

# Military myths and urban legends

*We will be looking at some well-known, and some lesser known, myths and legends about the military and seeing if they are true or not.*

**D**id you know that Hitler's real surname was Schicklgruber? Or that Roosevelt knew that Pearl Harbour was going to happen? And of course you must know that carrots help you see in the dark.

And if you did know any of the above, sorry to disillusion you, but none of it is true.

It's not surprising that myths will spring up about wars, the events that took place during wars, and the people that fought in them. While some of them are true, most of them are nothing more than myths and urban legends.

In this article we will examine a few of them and see whether they are true, or nothing more than a myth.

## The Myth

France meekly surrendered to Germany in 1940 because the French were cowards.

## The Verdict

False

## The Reality

While it is true that the French did surrender quickly - the Germans achieved this in six weeks, something they had been unable to do in four years during World War I - the reasons are oversimplified.

The French were relying heavily on the Maginot Line to stop the German advance. Instead of attacking it the Germans went around it.

French troops fought hard

during the Battle of France, inflicting over 150,000 casualties on the Germans and destroying over 800 tanks. The French army was let down by poor leadership, dumb tactics, bad logistics and commanders trying to fight a defensive war.

## The Myth

US President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew that the attack on Pearl Harbour was going to take place. He allowed it to happen as a pretext for war.

## The Verdict

False

## The Reality

While there were fears that the Japanese were going to launch an attack, the Americans had no idea of where and when it would happen.

Pearl Harbour was a combination of bad luck, poor training, and bitter rivalry between branches of the US military.

The US Navy believed that the Japanese did not have the ability to attack Pearl Harbour because of its shallow depth, making it almost impossible to launch torpedoes from planes.

The incoming Japanese planes were detected by radar but no warning was passed on. Radar was brand new and being operated by men who barely knew how to use it at the time.

## The Myth

US country singer John Denver was a sniper during the

Vietnam War. He had the second highest amount of sniper kills during the war. His hit song "Sunshine On My Shoulder" was actually about his exploits as a sniper.

## The Verdict

False

## The Reality

Not only was Denver not a sniper in Vietnam, he never served in the US Military at any stage.

## The Myth

A German U-boat, the U-1206, sank when the experimental toilet it used overflowed, causing a flood that could not be stopped.

## The Verdict

True (kind of...)

## The Reality

This story is true. Well almost true. The U-1206 was a new German submarine carrying a newly developed form of high-pressure toilet that could be used at lower depths than the older systems.

While on patrol the captain had to use the heads and when he went to flush the toilet he accidentally opened a valve to the outside.

This caused water to flood in which contacted the subs batteries, causing deadly chlorine gas to form.

In order to vent the gas the captain ordered the sub to surface, which it did, right in front of the Scottish coastline. The



**THE FUHRER QUICK STEP:** Adolf Hitler danced a jig on learning the news that France had surrendered. Or did he?

sub came under attack and was badly damaged. The captain ordered it to be scuttled.

## The Myth

When France surrendered after only six weeks Hitler was so overcome with joy that he danced a jig that was captured on camera.

## The Verdict

False

## The Reality

On learning the news that France had surrendered after only six weeks, Hitler took a slight step back in shock. The event was indeed captured on film.

The British then edited the film to make it look as if Hitler was dancing a silly jig. It was a clever bit of propaganda by the British and it certainly worked. It stirred up outrage and mockery of Hitler.

## The Myth

Hollywood actors Jimmy Stewart and Charles Bronson were decorated World War II veterans.

## The Verdict

True

## The Reality

Both Stewart and Bronson served in the US Army Air Corps during World War II.

Stewart served with a B-24 squadron and flew over 20 combat missions over Europe. He was decorated with two Distinguished Flying Crosses, the French Croix de Guerre, and multiple Air Medals.

Bronson, who was born Charles Dennis Buchinsky, came from a family that was so poor that he had to wear his sister's dress to school.

He worked in a coal mine until he was drafted into the US Army Air Corps. Trained as an aerial gunner, he served on

B-29 Superfortress bombers during the Pacific Campaign. He flew 25 missions and was awarded the Purple Heart for injuries sustained during a raid on Japan.

## The Myth

During World War II a British officer disabled a German tank with an umbrella.

## The Verdict

True

## The Reality

Major Digby Tatham-Warter was a British paratrooper dropped at Arnhem during Operation Market Garden.

He said that he carried an umbrella with him because he always had trouble remembering the passwords after a drop. Few men could mistake the man carrying an umbrella in the middle of a war to be anything but British.

During the failed attempt to hold the bridge at Arnhem he actually did disable a German tank by thrusting the umbrella through the observation slit of the tank and wounding the driver.

Another account was when the battalion chaplain was pinned down by mortar fire, Tatham-Warter walked over, opened the umbrella as if to give him cover from the fire, and calmly escorted the chaplain to safety.

Wounded and captured, he escaped from the hospital with another British officer.

## The Myth

If the Germans did invade England, the Royal Navy had developed a way of setting the English Channel on fire.

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

While it was a fact that the British Petroleum Warfare Department were working on a way to cover the English Channel with oil that could be set alight, their attempts had not been successful.

British Intelligence, however, played up the rumour and took it so far that many people actually believe that the Germans had already tried to invade England, with disastrous results brought about by the burning water.

No invasion ever did take place and the German invasion plans were scrapped after the Battle of Britain.

### **The Myth**

Famous American big band leader Glenn Miller was killed by the Gestapo, or accidentally blown up by British bombers dumping their bombs.

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

Miller served as a Major in the US Army Air Force during World War II.

On 15 December 1944 he was flying from England to Paris to give a concert for the troops stationed there.

The plane disappeared in bad weather and poor visibility. Miller was declared “missing in action”.

Miller’s plane crashed because it had a faulty carburetor. The plane’s engine had a type of carburetor that was known to be defective in cold weather and had a history of causing crashes in other aircraft by icing up.

### **The Myth**

The German SS in World War II were the cream of Aryan manhood.

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

For a while, at the start of the war, they were. But by the end of the war the SS would take anyone they would take anyone they could get their hands on.

As early as 1940, the SS began using foreign soldiers to bulk out its ranks. First, the special “Wiking Division” was authorized, made up of anti-Communist fanatics from Scandinavia, the Low Countries and Estonia. Then 1942 saw the creation of separate SS divisions made of Croats, Ukrainians, Estonians, and Latvians. There were also Spanish, French, East Indian, Romanian and Russian units in the SS – with an attempt even made at a British Free Corps division of English volunteers, which was a miserable failure.

Ultimately, 60% of soldiers wearing the SS runes weren’t German. And French SS soldiers were among the last defenders of Berlin, fighting to the death to avoid capture by the Russians.

### **The Myth**

During D-Day several Koreans fighting for the Germans were captured by the Americans.

### **The Verdict**

True

### **The Reality**

This story is absolutely true, and their story is bizarre. They were first captured by the Japanese and conscripted into the Japanese army. They had then

been taken prisoner by the Soviets during the Battle of Khalkhin Gol in Siberia in 1939.

They had then by drafted out of a labour camp and conscripted into the Soviet army to defend the city of Kharkov in 1943.

At Kharkov they were captured by the Germans. At that stage Germany was desperate for manpower and, because these Koreans had little love for the Soviets, were conscripted into the German army.

They had been conscripted into three different armies by three countries, thousands of kilometres away from each other.

### **The Myth**

Japan was about to surrender before the atom bombs were dropped.

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

It is clear from the records of meetings in the Japanese cabinet and from diplomatic cables that Japan was not on the verge of surrender, at least not of the unconditional surrender demanded by the Allies. Instead, the Emperor and his cadre of military and civilian leaders were preparing to fight a decisive battle in the Home Islands against the forthcoming American invasion, which was scheduled for November.

Japan’s leaders believed that they would inflict such horrific casualties on the invasion that American morale would break, leading to a negotiated peace. Hundreds of thousands of Americans and potentially millions of Japanese would die in this conflict – which both sides



**THE CREAM OF GERMAN MANHOOD:** Not only were the SS not the cream of Aryan manhood, 60% of them were not even German.

were still preparing for when the bombs were dropped.

It wasn’t until August 15th, after two atomic bombings, the invasion of Manchuria by the Soviet Union, a massive bombing raid on Tokyo, and a coup attempt by junior officers, that the Emperor made his famed announcement of surrender.

And still he was opposed by senior officers who believed victory could be achieved through heroic resistance. Additionally, while the Soviet invasion played a role in the Japanese surrender, it was not the only reason – as Soviet amphibious forces were too weak to pose any threat to the Japanese mainland.

### **The Myth**

During the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge in Korea, an American soldier attacked the North Koreans with only a trench knife and his fists and killed 40 of them.

### **The Verdict**

True

### **The Reality**

Herbert K. Pililaau was the last American left standing on Hill 931 of Heartbreak Ridge.

While the rest of his squad retreated, he covered them. He fired his Browning Automatic Rifle until he ran out of ammunition. Then he threw grenades until they to ran out.

He took cover behind some rocks and began throwing rocks at the enemy until there were none within reach.

It was at this point that he pulled out his trench knife and led a one-man charge at the advancing North Koreans. This was how the members of his squad last reported seeing him.

When the American retook the position the following day they found Pililaau were he had fallen. His body was surrounded by 40 dead North Korean soldiers.

For his exceptional bravery that day, Herbert K. Pilila’au was awarded the Medal of Honor and the admiration of every soldier he saved on Heartbreak Ridge.

### **The Myth**

During the Vietnam War American soldiers attempted to kill off officers they deemed incompetent or unpopular. The most common method was with a fragmentation grenade and it gave rise to the term ‘fragging’.

### **The Verdict**

True

### **The Reality**

Not only was this true, it was more common than people realise.

Fragmentation grenades were used because they were harder to trace than bullets fired from a gun.

Fragging incidents became so commonplace during the Vietnam War that it led one expert to state that the American military was “at war with itself.”

While the exact number of deaths remains unknown to this day, estimates indicate 600 documented fragging deaths from 1969 to 1973. Another 1,400 deaths due to “unknown causes” may be blamed on fragging by those who insist the phenomenon was even more pervasive than it really was.

### **The Myth**

During World War I, British soldiers were saved from being annihilated in Mons when angels, in the form of English archers, blocked the Germans path and fired arrows at them, forcing them to retreat.

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

This story appeared in an article written by British author Arthur Machen.

While he stated that the story was all fiction, it gradually be-

came accepted as fact by both the British military and public.

For them it was irrevocable proof that God was on their side.

Anyone who disbelieved in the angel's existence was quickly branded as traitors or defeatists.

### **The Myth**

German war crimes during World War II were committed only by the SS.

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

German regular army soldiers participated in countless massacres, illegal prisoner killings, mass rapes, reprisal shootings, plunders – and many had intimate knowledge of the Holocaust.

Civilians were shot in every country the Germans went to war with, mostly by the SS, but also by the Wehrmacht, often as retaliation for partisan activity.

American, Greek, French, British and Canadian POW's and civilians were all shot at various points in the war. There was also the notable massacre of 7,000 disarmed Italians of the 33rd Infantry Division, shot by regular German troops. And 5,000 regular army troops participated in the liquidation of Warsaw, killing 200,000 Poles.

### **The Myth**

The US Navy developed technology to make ships invisible, in the "Philadelphia Experiment"

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

The myth of the Philadelphia

Experiment holds that a US destroyer escort, the USS Eldridge, was equipped with advanced technology that allowed it to vanish and teleport. This cloaking technology was tested in October 1943, causing the small ship to disappear in front of hundreds of witnesses, only to materialize back again with the crew having been driven insane – and some of the men had been melded into the ship's bulkheads or were simply gone.

The Experiment has its proponents among UFO researchers and conspiracy theorists, but the whereabouts of the Eldridge are easily falsified: in October 1943 it wasn't in Philadelphia, but in the Bahamas on a shake-down cruise. The ship's logs report no unusual activity or men fused into its walls, and the ship served in North Africa and the Pacific before being sold off at the end of the war.

While it's possible that the logs were redacted and that the Navy is lying about the Experiment never having happened, it's much more likely that the "Philadelphia Experiment" was the creation of a mentally ill loner named Carl Allen, who sent a letter to UFO researcher Morris Jessup in 1955 claiming to have been a witness to the Eldridge's vanishing. Jessup was never able to confirm anything Allen wrote, nor has anyone else.

### **The Myth**

An entire soccer team made up of Ukrainian players was executed after beating a Nazi team. It became known as the

'Death Match'.

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

The thing is that the so-called 'Death Match' actually did take place.

It was an ad-hoc game between a Ukrainian team, Start FC, and a German occupier team, Flakelf.

However, the players were not executed en-masse afterwards and there is no proof that any German officials told the Ukrainians to lose or die, as many historical accounts of the time claim.

What's probable is that several of the players, all of whom were on a work detail, were shot as a reprisal for a resistance act. Those players are immortalized in a statue outside the stadium of Dynamo Kiev, the most popular soccer team in Ukraine.

### **The Myth**

Adolf Hitler escaped Berlin and lived out the remainder of his life in Argentina.

### **The Verdict**

False

### **The Reality**

Many articles, books and documentaries have been produced, all detailing how Hitler escaped Berlin and made it to South America. Yet there is little compelling evidence to support these claims.

The best timeline we have of his death is that his partially burned body was recovered by the Russians right after the German surrender, autopsied, buried, unearched, buried again and finally burned and the ashes scattered in a river.

A few fringe scholars believe



**THE ANGELS OF MONS:** A good story, but unfortunately none of it was true.

he somehow got out of Berlin, made his way to South America, crossed the Andes Mountains, and settled in a remote hacienda, where he lived until the 1960's. This is extremely unlikely for a host of reasons, not the least of which is that escape from Berlin was virtually impossible, and that Hitler's health was already failing at the time the War ended.

### **The Myth**

In 1942, Los Angeles was attacked by the Japanese - or aliens.

### **The Verdict**

False.

### **The Reality**

The "Battle of Los Angeles" was a real event that took place in February, 1942.

The 'battle', however, had nothing to do with the Japanese, or alien invaders for that matter. It was more about jittery gunners and public panic.

You have to take into account that the attack on Pearl Harbour had taken place only two

months before. So residents on the West Coast were justifiably afraid of what was coming next. Rumours were flying that Japanese submarines, ships and paratroopers were on their way.

So when a weather balloon broke free on a dark night and was illuminated by searchlights, it's not surprising that anti-aircraft batteries were convinced they saw Japanese aircraft. Naturally they opened fire.

By the time it was over they had fired more than eight tons of shells into the air. They old saying "what goes up, must come down" came into effect.

And the shells did come down - onto the panicked residents of Los Angeles. Five people died in car accidents or heart attacks, and thousands of buildings across the city were damaged.

It wasn't until 1983 that the Air Force finally divulged what the exact cause of the panic had been, ensuring four decades of speculation about aliens, hoaxes, false flags and secret

Japanese technology could take

hold. But none of the supporting documents from either 1942 or any other time confirm anything other than a panic taking place in the fog of war.

### **The Myth**

The Nazis used fluoride in water to keep concentration camp prisoners docile. This is because fluoride affects the brain and can make a person submissive.

### **The Verdict**

False on both counts.

### **The Reality**

Although this is a theory often cited by opponents of fluoride's use in municipal water supplies, there is no supporting evidence to show this.

Fluoride hasn't yet been found to have any kind of effect on human physiology.

And not a single reference to fluoride can be found in any of the paperwork recovered from any German POW or concentration camp.

The idea of the Nazis subduing their victims with fluoride originates with a self-published pamphlet by Australian anti-fluoride partisan Ian E. Stephens. The pamphlet is titled *Fluoridation: Mind Control of the Masses?*

Stephens cites Charles Elliot Perkins, an American chemist who traveled to Germany after the war and claimed he was told by "German chemists" of:

"a scheme to control the population in any given area through mass medication of drinking water. In this scheme, sodium fluoride occupied a prominent place.

"Repeated doses of infinitesimal amounts of fluoride will

in time reduce an individual's power to resist domination by slowly poisoning and narcotizing a certain area of the brain and will thus make him submissive to the will of those who wish to govern him."

Stephens never offers anything science-based to back these claims up, while Perkins was asked on numerous occasions for more evidence, but continued only repeating his initial claim.

### **The Myth**

Adolph Hitler had only one testicle.

### **The Verdict**

False.

### **The Reality**

He almost certainly had two. A German medic who claimed to have saved Hitler's life in World War I also claimed that the future leader of Germany had one of his testicles either shot off or damaged by shrapnel at the Battle of the Somme.

While military records indicate Hitler was wounded in the left thigh at the Somme, they're silent on the matter of his reproductive organs.

A Soviet autopsy of Hitler's body that was released in the 70's also claimed that the left testicle was missing, but this was probably just a propaganda gesture.

In reality, the "Hitler has only one ball" rumor almost certainly comes from a British song of the same name written in 1939 to satirize the leader of the country England had just gone to war with. While the medic's account of Hitler's monarchism has been accepted by many media outlets, there's no compeling

ling evidence to support it, and is mostly the stuff of tabloids.

### **The Myth**

In a shocking display of foolish bravery, Polish horse cavalry charged German tanks with their lances, dying in the process.

### **The Verdict**

False.

### **The Reality**

This is one of the most repeated urban legends of the war, and is completely incorrect. The real Charge at Krojanty was a Polish cavalry charge, but against infantry caught in the open. And it worked, with Polish lancers breaking up a German attack and sending panic through their lines. It was only after a German counterattack with armored cars that journalists were shown the bodies of fallen Polish troops and horses and told they charged tanks. But the "charge against tanks" was German propaganda swallowed, hook, line and sinker by Allied writers.

### **The Myth**

Field Marshal Horatio Herbert Kitchener was killed at sea by a German mine in 1916. His body was never recovered.

### **The Verdict**

True.

### **The Reality**

Kitchener won notoriety for his imperial campaigns, most especially his scorched earth policy against the Boers and his establishment of concentration camps during the Second Boer War.

In 1914, at the start of the First World War, Kitchener became Secretary of State for

War. On 5 June, 1916, he was making his way to Russia to attend negotiations.

He was travelling aboard the HMS Hampshire when it struck a German sea mine 2,4 km west of the Orkney Islands in Scotland. It was 19h40, visibility was poor, it was raining, and the seas were very rough.

On board, the crew scrambled to lower lifeboats, but their efforts were futile. The huge north sea waves smashed the lifeboats to kindling against the cruiser's side.

Of the 655 people on board, only twelve were saved, drifting to land clinging to small floats. Lord Horatio Kitchener was never seen again.

Today, the wreck lies upside down at a depth of around 40 fathoms and is designated as a war grave. We must assume that the bones of Lord Kitchener still lie there.

### **The Myth**

During World War I soldiers from opposing sides deserted and went into hiding together. They stayed hidden during the day and came out at night to rob the dead and dying of their supplies.

### **The Verdict**

False.

### **The Reality**

This rumour was very popular, especially during World War I itself.

Wild stories about deserters living together in abandoned caves, villages, and even trenches were rife.

It was said that they would remain hidden during the day, but at night they would come out in large, armed groups and rob



**FROM PILOT TO PRESIDENT:** Lieutenant George H. Bush was not only a fighter pilot during World War II, he was also shot down and almost captured by the Japanese.

the dead and dying of uniforms, supplies, weapons and ammunition.

Eventually these groups became so numerous and uncontrollable that the military authorities on both sides decided to wipe them out with gas.

No one knows exactly where this urban legend began, but there are no records of it ever happening.

### **The Myth**

George H. Bush narrowly escaped being executed and eaten by the Japanese in World War II.

### **The Verdict**

True.

### **The Reality**

In September 1944 the submarine USS Finback surfaced a few kilometres off the coast of Chichi Jima, an island some 1,126 km South of Tokyo. It's periscope had popped above the water and spotted the man they were there to save.

Lt. George H. W. Bush (a man who, in forty odd years, would be president of the United States), was delirious, bleeding, vomiting off the side of his small life raft, and lucky.

Of the more than 100 Ameri-

can pilots that were shot down during the raids over the Bonin (Ogasawara) Islands preceding the landings on places like Iwo Jima, Bush was only one of three airmen that were rescued. Scores of others perished with their aircraft or died in the cold waters.

The most unfortunate of all were those that flew in the bombing raid with Bush on 3 September, 1944. Some of the pilots were shot down and captured by the Japanese soldiers stationed on Chichi Jima. There were nine, in total, and only one survived. The others disappeared, their files sealed by the U.S. government until decades later.

The horrific fate of these aviators was virtually unknown past the war trials after World War II until James Bradley, author of *Flags of Our Fathers*, investigated the now unsealed files, found living eye-witnesses, and published the book *Flyboys: A True Story of Courage*, in 2003. The fate of the pilots that were captured by the Japanese - they were beaten, tortured, beheaded and eaten.



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