

attack of the GHOST ARMY

The director of a new PBS documentary tells the once-secret story of how phantom US troops, inflatable tanks, and Hollywood sound effects fooled the *Wehrmacht*.

by Rick Beyer

RUMBLING OUT OF PARIS late on September 14, 1944, a convoy of troop-filled American half-tracks, trucks, and jeeps left the City of Light behind and rolled east. By noon the next day the US Army's 23rd Headquarters Special Troops had travelled 250 miles and were moving into position along the Moselle River, near Metz, France. Inside their vehicles, GIs were edgy; German lines were reportedly less than two miles to the east, just across the river. "We're the only outfit on this part of the front except for one cavalry squadron spread very thinly," wrote Sergeant Bob Tompkins in his diary. "No one knows where front is." The Americans had rushed here to carry out a vital and dangerous mission dubbed Operation Bettembourg. Their job was to put on a show before an unknowing audience of German soldiers.

With a roster of just 1,100 men, the tiny 23rd was going to plug a hole in the winding lines of Lieutenant General George S. Patton's Third Army by impersonating the 6th Armored Division—with no weapon bigger than a .50-caliber machine gun. Technically not even a combat unit, the 23rd existed strictly to deceive the enemy, and it did so with a remarkable arsenal of rubber dummies, air-filled tanks and trucks, sound effects, and all the illusions its GIs could conjure. Its men understood that their lives depended on the quality of their performance. "There was nothing but our hopes and prayers that separated us from a panzer division," veteran Bob Conrad recalled. But thousands of other lives were at stake as well. If the Germans realized how thinly held the American sector was, they could smash through it and attack Patton's army from the rear. It was just another day in the life of the unit that would become known as the Ghost Army.

Story Declassified

WHEN I CAME ACROSS THE STORY of this remarkable army deception unit eight years ago, I was immediately captivated. I had long been aware of Operation Fortitude, the British-run operation

mounted to deceive the Germans about where the June 1944 D-Day landings would take place. (The British had also employed smaller-scale deception tactics against Nazi forces in North Africa.) But I had never heard of the 23rd—the Ghost Army—a unique and top-secret American unit tasked with befuddling German forces in the wake of the invasion from Normandy to the Rhine River. "It's amazing the fakery we perpetrated on the enemy," veteran Irving Stempel said in 2005. Their story remained classified for more than 40 years after the war and even today remains surprisingly obscure.

Military deception is as old as war itself. Generals from Caesar to Napoleon had detached soldiers to mislead enemy forces on the battlefield, but then returned them to their main duty—fighting. But the Ghost Army represented something new: a mobile unit recruited, trained, and equipped to stage multi-media illusions on demand. "The 23rd Headquarters is the first unit in the history of warfare that was dedicated solely to deception," says retired Major General George Rebh, who as a young captain commanded a company of combat engineers in the 23rd. Its members were full-time deceivers capable of simulating two whole divisions, approximately 30,000 men.

Let's Put on a Show

THE 23RD WAS OFFICIALLY ACTIVATED on January 20, 1944, and the bulk of the unit Headquarters Special Troops arrived in England in May, shortly before D-Day. Led by regular army veteran Colonel Harry L. Reeder, this highly irregular unit would go to war with three types of tools: visual, sonic, and radio.

Visual deception was handled by the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion. Many of this battalion's men were artists recruited from New York and Philadelphia art schools. (The outfit was said to have the highest IQ in the army.) In stolen moments of spare time they painted and sketched everything they saw, cre-



Above: Corporal Arthur Shilstone painted the comic scene: two French men shocked to see GIs lifting a tank. They didn't know it was inflated rubber! The tank belonged to the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion, part of the deception unit known as the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops—the Ghost Army. Top: The Ghost Army insignia.



ating a unique visual record of the war. “We were sleeping in hedgerows and foxholes,” says John Jarvie, “but nothing ever kept us from going someplace to do a watercolor.”

One of the artists was a 21-year-old from Indiana named Bill Blass. Fellow veterans recall that the future fashion designer read *Vogue* magazine in his foxhole, and his wartime notebooks are filled with sketches of women’s fashions. He was one of many Ghost Army soldiers who went on to prominent postwar art careers. Ellsworth Kelly would become one of the nation’s foremost painters and sculptors. Arthur Singer’s drawings of birds would eventually illustrate dozens of books and a series of US postage stamps. Art Kane’s photograph of 57 musicians on a stoop in Harlem would become a jazz art icon. And Ed Haas would be credited as one of the creators of the 1960s television show *The Munsters*.

To pull off its visual trickery, the 603rd was equipped with truckloads of inflatable tanks, cannons, jeeps, trucks, and even

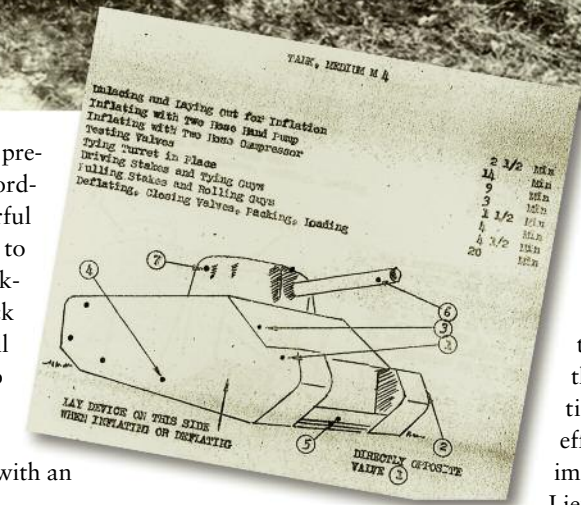
The Ghost Army gathered artists, set designers, audio engineers, radio men, and other unlikely soldiers. Their mission: trick the Germans into battlefield missteps. Top: Bill Blass of the 603rd Battalion flashes his trademark grin. Off duty, he turned his attention to fashion. He would be a leading postwar designer. Above: Some of Blass’s wartime design sketches. Opposite, top: The 603rd’s inflatable Sherman tanks looked real to enemy planes. Opposite, center: How long did it take to set one up? This chart estimated 24 minutes, if you used a hand pump.

airplanes. With these they created dummy armored formations, motor pools, and artillery batteries that looked like the real thing from the air. Attention to detail was critical in concocting convincing illusions. Bulldozers even scraped fake tread-tracks in the ground leading up to 93-pound, inflatable Sherman tanks. Working with these faux tanks had its lighter moments. Corporal Arthur Shilstone was on guard duty one day when he halted two Frenchmen on bicycles who accidentally wandered past his post. “They weren’t looking at me,” he says. “They were looking over my shoulder. And what they thought they saw was

four GIs picking up what was a 40-ton Sherman tank and turning it around.” As they searched for an explanation, Shilstone finally told them “The Americans are very strong.”

The 3132nd Signal Service Company handled audio trickery. With the help of engineers from Bell Labs, they painstakingly recorded the clanging sounds of moving armored and infantry units onto a series of records that they brought to Europe. Sound was mixed to fit various battlefield scenarios and then captured

ALL PHOTOS THIS STORY: COURTESY OF RICK BEYER



on state-of-the-art wire recorders (the predecessors to tape recorders). The recordings could be played over powerful speakers that could deliver sound up to 15 miles. “We could crank the speakers up on the back of the half-track and play a program to the enemy all night, of us bringing equipment into the scene,” recalled veteran John Walker in 2005. “We could make them believe that we were coming in with an armored division.”

RADIO DECEPTION WORK FELL TO the Signal Company, Special. This handpicked crew of highly skilled radio operators created phony traffic nets, while impersonating radio operators of real units. They mastered the art of mimicking a telegraph operator’s style so that the enemy would never realize that the actual unit and its radio operator were long gone.

The idea was to use all three weapons—visual, sonic, and radio—in concert, so that each reinforced the other. The men of the 23rd were told to consider themselves part of a traveling road show ready to perform at a moment’s notice. One week they might assume the guise of the 75th Infantry Division, and the next, the 9th Armored Division. And their work had to be spot-on. “We must remember that we are playing to a very critical and

attentive radio, ground, and aerial audience,” Reeder explained to his officers. “They must all be convinced.”

Performance Art

THREE WEEKS AFTER the Allies’ launched their invasion of Europe on June 6, 1944, the 23rd conducted its first major operation—codenamed Elephant—amid Allied efforts to secure the town of Saint-Lô. Almost immediately Reeder’s men—at the urging of Lieutenant John Fox, a Princeton-educated thespian and would-be Hollywood star—

expanded their bag of tricks to include “atmospherics,” a fancy term for what essentially was performance art targeting Nazi spies and informants. To their uniforms and vehicles they added the markings of much larger outfits. They created phony command posts and, against army regulations, staffed them with counterfeit commanders. “Impersonation is our racket,” wrote one officer in defense of their tactics. “If we can’t do a complete job, we might as well give up. You can’t portray a woman if bosoms are forbidden.” Suitably attired to mislead, 23rd GIs would hang out at cafes and spin stories for whatever enemy sympathizers lurked in the shadows. “We were turned loose in town and told to go to the pub, order some omelets, and talk loose,” says John Jarvie, a corporal in the camouflage unit.

Showtime along the Moselle

BY MID-SEPTEMBER the unit was in the middle of Operation Bettembourg along the edge of the Moselle. According to some estimates, German army units gathered more than 75 percent of their intelligence from radio intercepts, and misleading American radio transmissions likely first suggested that the 6th Armored Division was approaching the river. German listening posts reinforced this possibility by reporting the sound of American tanks edging forward for four straight nights. Had German reconnaissance planes flown over the area, their pilots would have spotted what appeared to be a few imperfectly camouflaged tanks and reported the likelihood that many others were nearby. Meanwhile, German sympathizers in one village took note of a new 6th Armored command post, and civilians could not miss the 6th Armored signs—with the division's distinctive codename Bamboo—that suddenly decorated every intersection.

On one occasion, a convoy of Ghost Army jeeps bearing 6th Armored markings pulled up outside a tavern operated by a suspected Nazi collaborator. One jeep carried the distinctive red license plate of a major general. In its back-

seat sat a ramrod-straight figure sporting two stars. In reality, he was a mere major. The fake general and a handful of sharply dressed guards marched into the bar, confiscated six cases of expensive cognac, and loaded them into the jeep. The convoy then sped off, leaving the jilted saloon-keeper plenty of incentive to tattle to the Germans about the supposed 6th Armored thieves.

Operation Bettembourg was supposed to last just 60 hours, but after additional German troops were called up, the 23rd was forced to remain in position for several perilous days. "We should have moved out a couple of days ago but attack seems imminent so I guess we have orders to remain until it begins," wrote a worried Sergeant Tompkins on September 21. That same day, Patton confided his own concerns to his wife in a letter. "There is one bad spot in my line, but I don't think the Huns know about it," he wrote. "By tomorrow night I'll have it plugged." The following afternoon the 83rd Infantry Division moved in to reinforce the sector, and the Ghost Army slipped away.

A Successful Run

BETTEMBOURG WAS JUST ONE of more than 20 large-scale deceptions that the Ghost

Founding Father or Fibber?

It seems fitting that the man who has claimed credit for creating the Ghost Army had a sketchy reputation himself. Perhaps only a person practiced in the art of deception could come up with the idea for a whole battalion of deceivers.

Before the Second World War, Ralph Ingersoll was a celebrity journalist and best-selling author, not to mention a man who attracted controversy as effortlessly as a starlet draws paparazzi. The *New York Times* called him "a prodigiously energetic egotist." He served as managing editor of *The New Yorker*, publisher of *Fortune*, and general manager of Time Incorporated. In 1940 Ingersoll founded his own innovative (and left-leaning) New York daily newspaper, *PM*. He acted as a star reporter for his own paper, met face-to-face with Soviet Premier Josef Stalin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, hung out at the White House with President Franklin Roosevelt, and made good copy for other reporters.

When war broke out he became a US Army staff officer. By 1943 Captain Ingersoll was stationed in London, working with British planners on large-scale strategic deceptions. According to an unpublished manuscript he wrote in the 1970s, this collaboration led him to the idea of a tactical deception unit that could be on call for whatever operations were required. "My prescription was for a battalion that could imitate a whole corps of either armor or infantry..., a super secret battalion of specialists in the art of manipulating our antagonists' decisions..." He went on to add, "When I first dreamed it up, I considered it one of my more improbable dreams, but



Publisher-turned-lieutenant Ralph Ingersoll. He said he invented the Ghost Army while on General Omar Bradley's staff.

damned if the Pentagon planners didn't buy it whole."

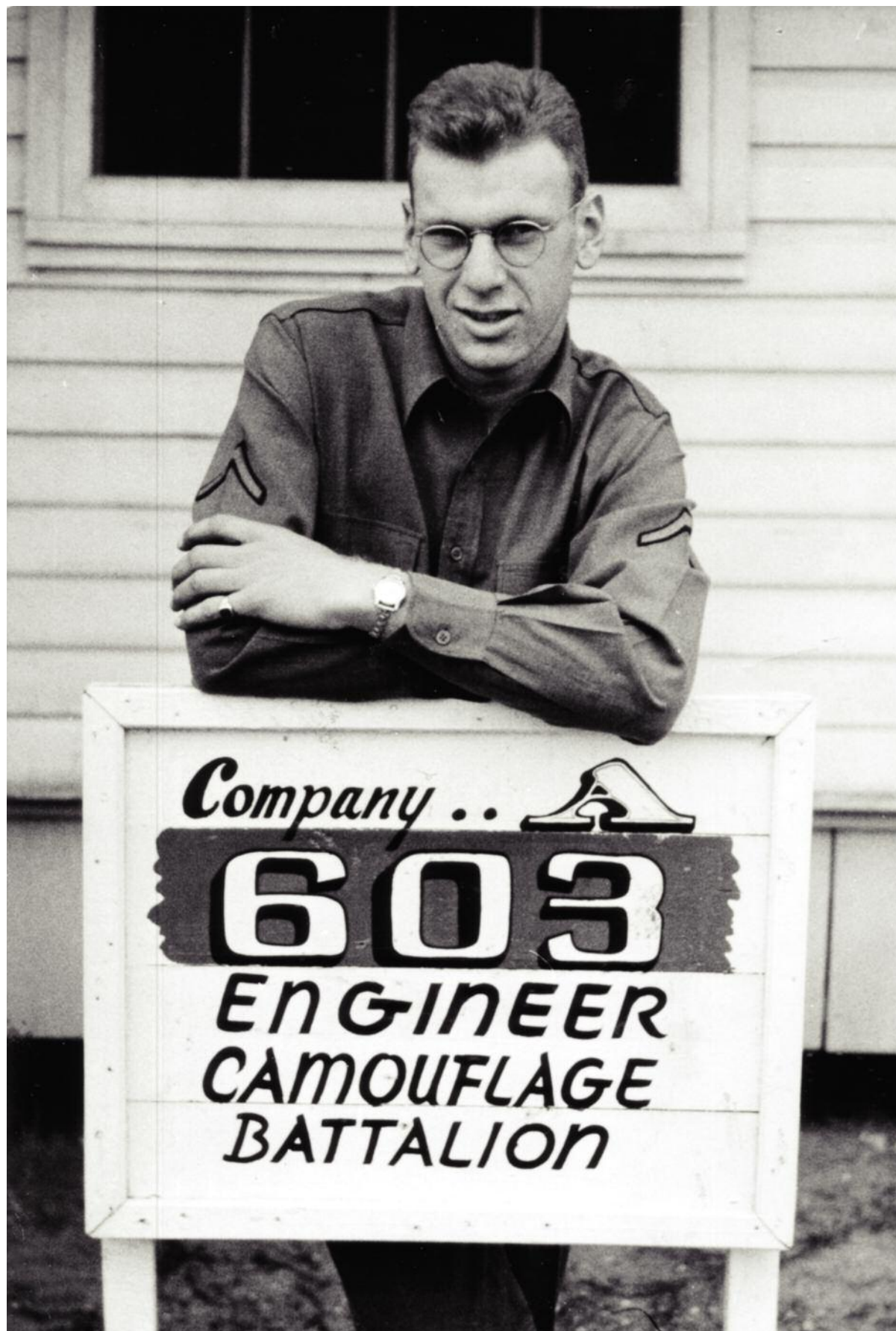
Ingersoll was known to enlarge the truth. "I've never met anyone who was such a bright guy who was such a god-damned liar," said Went Eldredge, a fellow intelligence officer. "He'd say anything to get what he wanted." John Shaw Billings, who worked with Ingersoll at Time, complained that he "blew his own horn in the most outrageous way." As a result, some experts dismiss Ingersoll's claim to be the father of the unit. "I just don't think it is anything other than his

own hooey," says Jon Gawne. Still, Ingersoll claimed credit for the idea more than 30 years ago, when the story was still classified and no one had ever heard of it. And no one else has ever stepped forward with a counter-claim.

Some share of the credit surely belongs to Ingersoll's fellow officers Billy Harris and Clarke Beck, who worked with Ingersoll to flesh out the initiative. In 1943, General Jake Devers, then commander of US forces in England, embraced the unique idea, and gave it the official go-ahead on Christmas Eve. Gawne believes that Devers deserves considerable credit. "Lots of people suggest things," he says, "but it was Devers that had his name on the bottom of the memo, and thus his butt on the line."

Years after the war, Ingersoll wrote that the creation of the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops was "my only original contribution to my country's armed forces." If it was his idea, it was a major contribution indeed.

—Rick Beyer



The Ghost Army wasn't sheltered from danger. Private First Class Ed Biow of the 603rd could testify to that. Biow had close calls with German artillery while driving one of the 603rd's trucks at the fighting front.



Above: 3132nd Signal Service Company troops with their half-track. 3232nd equipment played 30 minutes of recorded audio, audible up to 15 miles. Below: The Ghost Army is the focus of a PBS documentary this May.

The Documentary on PBS

After hearing of the Ghost Army's extraordinary exploits, I set out to make a documentary film about this shadowy unit. During the last eight years I have conducted on-camera interviews with 19 of its veterans, dug through thousands of pages of documents in scattered archives, and traveled across Europe to retrace the wartime steps of the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops. I have also gathered rare color film footage and hundreds of photographs and works of art collected from Ghost Army veterans. The finished film, *The Ghost Army*, premieres Tuesday, May 21, at 8 P.M. Eastern Daylight Time on PBS. It will be available on DVD from PBS Home Video at shoppbs.org. Its companion book, *Artists of Deception: The Ghost Army of WWII*, is currently available on amazon.com.

—Rick Beyer



Below: Dummy tanks go up for a last Ghost Army mission: simulating two divisions that will actually cross the Rhine elsewhere.



Three of the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion's visual artists in uniform (from left): Victor Dowd, Bob Boyajian, and Ray Harford. The bazooka looks real enough, and perhaps it *is* real. But with the Ghost Army, things weren't always what they appeared to be.

Army carried out during World War II's final year. Its men undertook their biggest and most daring effort in March 1945, when their inflated presence around the villages of Anrath and Dulkën took the heat off of US Ninth Army divisions and British units that crossed the Rhine River into Germany near the bomb-blasted town of Wesel. After the war a few stories about the 23rd made it into newspapers, but they offered few details of its brief existence. Decades would pass before the US government declassified records related to the unit and its veterans felt comfortable talking about it.

HOW EFFECTIVE WAS THE GHOST ARMY? "There are German records that show that some of the deceptions were taken hook, line and sinker," says John Gawne, author of *Ghosts of the ETO*. An army analysis 30 years after the

war went further. "Rarely, if ever, has there been a group of such a few men which had so great an influence on the outcome of a major military campaign," it asserted. The men won no victories, but they certainly saved lives. Using only imagination and illusion they pulled off one of war's most difficult maneuvers: making the enemy react the way they wanted him to. "You have to see into the mind of your adversary," says General Wesley Clark, former commander of NATO. "You have to create for him a misleading picture of the operation to come. And you have to sell it to him with confidence. It's the highest kind of creativity in the art of war." ★

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