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ALSO AVAILABLE AS AN E-BOOK AND IN AUDIO

SECRET SOLDIERS

HOW THE U.S. TWENTY-THIRD SPECIAL TROOPS FOOLED THE NAZIS

PAUL B. JANECKO

ABOUT THE BOOK

In World War II, the Twenty-Third Headquarters Special Troops worked a theatrical magic to deceive the Nazis. Actors, artists, set designers, sound engineers, photographers, radio operators, and camouflage experts joined together to create special effects such as convincing sounds of tanks and troops where there weren't any. Known as the Ghost Army, this remarkable unit secretly and systematically replaced fighting units, fooling the Nazi army into believing they heard and saw large numbers of troops that weren't actually there. The courageous, talented men ranged across Europe from battle to battle using sonic deceptions, inflatable tanks, pyrotechnics, and camouflage in more than twenty operations. Kept officially secret for fifty years after the war, the surprising story is full of fascinating facts, illustrated with photographs and with drawings from the artists of the Twenty-Third.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PAUL B. JANECKO (1945–2019) was a multitalented writer of poetry and nonfiction as well as a noted anthologist. He wrote *Top Secret: A Handbook of Codes, Ciphers, and Secret Writing*; *The Dark Game: True Spy Stories from Invisible Ink to CIA Moles*, a finalist for the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults; *Double Cross: Deception Techniques in War*; *Worlds Afire*; and *Requiem: Poems of the Terezín Ghetto*. His award-winning poetry anthologies include *A Poke in the I*, *A Kick in the Head*, *A Foot in the Mouth*, *Firefly July*, and *The Death of the Hat*.

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading informational text standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After the war ended, the members of the Twenty-Third were ordered to say nothing about their work, a ban that lasted fifty years. Why was secrecy central to what they did, both in relationship to the enemy and to others in the U.S. military?
2. Some of the early reactions to the creation of the Twenty-Third were negative. The idea was viewed as “sneaky and weird” and “underhanded” (page 26). Why might military officers react like this? What are the arguments against creating a unit like the Twenty-Third? What are the arguments for creating such a unit?
3. Fred Fox described the work of the Twenty-Third as “more theatrical than military . . . like a traveling road show” (page 3). Describe how their work was theatrical, then explain how it was military in nature.
4. Why were artists recruited for the Twenty-Third? Explain how their skills were put to use in specific operations. Discuss the backgrounds of some of the artists and their work after the war. Look at the illustrations by the artists included in the book and talk about what the pictures add to your reading.
5. What did the actor Douglas Fairbanks Jr. do in the war? What was the role of his unit, the Beach Jumpers? How were they different from the Twenty-Third? Discuss times when members of the Twenty-Third had to deceive locals and Germans through acting.
6. One of the Twenty-Third’s main forms of deception had to do with sound. How did they initially create these sounds? What was in their library of sound effects? What equipment did they use to project the sounds on the field? Identify specific times in the war when sounds deceived the enemy.
7. Radio was another weapon of the Twenty-Third. What was spoof radio? What were some of the ways that the Twenty-Third fooled the Germans with radio transmissions? Talk about what telegraph operators contributed, too.
8. How did the Twenty-Third use dummy tanks and weapons and camouflage to deceive the enemy?
9. How did the men move and maintain the dummy equipment? Why wouldn’t they let the locals near them? What are different ways that camouflage was used?
9. What were the duties of the Twenty-Third’s combat engineers? Find examples of when they made a difference in the operations. Why did the manual for combat engineers say their objective was “to change the shape of the ‘battle space’” (page 45)?
10. Why were bridges so important in the war? What are Bailey bridges, and how were they used? What was the importance of bridges in Operation VIERSEN?
11. What were some of the mistakes the Twenty-Third and those they worked with made? What adjustments did they make after the mistakes to get it right the next time?
12. Why was it often difficult to assess the success of the Twenty-Third’s role in a given operation? Point to events and details that show how complicated the operations were and how the work of the Twenty-Third was a small part of a bigger picture.
13. “All the men understood how putting themselves in harm’s way, becoming ‘Nazi bait,’ was dangerous work” (page 28). What made the Twenty-Third unusually vulnerable to the enemy? Why did the men of the Twenty-Third consider their fake sounds of a large Allied force to be “the sounds of a target” during Operation VIERSEN (page 241)? Why is it surprising that they didn’t suffer more casualties?
14. Why was Operation VIERSEN described as the Twenty-Third’s “finest hour,” and why were they commended for it (page 245)? Give a synopsis of their role in the operation and of the overall importance of the operation in the war.
15. War has its own vocabulary, including jargon, slang, nicknames, and operation names. Find examples from these categories in the book and discuss the origin and/or meaning of the words and phrases. Why do you think the military produces so much specialized language?

These questions were prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years. Kathleen, who chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee, now presents professional development workshops for educators on new books for young people.



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