



LW4 “The Man Who Never Was”—Was He the Man the British Say He Was?

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of why an unmet scientific review is needed.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating challenges for forensic pathologists and taphonomists, physics 101, and questions of war ethics.

Operation Mincemeat: Tens of thousands of military lives were spared during the allied invasion into the belly of Europe through Sicily. This was accomplished by deceiving Hitler with false documents into believing the invasion would be through Sardinia and Greece. He moved many forces out of Sicily.

A fully uniformed corpse made up as a fictitious “Major Martin,” who was to be believed to be carrying top secret documents in a briefcase to generals in North Africa, but who drowned during a plane crash into the Sea of Cardiz. Actually, the corpse was delivered by submarine. It washed ashore near Huelva, Spain, and was autopsied by a medical examiner who determined cause of death as drowning in the 60° seawater five to six days earlier. The autopsy report burned in 1976.

The corpse is said to have been a young adult London vagrant, Glyndwr Michael, who suicidally took yellow phosphorus and died in the hospital two days later on January 23, 1943, after failed life-saving efforts. The coroner wrongfully determined Glyndwr as having no next-of-kin and falsely certified the body as shipped out of the country. The corpse was then kept in a morgue refrigerator for 73 days, followed by another 14 days in a morgue freezer.

A double-hulled, 74-inch long, 22-gauge steel welded cylinder was manufactured; its outer diameter was 22" and its inner diameter was 19", with 1.5" asbestos wool insulation between the two hulls. A 22-gauge plate was welded over one end and a 22-gauge lid bolted shut over the other against a grommet. The cylinder proved to be airtight.

On April 17, the corpse was taken out of the freezer. The cylinder was placed upright, open end up. Twenty-two pounds of dry ice were placed in it to cool and to remove oxygen. The corpse's ankles were thawed to put on boots. A “Mae West” life jacket was placed around the chest, and the briefcase for false documents was chained to the wrist. A blanket was wrapped around the corpse, taped to protect it. The corpse was placed into the cylinder, “packed” with dry ice, and bolted shut.

Strangely, the submarine sailed around from Blythe to Firth of Clyde, and the cylinder containing the corpse was driven 430 miles through darkness to the Firth. After loading the cylinder into the submarine, departure was on April 19. The cylinder was on a torpedo rack where the sailors slept; they were told it contained optics. Arrival was about one mile from the beach on April 30. The cylinder was brought onto deck. Five officers were “in the know.” The cylinder was opened, the corpse removed, the blanket unwrapped, the Mae West inflated, and a short prayer offered. The cylinder was dumped overboard and was found five hours later by a fisherman; it was carried by donkey to a ferry, sent upriver to Huelva, and autopsied the next day. The body was buried in Huelva by the British as “Major Martin,” eventually attributed to Glyndwr Michael.

Questions: What was the degree of decomposition at autopsy? Does it comport with five to six days in 60° seawater? What about the CO2 sublimation pressure in the airtight cylinder? Should it have violently discharged upon unbolting? Should not the stench of decomposition have been noticed by sailors when officers returned below? Was the Firth of Clyde chosen because of the 379 sailors who drowned there on March 27, when the aircraft carrier HMS Dasher exploded? Sir Erin Montagu, who conceived of and managed Operation Mincemeat, met with the submarine captain three days later. The wife of one of the drowned sailors, John Melville, was singularly denied the viewing of his body and buried him in the family cemetery. In 2004, Lieutenant Commander Mark Hill held a memorial tribute in the Mediterranean in honor of John Melville as the “man who never was.” Not long after, the Ministry of Defense denied this. Who is buried in Huelva? Glyndwr Michael's family eventually were found and honored. Mrs. Melville never found her husband.

Decomposition, Sublimation, Ethics