

ESCAPING ON A SHOESTRING

Fisher's claim that Maskelyne devised "*some of the most ingenious spy devices ever used in warfare*" is a misleading exaggeration. Maskelyne was not the first to invent them. Clayton Hutton was producing compact concealed escape equipment long before Maskelyne had even entered the Army, let alone joined A Force. These details can be found in *Official Secret* (1961), Hutton's wartime memoirs. Hutton makes no mention of Maskelyne.

As early as 1940, Clayton Hutton had begun making special silk maps which bomber crews could carry inside their protective clothing. Hutton, not Maskelyne, was the first to introduce button compasses and miniature hacksaws. Hutton also developed a special RAF boot with laces containing 'Gigli' saws (strengthened wire used by neurosurgeons to cut through skulls) and magnetised tags that could be used as bar compasses. A hidden heel compartment held further escape items. Hutton's flying boot is a clear precursor to Maskelyne's commando boot. (Hutton's flying boots, now a collector's item, sell for about £250 on the Web.)

In 2005, an exhibition on Great Escapes at the War Museum, London displayed an adaptable RAF escape boot designed by Hutton. The upper half of the flying boot could be cut free above the ankle, leaving behind a plain civilian style shoe.

Hutton realised that his gadgets would eventually be discovered by the enemy. To fool the Germans, he introduced a button compass with a reverse thread. "*Any attempt to unscrew it, therefore, only tightened the thing.*"

In response to my queries regarding the origin of the escape and evasion tools, Alistair Maskelyne wrote: "*Most of the gadgets described such as the camouflaged tools, maps, compasses were produced by the workshops run by my father. Whether he invented them or not, he had quite a supply with him when he left the British Army, and I can still lay my hands on one of the ingenious little brass uniform buttons that is actually a compass. The button ring is the handle to unscrew the back; you must turn it CLOCKWISE to unscrew it. Then there is displayed a tiny glass fronted magnetic compass bowl in the back of the button.*"

"Maybe Hutton was the inventor. It certainly would not be unusual for my father to give the impression he was the person responsible for the ideas."

Another obscure figure in escape and evasion was Charles Fraser-Smith who published his war memoirs in 1983. Unfortunately, Fraser-Smith's anecdotal account is vague on dates. His references to Maskelyne are of questionable accuracy. He knew Clayton Hutton and claims to have supplied Maskelyne. Fraser-Smith's book includes photographs of various wartime gadgets, such as a hairbrush with a secret cavity (similar to Maskelyne's shoe polish brush) and a smoker's pipe with an asbestos lined bowl that could hide a compass and a map. Fraser-Smith also designed invisible maps printed on handkerchiefs with special ink. Some became visible only when urinated on.

Fraser-Smith claims he invented a miniature wireless the size of a cigarette packet. Hutton and Fraser-Smith also independently take credit for disguising a miniature camera as a cigarette lighter.

Sixty years later, with all parties deceased, it is hard to unravel decisively the competing claims.

Hutton takes credit for procuring ‘Gigli’ saws and developing them into escape tools. Fraser-Smith claims he was the first to do this.

Magic-Top Secret credits Maskelyne with inventing rice paper maps. Fraser-Smith worked along similar lines: “*I could supply a completely edible paper, tough but palatable, so that a suspect or accosted agent could make a meal of his notes, swallowing them after a few quick bites. Rice paper made this possible*” Fraser-Smith also claims there was a second method (familiar to magicians): “*We developed a flash paper which when ignited simply disappeared without trace. No smoke or ash ... we supplied literally tons of both rice and flash papers during the war.*”

Alistair Maskelyne added the following anecdote about his father returning to London after the war: “*The hall of our house in Kensington was crowded with three or four large war department boxes, containing all manner of things such are described in the various books about evasion and escape. There were almost bales of silk maps, pocket sized radios, long before the advent of the transistor: these things had miniature valves, the type only seen by me before in our radar installation at sea.*

There were small arms, I remember Beretta hand guns, and cameras, upon which I gloated. Although the destination of this material was the War Office, or one of its divisions, my father had a fairly cavalier attitude to its disposal, and he invited me to take my choice of the cameras. I could hardly refuse, although I was well aware all this was Government property. Eventually, I selected a German Contax 2, with an F2 Sonnar lens.”

(Under the category of Personal & Family Snaps in the PHOTOS section of my website, I have added a picture of the young Alistair Maskelyne in Sydney harbour with his German camera.)

THATCHED BARN

Ten years after Alistair’s letter, I came across a solid reference to Jasper Maskelyne in Boyce and Everett’s *SOE: the Scientific Secrets* (2003): “*Station XV had a depot in Cairo headed by the well-known stage illusionist, Jasper Maskelyne whose treasure chest exhibited some of the more exotic products of the Thatched Barn.*”

Station XV was a special camouflage section based in a mock-Tudor hotel on the outskirts of London near Elstree film studios. The Thatched Barn produced equipment for Britain’s Special Operation Executive (SOE). Film director Captain Wills ran the outfit. Wills was originally recruited in November 1941, twelve months before Maskelyne even began producing his escape equipment drawings. Wills’ team included experts from the film industry who could work miracles with stage props. They pioneered ways of hiding items inside ordinary objects.

Magic-Top Secret occasionally contains gems of information that are not merely the product of a ghost writer’s fantasy. Classic items such as miniature compasses, pen guns, hidden hacksaws, edible maps, tiny radio sets, booby-trapped rats, and explosive coal really did exist. However, Jasper Maskelyne did not invent these ingenious gadgets. Credit must go to the research and development sections of the SOE back in England. This group also devised the

explosive tyrebursters disguised as mule or camel excrement.

Maskelyne made use of other people's ideas and sometimes came up with his own modifications. This is common practice in the magic world.

With all this privileged information, Jasper Maskelyne could have written a modest but worthwhile account of his wartime service, based on what he and his colleagues actually tried to accomplish. He could have produced a minor classic concentrating on military camouflage, deception, and escape & evasion

Whether such an evidence-based book would have made it past the censor is unclear. There was perhaps a narrow window of opportunity from 1947 to 1949 before the Cold War went permafrost.

Correspondence in the Archives details Clayton Hutton's long legal battle with the authorities. The Air Ministry warned Hutton that his book *Ways of Escape*, "would undoubtedly help our potential enemies to combat escape and evasion measures which we hope will help our people in a future war. Therefore we must regretfully request that you withhold publication at least until the international situation radically changes for the better." In January 1951 Hutton completed his manuscript on escape devices and sent it to the printers. The Government confiscated this material and threatened to prosecute him for breaching the Official Secrets Act.

Clayton Hutton had only one escape route. To avoid jail, he reluctantly agreed that his book was 'injurious to the national interest' and gave assurances that it would not be published.

SIGHTINGS

Anthony Quayle, the famous British actor, who starred in *The Guns of Navarone*, refers to Maskelyne in his autobiography. During the real war, not the celluloid version, Quayle visited SOE headquarters in Cairo and bravely volunteered for special operations in the Balkans. His first SOE mission was to Albania. "There followed several weeks of courses—in explosives, ciphering, deciphering, and in the rudiments of the Albanian language. We even had a few lessons from Jasper Maskelyne—one of the magicians from my music-hall days ; he instructed us in various idiotic skills, like writing in invisible ink."

David Smiley's memoirs, *Irregular Regular*, records how in early 1943 he was based at SOE headquarters, Cairo. Like Quayle, he received specialised training for a covert mission to Albania. "We did a final course in escaping which was taught by Captain Jasper Maskelyne, a peace-time conjuror. He equipped us with various silk maps for sewing into our clothes and a number of magnetic items which would all point north—such as compasses in buttons, pencil clips and even magnetic fly buttons. We also carried gold sovereigns sewn into our trouser turn-ups and our badges of rank were specially made of 24-carat gold."

On a nighttime sabotage expedition, Smiley placed explosive charges beneath a bridge and attached a 10-minute timer. He then scattered 'tyrebursters'—miniature explosives disguised as mule droppings—along the roadway. These devices disabled two approaching German vehicles. After a tense delay, Smiley's faulty timing pencil eventually triggered the gelignite beneath the bridge. "With a flash and a tremendous explosion, the bridge went up, complete with the

Germans on it.”

Near the end of his Albanian mission, Smiley ran out of food. He took refuge in a cave and survived on a desperate diet of dead mule and rainwater. He was eventually rescued and shipped across the Adriatic to Bari. *“Here a personal disaster overtook me. While I was soaking in a carbolic bath, some bright spark removed all my clothes and burnt them. I was furious, for I was devoted to my tailor-made corduroy trousers, which furthermore had sovereigns sewn into the turn-ups, and my uniform jacket was riddled with sewn-in maps and other escaping kit. Even my Household Cavalry captain’s stars were made of 24-carat gold.”*

In the Archives, as previously mentioned, I came across a new drawing by Jasper Maskelyne of an army uniform laden with concealed escape devices. Maskelyne used these ideas in his numerous lectures for MI9. In the same folder were two letters signed by Maskelyne in 1943. One letter asks for the return of certain escape devices. Another acknowledges receipt of 1000 silk maps, 2 pipes, 700 compasses and 200 saws.

U.S.A.F. LECTURES

The evidence suggests Maskelyne’s lectures on escape and evasion were well received. In October 1944, the American 15th Air Force wrote a letter of commendation *“for the most excellent work which Major MASKELYNE has done with combat crews of this command during the past four days. Working under a heavy schedule, Major MASKELYNE delivered four lectures daily, each lasting approximately one and a half hours, and thus managed to reach almost every flying officer and enlisted man in this bombardment wing with his message concerning escape and evasion.”*

Maskelyne was justifiably proud of this letter and pasted it in his album. His public speaking skills and his conjuring abilities made him a valuable wartime lecturer.

Maskelyne’s Farnham colleagues also resorted to attention-focussing tricks, but of a different kind. To keep the army audience awake, Julian Trevelyan laced his lectures with photographs of nude females covered in camouflage netting. Roland Penrose would occasionally throw in a daring nude shot of his extraordinary girlfriend Lee Miller spreadeagled in matt green camouflage paint.