

Extracts from memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty to the War cabinet, October 1941

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Coal Dust Films for Camouflage of Coastlines.

Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty.

In Battle of the Atlantic, S/50/79, Second Meeting, Conclusion 1, the Admiralty, in conjunction with the Ministry of Home Security, were directed to experiment with the camouflage of tidal water by the application of coal dust.

2. The Appendix attached summarizes the results of the trials which have been carried out.

3. If the process is to be applied on the large scale required for the camouflage of major waterways or commercial port areas, the number of craft and personnel would be very large, and the quantity of coal which would have to be transported would be prohibitive. For example, to cover the Mersey alone, and outside the docks, would require a monthly consumption of 200,000 tons of coal, and the employment of at least 400 mobile units. This consumption is based on 10 moonlight nights of 10 hours each.

4. The coal will have to go somewhere once it has been placed on the water. Some will be carried away by the tide, some will sink, and a little may remain temporarily suspended. The quantities involved will represent considerable siltage in rivers and estuaries which have already to be continually dredged to keep them clear. The

6. In view of the large numbers of craft and personnel, and the great quantities of material, required, it seems doubtful whether this method will be a practical proposition.

WESTERN EUROPE 1939–1945: DECEPTION & BLUFF**What is this source?**

This is a memorandum or note from the First Lord of the Admiralty to the War cabinet commenting on the use of coal dust to camouflage the coastline.

Experiments were carried out to use coal dust to disguise the outline of the coast and other inland waterways and rivers, thus making it difficult for German bombers to attack ports, docks and estuaries. The film of coal dust would cut out any reflection from the water and make it less visible.

What's the background to this source?

After the Battle of Britain in October 1940, Hitler had renewed plans for Operation Sealion (the invasion of Britain) in the spring of 1941. However, with the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, it became unlikely that Hitler would invade until this conflict on the Eastern Front was resolved.

The Battle of the Atlantic however, continued at this time. The Royal Navy, along with other Allied navies had the task of defending from German surface and U boat attack, merchant ships carrying essential food and supplies.

It's worth knowing that...

These plans to camouflage the coastline were rejected in the end. There were too many problems. It was a wasteful use of vital coal during wartime and caused rivers to silt up. Tides would wash away the coal dust film and break up the cover.

This experiment shows that the government was interested in the use of camouflage and was prepared to consider all sorts of ideas!

How does this source help us to understand why D-Day was successful?

1. What was the main idea behind this experiment?
2. Why was it not really practical?
3. Why might people today object to such plans?
4. Do you think this source can help you to convince your friend that the British used deception tactics in WW2?