

In 1942, the Army Built a Decoy Airfield in Virginia to Fool the Luftwaffe

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The Elko "airfield". A target from above, topiary from below. (Aerial photo courtesy Lyle Browning)

In late 1942, a wooded tract of land in Henrico County, Virginia, five miles southeast of Richmond's airport, Byrd Field, was invaded by the U.S. Army's 936th Camouflage Battalion. Using bulldozers, the troops cut and graded dummy runways to create a near-exact imitation of Byrd's triangular layout and maze of taxiways.

The field, recorded in land registries as the Elko Tract, soon appeared to be populated by aircraft, hangars, and vehicles—all fakes, assembled using techniques dreamed up by Hollywood set directors at the start of the war. The buildings were canvas backdrops. The trucks were cloth and wire, so light you could pick them up and carry them. The airplanes were

plywood, propped on “landing gear” made from two-by-fours. Servicemen trimmed the surrounding brush to leave P-47–shaped silhouettes.

Constructed in response to fear of attack by German aircraft, which were being manufactured with ever-increasing range, Virginia’s decoy airfield was little more than a stage set, but its planners hoped it was convincing when viewed from on high by an anxious Luftwaffe bombardier. In the event of a night raid, Richmond’s city lights would be darkened. Then the dummy field, lit and apparently vulnerable, could mislead the crew of approaching aircraft into releasing their bombs, sparing the city of Richmond, its crucial ports, and its real airfield, which had recently been converted to a U.S. Army flight training base. And should the ploy prove so convincing, some of the field’s fake structures concealed real anti-aircraft guns.

Camp life at the installation, however, was not staged. Soldiers from the Army’s 1896th Engineering Aviation Battalion were stationed there; among their missions was routinely trundling things about to feign the activity of a real air base. They later recalled cold winters in flimsy Quonset huts.

Both Allied and Axis forces made considerable use of similar decoys, often successfully diverting attacks, though one (possibly apocryphal) tale recounts a Nazi site where fake wooden airplanes were assaulted by equally fake wooden Allied bombs, a wry way of telling the enemy the ruse wasn’t working. In Burbank, California, a Lockheed aircraft assembly plant was camouflaged to resemble suburbs from above; Boeing disguised a Seattle plant the same way. But such efforts were curtailed later in the war, when it became clear they were unneeded. Hermann Goering’s “America Bomber” project never materialized; the Nazis couldn’t carry blitzkrieg that far.

In March 1944, the 1896th was sent to the Pacific, where the troops built real air fields (wearing insignias emblazoned “L-K-O,” to honor their deceptive origins).

In the cold war years, the Virginia site was used as a bombing target. Markings on sectional charts warned pilots of the “Dummy airfield—for bombing practice only.” Dubbed The Lost City by residents around Henrico (who circulate various conspiracy theories about its origins), the base’s most visible remains, including roads leading nowhere and an ominous water tower, were built after the war, detritus from a failed attempt to build—of all things—a psychiatric facility.

The adjoining grounds are now a modern industrial park, producing semiconductors and other modern sundries. Yet when viewed from the air, stretches of the decoy field’s triangular runways still peek through the trees, and a marker along a nearby highway reveals this once-secret tale of war and deception.

Long ago returned to the city, the airfield that Elko’s fake defenses once protected is today Richmond International Airport; the military, in the form of a Virginia National Guard unit equipped with F-16s, departed in 2007. Now overseas travelers arrive in Richmond daily—and only on the friendliest of terms.