

MIRACULOUS APPEARANCE IN EGYPT

Maskelyne's handwritten caption to the Pyramid photo:
L to R. Colonel's sister-in-law, his girlfriend, himself and me!
The great pyramid in the background. It's 480 feet high –
used to be 500, but some thing or other knocked the top off
some thousands of years ago!!! I've been inside it – most
interesting.

After completing his Farnham camouflage training, the next important stage in Maskelyne's career was his transfer to North Africa. Again there is confusion. When did he arrive in Egypt?

Secondary sources carelessly place Maskelyne in Egypt by the autumn of 1940. The book, *Trojan Horses*, claims that Dudley Clarke called upon the services of Maskelyne at the battle of Sidi Barrani against Mussolini's troops in December 1940: "*They started to construct, at great speed, dummy Cruiser tanks and heavy field guns. In reality, the guns were lengths of drainpipe filled with chemicals that produced loud flashes ... Maskelyne hired teams of native workers who drove their camels and horses relentlessly to and fro, trailing chains that whipped up the sand and suggested the incessant movement of large armoured columns.*"

According to Fisher, Maskelyne was still at Farnham. **In this example, Fisher is correct.**

Small-scale deception operations designed to exaggerate British military strength were carried out in late 1940 against the Italians. However, these schemes did not involve Jasper Maskelyne. The celebrated magician had not even left English soil.

Even *Magic-Top Secret* makes this **major blunder** when it describes the effects of Maskelyne's tank camouflage: "*the Italians, outnumbering Wavell's troops by five to one, were in pell-mell retreat ... That offensive, which undoubtedly saved Egypt, was a masterpiece of bluff and daring.*"

I queried such discrepancies with Alistair Maskelyne and he replied: "*My father arrived in Egypt in 1941.*"

Geoffrey Barkas' account, *The Camouflage Story* (1952), supports Alistair's assertion: "*On 10th March, 1941, a draft of twelve camouflage officers reached Cairo, all of them captains and all trained by Buckley in England. The first I knew of their arrival was an urgent telephone message from Jasper Maskelyne. "Please tell Major Barkas," it read, "that I am stranded here with eleven other officers and that we have no money at all. The fact of their financial plight was no great surprise, for almost all of us in the Andes (their passenger ship) had also run out of cash, but I confess that I was disappointed. A magician of Maskelyne's skill, I thought, should have been able at will to cause ten piastre pieces to stream from the nose and ears of the nearest field cashier.*"

When I asked Alistair Maskelyne about this 'shortage of money' anecdote, he regarded it as credible: "***I never knew my father to be any other way.***"

Steven Sykes in *Deceivers Ever-The Memoirs of a Camouflage Officer* (1990) writes about the same voyage on the Samaria. He shared a cabin with Wilton and Fielding. "*Other camouflage officers on board included Peter Proud, Robert Medley, John Codner and Jasper Maskelyne, the internationally renowned stage magician.*" According to Sykes, they set sail on January 4th 1941. The convoy took the safer but longer route via the coast of West Africa, then down around the Cape of South Africa, and up through the Red Sea to the Gulf of Suez.

Fisher at least got the year right but erred with the departure and arrival dates. Fisher has Maskelyne depart from Liverpool onboard the Sumaria (sic) on January 19th and arrive in Egypt mid-April 1941 (a month later than other accounts).

Maskelyne's own army file states he embarked for service overseas on January 5th 1941 and reached Egypt on March 3rd 1941. According to Sykes, the threat of air-raids led to their convoy being dispersed several miles offshore. The camouflage party finally disembarked March 10th at Port Tewfik and caught an afternoon train to Cairo.

The Middle East Camouflage Report in the National Archives confirms that Maskelyne and eleven other trained camouflage officers arrived March 10th 1941. This is consistent with Sykes and Barkas' recollections.