



Home Guard Manual of Camouflage

By Roland Penrose

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“I could not help laughing at the ease with which he explained his process of deduction. ‘When I hear you give your reasons,’ I remarked, ‘the thing always appears to me to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though at each successive instance of your reasoning I am baffled until you explain your process. And yet I believe that my eyes are as good as yours.’

“‘Quite so,’ he answered, lighting a cigarette, and throwing himself down into an armchair. ‘You see, but you do not observe.’”

— **“A Scandal in Bohemia,” *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle**

Thanks to Lee Miller Archives Publishing, *The Home Guard Manual of Camouflage* by Roland Penrose (one of the best camouflage manuals ever written) is now back in print — and that’s good news!

Yeah, I know... who is this Roland Penrose person and why do I care what he has to say about camouflage? Penrose (1900-1984) was an artist associated with the Surrealist Movement. He was also a photographer as well as a friend and biographer of Pablo Picasso. What concerns us, however, is the impact he had on camouflage training in England during World War 2.

During World Wars I and II, numerous artists working in paint, sculpture, and the like were recruited into military service with an eye towards using their insights into vision, color, and texture to develop means and methods to conceal men, buildings, and equipment.

Although a Quaker and a pacifist, British artist Penrose contributed to the war effort by training the British Home Guard in camouflage techniques. The Home Guard was a volunteer uniformed defense militia eventually consisting of 1.5 million volunteers who were unavailable for military service due to being too young or old. Membership also included men in protected occupations who were ineligible to serve in the military.

It’s important to understand in the context of this manual that the Home Guard was mainly intended to serve as an anti-invasion force, so they were trained in tactics, small arms, demolitions, hand-to-hand combat, and of course, camouflage. They also did this on basically no budget, being last in priority for military weapons, equipment, and other resources.

This also leads into why this book is relevant today: Once upon a time, people and things had to be camouflaged from overhead observation. Training exercises were conducted where Army engineers in training would camouflage a building, an artillery battery, or vehicles and then an airplane would fly overhead to provide feedback. More on this later.

Penrose became a lecturer at the War Office School for Instructors, and fortunately, those lectures are what have been captured in this book. What I found fascinating was his approach of the subject. Similar to how a doctor may not look for an individual germ but rather the symptoms being displayed to diagnose a disease, someone looking for you with ill intent isn't necessarily hoping to see you but rather the symptoms of your presence.

The book has two chapters that I consider timeless: "Nature As A Guide" and "Applications of Lessons Learned From Nature." The budding camouflage expert is encouraged to note not only the color but the texture of surrounding objects, among other things. Or, as I would present it to a modern audience: Step outside, put away the phone, and see what nature looks like for yourself!

He provides a thorough and enjoyable section on his general principles related to how things are seen (I loved how this artist pointed out that most green paint has too much blue in it to blend into nature). From general principles, he moves into specific applications and then concludes with individual camouflage. And as I suspected, although instructions for preparing various sniper suits are included with diagrams, there's no mention whatsoever of ghillie suits.

The text is amplified by numerous black-and-white graphics that range from rough sketches to detailed drawings to crisp aerial photographs. I emphasize the aerial photos because I've been a firm believer that in order to be a good "hider" in this life you have to strive to be a good "finder" and vice versa. This is why I chose to start this review by quoting the great Sherlock Holmes. No doubt you'll come across something in the text concerning shadow and think to yourself, "Well, that's obvious!" In my experience though, it only becomes obvious once someone else has pointed things out you.

Like a lot of wartime texts, there are references made to other British Army training manuals that are themselves now collector's items, specifically Military Training Pamphlets 46 Parts 1 and 2 as well as "Training Posters" Penrose disseminated at the Camouflage School. The good news for the serious student is that both of these manuals are available as hi-res scans at the Internet Archive and made available through the Vickers Machine Gun Collector's Society. I'm still trying to get a handle on the posters as I write this, however.

Also, since this was written in 1941, there's no consideration given to either near infra-red (reflectance) or far infra-red (thermal), nor to image intensifiers at night.

Regardless of those two caveats, this is a very useful book to keep handy in that section of your library devoted to camouflage. If nothing else (and that's a big "if" given the current existence of drones for sale on the civilian market), this book gets your head back in the game regarding camouflage against overhead observation. So, I say keep it handy because it bears re-reading numerous times while you either underline, highlight, or otherwise call out passages that you particularly need to practice. And I'll finish by repeating my earlier suggestion: Go outside, put away the phone, and start noticing things. You'll be glad that you did.