

Learn to Stop Worrying and Embrace Deception

MILDEC at the tactical level

by 1stLt Michael Germano

As soon as they walked back into the battalion command post, I could tell that Abbott and Davis were up to something. Their hurried strides and toothy grins told me more than the maps and folders they had under their arms. Entering my twentieth hour of wakefulness and fourth cup of coffee, I vaguely remembered OKing a childish plan the junior Marines had concocted. Their goal: disrupt the planning efforts of our adversaries living a few miles away at Camp Wilson during Integrated Training Exercise 2-20. Now they had returned after having “accidentally” revealed key aspects of our plan to the adversary’s S-2 shop. For many, the phrase “military deception” exists solely in exaggerated tales of World War II ingenuity and outdated army pubs belaboring the staff planning process. In March 2020, two lance corporals demonstrated that, given the right circumstances, deception can be practiced and employed at the lowest levels. We must allow troops at every level the greatest latitudes of creativity in order to further develop our tactics, techniques, and procedures and tailor our training exercises to encourage their practice.

Often when Marines think of deception, we think of elaborate ruses making strategic-level impacts. Beyond the occasional twig in the cateyes, tactical deception is often ignored because it does not fit neatly into the maneuver concept. Deception is seen as a Hail Mary when it should be employed like the West

“The mechanisms of the new warfare ... are ever at the mercy of training methods which will stimulate the soldier to express his intelligence and spirit.”

—SLA Marshall, Men Against Fire

>1stLt Germano is a Ground Intelligence Officer and currently serving as the Small Unmanned Aerial Systems Manager at 1st MLG.

Coast offense: how can a number of short gains yield a greater victory? Its utility boils down to the age-old complaint of the young infantryman: “Is this face paint REALLY going to make a difference?” In the business of killing, no advantage can be ignored when it can be reasonably employed. Deception should be employed by unit leaders at every level and every type of unit. A rubber rifle and extra Kevlar are a fighting position, while an extra tent and Cammie netting is a fake combat operations center. Moreover, the adversary’s reactions to a deception measure can be measured through collections and be used to enhance the commander’s decision-making.

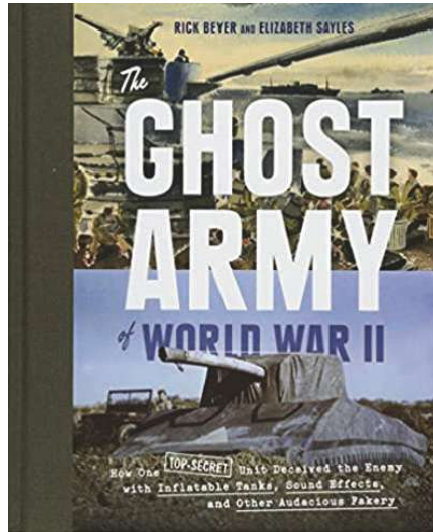
This is a concept that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) understands well. Current assessments put Chinese doctrine at a ratio of one-to-one real equipment compared to fake equipment.¹ The PLA employs deception at both the tactical and strategic level.

The PLA Rocket Force goes so far as to assign dummy rockets serial numbers and companies while disguising real Transport Erector Launchers as civilian trucks. At the tactical level, the PLA employs highly mobile and easily constructible decoys of both solid and inflatable material. One such decoy is 75lbs, lighter than the Browning M2. The PLA even has dedicated camouflage militias who are used not only for disguising bridges and fuel depots but for testing new methods of deception.

The U.S. military must make a similar effort to bring deception execution and planning to the tactical level. Deception is an idea that is discussed in recent U.S. doctrine, but no effort has yet been made to seriously commit to the concept. The Marine Corps’ new EABO concept perfectly exemplifies a weak commitment to deception. The words “decoy” and “deception” are often used in briefs, handbooks, and publications, but no firm commitments to deception are made. How can commanders and staff be expected to plan for deception considerations with no training or resources? Worse still, very few commanders have experience employing deception at any level beyond

leaving their cover at the office to give the appearance they are not out to an early dinner with the wife. The Marine Corps as a whole has failed to prepare for combat. Instead, units must be given opportunities to take risks and be creative in free-play environments.

Commanders are too unfamiliar with deception as a concept to be able to employ it comfortably at any scale. To fix this, deception should be implemented as an evaluated criteria in large-scale force-on-force exercises. Tactical deception as a concept requires out-of-the-box thinking and creativity, and despite the required element of secrecy, it is not exempt from the need for rehearsals. Commanders and staff must practice exercising their creativity for deception and TTPs must be established and disseminated. Just as in doctrine, large-scale exercises often mention or encourage deception but do not take meaningful steps to facilitate its practice. Broader lateral limits should be put in place to allow commanders



The allied deception effort in WWII provides a historical example of deception at the tactical and strategic levels. Ghost Army by Rick Beyer and Elizabeth Sayles, (Princeton: Architectural Press, 2015).

to think outside the box. This can be done within existing framework. For example, a logistics unit executing an aerial delivery of ammunition to an infantry battalion could execute a dummy drop. This might function as a preventive security measure in the event of a high probability of enemy interdiction of said aerial delivery. It might also be used in support of an intelligence collections plan if there is a high likelihood of enemy forces unmasking after a dummy supply drop. A false reconnaissance operations center can be constructed and used to launch UAS to deceive the adversary and protect the true reconnaissance operations center or bait for an ambush. UAS squadrons should have inflatable replicas of their aircraft. Further integration with information operations could reinforce the deception by providing a second verification of this information. The possibilities are endless but must be practiced. The old adage about becoming comfortable being uncomfortable must apply to the planning process. Commanders and staff should become comfortable expressing ideas that might previously have been considered unprofessional. For example, I once ruthlessly mocked a peer when he proposed inserting a scout sniper team via civilian train. Please accept my apologies, Lt Leland.

On the final day of Integrated Training Exercise 2-20, the adversary's CAAT section was furious when the command and control node they attacked was empty. I had tasked our engineering platoon to set up a combat operations center in the exact spot which my Marines told me their S-2 believed our combat operations center would be. The engineers sold the fake well, putting up cammie netting over a tent and adding some concealed c-wire. 1/4 Mar was not so pleased and broke the poles of our tent. Exercises are too restrictive to allow creative deception solutions and must be improved in this regard. Commanders must take it upon themselves to foster a creative spirit in their planners. They must be beholden to these efforts by staff officers at higher echelons devoted to deception planning. Finally, it is worth noting that this idea came from two junior Marines. information operations/social media integration will make Deception an extremely powerful tool, and an ever-changing media environment will require the participation of the perpetually online Gen Z. If any doubt remains as to the importance and viability of IO, consider the Club-K, a Russian cruise missile that is housed and controlled entirely within a shipping container. If the U.S. military wishes to reach such a consistent level of deviousness, planners must feel free to experiment and be encouraged by dedicated and trained personnel. The most stoic of commanders must let loose their inner lance corporal. We must learn to stop worrying and embrace deception.

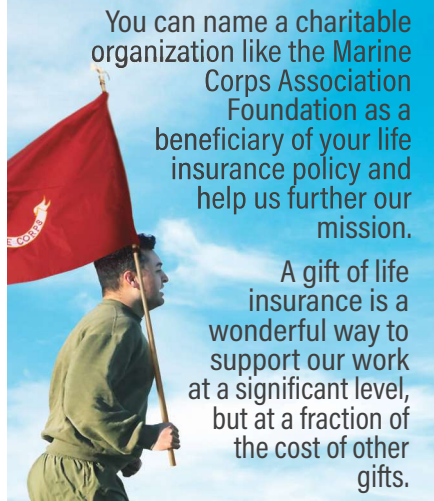
Note

1. Aaron Jensen, "Deception Is Key to Chinese Military Strategies," *Diplomat*, (August 2020), available at <https://thediplomat.com>.



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