

Operation Tracer: British Secret Eyes in the Rock**Afifa Mehboob¹, Hafiza Sahar Saeed²**

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Abstract

This research examines Operation Tracer, a covert British Intelligence initiative during World War II, designed to ensure continuous surveillance in Gibraltar if it were occupied by Axis forces. By embedding a team of operatives within a concealed observation post inside the Rock of Gibraltar, Operation Tracer exemplified the fusion of strategic foresight, technological innovation, and psychological endurance in intelligence planning. Through an analysis of the operation's design, including threat perception, vulnerability assessment, operational secrecy, and data collection tools, the study demonstrates how Tracer served as a mode for preventive intelligence operations, even though it was never activated. The research further situates Operation Tracer within broader intelligence frameworks by highlighting its contribution to the development of "stay-behind" networks during the Cold War and its symbolic value as a strategic deterrent. Ultimately, this study argues that the true success of Operation Tracer lies not in activation, but in its meticulous planning, which reflects Britain's wartime ethos of resilience and commitment to maintaining intelligence capabilities in the face of uncertainty.

Introduction

Intelligence operations are essential components of national security, particularly during wartime, as they enable nations to gather, analyze, and utilize information to protect their interests and prevent adversarial threats (Madaminova, 2022). These operations encompass a wide range of covert activities aimed at infiltrating enemy lines, gathering actionable intelligence, and ensuring the continuity of nation's strategic advantage. One such operation during WWII was *Operation Tracer*, conceived in 1941, a British intelligence strategy designed to ensure the maintenance of surveillance and communication in Gibraltar, should the territory fall to Axis forces. The operation involved the operation of secret observation post, hidden within the Rock of Gibraltar, where a small team of operatives would remain in isolation to observe enemy movements and report back to British intelligence. Gibraltar itself, located at the gateway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, held immense military and intelligence value. Its strategic location made it critical naval base for the British, while also serving as the vital hub for controlling access to the Mediterranean. In this context, Operation Tracer exemplified how intelligence operations could safeguard national security by ensuring the flow of information even in the event of territorial loss.

Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholders in this operation included the Royal Navy, M15, M16, and the Naval Intelligence Division (NID). Each contributing to the planning and execution of this covert strategy. British intelligence services, including **M15 and M16**, were instrumental in conceptualizing the operation, recognizing the need for fallback position in Gibraltar to continue intelligence gathering in case of occupation. M15 contributed primarily through its counterintelligence expertise and security oversight, given the extreme secrecy required for this operation. M16 on the other hand, with its external intelligence mandate, played a more

strategic role in the design and necessity of the operation. One of the known personalities, who played a crucial role in the development of this mastermind plan was Rear Admiral **John**

Henry Godfrey, who served as the Director of Naval Intelligence for the Royal Navy during the WWII. Godfrey was instrumental in authorizing and shaping the concept of a “stay behind cave”.

National Security Objectives/ Concerns

During WWII, the national security concerns of the United Kingdom were defined by the rapid expansion of the Axis powers and the vulnerability of British Overseas Territories. Following the fall of France in 1940 and the entry of Italy into the war, the Mediterranean region became a major theater of conflict. The possibility of a German or Italian takeover of strategic locations heightened fears of losing control over essential naval routes and intelligence outposts. The British Government and military leadership were acutely aware that if Gibraltar fall into enemy hands, the consequences for Allied logistics, surveillance, and naval operations would be catastrophic.

Gibraltar, located at the entrance of the Mediterranean Sea, was one of the most critical strategic positions held by the Britain during the war. Often referred to as the “key to the Mediterranean”, its geopolitical position allowed Britain to monitor naval traffic between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean (Lincoln, 1994). The narrow strait of Gibraltar, just 13 kilometers wide at its narrowest point, was a chokepoint that could determine the movement of naval fleets and supply convoys. Holding Gibraltar ensured that British could safeguard access to its colonies in North Africa, maintain supply lines to Malta, and project power to the Mediterranean. Losing Gibraltar would not only sever these links, but would also give the Axis powers a powerful naval advantage and potentially open the western Mediterranean to Axis dominance (Truver, 1980).

The British were particularly concerned about the pro-German leanings of Spain under Francisco Franco. Though, officially neutral, Spain’s ideological alignment with fascist powers and the geographical proximity of Spanish troops to Gibraltar made a German-led assault through Spain plausible scenario. British intelligence anticipated that if Spain allowed German forces to pass through its territory, Gibraltar could be invaded and occupied quickly. This would not only represent a symbolic loss but would also cripple British military effectiveness in the region. Therefore, planning for such a contingency was not just prudent, it was imperative (Cabrera, 2021).

In this context, Operation Tracer was conceived as a response to one of Britain’s primary national security objectives; the continuity of intelligence gathering in occupied or contested regions. The operation aimed to ensure that even if Gibraltar were captured, a secret team of British operatives would remain hidden within the Rock, capable of monitoring enemy naval activity and relaying intelligence back to London. This was seen as crucial for maintaining situational awareness, a key principle in intelligence and national defense. The idea of embedding a team within the territory, prepared to live in complete isolation for an extended period, was unprecedented and reflected the seriousness with which British authorities viewed the threat to Gibraltar.

Moreover, the broader objective extended beyond Gibraltar itself. The British Government and its intelligence agencies understood that WWII would be fought not just on open battlefields, but in the shadows- through information, secrecy, and deception. Operations like Tracer were part of a wider strategy to embed intelligence capabilities within vulnerable regions, ensuring that if traditional command structures were disrupted, alternative means of observation and communication would survive. This was shift toward long-term strategic thinking in intelligence, where redundancy and covert resilience became central to national security planning.

Problem Statement

Despite its uniqueness and the symbolic value of its rediscovery in 19997, Operation Tracer remains largely absent from mainstream academic literature, theoretical intelligence frameworks, and comparative analyses of British wartime strategy. This absence reflects a broader neglect in the historiography of intelligence studies, where contingency plans—particularly those that were prepared but never activated—are often overlooked in favor of high-profile, executed operations like Operation Fortitude.

The problem is compounded by a lack of critical examination of the operation's multi-dimensional intelligence measures, such as the integration of HUMINT and SIGINT within a single covert framework, or the innovative communication technologies designed to avoid signal detection. The psychological, ethical, and operational challenges of selecting and training operatives for long-term, isolated missions in extreme conditions also remain under explored. The strict compartmentalization, the use of cover stories, and the psychological screening processes employed—while innovative—have not been adequately contextualized with intelligence doctrine or the compared to other wartime operations.

This research therefore addresses a significant gap in both intelligence studies and military history by critically examining Operation Tracer not just as an isolated event, but as a case study that raises fundamental questions about contingency planning, the human factors of intelligence work, and the ethics of covert operations over unrealized, yet deeply revealing, contingency plans.

Objectives

1. To critically analyze the strategic rationale behind the conception of Operation Tracer within the broader context of British wartime intelligence doctrine.
2. To examine psychological, operational, and ethical challenges in the selection, training, and deployment of operatives for long-term, isolated covert missions.
3. To explore the technological innovations and intelligence measures, such as HUMINT and SIGINT, employed in the design and anticipated execution of Operation Tracer.
4. To evaluate the role of Operation Tracer in safeguarding Britain's national security interests through strategic deterrence, despite its non-activation.

Research Questions

1. How did Operation Tracer reflect British intelligence's strategic foresight and doctrinal approach to contingency planning during World War II?
2. How did Operation Tracer contribute to Britain's national security objectives, despite never being activated?
3. How does Operation Tracer inform our understanding of human resilience, adaptability, and the psychological dimensions of long-term covert operations?

Literature Review

One of the earliest and most detailed discussions of Operation Tracer appears in Fielding's (2001) *Gibraltar: The Greatest Siege in British History*, where he outlines the strategic importance of Gibraltar in British naval and intelligence operations. Fielding provides a comprehensive background of the geopolitical tensions surrounding the Rock and describes the technical aspects of constructing the hidden chamber. However, his account remains largely descriptive. While Fielding offers valuable insights into the logistical and geographical challenges of the operation, he falls to explore the broader implications of such an operation on British intelligence strategy or how it fits within the broader framework of wartime deception and covert planning.

Similarly, Constantine (2002) in *Community and Identity: The Making of Modern Gibraltar since 1704* mentions Operation Tracer in the context of wartime secrecy but provides only a cursory overview. His focus lies more on a societal impact of British Military policies on the civilian population of Gibraltar. Although Constantine highlights the operation's symbolic significance in showcasing British resolve, he does not delve into the operational doctrine, psychological toll on the selected volunteers, or the ethical implications of sealing operatives

within a confirmed space with limited contact with the outside world. This omission represents a significant gap in the literature, as the human dimension of Operation Tracer-particularly the psychological resilience demanded of its participants- has yet to be rigorously analyzed.

A more focused narrative is found in the work of Fa and Finlayson (2006), researchers affiliated with the Gibraltar Museum, who were instrumental in uncovering the hidden chamber in 1997. Their report, "Operation Tracer: The Secret Cave in the Rock", offers invaluable primary data and photographic evidence, corroborating historical accounts with material findings. Fa and Finlayson's contribution is critical in conforming the physical existence of the operation site and verifying its intended use. However, their study, while rich in empirical detail, lacks theoretical grounding. They do not connect Operation Tracer to broader intelligence doctrines or examine its relevance within the context of British clandestine operations such as Operation Fortitude or the Double Cross System.

Furthermore, Andrew (2009), in his authoritative *The Defense of Realm: The Authorized History of M15*, provides a sweeping overview of British domestic intelligence efforts but barely touches on Operation Tracer. This absence is particularly striking given M15's role in coordinating wartime deception and covert planning. Andrew's neglect of the operation underlines a broader trend in intelligence studies, wherein small-scale or "unexecuted" operations are often overlooked in favor of more dramatic successes. This selective focus risks creating an incomplete picture of the diversity and contingency inherent in intelligence planning during wartime.

There is also a lack of comparative literature that situates Operation Tracer alongside similar operations. For Example, while Hinsley and Simkins (1990) in *British Intelligence in the Second World War* offer a comprehensive account of the machinery of British intelligence, they omit any reference to Tracer. This raises a significant question: why was an operation of such symbolic and strategic importance excluded from foundational intelligence histories? One plausible reason is the operation's non-activation-Tracer was prepared but never implemented, and perhaps this rendered it marginal in strategic assessments. Yet this very fact could make it a unique case study in understanding intelligence planning for contingency rather than active deployment.

Moreover, the ethical and psychological dimensions of Tracer remain under-explored in academic discourse. While anecdotal sources, such as interviews with descendants of selected operatives (as cited in local news archives and museum records), suggest a deep psychological commitment and rigorous screening process, there is no systematic analysis of how such missions were justified morally or how they were perceived by those involved. A study integrating intelligence ethics with psychological resilience theory could add a valuable layer to the existing literature.

Research Gap

Operation Tracer stands as a remarkable yet underexplored example of British wartime contingency planning, and the existing literature reveals significant gaps in its study. While researchers like Fielding (2001) and Fa and Finlayson (2006) have provided important descriptive accounts of Operation Tracer's physical construction and strategic intent, their works are largely limited to factual narration without deeper analytical engagement. For instance, Fielding outlines the geopolitical importance of Gibraltar and the operation's technical aspects but does not situate Tracer within the broader framework of British Intelligence strategies such as deception operations or psychological warfare. Similarly, Fa and Finlayson offer valuable primary data by uncovering the physical site of the operation, yet they fall short in examining its doctrinal implications or the psychological and ethical challenges faced by the volunteers intended for the mission.

Moreover, there is lack of comparative analysis situating Operation Tracer within the wider context of British intelligence operations during World War II. Other well-documented operations, such as the Double Cross System or Operation Fortitude, have been extensively analyzed in terms of their strategic value and theoretical implications. In contrast, Tracer has

been overloaded, possibly due to its non-activation, which has led scholars like Andrew (2009) and Hinsley and Simkins (1990) to omit it from broader studies of British intelligence. This selective focus on “successful” or executed operations has inadvertently neglected the study of contingency plans like Tracer, which, though never implemented, represent important dimensions of wartime intelligence thinking and preparation.

Another critical gap lies in the absence of a thorough examination of the human and ethical dimension of Operation Tracer. While, anecdotal sources mention the psychological demands of sealing a team within the Rock, there is no rigorous academic analysis of how such plans were developed, justified, or managed within the broader ethical frameworks of intelligence work. The implications for operation ethics, psychological resilience, and duty under extreme isolation have been largely ignored in existing scholarship. Such a study would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of contingency planning and its place within the broader landscape of covert operations during the Second World War.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the comprehensive analysis of Operation Tracer, a multifaceted theoretical framework integrating Contingency Theory, Cognitive Resource Theory (CRT), and Military Resilience Models offers the most robust lens to examine its strategic, psychological, and operational dimensions.

1. Contingency Theory: Strategic Flexibility in Intelligence Planning

Contingency Theory posits that there is no singular optimal approach to organizational structure or decision-making; instead, the most effective strategy is contingent upon the specific circumstances at hand (Fielder, 1964). Operation Tracer exemplifies this theory through its design as a contingency plan, activated only under the specific condition of Gibraltar falling to Axis forces. This strategic foresight reflects an adaptive approach to intelligence operations, emphasizing the importance of flexibility and preparedness in response to dynamic wartime scenarios.

2. Cognitive Resource Theory: Leadership and Decision-Making Under Stress

Developed by Fielder and Gracia (1987), Cognitive Resource Theory explores how a leader’s cognitive abilities and experience influence group performance, particularly under stress. Operation Tracer required operatives to function in extreme isolation and high-stress conditions, relying heavily on their training experience, and psychological resilience. The selection process for Tracer operatives, which included rigorous psychological screening, underscores the application of CRT principles, ensuring that individuals chosen could maintain effective decision-making capabilities despite prolonged stress and confinement.

3. Military Resilience Models: Psychological Endurance in Extreme Conditions

Military resilience frameworks, such as the Conservation of Resource Theory and the four Cs of Resilience (Control, Commitment, Challenge, and Connection), provide insight into the psychological endurance required for operations like Tracer (Hobfoll, 1989; Military Sphere, n.d). The operatives’ ability to sustain morale, maintain operational focus, and manage the psychological toll of isolation reflects these resilience principles. The meticulous preparation, including stockpiling supplies and ensuring communication capabilities, further illustrates the emphasis on sustaining psychological and physical well-being over extended periods.

Data Analysis

Intelligence Measures

Intelligence measures are a critical subset of national security planning, especially during wartime encompassing the processes through which states perceive threats, assess vulnerabilities-both of the adversary and of themselves-and formulate effective incident response. Operation Tracer is a unique and illustrative case that captures all three dimensions within a single covert wartime initiative. It was designed not merely as a passive defense

mechanism, but as a proactive measure to preserve strategic awareness, maintain surveillance continuity, and demonstrate the British intelligence community's capacity for foresight and resilience in the face of potential catastrophe.

1. Perceiving the Threat

The fall of France, aggressive advancement of Axis powers in Europe and North Africa, and Spain's flirtation with fascist ideology all signaled a plausible scenario in which Gibraltar would be attacked or overrun.

2. Vulnerability Assessments

British Intelligence analyzed its own vulnerabilities. Despite the military fortifications in Gibraltar, it was understood that a determined assault specially with Spain's tacit cooperation could succeed. As far as the vulnerabilities of adversaries were concerned, then British analyzed that Axis lacked technological infrastructure to detect deeply hidden observation posts.

3. Incident Response

Operation Tracer was developed as a direct response to the anticipated occupation of Gibraltar. The operation involved constructing a secret observation post within the Rock of Gibraltar, where a specially trained team of six men would be sealed inside and remain undetected for up to a year. Their role was to observe enemy naval activity through concealed observation slits and transmit coded messages via radio to British command, ensuring that Britain maintained a flow of intelligence even under the most adverse conditions.

The planning phase was meticulous led by Rear Admiral John Henry Godfrey, the operation brought together military engineers, intelligence officers and civilian specialists. The post was carved into the Rock itself, camouflaged from all external view. It included living quarters, a medical bay, observation ports, and a radio communication system powered by batteries and a hand cranked generator. The chamber was stocked with enough food, water, and medical supplies to support the team for twelve months without external contact (Franco, 2020).

Technological adaptations was a key feature. Engineers developed a communication system capable of securely transmitting messages using Morse code. The radio was carefully shielded to avoid detection by enemy signal intelligence units. Ventilation was designed to prevent moisture and suffocation, while sanitation was managed through chemical toilets.

➤ Selection and Training of Operatives

Personnel selection was one of the most sensitive components of the operation. The team had to be composed of individuals capable of withstanding psychological and physical isolation, while also possessing specialized skills. The selected included a medical officer, naval observers, and radio operators. They were trained in survival techniques, radio communication, field medicine, and long-term confinement. Psychological screening, conducted by M15 and military psychologists, ensured that only the most resilient candidates were chosen. They also had to swear absolute secrecy-a commitment that most upheld for decades, even after the operation was ultimately never activated.

➤ Operational Secrecy and Compartmentalization

Due to sensitivity of the mission, Operation Tracer was surrounded by the layers of secrecy. Knowledge of the operation was strictly compartmentalized, with only a select group within the Admiralty and intelligence services aware of its existence. Construction was conducted covertly, and cover stories were employed to deflect attention. The operatives themselves were unaware of the full scope of the mission until final briefing, reinforcing the need-to-know

principle. This level of operational secrecy ensured that no information about the operation leaked to enemy intelligence agencies.

Data Collection Tools for the Operation

Since it was a covert operation, thus the tools for used data collection were from covert sources. Two tools that were significantly used for this specific operation were:

- HUMINT (Human Intelligence)
- SIGINT (Signal Intelligence)

HUMINT: Operation Tracer was heavily reliant on HUMINT as its core mechanism. The entire concept centered around a small, specially trained team of operatives who would live sealed inside the Rock of Gibraltar. Their role was to observe enemy naval movement, particularly ship movements through the strait of Gibraltar. Using direct line-of-sight from concealed observation slit, these human observers would manually gather intelligence and document patterns, timings, and classifications of Axis ships. This form of intelligence was dependent on trained visual observation, record-keeping, and judgement, making it a pure example of tactical HUMINT (Hollis, 2025).

SIGINT: To transmit the intelligence gathered, the operation incorporated SIGINT tools. The team inside the chamber was equipped with **radio transmitters** that could send coded messages-back to British command. These devices were battery-powered and designed to avoid detection by emitting minimal signal traces. The secure use of radios for covert communication made SIGINT an essential tool for relaying sensitive data without revealing the observers' presence. Additionally, part of team's training included maintaining communication discipline, a key aspect of SIGINT operations (Riste, 2014).

How and whether the operation was able to serve the national security objectives?

Although, Operation Tracer was never activated and its observation post remained hidden and unused throughout WWII, the operation still holds significant value when evaluated through lens of national security concerns. The Strategic foresight, innovation, and psychological impact embedded within the planning process reflect the broader goals of intelligence and defense preparedness in a high-risk wartime context. As such, Operation Tracer contributed meaningfully to Britain's national security strategy, not necessarily through execution, but through its existence, planning, and doctrinal legacy.

The operation was preventive in nature, that was designed for the worst-case scenarios, the fall of Gibraltar to Axis forces-which, fortunately, never materialized. However, the value preventive intelligence measures lie not solely in their activation but also in their potential utility and psychological assurance they provide to national leadership. So, we can say that Operation Tracer act as a Strategic Insurance in this regard. Initially, its existence reassured military and intelligence leadership that even in the event of territorial loss, Britain's eyes and ears would remain operational (Nutter, 2025).

One of the most lasting impacts of Operation Tracer was its contribution to the conceptual foundation of 'Stay Behind' networks developed during the Cold war time. NATO's establishment of covert resistance and intelligence cells across Europe, including Operation Gladio in Italy, mirrored the principles set forth by Operation Tracer.

It also stands as the symbol of Britain's unwavering commitment to national defense and clandestine preparedness. So, Tracer's legacy can be measured by its influence on subsequent intelligence planning, its embodiment of resilience, and its representation of Britain's wartime ethos: to never surrender control of information.

Intelligence Operation was success or a Failure As far as this side is concerned, this analysis could also be seen in two ways: Operation Planning and Execution Phase, and Operation Activation Phase.

The Planning and Execution phase in this operation can be regarded as a clear **success**. The operation remained clearly covert for decades, it was meticulously planned for worst-case scenarios, demonstrating foresight and strategic depth. Importantly, Intelligence is not about what will happen, but rather about what could happen. This operation is a prime example of Strategic Deterrence which is success in itself.

Operation Activation phase in this operation can be viewed as **neither a success nor a failure**. The operation was specifically designed for hypothetical situation in which Hitler captured the Rock of Gibraltar- an event that never occurred. As Germany became increasingly occupied with Eastern Front, secondly, Spain's leader refusal to allow German troops to march through its territory (which was the easiest route to capture Gibraltar), third the victories of British over North Africa, the strategic threat to the Mediterranean receded. As a result, those six operators for Tracer were eventually withdrawn, since Britain had successfully regained control and stability in the region.

Why it was called as Tracer?

- The term 'Tracer' is often associated with tracking and following something, like a tracer bullet that visibly marks a projectile's path.
- In case of Operation Tracer, it was designed to trace or monitor enemy's activity. The team inside the chamber would observe and report enemy operations, essentially tracking Axis control from deep within occupied territory, completely undetected.

Conclusion

Operation Tracer stands as a unique and compelling example within the broader framework of intelligence operations during wartime. While it was never activated, its strategic conception, meticulous planning, and extreme secrecy underscore the essential characteristics of successful intelligence work-anticipation, adaptability, and discretion. Designed in the shadow of a possible Axis occupation of Gibraltar, Operation Tracer reflected the British Intelligence community's foresight in preserving situational awareness under worst-case scenarios. The covert nature of the operation, kept secret for decades, highlights the discipline and integrity with which British Intelligence services, particularly M15, M16 and Naval Intelligence, operated.

For modern intelligence agencies, Operation Tracer offers enduring lessons. It shows the importance of long-term strategic planning and the value of integrating human and signal intelligence capabilities in confined, high-risk environments. It also reminds intelligence services of the moral, psychological, and logistical complexities involved in covert missions, particularly those involving long-term isolation. Above all, it illustrates that success in intelligence is not always measured by activation, but by the ability to anticipate threats, reduce vulnerabilities, and maintain strategic advantage. In this sense, Operation Tracer is not just the relic of WWII history-it is a blueprint for resilience in the face of uncertainty.

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