

LIGHT MY FIRE

A key to the Maryut mystery may lie with Captain R. Morrison who was sent out as a camouflage officer to Egypt on the same boat as Maskelyne. He was Maskelyne's friend as well as his colleague.

Roy J.E. Morrison is listed as stage manager in a surviving program (February 1941) of the onboard pantomime, Aladdin. Morrison has autographed the program next to his printed name. The handwritten letters, 'GIPPO' have also been added.

The Natal Daily News, Feb 13th 1941 has a photograph of Morrison standing next to the Mayor of Durban and Jasper Maskelyne. The caption runs: *famous illusionist shows how to make handgrenades disappear.*

Morrison's name surprisingly does not appear in *Magic-Top Secret* or *The War Magician*, but does appear in Jasper's screenplay notes. Maskelyne says Morrison was born in Egypt (hence the nickname Gippo) and spoke several languages.

Trevelyan in his memoirs also mentions an officer named Morrison who lives in Alexandria with his wife. Morrison is "*the local camouflage king*". In April 1942, Trevelyan visited Alexandria and drove around the city "*ostensibly to visit one or two camouflage jobs but actually to visit the sites mentioned in E.M. Forster's Guide to Alexandria ... We discover where the Pharos stood ...*" The following day, Trevelyan and Morrison flew over the city to examine bomb damage.

Archival lists confirm that by July 1941 Morrison was a Staff Lieutenant attached to the Alexandria area. In October 1941 Morrison was promoted to GSO III. In February 1942 he was still based in Alexandria.

This information is consistent with Trevelyan's account.

In contrast, Maskelyne does not appear on the same lists. His name only appears on the April 1941 list as Staff Lieutenant C.E.S. (Camouflage Experimental Section).

Maskelyne's service record reveals that after his Experimental Section was closed down he served only briefly in the Camouflage Training and Development Centre (September 10th to November 3rd 1941) before being transferred to HQ, Cairo. This probably ties in with Maskelyne moving to Entertainment and Welfare (Preparing Christmas shows for the troops?)

From September 1941, the newly arrived South African 85th Camouflage Company began taking over the Helwan workshops. They were to design most of the dummies, decoys and test models used by the British Army throughout the rest of the campaign. Maskelyne's role was rapidly marginalized.

Let me suggest a new theory: A decoy site near Maryut Lake may have been developed in early 1942 and was one of several sites around Alexandria inspired by Major J. Hutton. At this time, Maskelyne had transferred to entertainment duties and was less involved in camouflage. Maskelyne had indirect knowledge of the Alexandrian projects because his friend Morrison supervised them. Maskelyne may have even visited a site near Maryut Lake, but was not the instigator of this project.

The appendix in the secret wartime camouflage report names the general locations of the 44 Middle East fire decoy sites, though does not give precise map references. 10 were planned for Alexandria, the highest concentration anywhere in Egypt.

Two more were planned for Amiriya, an important airbase southwest of the city. An additional QF was earmarked for Aboukir (only 14.5 miles north-east of Alexandria along the coast) and another was built further east to protect a significant airbase by the shores of Lake Idku. This airbase housed a squadron of nightfighter Hurricanes protecting Alexandria Harbour.

A fire decoy site was also planned for Helwan and another for Abbassia. Maskelyne was closely associated with these two military supply bases. He would probably have been aware of these local QF sites as well as the Alexandrian ones.

21 QFs were built along the Suez Canal.

The appendix also says the QF sites were of a comparable standard to the U.K. sites: "*When, in January, 1942, an Air Ministry Decoy Fire expert arrived with information about U.K. technique, it was found that progress in ME had been in most important technical respects parallel with U.K. and that there was not much else that could be recommended.*"

QF decoy sites were not as sophisticated as Starfish sites, but still consumed resources: *“Each fire area, if it is to be successful as deception, requires many tons of material and considerable labour and expense.”*

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Where would you place a decoy site around Alexandria?

A QF too close to the eastern side of the city (along the coast which stretches in a north-easterly direction) might endanger the civilian population.

A QF on the western side of the city (where the coast continues in a south-westerly direction) might make more sense. Firstly, it would avoid civilian centres. Secondly, it would present a more tempting target for enemy bombers stationed in North Africa. These bombers were more likely to approach Alexandria along the coastline from the west.

Why not choose a site immediately west of El Agami Fort on the Mediterranean coastline? It is approximately twelve miles west of Alexandria and is the only promontory for many miles. And there is a stone lighthouse there. This would be my favourite choice.

By mid-1941 German bombers stationed in the Aegean at Rhodes posed a more menacing threat to Alexandria. Their flight-path was significantly shorter. These bombers would fly in from a north by northwest direction directly across the Mediterranean.

Some of these aircraft might make navigational errors and intersect with the coastline too far to the east of Alexandria. So a second decoy site, away from the city, further to the east, might still be of value.

Another possibility is an overshoot decoy. If a bomber coming in directly over the Mediterranean overshoot its target, it would find itself over the wide expanses of Lake Maryut. A decoy fire site on the southerly side of the Lake could be of some value. A decoy site on the north side of the lake might be too close to important industrial and rail centres.

There are further clues in Maskelyne’s film treatment notes (May 1967): *“this was a normal camouflage-deception idea—I had a control room in the Pharos at Alexandria and to mislead German and Italian raiders I had a remote control system for igniting fires in Lake Meyrut (sic), near Alexandria so that bomber pilots could think that they had hit Alexandria installations.”*

The reference to the Pharos is unclear. It could mean the main Western harbour lighthouse, Grande Faro di Ras-el-Tir, built in the nineteenth century.

Pharos might also be a generic term for any lighthouse.

Maskelyne, in this snippet, accurately refers to Maryut as a Lake, not a Bay, which suggests familiarity. By describing the scheme as *“a normal camouflage-deception idea”*, he appears to be conceding that the decoy site was nothing exceptional. These film notes are more consistent with a plain QF site, rather than with an elaborate dummy harbour that combined QF and QL features.

My theory is that Maskelyne was not averse to taking credit for other people’s work. He was probably aware of decoy installations built around Alexandria, Helwan, Amiriya, and Abbassia in 1942. After the war, he passed on incomplete and second hand information to Frank Stuart, his ghost writer.

Stuart, unfamiliar with overseas geography and indifferent to chronology, produced an even more exaggerated and inaccurate version.

Somehow, the modest fire decoy sites scattered around Alexandria in 1942 morphed into the miraculous replica harbour built in May/June 1941.

In mid-1941 Maskelyne did not have the time or the resources to construct such an ambitious site. As explained previously, he was still stationed at Abbassia and was preoccupied with sunshields.

Chapter IV of *Magic-Top Secret*, which contains melodramatic accounts of the Maryut Bay and Suez Canal schemes, is a narrative confidence trick.

Maskelyne authorized this dubious material but did not author it. The ghost writer, specialising in imaginative ‘autobiography’, enhanced these minor projects beyond recognition.

The Alexandrian spectacle, the greatest illusion in magical history, was nothing more than a set of glorified bonfires.

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

Maskelyne in his film correspondence (December 1966) refers to the '*Phoenician Lighthouse*' at Alexandria and says it was "*less than 100 feet high.*"

"Originally used by Egyptians using concave polished copper reflectors to set fire to sails of invading ships".

The original account in *Magic-Top Secret* was aware that the ancient lighthouse was no longer standing. Maskelyne twenty years later gets the fundamentals wrong. The ancient lighthouse, probably 400 foot high, was seriously damaged by earthquakes in the fourteenth century. It was built on the Eastern Harbour, not the Western Harbour. A medieval fort now covers its foundations. Haag also advised me that the adjective Phoenician makes no sense. There were no Phoenician lighthouses in Egypt.

Maskelyne probably meant the nineteenth century Grande Faro Lighthouse in the Western Harbour.

"From it one could get clear views down the canal to Maryut bay."

Maskelyne must surely mean the Mahmoudia Canal which snakes its way south from the Western Harbour and turns east alongside the railways lines and Maryut Lake.

"I had a series of switches connected by land line to dummy fires. During a raid at night on Alexandria I could, when enemy dropped a stick of bombs on Alex, get fires going in the false area. Enemy thinking they had hit something worth while (surrounding area was sand or water) the rest of raiding force would drop bombs quite happily and uselessly on the false area. I would work my switches and get a really good effect going."

It is unlikely that Maskelyne could have worked any decoy fires by landline from where the Grande Faro is situated. Remote control technology was primitive in 1941/1942. It would not have been easy to set up a connecting cable from the lighthouse to Maryut Lake because the harbour waters were in the way. This project would have required a special submarine cable.

The captured German map denotes a second lighthouse across the Western Harbour at the Quais des Charbons. This is closer to Maryut Lake and would also give a clear view of the Mahmoudia Canal. A control site here would still require a lengthy landline cable.

The original account in *Magic-Top Secret* claims the explosive pyrotechnics were activated from the top of the lighthouse: "*the men in the Pharos pressed their buttons and blew up the faked buildings and ships.*" It does not claim that Maskelyne was controlling the show from the lighthouse, as Fisher claims.

Either lighthouse, preferably with a telephone link, might have been used as an observation post, but not as a control post.

The standard procedure was to build a reinforced control shelter at ground level close to the decoy, usually within 400 to 600 yards. Even at this short distance the cabling was extensive, complicated and likely to break down.

Maskelyne's description of his fire decoy site lacks credibility.