

The Intelligence War: Operation Lincoln

After the success in World War Two of Operation Mincemeat (made famous in the book and film “The Man Who Never Was”), British Intelligence decided that the concept of using a corpse to send false information to the enemy could be reused. In the 1970s, the plan was resurrected under the auspices of a joint team from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) (including elements of all three services) and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS – known more popularly as MI6). It was given the cover name Section 27M as part of the MoD. Strength is estimated as around twenty staff at any one time with military personnel usually serving a three year tour.

Aware of the vast Soviet information gathering capability, in an attempt to ensure that the authenticity was high a number of fictitious officers were created and added to the service records (including places such as the Army List and the London Gazette). These were gradually promoted and a full service history gradually created for them (often complete with a number of awards – at least one stand in was publicly awarded an MBE by the Queen). Slowly as time went on some of these were retired and new identities created to replace them. In a few cases regular officers were used to appear as them at certain events (in at least one case an officer was required to play the part of a Lincolnite as they later became known, for six months as the military attaché in South Africa).

Their use in the war is still covered by the Official Secrets Act but a number of pieces of information have leaked out allowing us to reconstruct some of the details.

An army officer’s corpse supposedly from the 6th Division was left with false information about the forthcoming Chinese counter-attack plans and was recovered by Soviet reconnaissance troops. Details of success are sketchy but it appears that a number of Soviet divisions were redeployed and as a result the Pact allies suffered increased casualties (this appears to have been the main aim of the operation). It appears that the Chinese were not informed of the scheme but instead an operation was created months before that allowed the Chinese to believe that the UK had a mole in the Soviet High Command and that this was the person who had provided the information about the expected Soviet redeployments. After the operation this was then subsequently leaked to the Soviets to help protect Operation Lincoln. The details of this operation came to light after the diary of a King's Messenger, Captain Patrick Price (formerly of the Irish Guards) referring to the delivery of the information personally was found in an East Anglian antique shop in 2029 and sold to a journalist, Keith McDonald. McDonald claims that plans to include follow up broadcasts aimed directly at the Pact allies were dropped over concerns that it would give away the source of the information. In 2036 the author Francis Knight made it a major sub-plot in the semi-fictional account of the 6th Division's war as “High Road From Hell.” Here he adds a detail he states he was told by an officer involved that a second (this time Chinese) corpse was left as the offensive started with revised (accurate) plans as these would probably be discounted and even if they were accepted were unlikely to be of use in time. He also adds the detail that the body was left in a wrecked Land Rover but stated that this was his own invention as no details of how the body was found were available.

At least one fictitious SAS officer was created and a body purporting to be him left behind on a mission into the Soviet Union. It was rumoured that the Prime Minister’s son was involved in this mission when he went missing. The purpose of this has never become known. Colin Childs in his book “Lies and Deception” states that the whole aim of the mission was purely to leave this evidence. Unfortunately he does not give any evidence to back up this theory.

A fictional version of one variant of operation Lincoln has appeared in the novel “Agent 42,” by Fiona Webster. Here a fictitious member of MI6 was created and supposedly killed after a heart

attack leading to a car crash (using a remote controlled car) outside the surgery of a doctor in Berlin known to have sympathies with the Soviets and to be an occasional courier for them. In the car was a folder that appeared to have come from the burst open briefcase that stated that some of the information provided by an unnamed source in the KGB was suspect. Careful ground work by MI6 in co-operation with the German intelligence services ensured that if the Soviets followed this up they would be able to identify a completely loyal officer who ran a chain of agents in Germany (including the doctor himself). The story has the Soviets fall for this and the novel ends with the officer left with the choice of defecting or being tried as a traitor. While this appears to only loosely link with Operation Lincoln, it is worth noting that Fiona Webster was the pen name of Alison Deveraux, wife of a member of MI6 who's name appears on a list of staff involved with Operation Lincoln in the early 1990s. How much truth is in the story is hotly debated and with the death of Alison Deveraux and her husband Sean in a car crash in 2024 it is now unlikely ever to be known.

At least one other NATO country (believed to be the US) was involved in the scheme as leaked papers show a foreign award being issued among much debate as to the value of increased authenticity against increased vulnerability to discovery.

The normal 30 year release of documents has been extended on this operation so it is unlikely that we will know the full story at any time in the near future.