

FINAL WITNESS

John Codner is the last surviving member of the remarkable group of camouflage officers who accompanied Jasper Maskelyne to Egypt in January 1941 on board the Samaria.

I tracked Codner down to his retirement hideaway on the west coast of England.

Codner was in fine form, despite encroaching ailments. He had recently celebrated his 92nd birthday. He suffers from hearing loss and restrictive vision. He no longer paints, but he can still walk unassisted. He showed me round upstairs: *"They call it the penthouse flat, but we call it the attic."*

The following conversation was recorded on my i-Pod:

Where and when did you do your camouflage training?

"Aldershott in 1940."

Was this before the Farnham training course?

"Yes." (Codner did not train with Maskelyne. Fisher erred by placing Codner's name on the October 1940 Farnham list.)

Sykes and Proud received training in June 1940 at Larkhill, Salisbury Plain. Were you on this course?

"No, I was on a later course."

Can you remember much about your training? Was it primitive?

"It was pretty simple and straightforward. And we also fired odd bits of equipment. We visited the snipers' unit which was very instructive."

The soldiers in special camouflage clothing?

"Yes. They sat in front of a tree instead of behind it. You really couldn't see them until you were right up. And it was just a simple bit of foliage."

Some of these ideas were from the First World War?

"I expect so. Yes."

Before going overseas, did you do any camouflage in England in the summer of 1940?

"Oh yes. In Woodchurch, Shropshire. I gave short lectures and we built a few dummy pillboxes. I worked with van Ost, quite a good painter. Later on, he was drowned while looking at camouflage from the sea."

Did you ever meet Oliver Messel?

"Yes, he was on my camouflage training course. He went to Norwich."

Do you remember anything about dummy sheep?

"Sheep?"

Yes, sheep. They were supposedly placed in fields and packed with explosives. Designed to prevent German glider landings.

"No, I never heard of that. But all sorts of things went on. It could have worked, of course. It's a good idea."

After working in England, you were transferred overseas.

"I volunteered to go abroad. So I was sent to the Middle East."

You left for Egypt in January 1941. Was it a perilous voyage?

"We were lucky. We went just straight through. In a convoy right around the Atlantic. We stopped at Durban for a few days."

Were you able to see much in that brief stopover?

"Well, it so happened they made me Orderly Officer. I had to oversee all the activities. So I only got ashore one day." (Laughter)

Do you remember Maskelyne performing any shows onboard ship?

"He probably did a few conjuring tricks. Especially with the Rings. I remember that one."

Do you remember Captain R. Morrison?

"Yes, I do."

What was he like?

"Pushy."

Pushy?

"Yes, he clung to Maskelyne."

Do you remember that?

“Yes, we were all amused by it. He knew jolly well that Maskelyne wouldn’t be out in the Blue, out in the desert. He wasn’t going to risk anything. Pushy chap.”

I believe he married an Egyptian woman from Alexandria.

“Oh yes. He got a cushy job in Alex, I think.”

Barkas wrote that when you first arrived in Cairo, Maskelyne rang him saying you were all stranded, had no money, and needed help?

“Yes. We ran out of money on the ship. At Freetown we weren’t allowed ashore. When we got to Durban, the banks said you can only have a fiver. So by the time we got to Tewfik we were broke.”

Barkas joked that he thought a magician of Maskelyne’s skill would be able to pull money out of nowhere. (Laughter) So the money shortage was not due to reckless gambling...

“What little we had we spent on drink.”

Sykes says on March 24th, 1941, the new camouflage crew were taken on a special flight over Egypt. Do you remember going on this flight?

“Yes on a terrible old airplane. Very slow.”

With all the camouflage officers?

“Yes, Barkas thought we must at least get a feeling of what the desert looks like from the air. And what we could do about it. It was an interesting flight. We didn’t go far.”

Over the Delta?

“Yes, we stayed over the desert side, the western side. We didn’t go very far into the desert, but far enough to realise the difficulties of concealment. Which was almost impossible, of course.”

Did you ever hear the story about a wooden bomb? Enemy planes bomb a dummy aerodrome. Later, they return and drop a solitary bomb. It fails to explode. It is covered in obscenities. It’s a dummy wooden bomb.

(Laughter) *“Never heard of it. A pure joke perhaps. Never occurred. Music hall joke, I should think.”*

I found a letter written by Proud in Tobruk, May 1941: “Codfish and myself moved out of Tobruk H.Q. and created our own ménage in a ruined suburb where we found an untouched villa.” I assume ‘Codfish’ was your nickname?

(Laughter) *“Yes, I was called Codfish at school.”*

Proud says you had an unusual personality.

“Me?”

Yes, but he meant it in a positive way. He says you were able to convince the higher-ups that camouflage was worthwhile.

“The regular officers, the ones from India, were old-fashioned, Northwest Frontier and that kind of thing, and tended to pooh-pooh the whole thing. The officers from England were much more interested.”

Why did they denigrate camouflage?

“They were purely old fashioned. Their attitude was: We don’t hide from the enemy. We charge.” (Laughter)

In red uniform! And yet, in Tobruk, camouflage was urgently needed.

“Yes. Well, we couldn’t hide very much, though we found all sorts of materials. There were curtains and all kinds of curious bits and pieces which we could use up to a point. We couldn’t actually hide anything really. It was just like a white ball on a green billiard table. It was almost impossible.”

What kind of schemes did you try in Tobruk?

“I was very busy setting up dummy petrol stores.”

And hiding the real petrol?

“Yes, as much as we could...and of course it worked, the Bosch bombed the hell out of the dummy area.”

Were you facing dive-bombing attacks from Stukas?

“Oh yes. When I was there we were dive-bombed quite a lot. And I watched the last British airplane, a Hurricane, knocked out of the sky.”

“Proud found a whole lot of condemned Italian coffee which he mixed with water and flung on light-coloured sheets, which were too light to look like sand. So, he had to flick on this coffee to bring it down to the sand colour. The sand, it was good earth really. We didn’t have paint at that stage. We just used what we could with this coffee stuff.”

Maskelyne supposedly created a camouflage paint using flour paste, Worcestershire sauce and camel dung? Have you heard this story?

"Well, I've never heard it, but it's the sort of thing that could be said."

Were you aware of Sykes' dummy railhead scheme in late 1941?

"Yes, they were building a railway at that time. The idea was immediate. To try and do something like that. Not to actually hide it, but to mislead low bombing. High bombing, it didn't matter. They never hit anything, anyway. We didn't either." (Laughter)

By February 1942, you were transferred to Palestine.

"Based in Haifa"

Why were you sent to Haifa? Did you request a transfer?

"I'd done quite a stint in the desert. Sykes took over from me at Eighth Army HQ, Sidi Bagush. I went back to the Delta on a nice long leave. Then Barkas said you've had enough of the desert. I'm sending you up to Palestine. They were worried about a possible German invasion from the north, down through Russia and Turkey."

There was an important oil pipeline from Iraq to Haifa. The oil for the fleet was shipped from Haifa to Alexandria. What kind of camouflage did you do in Haifa?

"All over the area there were factories which we tried to do our best with. We had plenty of paint there. Biggish industrial targets. Funnily enough, I don't remember doing anything on the pipeline at all."

Someone (Sykes) worked on it before you arrived. Did you ever hear about decoy sites? Building a fake site nearby. Were you ever involved in this?

"A lot was done in Britain but we didn't really have the materials to build anything big at all. So some of those things were frowned on. The ideas were pushed out, of course."

There was shortage of material in 1941, but what about 1942?

"Well, still jolly low priority. The shipping capacity was purely for military equipment. Anything peculiar like sheets or cloth just didn't come."

In late 1941 and early 1942, they began to build small decoy sites (in Egypt). They were planning to build 10 fire decoy sites around Alexandria.

"Oh, there could have been. But I wasn't there. It wasn't my area. I was up in Haifa."

Did you ever visit Alexandria?

"Just occasionally; probably to collect drink. (Laughter) I don't remember seeing anything, because I hardly ever went to Alex. But the ideas were pushed out Making a similar factory, but much smaller. With any luck we'd put the pilot off, not knowing quite where it was. We used to talk about these ideas a lot. And I have no doubt some of it was done."

Were you aware that decoys were being tried in England?

"Oh yes. We knew that those things were going on. But we didn't know what or where exactly."

Do you recall Trevelyan's visit to Palestine in April 1942? He came on a fact-finding mission. He writes: "I end up in a drunken argument about camouflage with Johnny Codner in Hal Woolf's flat, while Hal snores on the sofa."

"Drunk probably." (Laughter)

Do you remember this? Did you have a few drinks with Julian?

"Oh, yes. We had a party... He had no idea what it was like. And he had strong ideas of what happened in Britain and he couldn't quite gather what we were trying to do and why. Because conditions were so different."

Trevelyan was a celebrity. You get these people picked up by the media. Most of them come and go with just five minutes of fame. He knocked about enough, for the media, to keep in the limelight..."

He was a brief visitor to the Middle East.

"He came to look. We fairly cursed because if someone could come out, then one of us could go back." (Laughter)

Good point. In fact, only he went back.

During breaks in the campaign, did you ever pursue painting?

"No. Somehow or other it wasn't conducive. Conditions were just not right. I couldn't do it. I wish I had. Marvelous opportunities to paint away"

Were you frustrated because you couldn't easily get into an aeroplane and check how good your camouflage was?

"Yes, it was bloody annoying. We never really got to grips with that. One general wanted to know if it was possible to hide anything. We were standing out in the desert. I said the only thing we could do was to use a certain cloth, but we'd need at least a trainload.

And he said, oh well, that's hopeless.

If you buried it (petrol), it would be lost. If it was in neat little squares, it would be seen. The only thing I suggested is that we made dumps in interesting shapes. For instance, you might follow on a line of the remains of water on the earth, which was probably made a thousand years previously, but the shape was still there. And if we followed on these shapes with dumps of petrol, we might just have got away with it, but I doubt it."

Sounds reasonable, but were you able to confirm this from the air?

"No, we didn't."

That was the flaw. It was always military resources first...

"Absolutely. Priorities..."

We can't spare you a plane...

"Our priorities were lost, pretty well."

Maskelyne claimed he vanished the Suez Canal using dazzle lights, swirling searchlights that blinded the enemy bombers. For the record, did you hear any story like that either during or after the war?

"Not until just recently when they had a film on the telly about it, which I'd never heard of or seen before."

Was this the documentary *Magic at War* about Jasper Maskelyne?

"Yes."

Maskelyne experimented with a searchlight at Abbassia, but there's no evidence he vanished the Suez Canal. It would have been so sensational, you'd be talking to me about it, and not the other way round. The greatest illusion in history...I don't think it happened. If you have any evidence, SPEAK NOW (Laughter) because your recollections will be passed on ...

"I've never heard anything about it, whatsoever."

Did you know that in 1943 Maskelyne became involved in escape and evasion lecturing?

"He did? Good lord. What did he know about it?"

My impression on reading Trevelyan and Barkas is that they didn't take Maskelyne too seriously. They wrote about him in a whimsical way. Did you feel the same?

"Yes."

Maybe he never completely shed the role of entertainer. 'Transferred to welfare'. What do you think that means in army jargon?

"Oh, Giving shows, I expect."

So 'welfare' means entertaining the troops?

"I think so."

"We went out on the same boat. We weren't particularly friendly. He wasn't my type. Some people you take to. Others you can't be bothered with. He was one I just couldn't be bothered with."

It's a pity that Proud or Robb did not produce memoirs. We're left instead with Maskelyne's ghostwritten exaggerations. (Laughter) Did you realise the Americans were going to make a big Hollywood movie about Maskelyne? But they shelved it. Who knows, your name might have come up, you might have become a star? (Laughter)

Postscript: Johnny Codner passed away in August 2008, aged 95.

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