



Bullet'n Backstory

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Weird World War II, Part 1: The Ghost Army

In 1944, the United States created a World War II military unit so unique it remained a secret for 52 years. The idea for the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, a tactical deception unit, originated with the actions of British Brigadier Dudley Clarke. In 1942, Clarke planned an elaborate deception, to mislead German Field Marshal Edwin Rommel about Allied military operations in Egypt in the lead-up to the Second Battle of El Alamein (Sept.-Oct. 1942). Clarke's plan, called Operation Bertram, used false radio signals to simulate orders and troop movements, dummy tanks and field guns to create the illusion of an army, and elaborate camouflage to hide actual units. After Britain and her allies, under Lt. Gen. Bernard Montgomery, won the battle, captured German officers revealed that the deceptions had worked.

The British success inspired the U.S. military to create a unit dedicated to conducting deception missions for the remainder of the war. The 23rd Headquarters Special Troops unit was formed at Camp Forrest, Tennessee, in Jan. 1944. Members were recruited from occupations known for creativity. Among the 1,100 members of the 23rd, many were artists, writers, advertising agents, actors, set designers, and engineers. The unit was divided into four special sections: the 406th Combat Engineers (security), the 603rd Camouflage Engineers, the 3133rd Signal Service Company Special and the Signal Company. Once formed, the 23rd assembled at Fort Drum (formerly Camp Pine, New York) before sailing for Britain in May 1944.



Ghost Army Patch
associated with the unit after the war



M4 Sherman-style inflatable dummy tank

From its base near Stratford-upon-Avon, the 23rd developed and honed deception techniques designed to mislead the enemy about the size and location of Allied armies as well as their intentions. The tactics included visual, sonic, atmospheric and radio deception. The visual element was directed by the 603rd Camouflage Engineers, led by recruits from the art schools of New York and Philadelphia. Using wooden frames, inflatables, painted canvas, and other props, the 603rd was able to create fake airfields, barracks, motor pools, and tank formations in a matter of hours. They employed atmospheric elements to further the deception. These included using the insignia of actual units to hide the fact that the units in question were deployed elsewhere as well as swapping out insignia on looped convoys, to create the illusion of numbers. These techniques made it possible for the 1,100-member 23rd to present as an army 30,000-men strong. The

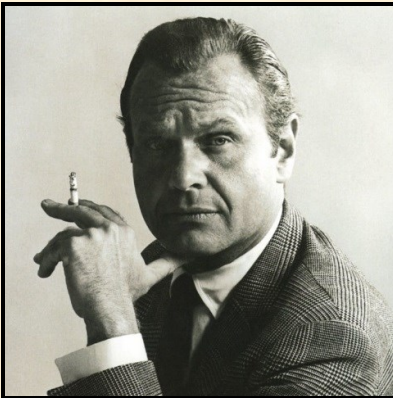
3133rd Signal Service Company Special included engineers from Bell Labs. This group recorded the sounds of heavy equipment and infantry movements at Fort Knox before deploying to Britain. Mixing the recorded sounds, the 3133rd could simulate various troop movements, broadcasting the sounds from mobile amplifiers to simulate the presence of a full army for enemy informants within the 15 mile audible range. The Signal Company pulled all of these elements together by creating radio traffic designed to coincide with the perceived movements of the fake military units. This included perfectly imitating the Morse code operators of known military units, to hide the fact that those units were no longer present.

The first efforts of the 23rd were in support of Operation Fortitude, a deception strategy designed to mislead the Germans about the location and timing of the Allied attack leading up to the D-Day invasion of Normandy. This primarily involved creating the illusion of military buildups in Scotland and southern England, presumably aimed at planned attacks on airfields in Norway and the port of Calais, France. Collectively, these mock units were meant to draw German attention and both prevent the reinforcement of Normandy. After breaking enemy signal codes, the Allies learned that Adolf Hitler and his generals had been completely deceived by Operation Fortitude. After D-Day, the 23rd deployed small units to Normandy to draw out and occupy German forces through the creation of false artillery emplacements, armies and even mock portable harbors. The 23rd moved into Europe as the Allies advanced. From a base in Luxembourg, the unit distracting the enemy by simulating actions against river crossings, in the Hürtgen Forest and along the Maginot Line. They plugged a gap in the line during Gen. George Patton's attack on the city of Metz, drew German forces away from Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge and simulated a 40,000 man army, drawing German fire while the 9th Army successfully crossed the Rhine elsewhere. Collectively, members of the 23rd conducted more than 20 missions throughout Europe, saving the lives of an estimated 25,000 soldiers.

The existence of the 23rd remained a secret until the information was declassified in 1996. Beginning in 2013, documentarian Rick Beyer, backed by the American Legion, National World War II Museum, American Veterans Center and National D-Day Memorial Foundation, formed the Ghost Army Legacy Project. The project spent several years lobbying to get Congressional recognition for the unit. In January 2022, the House and Senate passed the Ghost Army Congressional Gold Medal Act. President Joe Biden signed the act into law in February and awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to the Ghost Army in a March 2024 ceremony attended by three of the seven surviving members of the 23rd.

Prominent Members of the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops

Bill Blass (1922-2002) was a member of the 603rd Camouflage Battalion and served throughout Europe, including the Rhine River operation. He went on to become one of the most prominent fashion designers of the 20th century. Beginning his career with womenswear, Blass became the first major designer to develop a menswear line. His brand would expand to include swimwear, furs, luggage, perfume and even chocolate.



Ellsworth Kelly (1923-2015) joined the U.S. Army in 1943, training first with mountain ski troops before transferring to the Ghost Army and serving in the 603rd. After the war, he attended art schools in Boston and Paris, living in the latter city for six years before returning to New York. He spent his early career years painting in European styles before doing his first abstract work in 1949. As a painter, sculptor and printmaker, his work became known for its hard edges, reliance on blocks of color, and minimalism. He is considered an essential contributor to the development of modern American art.



Art Kane (1925-1995) was recruited by the U.S. Army while attending the Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture as an illustrator. He served in the Ghost Army as a member of the 603rd. At age 26, he became Art Director for *Seventeen* magazine and developed an interest in photography. In 1958, he took the iconic group photo of 57 jazz musicians known as *A Great Day in Harlem*. He would go on to photograph prominent musicians like Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, The Who and The Rolling Stones. He also took the famous photo of John DeLorean posing with his car.



JMC Historical Document Collection

The JMC Public and Congressional Affairs Office maintains the JMC Archives, which collects and maintains historically significant records, including: emails, manuscripts, letters, reports, studies, images, videos, films, photographs, oral history interviews, briefings, SOPs, policies, decision papers, memoranda, statistics, newspapers, newsletters, brochures, maps, blue prints, drawings, and artifacts. Such records are pertinent to the Army's knowledge of active and predecessor installations, the ammunition industrial base, and JMC missions. JMC regularly uses these materials to research command history, and to answer research queries. When JMC workers leave positions or make physical moves, it is vital that their records be assessed before disposal. If employees are uncertain about the historical value of materials, the best policy is to make the items available to Command Historian Keri Pleasant (keri.j.pleasant.civ@army.mil).

This Month in Military History

- Sept. 1-2, 1870:** A Prussian army under Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, defeats and captures Napoleon III at the Battle of Sedan, ending the Second French Empire.
- Sept. 4, 476 :** Germanic king Odoacer invades Rome, forcing the abdication of Romulus Augustulus, marking the official end of the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire, from its capital of Constantinople, will continue for another thousand years.
- Sept. 7, 1191:** As part of the Third Crusade, a combined force of European soldiers, led by England's King Richard I "Lionheart", defeats Saladin, the Ayyubid Sultan of Egypt and Syria, at the Battle of Arsuf (present day Tel-Aviv, Israel).
- Sept. 10, 1776:** The first official American Colonial spy network is founded by George Washington during the Revolutionary War. The first volunteer, Nathan Hale, will later be captured in New York City and hanged by the British. His final words are, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."
- Sept. 13, 1900:** In the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), more than 1,000 Filipino resistance fighters under Maximo Abad ambush and defeat 54 Americans under Capt. Devereux Shields at the Battle of Pulang Lupa.
- Sept. 16-17, 1862:** A force of 25,000 Confederate soldiers under Gen. Braxton Bragg and Brig. Gen. James R. Chalmers force the surrender of a 4,000-man Union garrison at the Battle of Munfordville (Kentucky).
- Sept. 19, 1356:** As part of the five-generation Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), 6,000 Anglo-Gascon forces under England's Edward the Black Prince defeat an army of 15,000 French and capture French King John II at the Battle of Poitiers. The French suffer 4,500 killed or captured compared to 40 English.
- Sept. 22, 66:** Emperor Nero creates the Legio I Italica, a Roman legion made up of soldiers who were at least six feet tall.
- Sept. 25, 1066:** King Harold II of England defeats Norwegian King Harald Hardrada's army at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Three weeks later, he loses his country and crown to William of Normandy at the Battle of Hastings.
- Sept. 28, 1939:** The German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty is signed between Germany and the USSR after the joint invasion of Poland. It lasts until June 1941, when Germany invades the USSR.