



Secret Soldiers: The Story of World War II's Heroic Army of Deception

Philip Gerard

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They were masters of the craft of illusion and deception, and their greatest disappearing act was to vanish from history. The men of the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops were recruited to become phantom warriors in a ghost army to help win the Battle of Europe. A thousand strong, they fought in more campaigns, from D Day to the Rhine River, with more Allied armies, than any other unit in the European Theater of Operations-yet not even their fellow American soldiers were aware of their presence.

After Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., USNR, completed a tour of England and its special forces installations, the Hollywood star convinced the Navy brass to train an elite unit that eventually evolved into the only Army force of its kind. These elite soldiers counted among their number designer Bill Blass and painter Ellsworth Kelly, and was inspired by Hilton Howell Railey, the "P.T. Barnum of Deception."

The Special Troops' mission was two-fold: to deceive the German Army into believing that the Allies possessed more troops and material than they actually did and, even more heroically, to draw enemy fire on their position to allow other units to advance free of lethal resistance. Through the art of camouflage, sonic deception, and illusion this extraordinary troop of brave, ingenious men saved countless American lives-while sometimes losing their own. From the use of inflatable rubber tanks and howitzers to elaborate sound effects, fake radio transmissions, special effects artillery, and other elements of stagecraft, these shadow soldiers put their lives on the line for their brother soldiers and for their country-only to disappear from history and memory.

Secret Soldiers tells the astonishing story of this special troop whose mission was so top secret, information about it was only recently declassified. More than half a century later, these uniquely talented patriots can at long last take their place alongside the other honored veterans of World War II.



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