

# LOST

When I first read *The War Magician*, I found the ‘lost in the desert’ episode plausible and assumed it was authentic. Examples of similar desert misadventures occur in German and British accounts of the war. In a violent sandstorm, soldiers could get lost merely crawling from their tents to the latrine. Even in clear weather, drivers frequently found themselves off-course.

However, a comparison of the same episode in *Magic-Top Secret* and *The War Magician* reveals numerous discrepancies. In the earlier account, Maskelyne and a colleague drive into the desert to test out new ways of camouflaging a truck. They get lost because it is late in the day and the terrain becomes unfamiliar as the sun goes down. The truck becomes bogged in sand and they have forgotten to pack a spade. After their rescue, Maskelyne needs 36 hours sleep and is fully recovered.

In Fisher’s account, Maskelyne and a colleague head into the desert to test a miniature compass. Maskelyne is puzzled by the erratic readings. A desert storm, the Khamsin, suddenly descends. The wind and sand drastically alter the terrain. Their vehicle gets bogged in sand. Even with an emergency spade they cannot dig the truck free. Maskelyne and his colleague almost die. After being rescued, Maskelyne spends two days semi-conscious and delirious in hospital and requires a further week to recover from the ordeal. He realises the near fatal mistake he made: their large metallic truck distorted the compass readings.

Fisher’s extra detail may have come from Maskelyne’s 1960s film notes.

In the following section Maskelyne is discussing the various members of his crew:

The driver (unnamed): “*I was stuck with him once in Southern Desert, about 800 miles south of Mersah Matruh. He had lost us. We were on a “desert acclimatisation course” and compass bearings had been taken too near vehicle. We were novices in desert. Engine seized, no water. Almost at end when British tank, badly damaged after a skirmish spotted us, towed truck back. All time driver in tears.*”

Did Fisher gain access to Maskelyne’s unpublished comments? This extract and the Farouk Palace embellishments suggest he did, but Fisher has never admitted this in print.

Is the ‘lost in the desert’ story just another fictional adventure? Should we be more concerned about awkward textual anomalies rather than magnetic anomalies?

Alistair Maskelyne warned me in his first letter that “*the whole episode of being lost in the desert is not true.*”

In follow-up correspondence, I tried to clarify why Alistair thought this episode was fictitious.

Had his father confirmed this personally? Did Jasper admit it was made up to suit the purposes of the ghost writer? Was it never mentioned in his wartime letters?

Alistair replied: “*Your question about the lost in the desert episode: this was one of several anecdotes in Magic-Top Secret about which I questioned my father, since we had never been previously told of it. The reply was ‘the writer thought it would make the story more interesting.’*”

My own theory is that the ghost writer recycled an incident from *Immortal Wings*, an earlier collection of his stories published during the war. “*A Queensland dust-storm was raging – one of those storms in which experienced sheepmen who wander a few yards from the wire get lost and die.*” An Australian Ambulance Aircraft, unable to follow familiar landmarks, loses its course, runs out of fuel and crash-lands in the desert.