

Extended Essay

To what extent was it British planning and execution that ensured the successful outcome of 'Operation Mincemeat'?

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Abstract

This investigation deals with the question: To what extent was it British planning and execution that ensured the successful outcome of operation Mincemeat? To answer this question the context of Operation Mincemeat during the Second World War is reviewed and the operation, as described by various sources both primary and secondary, is discussed. These sources are: a book written by Ewen Montagu, the man who came up with the plan, a forensic report, a documentary, newspaper articles both from that time and now, internet journals and a very well researched biography. Operation Mincemeat was a counter-intelligence operation by the British Double-Cross Committee, the aim of which was to convince the Germans that the next strategic move for the Allies was not the invasion of Sicily. The British planning and execution when it came to finding the body, giving him an identity, finding a location, delivering him safely and giving him the right evidence as well as other factors such as the German failures, Spanish inefficiencies and the all-important factor of luck are described and evaluated. This investigation deals with questions that for a long time were unanswered, and explores an aspect of the Second World War which, though surprisingly important when it comes to allied success, is not very well known. It adds depth to the knowledge of the course of WW2. The conclusion of this essay is that the primary reason for success was indeed the British planning and execution although the other factors clearly contributed and there were moments when it seemed the operation would fail, but either due to luck, or British execution, but mostly a combination of both, these obstacles were overcome, making Operation Mincemeat one of WW2's boldest and most successful counter-intelligence operations (Montagu).

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To what extent was it British planning and execution that ensured the successful outcome of operation Mincemeat?

1. Introduction:

During World War 2 a battle was raging in North Africa between the British 8th Army under General Montgomery and the German Africa Corps under German General Rommel (*Secrets of WWII*). By 1943 the Germans were defeated in North Africa. The Allied High Command faced a dilemma over the next move in the war. The British wanted to keep pressure up in the Mediterranean, the Americans wanted to throw everything into France. The British target options were Sardinia, Sicily and southern Greece (*Secrets of WWII*). This crucial strategic standoff between the Allied powers was resolved when Roosevelt and Churchill met at Casablanca. It was decided to focus on invading Sicily and going through Sicily to Italy (*Secrets of WWII*). Here the Allies faced an obstacle. Hitler and his High Command would anticipate that Sicily would be their next target. How could the Fuhrer be convinced that they had every intention of striking elsewhere? (*Secrets of WWII*). “The question in everyone’s mind was how to make the Germans believe the blow would fall somewhere else- a formidable task, as Churchill observed, when “anybody but a damn fool would know that it was Sicily” (Russell 185). The people with the plan were Charles Chomondeley and Ewen Montagu (see appendix 3) and their answer to the problem was Operation Mincemeat. They were members of the top secret XX committee (Double-Cross Committee), whose job it was to maintain security of forth-coming Allied intentions (Macintyre). This mission of Operation Mincemeat was to lay an Intelligence smoke screen to guard Sicily.

I chose this topic because WW 2 has always been of interest to me as it is such an important part of history. I wanted to choose a less well-known subject and one that is, till this day, shrouded in mystery. I found during my research that many of the assumptions or beliefs about this operation were in fact false, an intricate web of lies fed to the people interested in the story, just like the webs spun by the top secret XX Committee. It was one of the boldest counter -intelligence operations of World War 2 and I wanted to research it for myself.

To do this, a brief explanation of operation Mincemeat is necessary. The efforts of the British in the plot will then be evaluated. Their plans, execution, successes and failures will be investigated. This paper will then examine the Spanish and look at how much of the success

of the plot was due to Spanish failures and efforts. The same will be done by evaluating the actions of German forces operating in Spain at that time and the failures of the Germans as the documents and deception travelled further up the ladder all the way to Berlin. Lastly the simple force of luck will be investigated as a factor in ensuring the successful outcome of operation Mincemeat. The paper will end with a discussion of these factors and conclusion and will attempt to answer the question: To what extent was it British planning and execution that ensured the successful outcome of operation Mincemeat?

2 The British Operation:

Operation Mincemeat started with a corpse. This corpse was “provided with a uniform complete with various papers identifying the bearer as a Major in the British Royal Marines”(Lyons 205), the body, carrying a briefcase with ‘top secret’ information was taken by submarine and floated off the coast of Huelva, Spain. Here on 1st of May 1943 it was found by a fisherman and brought to the authorities (Barclay). In Huelva there was an active German spy network very eager to please German officials. The briefcase soon found its way higher up in the German line of command and copies were made of its contents. These then found their way to Berlin, to Hitler himself (Russell). The British got their suitcase back 2 weeks later and found that the documents had been tampered with. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. Hitler followed through on the information in the briefcase and moved divisions, panzers and submarines away from Sicily and to Greece and Sardinia (Lyons).

2.1 The Preparation:

2.1.1 The Body

One of the factors of the operation’s success was the amount of preparation that Montagu, Cholmondeley and their crew did to ensure that Major Martin became a real person, or as close as possible. The validity of the plan depended on the validity of the man carrying the papers (Montague). To ensure this, the team started with the body. It was surprisingly difficult to find a suitable corpse but eventually they did (see appendix 5). The body used was said, by most of the sources used in this investigation, to have died of pneumonia which meant that there was a buildup of fluid in the lungs which could be mistaken for someone who

drowned. In reality however this was not true. The body found “was that of a homeless, mentally ill Welshman named Glyndwr Michael, who died from ingesting rat poison” (Telegraph 11). Only 2 sources (Operation Mincemeat by Macintyre and the forensic report by Gottlieb), state the true name of the man and how he died, and that death by rat poisoning is not at all consistent with pneumonia or drowning. It seems that in the end, finding a perfect corpse didn't have so much to do with how the person died, but was “predicated on the notion that they wouldn't have to ask anybody's permission” (Ewers 10) to use the body. The reason that so many of the sources are contradictory on this topic probably has to do with Montagu's book, The Man Who Never Was. When this was written, his superiors were adamant that no-one found out how they got the body (as technically it was theft) or who the person was so that no-one could complain. As this book was actually a primary source, many people based their research on it. This suggests that it should be used with some caution as it was checked by the government which could imply manipulation.

The care that went into finding the perfect corpse by the British ensured that they managed to successfully steal a corpse that no-one would miss. It was, however, also the first British failure or potentially disastrous mistake as bodies poisoned by phosphorus (the main product in rat poison) are easy to identify and often manifest in a discoloring of the face as it “causes death by liver failure with jaundice” (Gottlieb 95). A pathologist with much experience in this field states clearly that the body would have looked nothing like a drowned or accident victim (Gottlieb). This meant that any good pathologist should have been able to see that the cause of death was not consistent with the story, i.e. a plane crash victim. The forensic pathologist, who performed the autopsy in Huelva was very capable and it was clear that “the more detailed the autopsy, the more likely it was that the pathologist would find some clue to the real cause of death” (Macintyre 205). However the British Vice Consul in Huelva stepped in at this point and suggested that “since it was obvious the heat had done its worst, there was no need for a detailed autopsy”(Macintyre 205). The pathologist gladly called it a day, due to the heat, but stated that the body had been in the water “between 8 and 10 days” (Gladwell). The Gottlieb report is useful in this investigation as it shows a precarious point in this operation, but due to the effort and follow through of the British even this potential disaster was smoothed over.

2.1.2 Major Martin:

The second part of the British preparation involved the building up of Major Martin's identity and personality. The body was selected and they now had to make a credible person

out of him. To do this Montagu filled Major Martin's pockets (see appendix 1 and 6). The book by Montagu was useful in this regard as he wrote it soon after the incident using his own, as well as official papers and documents (see appendix 7 and 8). The papers had to be as realistic as possible so real tickets and letters from banks were used and women in the department were even persuaded to write the love letters (Montagu). To ensure authenticity the papers were carried around in pockets for the right amount of days and opened and refolded to look genuine (Macintyre). The extreme care which had gone into assembling these items and checking their dates is evident but this is where another error on the English side arose. According to the autopsy, the body had been in the water for 8 to 10 days, at minimum, possibly longer. "According to the evidence in Major Martin's pocket, he flew from London late on 24 April; and the body was retrieved in the early hours of 30 April" (Macintyre 207). This means that according to the dates on documents in his pockets he had only been at sea for just over 5 days which was inconsistent with the state of decomposition. This was a very dangerous error on the part of the British, especially as "the decomposition was more advanced than what had been hoped for: a greenish mold covered the inferior half of the face" (Gottlieb 95). Fortunately, the documents in Major Martin's pockets never reached the pathologist. They were passed onto "Captain Francisco Elvira Alvarez, commander of the port of Huelva and, as it happened, the best friend of Ludwig Clauss, Huelva's elderly German Consul" (Macintyre 207).

3.1.3 The Location:

This brings us to the third part of the British preparations: the location chosen to drop the corpse, which was extremely well thought out. "Spain had maintained a neutrality of sorts" however, "Spanish official opinion was broadly in favour of the Axis powers; many Spanish officials were in contact with German intelligence" (Macintyre 10) and the Spanish could be trusted to pass any information on to the Germans. Now they had to find a specific place in Spain. They found that the Spanish coast near Huelva met all the conditions (Montagu) and that "an active German agent there, known to be on good terms with local Spanish officials, would be likely to secure copies of the papers himself, or ensure that they quickly reached the Abwehr" (Stripp 9). This is what actually happened, although in a roundabout way. During the autopsy the Spanish naval judge, lieutenant Pascal del Pobil, who happened to like the English Vice Consul Haselden, offered to give the briefcase straight back to him during the autopsy. He believed he was doing Haselden a favour. Haselden "knew he had to react swiftly" (Macintyre 204). This would have been a nightmare as the British would

have the briefcase back before it even reached any German hands. So “ with as much nonchalance as he could muster, he said: ‘ well your superior might not like that, so perhaps you should deliver it to him, and then bring It back to me, following the official route’” (Macintyre 204). This was surely very suspicious as the contents of the briefcase were later found to be extremely important and top secret. This could be seen as a fault on the British side when looking for a location, as maybe this area was too neutral.

3.1.4 The Documents:

Another important factor in the British planning lay in the ‘top secret’ documents that Major Martin had on him. These could not be too obvious but also not too obscure. The Germans had to believe these letters otherwise the whole operation would be pointless. “If the German General Staff was to be persuaded, in face of all possibilities, to bank on our next target being somewhere other than Sicily, it would have to have before it a document which was passing between officers who must know what our real plans were, who could not possibly be mistaken and who could not themselves be victims of a cover plan” (Montagu 43). It would also have to be letters from someone whom the Germans would be impressed by. So the first letter was ‘written’ by General Sir Archibald Nye, the Vice Chief of the Imperial General staff (See appendix 2). He would be writing the letter to General Alexander, who commanded an army in Tunisia under General Eisenhower (Stripp). It was also decided it should be a “look here old chap “letter of “the old boy type” (Montagu). If it was a slightly more personal letter it would explain why it was delivered in this way. Another difficulty was identifying a cover target. Sardinia (see appendix 9) and Corsica had been chosen as a cover target. Montagu felt that just this one cover and one letter would not be enough so he chose Greece as well. Another stroke of brilliance on the British side was to try and convince the Germans that the invasion at Sicily was the cover target. In this case “if there was an actual leakage of the real plans, the Germans would think that, what was in fact a leakage was only part of the cover that they had read about in the letter” (Montagu 50).

3.2 The Execution:

Another factor that contributed to British success in this operation was the careful execution of the plan. The corpse was placed on the submarine Seraph, commanded by Captain Jewell, and was successfully dropped, off the coast of Huelva. The documents were put in a briefcase. The problem that arose was how to make sure the briefcase and Major Martin washed up together. To solve this they tied the briefcase to Major Martin with a chain (Gladwell). This was highly irregular for these kinds of letters, but it had to be done. It could

have been very problematic had the Germans or Spanish thought about it. In the official German report, however, the chain wasn't even mentioned (Macintyre). A special air-tight canister was made to prevent the body from decomposing and Major Martin, in full uniform was put inside and packed with dry ice (Russell 186). "Twelve days later, at 4.30 on the morning of April 30, 1943, the Seraph surfaced a mile off the mouth of the Huelva River. The Major was taken out of his canister and after a brief, impromptu prayer service; he was consigned to the sea and the mercies of German intelligence" (Russell 186). This too was risky. The wind was not quite right and had Jewell not gone quite that close to the coast, the body might never have made it to land (Macintyre). Once again though, thanks to British efforts, this time from Captain Bill Jewell, the operation was back on track.

4 Spanish and German Involvement:

The successes of this operation relied not only on the British successes, but German failures as well. The first German failure was their intense willingness to please. A document of this importance would surely mean that they could make a name for themselves and show off the efficiency of their spy network in Spain. As the British had anticipated "by the time the British Vice Consul informed Madrid that the papers had arrived, Clauss, Germany's Consul, had already mobilized his extensive spy network to intercept them" (Macintyre 208) (see appendix 4). The next part of the briefcase's journey was inconvenient to both the Germans and British. It had ended up in the hands of the Spanish navy which was on good terms with the British. This made the briefcase hard for Clauss to get to, even though he was in control of the Huelva police, civilian governor, harbor master, and army authorities (Gladwell). At this point Montagu again intervened by sending a letter to the Consul suggesting that the letters were of extreme importance and needed to be brought back. Clauss, however still failed to get the documents and, because of all the telegrams, "the ambitious Karl Erich Kuhlenthal saw an opportunity to add another feather to his espionage cap" (Macintyre 218). At this point Clauss' reputation was at stake, and he insisted he would get the documents, but it was too late as there was an order to send the documents to the admiralty of Madrid. Clauss had failed to retrieve them in Huelva. Now it was up to Kuhlenthal in Madrid (Macintyre). When investigating German failures, the book *Operation Mincemeat* by Macintyre is especially useful. This biography published in 2010 has an impressive list of references and sources and the information is well researched and referenced. Also because it was written later, it was able to explain with hindsight, what

happened in Spain and Germany and why. It is however not a primary source and was written a long time after the operation, which could potentially be a problem.

Spanish bureaucracy, which was inept, self-important and slow (Macintyre), caused the briefcase to get stuck in the muddled system and almost never reached the Germans, which would have made the whole exercise a waste of time for the British. Kuhlenthal now turned to the Gestapo office in Spain. They too failed. All this poking around stirred up speculation surrounding the briefcase in the Spanish military hierarchy. This led to Colonel Barron, Franco's head of security hearing about it. The Spanish managed to successfully extract the letters, copy them and replace them without leaving a trace (Gladwell). Finally after 9 days and a lot of stress the letters landed in German hands. The letters were taken to the German Embassy and handed to Leissner, (see appendix 4), the Abwehr chief in Spain. "They seemed to be of the highest importance; the letters not only indicated an imminent Allied landing in Greece, and possibly Sardinia too, but specifically identified Sicily as a decoy target (Macintyre 228). Leissner however was doubtful, it seemed too easy to him. Kuhlenthal however was the opposite; he was eager and gullible and had no doubts (Gladwell). Another error on the side of the Germans, which ultimately led to the success of the British plan, was the report which was sent with the documents. Kuhlenthal embellished the case. He implied a pilot was found, but made no mention of the chain which attached the briefcase to Major Martin (BBC). He described the theatre tickets (see appendix 8), as nightclub receipts but got the date wrong too. The date was the 22 April while Kuhlenthal said it as the 27th. The body was only discovered on the 30th, this timescale contradicted the autopsy. The Mincemeat letters and report quickly moved on to the western intelligence arm of the German army where all documents were assessed for their authenticity and value (Macintyre). The leader at that time was von Roenne who was held in the highest regard by Hitler (see appendix 4). The documents were examined with suspicion and caution. Von Roenne, however, after long intense inspection of the documents wrote up a full report stating exactly what Cholmondeley and Montagu had intended. He even suggested that the Germans enforce a counter intelligence plan to make the British believe they had not read the documents (Gladwell). He believed in these documents without a doubt. This was another missed opportunity by the Germans. This contradictory evidence and the facts left out by Kuhlenthal could and should have exposed this deception.

5 Luck:

This leads to another factor which was instrumental to the successful outcome of this operation for the British, luck. Besides the luck mentioned earlier, Von Roenne's reading of the documents was a huge stroke of luck to the British as it later turned out that his motivation was that he "loathed Hitler, wanted to undermine the Nazi war effort and was intent on passing false information to the high command in the certain knowledge that it was wholly false, and extremely damaging"(Macintyre 239). This suggests that Von Roenne might not actually have been deceived and had the British not been lucky, that the papers reached a closeted anti Nazi, the plan might have been stopped in its tracks. Another stroke of luck was that Hitler, from the beginning, had always feared a war on two fronts and feared Greece as a possible target long before operation Mincemeat. This possibility was already installed in his mind. Without this, the deception might never have succeeded (Montagu).

"You can forget about Sicily. We know it's in Greece" (German General Jodl, BBC1). The plan worked. When Hitler received the letters and the report he believed them, his existing fears were proven to be true. He immediately deployed troops and panzer divisions to Greece and Sardinia. He "established field Marshall Rommel in Greece to organize a substantial defense effort" (Halter 96). He strengthened these coasts and left Sicily with minimal security. This turned out to be of great importance when the Allies landed and managed to invade Sicily (see appendix 10). At this time there were "only two German divisions available to oppose the landings" (Keegan 779). The proof of the success was clear as, even after Sicily had been attacked, Hitler still maintained that it was a cover operation and didn't move troops. Even when he realized it wasn't a cover operation and he started deploying troops to Sicily he still left Greece and Sardinia fortified believing till the end that they were targets.

6 Discussion:

So what exactly was it that made this operation so successful? How much did it depend on the careful planning and execution by the British and how much to other factors? According to Montagu, Macintyre and the article from Gladwell, if Hitler hadn't already feared Greece and found it likely he would probably not have been convinced by Operation Mincemeat. However, according to Ewers the success is attributed more to the planning and execution of the British, the focus on the details. Montagu himself said that the most important part was to think like the Germans and mould the information to fit German ideas.

This is a big part of British planning because Montagu played the game exactly right. He knew what the Germans would be looking for and how to make them forget their usual caution because of the sheer ‘importance’ of the documents. In this way it can be seen as a German and Spanish failure. Another big factor was luck. This becomes clear when examining sources like Gottlieb’s forensic report, which stresses the mistakes made. These mistakes are also examined in Macintyre’s book, but he disagrees that the success of the operation was due only to luck. His opinion and that of Gladwell’s New Yorker article is that it was the careful, detailed planning of Montagu and Cholmondely that ensured the success. Most sources do however agree that without Von Roenne at the top and some important facts being overlooked by the Spanish and Germans, like the conflicting dates and autopsy report, the operation might have failed. This all contributed to the success of operation Mincemeat.

7 Conclusion:

I agree with the majority of the sources, including the primary sources, which maintain that the success of Operation Mincemeat can be attributed to British planning and execution, but that British efforts alone would not have been enough. Clearly, other prominent factors were the German and Spanish mistakes of overlooking some crucial elements in their eagerness to please. Macintyre, with the objectiveness provided by time, stresses the importance of Von Roenne’s duplicity and Hitler’s fears and preconceptions, which made it possible for him to believe in Operation Mincemeat. It has been demonstrated that another factor was luck which helped the British with this operation, from the first to its final stage and patched up all the holes that the British did not fill and the Germans and Spanish left unfilled and undiscovered. Whatever the reasons for its success, succeed it did, “the most fitting, (and aptly fishy) tribute to the operation was contained in a telegram, sent to Winston Churchill on the day the Germans took the bait: ‘Mincemeat swallowed rod, line and sinker’” (Macintyre 308).

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Appendices:

APPENDIX 1:

Contents of Major Martin's pockets (Montagu P93-94)

- "identity discs (2)" Major w. martin, R.m., R/C," attached to braces.
- Silver cross on silver chain around neck.
- Watch, wrist.
- Wallet containing:
 - Photograph of fiancée.
 - Book of stamps (2 used)
 - 2 letters from fiancée.
 - St. Christopher plaque.
 - Invitation to cabaret club.
 - C.C.O. Pass
 - Admiralty identity card
 - Torn off top of letter.
 - 1 £5 note
 - 3£ 1 notes
 - 1 half-crown
 - 2 shillings.
 - 2 sixpences.
 - pennies.
 - Letter from 'father'
 - Letter from 'father' to McKenna & co., solicitors. letter from Lloyds Bank.
 - Bill (receipted) from naval and military club
 - Bill (cash) from Gieves Ltd.
 - Bill for engagement ring
 - '2 bus tickets
 - 2 counterfoil stubs of tickets for Prince of Wales, theatre, 22nd April, 1943
 - Box of matches
 - Box of cigarettes.
 - Bunch of keys
 - Pencil stub.
 - Letter from McKenna & Co., solicitors.

MY DEAR ALEX

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the extensive preparations in the Eastern Mediterranean were also directed at Sicily. For this reason they have told Wilson his cover plan should be something nearer the spot i.e. the Dodecanese. Since our relations with Turkey are now so obviously closer, the Italians must be pretty apprehensive about these islands.

I imagine you will agree with these arguments. I know you will have your hands more than full at the moment and you haven't much chance of discussing future operations with Eisenhower. But if, by any chance, you do want to support Wilson's proposal, I hope you will let us know soon, because we can't delay much longer.

I am very sorry we weren't able to meet your wishes about the new commander of the Guards Brigade. Your own nominee was down with a bad attack of the 'flu and not likely to be really fit for another few weeks. No doubt, however, you know Forster personally; he has done extremely well in command of a brigade at home, and is, I think, the best fellow available.

You must be about as fed up as we are with the whole question of war medals and 'Purple Hearts'. We all agree with you that we don't want to offend our American friends, but there is a good deal more to it than that. If our troops who happen to be serving in one particular theatre are to get extra decorations merely because the Americans happen to be serving there too, we will be faced with a good deal of discontent among those troops fighting elsewhere perhaps just as bitterly - perhaps more so. My own feeling is that we should thank the Americans for their kind offer, but say firmly it would cause too many anomalies and we are sorry we can't accept. But it is on the agenda for the next Military Members Meeting, and I hope you will have a decision very soon.

Best of Luck
Yours ever,
Archie Nye

General the Hon Sir Harold R.L.G. Alexander, G.C.B.,
C.S.I., D.S.O., M.C.
Headquarters, 18th Army Group

APPENDIX 3:

Ewen Montagu above and Charles Cholmondely below. (Macintyre 114)



APPENDIX 4:

Left, Leissner, right, von Roenne & below, Adolf Clauss (Macintyre 274)



Leissner, alias Gustav Lenz,
'Heidelberg', head of German
intelligence in Spain.



Lieutenant Colonel Alexis Baron von
Roenne, chief German intelligence
analyst and anti-Nazi conspirator.



Clauss, butterfly collector and the senior Abwehr officer in Huelva.

APPENDIX 5:

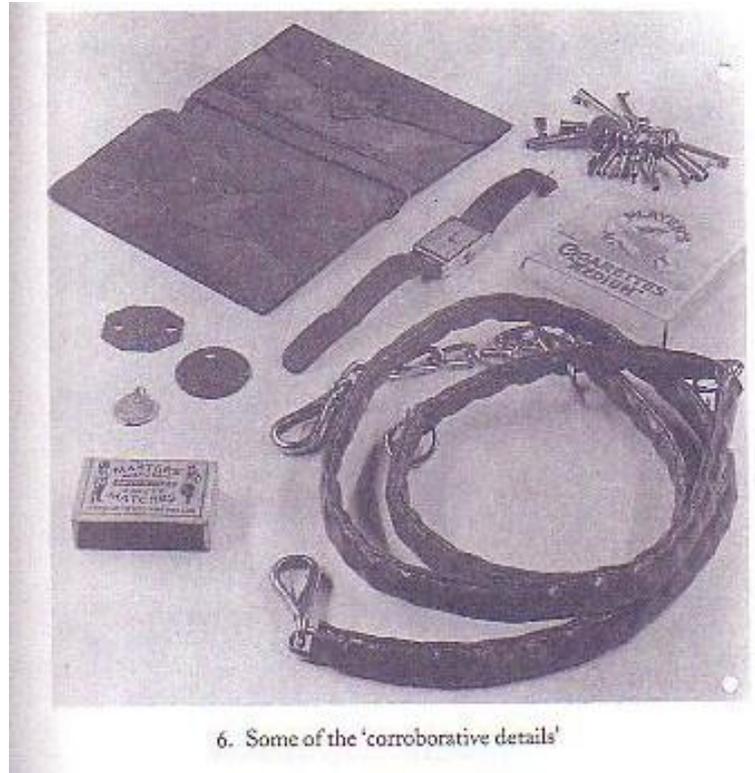
Picture of Major Martin (Montagu 89)



10. Major Martin goes to war

APPENDIX 6:

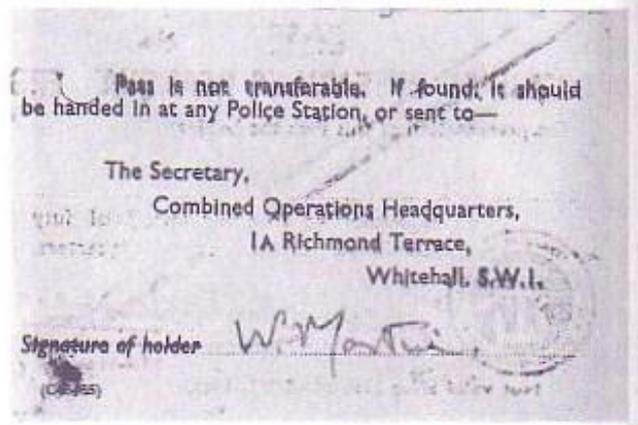
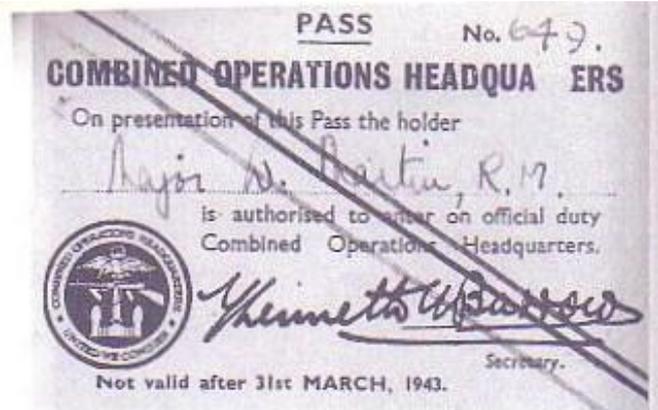
Items found with Major Martin (Montagu 88)



6. Some of the 'corroborative details'

APPENDIX 7:

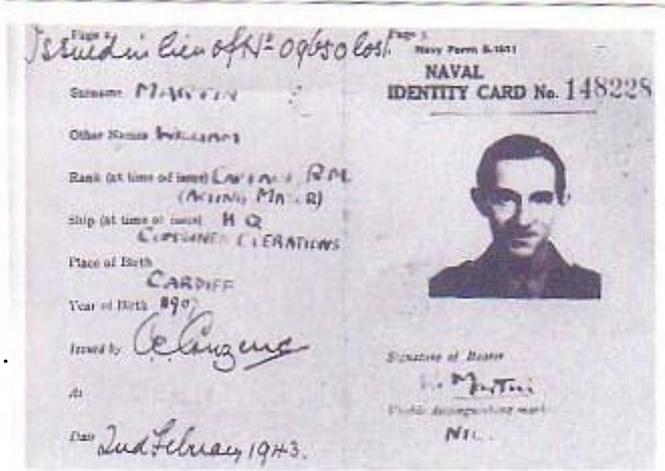
Major Martin's Combined operations pass. (Montagu 88)



2. Major Martin's pass to Combined Operations Headquarters

APPENDIX 8:

Major Martin's identity pass; below theatre tickets (Montagu 89)



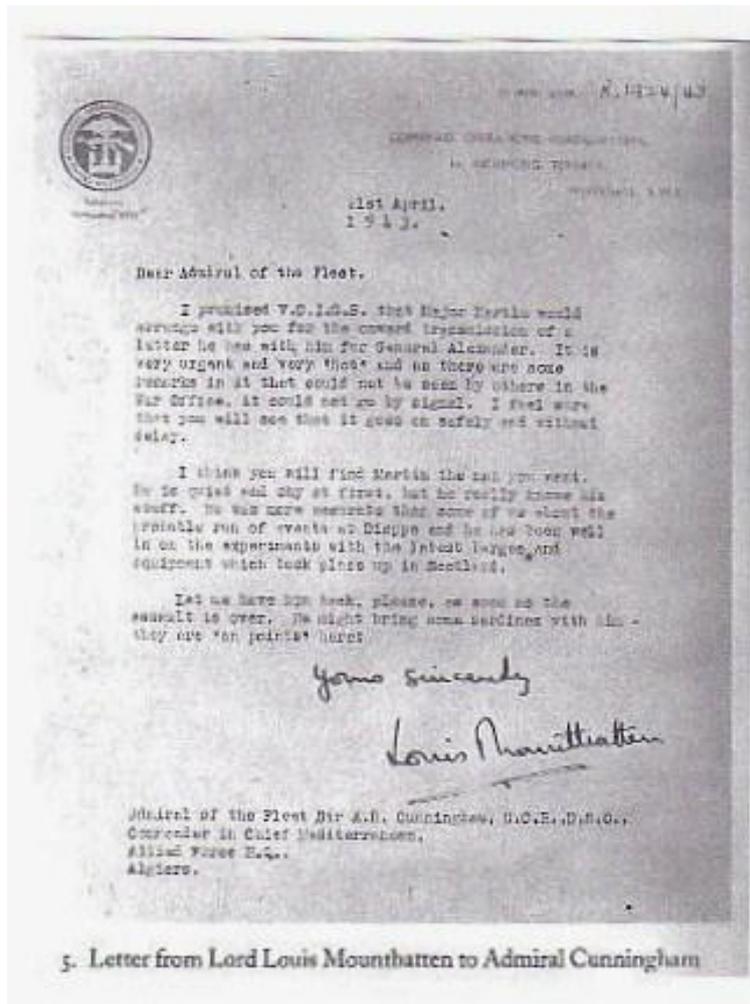
3. Identity card



4. Theatre tickets

APPENDIX 9:

Letter from Louis Mountbatten to Admiral Cunningham (Montagu 64-65)



In reply quote: S.R. 1924/43
Combined Operations Headquarters
1A Richmond Terrace
Whitehall, S.W.1

21st April

Dear Admiral of the Fleet,

I promised V.C.I.G.S. that Major Martin would arrange with you for the onward transmission of the letter he has with him for General Alexander. It is very urgent and very 'hot' and as there are some remarks in it that could not be seen by others in the War Office, it could not go by signal. I feel sure that you will see that it goes on safely and without delay.

I think you will find Martin the man you want. He is quiet and shy at first, but he really knows his stuff. He was more accurate than some of us about the probable run of events at Dieppe and he has been well in on the experiments with the latest barges and equipment which took place in Scotland.

Let us have him back, please, as soon as the assault is over. He might bring some sardines with him - they are 'on points' here!

Yours sincerely,
Louis Mountbatten

Admiral of the Fleet Sir A.B. Cunningham G.C.B., D.S.O.
Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean
Allied Forces HQ
Algiers

APPENDIX 10:

Photo's of the Allied troops landing in Sicily (Macintyre 275)



British soldiers pass shells ashore.



Sicilians greet the Allied invaders as liberators.