

THE ILLUSIONIST

The True Story of the Man Who Fooled Hitler

ROBERT HUTTON

W&N
WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON

Prologue

Cairo, 1 July 1942

The smell of burning paper was everywhere. Smoke hung in low clouds over the Nile, drifting there from the chic quarter of the city where the British government and military had made their home. In the grounds of the embassy and General Headquarters, diplomats and soldiers shovelled files onto bonfires, while gardeners poked the pyres with rakes to feed the flames. Now and then a document would get caught in a draught and fly up, intact, with the smoke, out over the walls and into the streets beyond, still clearly displaying whatever secrets its owners had hoped to destroy.

From the buildings moved a steady stream of men and women carrying trays and bags of papers to be burned, the smoke stinging their eyes and getting into their hair and clothes, which already stank of sweat from the heat of an Egyptian afternoon in high summer. They made the occasional joke, affecting unconcern, but there was no disguising the seriousness of their purpose, for there was much to do and no one knew how much time they had to do it.

In the streets beyond, there were queues outside banks and crowds inside, as people fought to get their money out. It was the same at the railway station, where they were trying to get themselves or their families out. Some wanted to get their affairs in order first, hoping to sell their businesses or their homes for whatever cash they could raise. Others, including those who had arrived recently in the city as refugees, knew that the most important thing about escaping an advancing army is to flee while you can. People piled into cars, tying mattresses onto the roofs in the desperate hope they would provide some protection from falling debris.

This was panic. Rommel was coming.

For two years the Allied and Axis armies had been chasing each other back and forth across the deserts of North Africa. At

times, each side had seemed on the point of victory, only to have it snatched away. Now, though, the result seemed certain. The maverick German commander had swept past the forces that were supposed to stop him, seized the port of Tobruk and rolled over the Egyptian border.

By now, Rommel had become an almost mythic figure to the troops of both sides: fearless, a master tactician, unstoppable, unbeatable, everywhere at once and apparently better informed about his opponents than their own commanders. The Allies had no one to match him, and they knew it.

And he was only hours away. Between him and the city exhausted soldiers gathered from across the British Empire were dug into the sand, preparing to make a final desperate stand in the desert, far from their homes. But what chance did they have of holding him back when their better-prepared and better-equipped comrades had already failed?

Back in Cairo, in a courtyard behind a block of flats a little way away from the embassy, a small team of men and women were holding their own bonfire of paperwork. Overseeing them, telling them which files to keep and which to burn, was a small man in his early forties with a smooth oval face, a high forehead, and a pipe clamped between his teeth.

While others were falling apart, this chap – the shoulders on his uniform revealed him to be a colonel – was calm. They were preparing to flee, but he was getting ready to stay. Destruction of records was only one of the things on his mind. In his office inside, there were maps spread on his desk, and as a motley collection of figures made their way in and out, he took reports, gave orders and made offers. He was blinking incessantly, but not from the smoke or nerves, that was just his way. He was currently conducting simultaneous negotiations with both the police and the local crime syndicates. He had people out in the city organising disguises and hideouts. If the Germans were going to occupy Egypt, he was going to make their lives hell.

There are people who only become their full selves in war, when the normal rules of civilised life are suspended. Some simply relish the chance to kill. But for others war offers the opportunity to become a sort of respectable scoundrel, doing things no gentleman would usually consider, but with official approval. A pirate, if you

like, in the service of your country. Dudley Clarke was one of those men.

All around him was chaos, and he was having the time of his life.

If you had asked a British officer in Cairo in 1942 to point Colonel Clarke out to you in the bar of Shepherd's, the hotel that was one of the hubs of life for Cairo's military smart set, they would have been able to. He was a well-known figure in the city's wartime society, always ready with a cocktail and a story. But if you'd asked what it was that he did, you would have had less success. Those who knew didn't tell, and almost no one really did know. It was something hush-hush, working for the commander-in-chief.

The mystery persisted for the rest of his life. When Clarke died in 1974, *The Times* carried a two-paragraph obituary, describing him as 'a soldier of originality and independence', but not explaining how these qualities had manifested themselves, or what part he had played in the world war in which he rose to the rank of brigadier.

Neither does Clarke appear much in histories of the war, even those dealing with campaigns and operations with which he was intimately involved. When he does, it is generally a passing reference. He sometimes pops up in memoirs, in the background in some scene of great moment, but even then the authors often seem faintly baffled about his presence.

He enjoyed a brief moment of celebrity in 2013, when files were released dealing with his 1941 arrest in Madrid – an episode that might have cost him his career – but those reports too were vague about what his job had actually been. He had another sudden moment of prominence at the end of 2022, when he was portrayed by Dominic West as a louche spy in a Chanel dress in the BBC drama *SAS: Rogue Heroes*. Though the series is based in fact, it largely fictionalised Clarke. That's fair enough: he was a man to whom stories attached themselves.

But if Clarke was obscure, his commanders had a keen sense of his value. 'He is irreplaceable,' wrote General Harold Alexander, then commanding Allied forces in North Africa, in 1943. 'His mental ingenuity, balance, foresight, tact, character and remarkable personality have achieved results which have contributed more to the successful operations in the Middle East than probably any other officer of his rank.'

Others agreed. ‘By his outstanding intelligence, professional skill, energy and grasp of the many complex problems he has dealt with he has contributed in an unusual degree to the success of Allied campaigns,’ read a citation for the US Legion of Merit signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

What was that work? The short answer is ‘deception’. But that is a little like saying that Robert Oppenheimer worked on bombing. Throughout history, military commanders have sought to mislead their opponents. Dudley Clarke set out to do it on a scale no one had imagined before. Even afterwards, almost no one understood the scale of his achievement.

Clarke thought of himself as developing a new kind of weapon. It was a weapon that helped to deliver victory but it also saved lives, hundreds of thousands of them.

Most unusually for a weapon, it saved the lives of enemy soldiers as well. There are many Germans alive today whose grandfathers owed their survival of the war to this eccentric English soldier.

The success of this weapon depended on secrecy. Very few people knew what Clarke was up to. Even the commanders who were cleared to know about his work struggled to understand it. After the war, he was forbidden from talking about it. Others took credit instead, with stories that were at best exaggerated, and often fictitious.

In recent decades, the opening up of secret wartime files has revealed the scale of the Allied deception operations ahead of D-Day, and the use of double agents to plant false information in Berlin. What has generally been missed is that there was nothing done in London in 1944 that hadn’t been done first in Cairo by 1942. The men who worked on the Normandy landings were Clarke’s disciples, trained by him and using techniques he had invented, tested and refined.

This is the story of how Clarke conceived and built his weapon. Its sources include Clarke’s private papers and those of some of his colleagues, but the main one is the files of his team, now open at Britain’s National Archives in Kew.

There is no shortage of documentation around Clarke. His own writings include two volumes of personal memoirs, a history and a novel. His papers contain letters and diaries. All these words reveal him to be an entertaining writer who knew how to tell a tale, but also one practised at deflecting unwanted attention and directing the

audience's eyes elsewhere. Of one of the most critical moments of his own war, he wrote not a word that I can find. He is an easy man to like but, at the deepest level, a difficult man to know.

And so there are parts of Clarke's story that remain mysterious, hidden even from those closest to him. But it is a good story. Clarke loved good stories.