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To Fool a Glass Eye: Camouflage Versus Photoreconnaissance
in World War II (review)

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Technology and Culture, Volume 41, Number 2, April 2000, pp. 385-387 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2000.0076>



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To Fool a Glass Eye: Camouflage versus Photoreconnaissance in World War II.

By Roy M. Stanley II. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998.
Pp. 192; appendixes, notes/references, bibliography, index. \$37.95.

The story of camouflage is not new, and many books have been written on the subject. However, Roy Stanley, himself a former photo interpreter, is

APRIL
2000
VOL. 41

one of the first to tell it from the “camera’s point of view.” Enhanced by 350 photographs that clearly and graphically prove and illustrate the author’s points, this is a very informative and entertaining work. Because both sides were evenly matched, World War II was the golden age of camouflage operations and detection. Previously, aerial photography and interpretation techniques had been insufficiently developed, so the camoufleurs on the ground had the advantage. After the war, new inventions, such as infrared sensors and special radars, gave dominance to the intelligence specialists. Stanley’s tale emphasizes the crucial role played during the war by individuals on both sides who matched wits with an endless stream of tricks and counters that resulted in the advantage swinging from one side to the other several times in the course of a few years.

The act of camouflage involves concealment or deception. In some cases the structure or weapon is hidden, while in other cases the aim is to confuse the observer, or attacker, as to the exact location or nature of a particular object. To hide objects, camoufleurs work with basic principles such as the avoidance of straight lines or circles, which seldom occur in nature, and the importance of blending into surroundings. It does little good to paint an aircraft hangar to look like a group of residential homes, but then do nothing to hide the parking ramps and runways in front of that hangar. A building or vessel may be too large to move or hide, however, and so techniques of confusion are used: a decoy structure is built nearby in the hope it will be attacked instead, or a ship is painted to make it appear smaller or slower to an enemy gunner. Even momentary confusion or hesitation in an air attacker traveling several hundred miles an hour may be enough to save a target.

The patience, perseverance, and cleverness that went into both sides of this conflict is astounding. Photographs illustrate how entire industrial complexes were built as decoys, complete with fake roads, rail lines, even bomb craters. On the other side, photographs show how seemingly invisible planes, guns, and buildings were detected and identified by sharp-eyed photo interpreters. New photographs of a particular area would be examined millimeter by millimeter and compared with older photos of the same area to determine if anything might have changed. The amount of time and effort expended by both sides in all of this was enormous.

Several points come to mind when reading *To Fool A Glass Eye*. Air superiority gives a tremendous advantage. If an enemy cannot see your territory, much less bomb it, there will be no need for deception or concealment. By the end of World War II facilities and equipment in Britain were no longer being camouflaged or hidden because there was no longer any threat from German bombers. In today’s terms this means that U.S. military forces, which have enjoyed air superiority for decades, might not be trained or equipped to conduct camouflage operations if they were to become necessary. On the other hand, fighting forces elsewhere are well aware of camouflage techniques. There are numerous reports from the Per-

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sian Gulf War and Kosovo about Iraqis and Serbs concealing equipment or building decoys to fool allied satellites, sensors, and pilots. As a result, many of the “tanks” destroyed were actually made of wood or inflatable rubber. Similarly, just as the Germans installed smoke generators to veil factories or cities from air strikes, so too did the Iraqis ignite oil wells in Kuwait to hide the position of their troops. One sobering note to all this is the realization that the more effective a defender becomes at concealment or deception—thus diverting bombs and missiles elsewhere—the higher the price to pay in collateral damage and the death of innocents.

This is an excellent book. The text and accompanying photographs provide fascinating insights into an important subject, one that is still highly relevant for military operations today.

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