondeley**, on the other hand, was a Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve who had been seconded to Naval Intelligence. Described as an ideas man with a somewhat whimsical approach, Cholmondeley brought a creative and often unconventional perspective to the often-serious world of wartime intelligence. He was known for his enthusiasm and his ability to think outside the confines of traditional military strategy.



Working within a secretive branch of Naval Intelligence tasked with devising deception strategies, Montagu and Cholmondeley found themselves presented with the challenge of convincing the Axis powers that the Allied invasion of Sicily was merely a feint. It was within this environment of wartime urgency and the need for innovative solutions that their unlikely partnership blossomed, leading to the conception of a plan that would hinge on the meticulous creation of a fictitious officer and the strategic placement of his body.

## "Trout Fishing"

The seemingly outlandish concept at the heart of Operation Mincemeat had its roots in a more general discussion about deceptive tactics. The initial spark is often traced back to a memorandum circulated within British intelligence circles, sometimes referred to as the "Trout Fishing Memo." This document, believed to have been authored by **Ian Fleming** (the future author of the James Bond novels), explored various "queer ideas" for deceiving the enemy.

One of the suggestions within this memo, though not fully fleshed out, involved planting misleading information on a dead body that would then fall into enemy hands. The notion was akin to "fishing" for information by presenting bait – hence the "trout fishing" analogy.



Ewen Montagu and Charles Cholmondeley seized upon this basic premise and began to develop it into a more concrete and elaborate plan. They recognised the potential to use a carefully staged scenario involving a deceased individual to carry false intelligence directly to the German high command.

However, the leap from a vague idea on a memo to the intricate operation that unfolded was significant. Montagu and Cholmondeley had to grapple with numerous practical and ethical considerations:

- **Finding a suitable body:** As we discussed, this was a crucial and sensitive issue.
- **Creating a believable identity:** The fictitious officer needed a detailed backstory and personal effects to withstand scrutiny.
- **Crafting convincing false documents:** The information carried by the body had to be strategically valuable and presented in a way that would appear authentic.
- **Ensuring the body and documents would fall into the right hands:** The method of "delivery" was critical to the plan's success.

The "Trout Fishing" memo provided the initial seed of the idea, but it was the ingenuity, meticulous planning, and sheer audacity of Montagu and Cholmondeley that transformed this abstract concept into the remarkable reality of Operation Mincemeat.

## Major William Martin

The linchpin of Montagu and Cholmondeley's audacious plan was the need for a body – a real human corpse that could convincingly play the role of a deceased British officer carrying sensitive documents. This was a morally complex and logistically challenging aspect of Operation Mincemeat.

Several criteria had to be met. The body needed to appear as though death had occurred relatively recently and due to circumstances, that could plausibly explain a body washing ashore after a wartime incident, such as a plane crash at sea. Crucially, the cause of death could not be immediately obvious or suggest foul play that might lead to closer scrutiny.



After a difficult search, the body of **Glyndwr Michael** was identified. Michael was a homeless Welsh man who had tragically died in London from pneumonia after ingesting rat poison. His death certificate indicated "poison by rat poison – suicidal," but this detail was carefully concealed. The medical examiner, Sir Bernard Spilsbury, played a crucial role in facilitating the use of Michael's body, ensuring the cause of death could be presented ambiguously enough to fit the operational requirements.

The decision to use Glyndwr Michael was not taken lightly. Montagu and Cholmondeley were acutely aware of the gravity of their actions. However, they believed that the potential success of Operation Mincemeat could save countless Allied lives, a justification that weighed heavily in their decision.

Glyndwr Michael's body was treated with respect throughout the operation. He was given the fictitious identity of Major William Martin, Acting Captain of the Royal Marines, a name chosen to sound suitably credible and unremarkable. His was the unwitting sacrifice that lay at the heart of this extraordinary deception.

## Crafting the Persona

For Operation Mincemeat to succeed, "Major William Martin" couldn't just be a body; he needed a believable identity, a tangible presence that would resonate with anyone who examined his belongings. Ewen Montagu and his team meticulously crafted a detailed backstory and a set of personal effects designed to paint a picture of a real, albeit fictitious, Royal Marines officer.

Every item was carefully chosen and placed to create a sense of authenticity:

The Photograph of "Pam": A key element was a photograph of a young woman, presented as Martin's fiancée, "Pam." This added a personal and emotional layer to the character, suggesting a life and love that would be tragically cut short. The photograph was of an MI5 clerk who bore a resemblance to the kind of woman a Royal Marines officer might be involved with.

- **Love Letters:** A collection of heartfelt letters from "Pam" further reinforced their relationship, filled with everyday concerns and affectionate language, making their connection feel genuine.
- **Theatre Ticket Stubs:** These seemingly insignificant items suggested a normal social life, placing "Major Martin" in London attending a specific performance, grounding him in a particular time and place.
- **A Receipt for an Engagement Ring:** This was a crucial detail, subtly implying a future that would never come to pass and adding to the poignancy of his supposed fate.
- **A Tailor's Bill:** A bill for a tailored suit added another layer of mundane reality, suggesting a life of routine and ordinary concerns.
- **A Religious Medal:** A small silver cross and a letter from his supposed father added a touch of personal history and faith.
- **Keys and Personal Documents:** These included everyday items like keys, a comb, and identification papers that supported his cover as a Royal Marines officer.
- **Worn Documents:** Some of the crucial documents, particularly the personal letters carried in his wallet, were deliberately carried around in a real wallet for several weeks prior to the operation. This ingenious touch ensured they looked realistically worn and creased, as if they had been handled and read multiple times, further enhancing their believability.

The brilliance lay in the ordinariness of these items. They weren't overtly heroic or suspicious; they were the kind of things a typical officer might carry. The cumulative effect was to create a believable and sympathetic character, making it more likely that anyone finding these possessions would accept "Major William Martin" as genuine and, crucially, believe the sensitive documents he carried were real. The attention to such minute detail was a hallmark of the planning and a key factor in the operation's ultimate success.

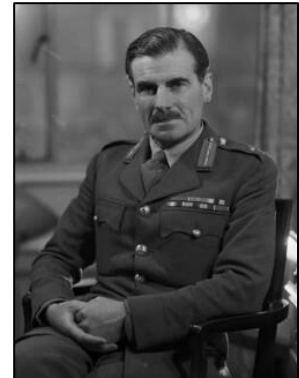


## The Crucial Documents

While the carefully constructed persona of "Major William Martin" was vital for believability, the true weight of Operation Mincemeat rested on the authenticity and impact of the documents he carried. These were meticulously crafted letters designed to fall into enemy hands and mislead them about the Allies' intended invasion target.

The key documents were two personal letters, seemingly written between high-ranking Allied officers:

- A letter from Lieutenant General Sir **Archibald Nye**, Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to General Sir Harold Alexander, commander of the 18th Army Group in North Africa. This letter was the primary piece of disinformation. It explicitly mentioned the planned Allied landings in Greece and Sardinia as the main objectives. Sicily was referred to in a way that suggested it was merely a secondary or diversionary target. The language was informal and conversational, lending an air of authenticity to a private communication between senior officers.
- A shorter, accompanying letter from Lord Louis Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations, also addressed to Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham. This letter served to further reinforce the idea of an imminent operation in Greece, mentioning the need for specific types of landing craft – craft that would be readily apparent to German intelligence as being suitable for a Greek landing.



The strategic brilliance of these letters lay in several factors:

- **Plausibility:** The officers involved were real and held the ranks indicated. The informal tone suggested genuine correspondence.
- **Specificity:** The letters contained enough detail about the supposed Greek and Sardinian operations to appear credible, without revealing any genuinely sensitive information about other Allied plans.
- **Subtlety regarding Sicily:** By mentioning Sicily in a casual, almost dismissive way, the letters aimed to downplay its true importance as the primary invasion target.
- **Reinforcement:** The two letters corroborated each other, strengthening the overall deception.

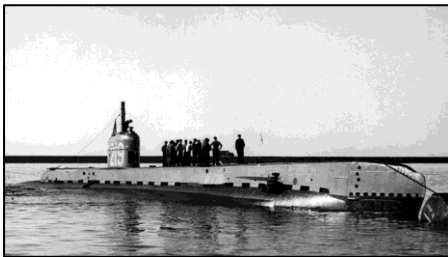
These documents, carefully aged and placed within "Major Martin's" briefcase, were the bait intended to lure the German high command into believing a false narrative, ultimately diverting their attention and resources away from the real target: Sicily.



## The Drop Off

The carefully constructed illusion of "Major William Martin" and the vital false documents now needed to be delivered into enemy hands. The chosen vessel for this clandestine mission was HMS Seraph, a British submarine commanded by Lieutenant Commander Norman "Bill" Jewell.

The body of Glyndwr Michael, who became "Major William Martin," was handled with care and a degree of solemnity by the crew of HMS Seraph. To preserve the body during the journey and to ensure it appeared as fresh as possible when found, it was stored in a specially constructed metal canister filled with dry ice.



This canister was described as being roughly the size and shape of a torpedo tube. When HMS Seraph reached the drop-off point, the canister was brought up onto the deck. The body was then removed from the canister, dressed in the Royal Marines uniform, fitted with a Mae West life jacket, and the briefcase containing the documents was secured to his wrist with

a chain. The canister itself was then disposed of in deeper water to avoid it being linked back to the submarine.

Under the cover of darkness and operating with utmost secrecy, HMS Seraph embarked on its crucial voyage. The body of Glyndwr Michael, dressed in the uniform of a Royal Marines officer and with the briefcase containing the planted documents secured to his wrist, was carefully stored in a special refrigeration chamber on board the submarine.

This method of transportation ensured the body was relatively well-preserved for the planned discovery.

The destination was the coast of Huelva, Spain. This location was strategically chosen because Spain, while officially neutral during the war, had a significant German intelligence presence. It was anticipated that any sensitive documents found would quickly be passed on to the German high command. Furthermore, the prevailing currents in that area increased the likelihood of the body washing ashore within a reasonable timeframe.

The journey of HMS Seraph was fraught with risk. Operating in enemy-controlled waters, the submarine had to navigate carefully to avoid detection. The crew was aware of the unusual and sensitive nature of their cargo, adding to the tension of the mission.

Upon reaching the designated location off the Spanish coast in the early hours of April 30, 1943, the crew of HMS Seraph, with heavy hearts and solemn respect, prepared to release "Major William Martin" into the sea. In accordance with the plan, the body was gently placed in the water, with the briefcase still firmly attached. The hope was that the tides and currents would carry him ashore, along with the precious cargo of deception, to be discovered by the Spanish authorities and, ultimately, by German intelligence. The success of Operation

Mincemeat now rested on the currents of the Atlantic and the unwitting role of those who would find the man who never was.

## Into Enemy Hands

As planned, the body of "Major William Martin" was discovered on the morning of 30 April 1943, by a Spanish fisherman near the town of Punta Umbría, not far from Huelva on the southwestern coast of Spain. The fisherman promptly reported his find to the local Spanish authorities.

Spain, being a neutral country during the war, was obligated under international law to investigate the death of a foreign military officer found on its shores. The British Naval Attaché in Madrid, Vice-Admiral Alan Hillgarth, was informed of the discovery.

Crucially for the success of Operation Mincemeat, the Spanish authorities, particularly a local naval intelligence officer, Commander Francisco Ruiz-Moguer, showed considerable interest in the deceased officer and the documents attached to him. Ruiz-Moguer, while officially representing a neutral nation, was known to have pro-German sympathies and allowed German intelligence officers access to the recovered items before they were returned to the British.

The briefcase, still secured to the body's wrist, was carefully opened. Inside, the Spanish authorities found the personal effects meticulously planted by Montagu's team, including the photograph of "Pam," the letters, and, most importantly, the two key letters between the Allied generals.

German intelligence operatives, including a seasoned Abwehr agent named Adolf Clauss, were able to examine copies of these documents. They were impressed by the apparent authenticity of the letters and the seemingly casual tone used by high-ranking Allied officers discussing sensitive military matters.

While the British authorities, through Vice-Admiral Hillgarth, requested the prompt return of the body and the documents, the delay caused by the Spanish investigation and the clandestine access granted to the Germans was precisely what Montagu and Cholmondeley had hoped for. The bait had been taken. The false information was now in the hands of the enemy.

## The Deception Works

The planted documents, having passed through Spanish hands to German intelligence, reached the highest levels of the Nazi regime. The meticulous detail in the letters, the seemingly genuine tone between senior Allied officers, and the corroborating personal effects of "Major William Martin" combined to create a compelling illusion of truth.

Key figures within the German high command, including Adolf Hitler himself, were presented with the contents of the captured documents. Several factors contributed to their acceptance of the deception:

- **Pre-existing Beliefs:** German intelligence had long held concerns about a potential Allied landing in Greece, given the historical ties between Britain and Greece and the strategic importance of the Balkans for Germany's war effort (access to raw materials like oil). The Mincemeat documents conveniently reinforced these pre-existing fears.
- **The Apparent Confirmation:** The letters explicitly detailing plans for Greece and Sardinia appeared to confirm their suspicions, making the information seem more credible than if it had been entirely unexpected.
- **The Believability of "Major Martin":** The detailed persona created for the fictitious officer, with his photograph, love letters, and everyday personal items, helped to humanize the carrier of the documents, making him seem like a genuine individual entrusted with important information.
- **The Reluctance to Dismiss:** High-ranking German officers, including Hitler, were reportedly convinced of the authenticity of the documents. There may have been a reluctance to dismiss such seemingly concrete evidence, especially as it aligned with their existing anxieties about the Mediterranean theatre.

As a direct result of the information contained in the Mincemeat documents, the German high command took significant action:

- **Reinforcement of Greece and Sardinia:** Crucially, they began to divert troops, including valuable panzer divisions, and resources to Greece and Sardinia in anticipation of the supposed Allied landings.
- **Weakening of Defences in Sicily:** Consequently, the defences in Sicily, the actual Allied target, were left significantly weaker than they might otherwise have been.

British intelligence received confirmation through intercepted German communications (Ultra decrypts) that the deception had worked. The message "Mincemeat swallowed whole" was famously sent back to London. The success of Operation Mincemeat in convincing Hitler and his commanders to redeploy their forces played a vital role in the subsequent Allied invasion of Sicily.

## Operation Husky

On the night of 9th–10th July 1943, the Allied forces launched Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. It was one of the largest amphibious assaults of the Second World War, involving vast numbers of troops, ships, and aircraft. The landings took place along a wide stretch of the southern and eastern coasts of the island.



The invasion force comprised the British Eighth Army, under General Sir **Bernard Montgomery**, and the American Seventh Army, under Lieutenant General George S. Patton. They faced a combined Axis force of German and Italian troops on Sicily.

Crucially, due to the success of Operation Mincemeat, the German high command was convinced that the main Allied invasion would target Greece and Sardinia. As a result, they had redeployed significant numbers of troops and, more importantly, armoured divisions to these areas. Sicily was left with a relatively weaker defensive force than it might

otherwise have had.

While the Allied troops still faced resistance, particularly from the German units on the island, the initial landings were met with less opposition in key sectors than anticipated. The element of surprise, significantly enhanced by the German misdirection, allowed the Allies to establish a firm foothold and rapidly push inland.

The impact of Operation Mincemeat on Operation Husky is widely acknowledged by historians. The deception contributed to:

- **Reduced German troop strength in Sicily:** Fewer German reinforcements were available to counter the initial landings.
- **Misallocation of German resources:** Vital armoured units were positioned in Greece and Sardinia, far from the actual invasion site.
- **Increased element of surprise:** The Allies achieved a greater degree of surprise than would likely have been possible had the Germans correctly anticipated Sicily as the main target.

The invasion of Sicily was a hard-fought campaign that lasted for over a month. However, the initial success, partly attributable to the effectiveness of Operation Mincemeat, was a crucial factor in the eventual Allied victory and the subsequent advance into mainland Italy.

## The Legacy and the Unsung Hero

Operation Mincemeat stands as a remarkable and almost unbelievable example of successful wartime deception. Its audacity and ingenuity continue to fascinate historians and the public alike. The operation demonstrated the power of creative thinking and meticulous planning in achieving strategic objectives, even in the midst of a global conflict.

The success of Mincemeat had a tangible impact on the Allied invasion of Sicily, contributing to a greater element of surprise and potentially saving countless lives by diverting German forces. It remains a testament to the crucial role that intelligence and deception played in the Second World War.

Beyond the strategic implications, Operation Mincemeat also raises important ethical considerations. The use of a deceased individual in such a manner was a deeply serious decision, albeit one made with the belief that it would serve a greater good.



At the heart of this extraordinary operation lies the story of Glyndwr Michael, the homeless Welsh man whose body was used to carry the deception. His identity was largely unknown for many years, and he remained an unsung figure in this incredible tale. While his involvement was unwitting, his body played a pivotal role in a major turning point of the war. In a strange twist of fate, under the guise of "Major William Martin," he received a dignified burial with military honours in Huelva, Spain – a stark contrast to the obscurity of his life and death.<sup>1</sup> This unintended consequence highlights the complex and often paradoxical nature of wartime operations.

In the years since the war, the story of Operation Mincemeat has been recounted in numerous books, most notably "The Man Who Never Was" by Ewen Montagu, and in several films, ensuring that this improbable true story continues to be remembered and discussed. It serves as a powerful reminder of the complex moral landscape of warfare

and the extraordinary measures taken in the pursuit of victory.