Deception – the Operation We Avoid

by CPT Andre C. Aleong

In the opening months of 1944, aircraft from the German Luftwaffe conducted multiple reconnaissance flights over the English Channel. After-action summaries from missions would later report sighting large masses of armored vehicles postured as a potential invasion force. As these missions continued, the German army became confident that they had determined the timing and locations for the eventual Allied invasion of northern France. Armed with their newly acquired information, they immediately moved reinforcements to augment defenses at a major port region known as Pas de Calais.

Much to their dismay, the Allies never landed at Pas de Calais and instead landed in Normandy. In time, the Germans would learn that the Allies deliberately deceived them and that the large masses of vehicles they sighted were actually decoys. This military operation, known as Operation Bodyguard – along with another operation known as Operation Anadyr (Russian) – shared one thing: they were deliberately planned deception operations that enabled armies to achieve a tactical advantage over their foe.

Although these operations occurred during the modern era of warfare, the concept of deception is not new, as examples of deception operations date back to the Middle Ages. As we examine our Army today, can we conclude that deception operations are not as prevalent as they were in the past, and that units no longer place the same amount of emphasis on planning and executing deception operations? Current trends at combat-training centers (CTCs) such as the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) indicate that units seldom conduct, and often completely avoid, deception operations.

Habitually, commanders and staffs visit JMRC and commence the requisite steps associated with the military decision-making process (MDMP). As the staff transitions into course-of-action (CoA) development, priorities center around planning a CoA that nests with criteria such as "massing effects" and "synchronizing combined-arms maneuver." Rarely do units account for deception and view it as an operation that enables mission success.

On the contrary, we see a different trend when we observe armies from allied or partnered nations when they conduct operational planning. Armies from partnered nations, especially those from Eastern Europe (Poland, Ukraine and Romania), usually incorporate deception into their military operations.

When the British execute "the combat estimate," the military equivalent of our MDMP, deception is a necessary criterion for a valid CoA. In the earliest stages of their planning cycle, they challenge their leaders to use their imagination and resource a deception plan.

Figure 1. A British army decoy battle position during Rotation 19-04 Allied Spirit X. *(Photo by CPT David C. Hale, Timberwolf Maneuver Team)*

Why do we not see U.S. rotational training units (RTUs) place the same amount of emphasis on deception that our allies and partners do? Observations from observer/coach/trainers (O/C/Ts) at JMRC continue to show that

deception is an operation that is perpetually underused, and it is a skill where RTU level of proficiency has deteriorated. We trace the cause of this to three factors: 1) we do not understand the importance of deception; 2) we do not discuss deception at length at the institutional level; and 3) we do not evaluate or observe deception as a necessary mission-essential task (MET).

Why is deception important?

Military deception (MILDEC) facilitates mission success by convincing opposing forces (OPFOR) to take certain actions based on perceived friendly actions. Joint Publication 3-13.4, **Military Deception**, defines MILDEC as "actions executed to deliberately mislead adversary military, paramilitary or violent extremist organization decision-makers, thereby causing the adversary to take specific actions (or inactions) that will contribute to the accomplishment of the friendly mission."[17]

Ideally, when units effectively employ MILDEC, it forces the enemy to prematurely commit its forces and expose its scheme of maneuver, which enables friendly forces to gain time and space to refine courses of action based on newly acquired information on enemy actions. MILDEC also extends a unit's freedom of maneuver to conduct follow-on actions such as disruption or isolation of enemy forces.

The Battle of Cowpens is a classic example where such actions occurred. At Cowpens, a portion of the Continental Army deliberately engaged a numerically superior force with the intent of disrupting the British army for a specified period. Forces conducted a bold feint, followed by a planned retreat, to draw out a larger force and successfully led their adversaries to a larger force in waiting. This tactic allowed the Continental Army time to conduct a double envelopment that isolated the British army and secured victory.

Modern examples of deception illustrate that future potential threats are also employing deception operations. During the recent conflict in Crimea, separatist-backed forces used tactical and strategic deception to mislead Ukrainian forces. At the tactical level, forces conducted exercises close to the Ukrainian border, which served to distract Ukrainian forces and enable Special Operations Forces and conventional forces to infiltrate Crimea. Once inside Crimea, deception operations continued as forces disguised themselves as civilians and humanitarian workers. At the strategic level, misinformation campaigns aired on news and social-media outlets with the intent of subverting the Ukrainian government and creating an environment of distrust with the populace.

This concept, commonly referred to as *maskirovka*, has a prominent presence in Russian military doctrine. *Maskirovka* is "the art of deception – to elevate the complete set of actions and conditions that fall short of war that enables battlefield victories to be decided before tanks and infantry close in battle."[2]

In the preceding examples, armies fought in a scenario where they did not initially hold a tactical advantage over their foe or they preferred to fight small engagements until they acquired information from their enemy. In both instances, they relied on deception to make limited contact until they gained a position of relative advantage. To achieve deception, both armies had to commit forces and assume some level of tactical risk.

Why are U.S. units that come to CTCs uncomfortable with assuming such tactical risk? Recent conflicts, starting with the Persian Gulf War, created a culture where our army enjoyed an overmatch against its opponents. This fostered an environment where units needed to conduct significantly less analysis with respect to risk mitigation. Emerging threats, especially in Crimea, demonstrate this will not always be the case. We may likely face an enemy where we both will share parity across multiple domains -- including cyber, electronic and air warfare. Inculcating leaders to plan and execute MILDEC operations is vital if we intend to combat a near-peer enemy.

Institutional level – learning MILDEC early

When leaders attend the Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course and Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC), the program of instruction provides little discussion on the subject of deception. Blocks of instruction outline deception techniques such as a feint, but they do not include practical application of MILDEC.

At the noncommissioned-officer level, leaders share the same experience during their time attending the Advanced and Senior Leader's Courses. During rotations at JMRC, the benefits of planning and employing deception operations are not usually immediately apparent until training units observe RTU from other nations execute MILDEC and see the tangible results that deception operations produce.

Multinational units that plan and execute deception operations succeed because they execute deception at all echelons and indoctrinate their subordinates to understand its significance. During rotations at JMRC, multinational units have continued to use small-scale deception techniques such as deliberately creating dust trails with armored vehicles to deceive the enemy of the location of their defensive belts or their direction of attack.

Another technique most recently seen at JMRC during rotation Allied Spirit X involved a British infantry battalion digging and constructing decoy battle positions, which included constructing dummy silhouettes and placing ration heaters adjacent to fighting positions to create a false thermal signature. The results of their labor effectively deceived the OPFOR, leading them to fire several BM-21 indirect-fire missions at the British decoy battle positions.

These tactics allowed units to achieve surprise and regain the initiative despite the fact that OPFOR outnumbered them and possessed superior assets such as attack aviation.
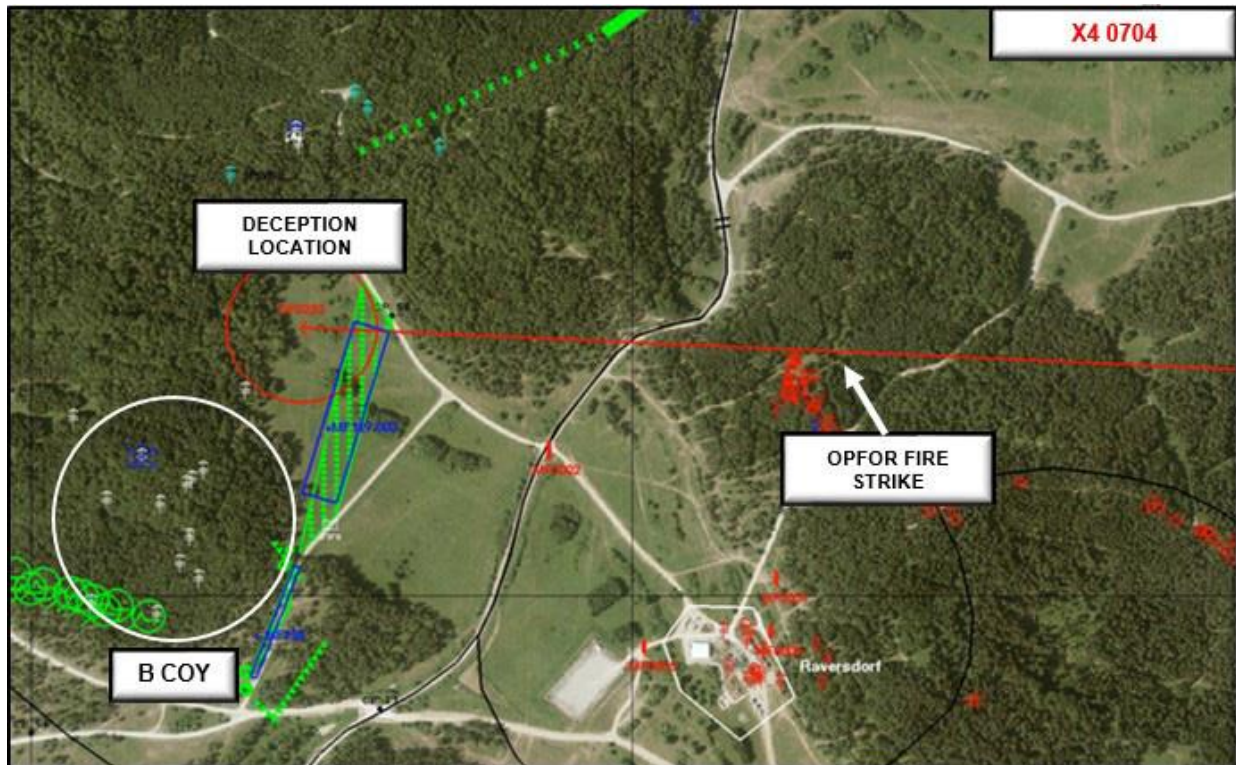

Figure 2. JMRC instrumented system playback of an OPFOR fire strike against the British army's decoy battle positions during Rotation 19-04 Allied Spirit X.

The trend of MILDEC operations at CTCs does not only pertain to multinational units. As we have seen over the last few decades, OPFOR at all three CTCs are experts in the art of deception. To achieve the same level of proficiency, we should educate our leaders as early as possible and encourage them to train on MILDEC during professional military education (PME).

Is deception a metric we care about?

For units to attain proficiency with MILDEC, we should also use existing systems to track progress. O/C/Ts at CTCs currently assess unit performance based on METs outlined in training evaluation and outlines (TE&Os). In some cases, units are not aware that several battalion METs list deception as a performance measure.

None of the TE&Os for all three brigade combat team formations currently list deception as a critical or leader task. This discourages units from planning deception operations because deception is not a performance measure that units must accomplish to achieve proficiency on their assigned MET. To incentivize units to train on

deception and illustrate its importance, we can elevate MILDEC planning from a performance measure to a critical task.

What is the fix?

To reverse the trend of unit tendencies to avoid planning and employing deception operations, change should start at the institutional level. Presently, leaders receive blocks of instruction on what defines deception operations during PME. However, military schools do not mandate deception as a task that leaders must plan and execute prior to graduation. We can expand the curriculum to include deception as a critical task that is necessary for a student to complete to graduate from a PME course.

MCCC provides a great venue where we can implement this CoA. For students at MCCC, each small-group instructor bases pass or failure of an OPORD brief on a series of tasks outlined in a rubric. Tasks include developing graphic-control measures, developing a plan that uses all enablers and verbally briefing the decisive point. Including deception as a critical task that a student should plan during company phase of MCCC can achieve the goal of making our leaders more proficient with MILDEC.

The intent behind this proposal is not to force students to develop grandiose plans, but rather encourage ingenuity among our leaders during the earliest stages of their military careers. Finally, we can expand current systems such as our TE&Os to stress MILDEC as a factor that necessitates mission success and dictates unit proficiency with a mission task. TE&Os provide a product for CTCs to focus collection on unit trends, but other methods exist to socialize and inform the force. During after-action reviews, O/C/Ts can leverage the OPFOR to share their lessons-learned and share how they coach their subordinates at the lowest level to perform deception operations.

Warfare continues to change, and while new threats are challenging leaders to avoid maintaining the status quo, deception is not a new or revolutionary concept. As Sun Tzu stated, "All warfare is deception." His comment applied then, and it still applies today.

CPT Andre Aleong is the task-force senior analyst for the Timberwolf Maneuver O/C/T team, JMRC, Hohenfels, Germany. Previous assignments include commander, B Troop, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, TX; assistant operations officer, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, Fort Bliss; and tank-platoon leader, mortar-platoon leader and executive officer, 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st ABCT, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX. His military schooling includes Armor Officer Basic Course, Maneuver Captain's Career Course, Cavalry Leader's Course, Joint Firepower Course, Airborne School and Air Assault School. CPT Aleong holds a bachelor's of arts degree in history from the University of Hawaii in Manoa. His awards and decorations include the Order of St. George, Silver Spurs.

Notes

[1] Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-13.4, **Military Deception**, Joint Doctrine Publications, Feb. 14, 2017; accessed March 8, 2019.
[2] J.B. Vowell, "Maskirova: From Russia With Deception," **Real Clear Defense**, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/10/31/maskirovka_from_russia_with_deception_110282.html; accessed March 8, 2019.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team
CoA – course of action
CTC – combat-training center
JMRC – Joint Multinational Training Center
MCCC – Maneuver Captain's Career Course
MDMP – military decision-making process
MET – mission-essential task
MILDEC – military deception
O/C/T – observer/coach/trainer
OPFOR – opposing force
PME – professional military education

RTU – rotational training unit
TE&O – training evaluation and outline