

FACTITIOUS SLEIGHT OF HAND

My review of the Channel 4 documentary

Magic at War spoke about Maskelyne's "brilliant idea for building dummy tanks" and then immediately cheated the viewer by showing photographs of Steven Sykes' dummy tanks. Sykes built these tanks from palm fronds and canvas. He installed them alongside his dummy railhead near Musheifa in November 1941. Maskelyne was not involved in this camouflage project.

The documentary then produced seductive computer graphics of the Alexandrian illusion and made the astounding claim that the original Pharos lighthouse, one of the seven ancient wonders of the world, was still standing.

Several specialists were interviewed for the program. However, the military experts did not appear to understand magic and the magic experts did not appear to understand military history.

Jeremy Baumberg, Professor of Physics and Astronomy, spoke enthusiastically about the Suez Canal searchlight illusion. Dazzling computer graphics enhanced his dizzying description. Baumberg's testimony appeared to validate Maskelyne's searchlight miracle...

Or did it?

In a recent personal e-mail, Baumberg conceded that TV programs of this type were more interested in engaging the viewers' attention than keeping them truthfully informed.

In regard to the vanishing of the Canal: "My own request from the program researchers was focussed on was it possible to make this work? And the answer from the optics after brief estimations was yes, it was possible. I was not provided any time for discussion with the historians or other interviewees on the program. I was also only given a few photocopied pages from the book, and took much on trust indeed (I'm certainly not a historian!)."

The documentary also included fragmentary testimony from three Army veterans.

Bill Pilkington and Alf Davies remembered meeting Maskelyne. Eddie Clothier referred to the realistic appearance of a decoy tank, and, later, spoke of the decoy water pipeline at Alamein, but made no direct mention of Maskelyne.

Magic at War also dredged up the name Ken Deveraux (deceased) and claimed he was a member of Maskelyne's Magic Gang, i.e., one of the fabled fourteen. It provided no hard evidence to back this up. Deveraux's son was interviewed but made only light-hearted comments about his father being involved in Maskelyne's 'theatrical productions' against the Germans. No specific details were given.

Ken Deveraux's name is not even on the original camouflage list in the Archives. The list includes corporals, sergeants and drivers, not just camouflage officers. (For example, Sykes's memoirs mention two minor characters, Driver Coleman and Driver Trow and these names are in the Archive list. Barkas refers to Driver Ashman and his Chevrolet truck. Ashman appears on the list.)

There is no independent confirmation that Deveraux was a member of the 'Magic Gang'. (And I have discussed earlier the problems associated with this imprecise term.) Deveraux was not a member of Maskelyne's Camouflage Experimental Section. This is not to deny that he may have met up with Maskelyne at some point. The camouflage officers relied on teams of tradesmen, clerks, and drivers and these numbers grew as the war progressed.

Let us give Channel 4 the benefit of the doubt and assume Devereux worked closely with Maskelyne on various camouflage projects. Why then does the documentary fail to deliver specific testimony about any of Maskelyne's grand illusions?

This is surely a glaring deficiency.

Why is it that Deveraux or the other three Eighth Army veterans were unable to pass on relevant information?

Could it be that these grand illusions were illusory?

I would have been impressed by solid eyewitness statements such as: *“Yes, I worked for Maskelyne in Alexandria. I helped knock together the Maryut lake decoy site. And what a display it was...Fooled those German buggers. Let me show you on the map where we built it...”*

Or *“I was part of the crew who set up the magic searchlights along the Suez Canal. We dazzled ‘em with whirling spray. Enemy pilots never knew what hit them, poor sods.”*

Or *“Yes, that cocky bastard came up with the deception plan at Alamein. He made us put together hundreds of bloody sunshields ...hard work, but it paid off, mate...”*

These are not real quotations. I have just made them up. But reminiscences of this type would torpedo my ‘Maskelyne make-believe’ theory. Especially if the veterans, or their surviving relatives, could corroborate their story with diagrams, maps, dates, photographs, contemporary letters and notes. Yet no one has come forward with convincing first-hand descriptions of these spectacular diversions, let alone supplied any written or printed evidence.

In *Magic at War*, we get banal comments restricted to the manufacture and display of dummy tanks at some vague stage of the Desert campaign: *“He made me paint a tank sand-colour...”*

Instead of precious insights into the world’s greatest-ever illusions, we get snippets like:

“He was a hard task-master...”

“He was a handsome bugger...he had a little moustache... like David Niven.”

Look upon these words, ye scholars, and despair. Apparently, nothing besides remains.

Magic at War climaxed with El Alamein and pulled off a double-sided deception. Without providing any evidence, it pushed the Fisher line that Maskelyne was unquestionably the major player in Plan Bertram. At the same time, it tricked the viewer into assuming that *Magic-Top Secret* contained important details on Maskelyne’s role at El Alamein. Channel 4 made no mention of the real people behind Plan Bertram and conveniently airbrushed the main camouflage officer, Tony Ayrton, from history. Acknowledging his existence would have fatally weakened the Maskelyne hypothesis.

Magic at War also claimed that the ‘Magic Gang’ broke up immediately after Alamein. The Maskelyne look-alike conveniently mouthed a line from *Magic-Top Secret*: *“the Crazy Gang of stage magicians, scene painters, artists, electricians, architects, glass-designers, doctors, picture-restorers, chemists, and others, surely one of the most mixed and unexpected assemblies of soldiers who ever gathered for a united purpose, began to break up finally.”*

But Channel 4 withheld from the viewer the fact that this quotation was drawn from 1945 — the very end of the war. Almost three years had passed. Japan had been defeated. Maskelyne was no longer in Egypt. He was performing Victory Shows for the troops in India and was preparing to return home.

Why did Channel 4 skip forward sixty pages in *Magic-Top Secret*, extract a convenient quotation from a different context, and then loop back one thousand days to 1942?

Why pretend to be still at Alamein?

Because falsifying the context helped fool the viewer into assuming that Maskelyne and his crew were deeply involved in the implementation of the Alamein deception plan.

The ‘Magic Gang’ supposedly concentrated on their task (Bertram) and then disbanded after their famous victory in November 1942.

This is simply not true.

Ultimately, the producer, Michael Wadding is responsible for this factitious sleight of hand. He and his creative underlings have added a new chapter to the undying Maskelyne myth.