

Poof! What Happened to the Suez Canal?

by Dennis Payton Knight

He is real enough to have a page in Wikipedia, and he may very well have had the magic to take down Adolph Hitler. I have found several articles that treat this story with varying degrees of skepticism, but the website MagicTricks.com tells it for people who believe in magic. Magic is illusion, and illusion is magical, so, for the purpose of this essay, let us be children again and believe the lady has been dramatically bifurcated without a drop of blood on the saw.

Jasper Maskelyne was a dapper, mustachioed British stage magician who wrote a book on his art in 1937. In 1938, a Pathé newsreel was made of his wizardry that depicted him, among other tricks, eating, one-by-one, a boxful of razor blades. At the onset of World War II, he volunteered and became part of a special unit focused on Egypt. With his knowledge of illusion, he is said to have designed systems to make tanks invisible from the air, hide whole buildings full of ammunition, and even make cities vanish and reappear miles away.

Assigned to a special force for subterfuge and counterintelligence, Maskelyne assembled a team of 14 that included an architect, art restorer, carpenter, chemist, electrical engineer, electrician, painter and stage-set builder, and dubbed it the "Magic Gang." They used painted canvas and plywood to make jeeps look like tanks, and make tanks look like trucks. They created illusions of whole armies and huge battleships. The largest illusion was to conceal all of Alexandria and the Suez Canal to misdirect German bombers.

In 1942 the Magic Gang was tasked to make Field Marshal Rommel think the British were planning an attack from the south. To carry it off, the team created 2,000 fake tanks with convincing pyrotechnics to dramatize the illusion, while in the north, a thousand tanks were disguised to look like trucks. They created a fake railway line, fake radio communications, fake sounds of construction, even a fake water pipeline that was deliberately made to appear it would never be finished, giving Hitler the false satisfaction of gross Allied incompetence. Sleight of hand at its best.

The Magic Gang eventually disbanded and, although Winston Churchill praised his efforts, Maskelyne did not receive the world's standing ovation he thought he so deserved. He retired to Kenya, gave driving instructions and magic lessons, or maybe integrated the two disciplines, and wrote a book on his exploits, "The War Magician."

In 2003, director Peter Weir and actor Tom Cruise were working on a film based on the war wizardry of life of Jasper Maskelyne, but it was dropped after large sums of money were spent in pre-production when it became apparent the illusions described in his book were mostly grand illusions about pulling off grand illusions.

But who knows? The war ended, Hitler lost, and the pretty lady is back together and dancing again. For a magic show, what could be better? Poof!