



(U) Practical Jokes and April Fools

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(U) An enemy decoy, built in occupied Holland, led to a tale that has been told and retold ever since by Allied pilots. The German "airfield," constructed with meticulous care, was made almost entirely of wood. There were wooden hangars, oil tanks, gun emplacements, trucks, and aircraft. The Germans took so long in building their wooden decoy that Allied photo experts had more than enough time to observe and report it. The day finally came when the decoy was finished, down to the last wooden plank. And early the following morning, a lone RAF plane crossed the Channel, came in low, circled the field once, and dropped a large wooden bomb.

(U) On the subject of practical jokes-- where did April Fools come from? As far as anybody can tell, the history of April Fools' Day is somewhat obscure. The most popular theory seems to be that the tradition dates back to 1582 in France, the first country to switch from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar, which moved New Year's Day to 1 January. Prior to 1582, the new year was an 8-day celebration that culminated on 1 April. Because communications in 1582 were not what they are now, some people didn't get word of the change. Others simply resisted the change and continued to celebrate the new year on 1 April. These people were labeled "fools" and were subject to ridicule and other practical jokes, such as being sent on "fool's errands." Over time, this practice evolved into the current tradition of harmless pranks.

(U) Regardless of its origins, April Fools' Day has spawned numerous classic hoaxes, many now celebrated on the Internet--where the "Top Ten" list has evolved to the "Top 100." Mentioned in almost every source that discusses the holiday and appearing at the number one spot on the Top Ten list is the Swiss Spaghetti Harvest. In 1957 a respected British documentary program ran a story on 1 April announcing a bumper Swiss spaghetti crop, complete with footage of Swiss farmers pulling strands of spaghetti down from trees. Huge numbers of viewers called in wanting to know how they could grow their own spaghetti trees.

(U) Occupying the number 10 slot and billed as the oldest April Fools' Day prank is the elaborate 1708 scheme that began with the publication in February of that year of Isaac Bickerstaff's almanac predicting the death of famous London astrologer John Partridge on 29 March. On 30 March, Bickerstaff published a follow up pamphlet announcing that he'd been right and Partridge was dead. On 1 April, Partridge was awakened by a sexton wanting to know about his funeral sermon. When Partridge walked down the street, people reportedly told him he looked exactly like someone they knew who had died. Isaac Bickerstaff actually was a pseudonym for satirist Jonathan Swift, author of Gulliver's Travels. Swift's intent had been to discredit Partridge as a fraud and force him to stop publishing his own almanac of astrological predictions.

(U) So beware... and Happy Fools' Day!

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