

MASKELYNE'S GREATEST ILLUSION?

The Alamein deception plan is well documented. But was Maskelyne involved?

We know that sunshields were used as part of the plan, but Maskelyne was no longer responsible for their manufacture and would not have necessarily known their precise role in the actual battle. The concealment operation in the northern sector (Martello) was carried out by No.1 Camouflage Company RE and the South African 85 Camouflage Company. Maskelyne was not attached to either company.

Magic-Top Secret gives scant details of the deception plan. There is only a brief reference to preparations: "... we got to work again, producing dummy men, dummy steel helmets, dummy guns by the ten thousand, dummy tanks, dummy shell flashes by the million, dummy aircraft; and disguising the real tanks as trucks, disguising Bofors as trailers, making such a colossal hotchpotch of illusion and trickery as has never been accumulated in the world before."

The surrounding text is padded out by the ghost writer's poetical comments on death and destruction.

Surprisingly, the description of the battle is restricted to a single generalised paragraph: "*the German gunners and bombers smashing and blasting away at our cardboard, canvas, and fustian, while the real British armour tore through elsewhere ...*"

Why was an opportunity missed to highlight Maskelyne's career?

Because Maskelyne was not involved in Plan Bertram.

Maskelyne only seems to know the vaguest outline of the deception plan. I am puzzled as to why he was unable to pass any useful information to the ghost writer about this battle.

The earliest description of Bertram appears in Barkas memoirs in 1952, three years **after** *Magic-Top Secret*. Barkas includes many of the actual lines from his earlier classified report compiled during the war.

David Fisher came along 30 years later and gave Maskelyne a pivotal role in Operation Bertram. Fisher claims that on September 16th, 1942, Barkas and Ayrton whisk Maskelyne away to meet with Montgomery, Dudley Clarke and de Guingand at the battle headquarters of Eighth Army.

"After the meeting was adjourned Jasper strolled around the area with Barkas and Ayerton (sic), finally settling down on the crest of a high white dune ..."

They return to "*the third-class waiting room of the El Alamein railway station.*" Ayrton (conveniently) leaves to reconnoitre the terrain to the north, "*while Clarke, Barkas and Maskelyne set to work.*"

Maskelyne is credited with coming up with the 'switch' plan: "*Working on a battered old typewriter with sticky keys, they banged out a general plan of approach, a so-called "appreciation of the situation."*

Fisher is inserting Maskelyne's name into these episodes. Barkas' memoirs make no mention of Maskelyne's involvement.

In Barkas' version, on September 17th 1942, de Guingand meets with Barkas and Tony Ayrton at the new battle headquarters of the Eighth Army and asks them to develop a deception plan. Disappointingly for Barkas, Montgomery does not put in an appearance. "*With our load of top secrecy heavy upon us, Ayrton and I trudged through the glaring white sand, seeking a place where we could talk freely without being overheard ... Choosing the summit of a dune so that our words would be drowned by the thunder of the rollers, we tried to get the thing into perspective ...*"

And later that day: "*In two hours, after a feverish session on an ancient and gritty typewriter, Ayrton and I returned to Brigadier de Guingand with an appreciation and a report ...*"

Barkas' account does not refer to Maskelyne or Clarke being present at either the HQ meeting or the important brainstorming session. It does not mention the Alamein railway station as the venue. This station was only seven miles from the German frontline. Barkas and Ayrton met de Guingand north west of Burg el Arab, which is 35 miles east of Alamein station. (The British HQ was intentionally placed at a safer distance away from the German frontline.) Barkas and Ayrton would not have made a pointless 70 mile round trip journey from Burg to Alamein station before handing in their report to de Guingand. The Alamein station brainstorming session is surely a myth.

Thaddeus Holt, author of *The Deceivers*, recently informed me that Clarke's own diary shows he did not attend a meeting on September 17th.

The Archives hold a copy of Barkas' wartime report on Camouflage. This document again confirms that it was Barkas and Ayrton who met with the senior ranks of the British Army: "*On 17 September 1942 the Director of Camouflage and the GSO. II (Camouflage) of Eighth Army were called into conference by BGS and GSO.I (Plans) of Eighth Army ...*"

Director of Camouflage means Barkas; General Staff Officer II means Ayrton ; BGS refers to Brigadier de Guingand and General Staff Officer I (Plans) is Charles Richardson.

Jasper Maskelyne's own service record does not list him as GSO II (Camouflage).

The combined evidence proves that Maskelyne did not devise the deception plan and was not present at either the de Guingand meeting or the '*sticky typewriter*' session.

Maskelyne was not even involved in the implementation of the plan. A detailed appendix in the Archives reveals that there were twelve camouflage officers responsible for the nine components of Plan Bertram. Although it does not provide the names of the officers, this list gives precise information about their ranks and their units. Maskelyne's service record does not match any of the twelve.

The main thrust of David Fisher's book is a fabrication.

Alistair Maskelyne responded: "*I have the feeling that Fisher used the Alamein battle to provide a fitting climax to his own story. my father's "diaries" had no more than photos of various desert landscapes, interspersed with pictures of dummy tanks and trucks.*"

APOCRYPHA NOW

Fisher's embellished account, which exaggerated Maskelyne's role, was drawn from a corrupted source: Anthony Cave-Brown's best-selling *Bodyguard of Lies*, published in 1976.

Cave-Brown quotes de Guingand, Montgomery's Chief of Staff, as saying: "*You must conceal 150,000 men with a thousand guns and a thousand tanks on a plain as flat and as hard as a billiard table, and the Germans must not know anything about it, although they will be watching every moment, listening for every noise, charting every track ... You can't do it, of course, but you've bloody well got to!*"

Fisher transfers this quotation to *The War Magician*.

Cave-Brown's next paragraph is of interest: "*Clarke conferred with Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Barkas, a film set designer, and Major Jasper Maskeleyne, a conjuror, his two main camouflage experts. Within two hours, working at an ancient and gritty typewriter in the third-class waiting room of the Alamein railroad station, they arrived at a plan ...*"

"... *Barkas prepared what would become one of history's remarkable conjuring tricks.*"

Fisher took advantage of this brief reference when he fictionalised the climax to *The War Magician*.

Cave-Brown's mistaken reference to Maskelyne appears to be a product of compounded sources. He has carelessly fused together two separate pieces of information: 1) Barkas and Maskelyne were "*camouflage experts*" and 2) Barkas helped develop the deception plan for Alamein on an "*ancient and gritty typewriter*".

Cave-Brown has borrowed Barkas' very adjectives. His source must ultimately be Barkas' book. Ten years ago I challenged the accuracy of Cave-Brown's account of Plan Bertram. In January 2005 I learned I was not the only critic wailing in the wilderness. Thaddeus Holt encouragingly wrote: "*A.C. Brown's Bodyguard Of Lies is utterly worthless, as you seem to recognize.*"

It was camouflage expert Anthony 'Tony' Ayrton, not Maskelyne, who accompanied Barkas to the important briefing and who subsequently worked on the deception plan. Significantly, Sykes' own memoirs, *Deceivers Ever*, include a letter sent from Barkas on November 11th, 1942, the week after the battle. Barkas wrote: "*Within a few days Ayrton and I had been given a complete set of Camouflage Operational Tasks based on the agreed appreciation but now built in firmly with all the rest of the plan. We had a timetable, we knew just what we had to do and where it had to be done—and so we were able to crack on with manufacture and detailed arrangements of every kind ...*" Barkas was particularly appreciative of Ayrton's contribution: "*Ayrton ran by far the biggest and most varied part of the show well up forward ... Ayrton did outstandingly well.*"

This source—which has unique authority because it was written so soon after the event—does not mention Maskelyne being involved in the creation of Plan Bertram.

Even Montgomery's man, Charles Richardson, states in his memoirs: *"From the Camouflage staff I was given a most devoted and effective sapper, Major Ayrton who became my assistant and worked miracles."*

The full notes on Plan Bertram with text and numerous black and white photographs can be found in the National Archives. A.M. Ayrton, Major, General Staff wrote the introduction.

Finally, signed proof has emerged in a rare document from the South African archives, dated 30 September 1942. It details the construction of sunshields and cannibals by the 85th Camouflage Company (South African) in the build-up to Alamein, and is clearly signed by A. Ayrton.

In contrast, Jasper Maskelyne's signature does not appear on any of the Bertram documents.

And this hardly surprises me. Jasper Maskelyne, instead of preparing for one of the most significant battles of the Desert War, was putting his efforts into his 'Eastern and Western Magic Show at the Empire Cinema. Two and a half hours of MUSIC, MIRTH, MYSTERY which opened on September 7th, 1942.

Fisher has falsified Maskelyne's role at El Alamein.

Ayrton's contribution deserves greater acknowledgement.

Ayrton was unable to compile a definitive account of the camouflage war because he never survived the campaign. He died in tragic wasteful circumstances in 1943, after contracting meningitis.

Copyright© Richard Stokes 2005