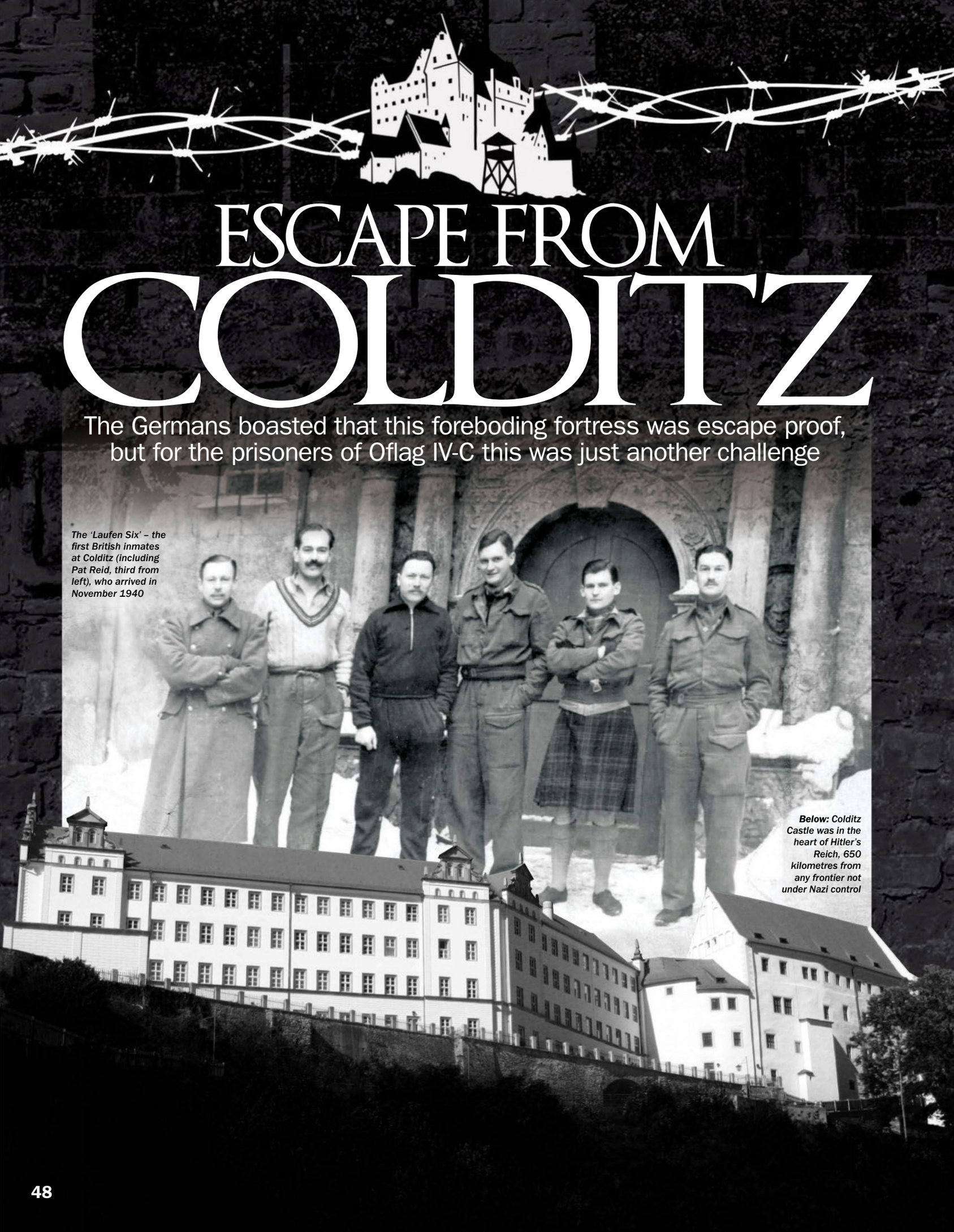
ESCAPE FROM COLDITZ

The Germans boasted that this foreboding fortress was escape proof, but for the prisoners of Oflag IV-C this was just another challenge



The 'Laufen Six' – the first British inmates at Colditz (including Pat Reid, third from left), who arrived in November 1940

***Below:** Colditz Castle was in the heart of Hitler's Reich, 650 kilometres from any frontier not under Nazi control*

The men who found themselves at Colditz Castle, or Oflag IV-C, came from varied backgrounds and had vastly different experiences of the war, but they all had at least one thing in common: the Germans viewed them as troublemakers.

This may have been because of (often repeated) escape attempts from other prison camps, or political views that classified them as Deutschfeindlich (anti-German). Whatever the reason, they were sent to Colditz, a sonderlager, or high-security prison, where it was assumed that their war would be over.

There was one other factor linking the prisoners of Colditz: they were all officers. Under the terms of the 1929 Geneva Convention, captured officers could not be made to do work; other ranks could and so found themselves in stalags. Although an apparent perk of being an officer, the lack of work was one of the biggest problems faced by the men at Colditz.

Keeping themselves occupied, mentally and physically, was one of their prime concerns, and for most this was a problem that stretched out over years, because although the very name conjures images of daring escapes and intrepid adventures, very few inmates would ever escape from Colditz.

United nations

The first British prisoners, six officers who had previously escaped from Laufen prison camp in Bavaria, arrived at Colditz in November 1940. They were greeted by 140 Polish officers (who had already been there for a week) as well as a handful of Canadians.

The majority of inmates arrived that year, caught in the German Blitzkrieg that had opened the war, but throughout the conflict a trickle of new arrivals brought new faces, new nationalities and new ideas. It was the accepted duty of an officer to try to escape, and many of the men thought of little else.

Colditz had originally been an 11th-century fortress, but had been extended and modified extensively over the years, most notably on the orders of Augustus the Strong at the end of the 17th century. It was a complex warren of staircases, corridors and rooms, which offered huge scope for the inmates to move around undetected, probing for weak spots.

The castle's vulnerability was that it had not been designed to keep people in, but rather to keep them out. It had only been adopted as a prison in 1933 (to lock up communists and other 'undesirables), although it had previously been used as an insane asylum.

Life in Colditz could be stupefyingly dull, so much so that several inmates had nervous breakdowns or actually went insane after years of captivity. To pass the time, the men exercised in their small courtyard or in the more generous exercise area outside the castle walls. In August 1941, the prisoners staged their own 'Olympic Games' (the British forgot all about it and missed the opening ceremony, then failed to win a single medal). A theatre was also put to good use, with regular productions that even the Germans attended (often as bored as the inmates they were guarding).

Relations between the different nationalities could sometimes be strained. All tended to be united, however, in their love of teasing the guards. Known as 'goon-baiting', this took different forms, but was always intended to push the guards to the edge of their patience without actually provoking violence. The French used wit, the British favoured childish pranks (including water bombs), while the Poles displayed more open hostility, partly because the guards were more contemptuous of them as their country had officially disappeared following the German invasion.

Letters from home were a huge comfort for the men in Colditz, although they were often delivered many months after they had been sent (and these delays were sometimes intentional, as the Germans got their own back for the goon-baiting).

Also welcome were the regular Red Cross parcels. The food in these parcels became a literal lifeline for the prisoners as the rations provided by the Germans were appalling. Many of the men reckoned that they might actually have starved had they not received their weekly parcels, and preparing elaborate meals (within reason, of course) became a major preoccupation for the men.

Above: Dutch POWs gather in the castle courtyard for a photo, March 1942,

The main way of passing the time, however, was the dreaming up and implementation of escape plans. These could be complex affairs or spur-of-the-moment attempts (known as 'snap escapes'). Focusing on escaping was thought to be so important that the wildly ambitious plan to build a working glider, late in the war, was given the green light as much to keep the men working happily as to provide a genuine means of escape. The glider was still awaiting its first flight when American soldiers arrived in April 1945.

Only 32 men escaped after being imprisoned in Colditz, and many of those made their bids for freedom when outside the castle for various reasons. Only 15 men are credited with full home runs – successful escapes that started within the castle itself or its grounds. Colditz, for the most part, lived up to its reputation.

"IT WAS A COMPLEX WARREN OF STAIRCASES, CORRIDORS AND ROOMS, WHICH OFFERED HUGE SCOPE FOR THE INMATES TO MOVE AROUND UNDETECTED, PROBING FOR WEAK SPOTS"

Below: Ranking POWs of Yugoslav, Belgian, Polish (navy and army), British, French and Dutch armies, 1941.

Below: The 'Colditz Cock' was destroyed after the war, but a replica makes it clear how ambitious an undertaking this escape plan was

AN OFFICER'S DUTY

ANY CAPTURED OFFICER FELT IT WAS THEIR DUTY TO TRY AND ESCAPE – BUT ONLY A SELECT FEW ATTEMPTS WOULD SUCCEED

A THE HONEST GUARD FAILURE

NOT EVEN BRIBERY COULD ENSURE A SUCCESSFUL ESCAPE FROM COLDITZ

Of all the methods of escape, a tunnel is perhaps the most iconic, but the inmates at Colditz had uniformly bad luck when trying to dig their way to freedom. Before he was made 'escape officer' for the British, Pat Reid was part of an audacious plan to tunnel out of the canteen. It was to be a mass breakout, with 12 men ready to run for it – eight Brits and four Poles. Three months of hard work and meticulous preparation saw the men poised for their attempt on the night of 29 May 1941. Paperwork, disguises and maps were manufactured for the men, but the entire plan rested on the ability to bribe a single guard.

It was believed by the prisoners that this guard could be persuaded to look the other way for approximately 500 Reischmarks. It turned out to be a miscalculation, and on the night of the escape, Reid popped his head out of the tunnel to be greeted by a large party of guards. It was one of the greatest successes of the war for the German guards and a bitter disappointment for the 12 men who had dreamed of their freedom.

B DOUBLE DUTCH SUCCESS

NOBODY EXPECTED ESCAPE FROM THE CASTLE'S MODEL PRISONERS

The Dutch prisoners at Colditz were viewed with suspicion by the others, partly because they seemed to have no interest in escaping. Even the guards seemed to view them as harmless, but Colditz was about to get a shock.

On 16 August 1941, a roll-call revealed that four Dutch officers were missing. They had escaped in pairs, on 13 and 15 August. The plan had been ingenious. A manhole cover in the middle of the exercise area had got the Dutch escape officer, Machiel van den Heuvel, thinking. Using a boisterous rugby-style game as cover, two men were smuggled under the manhole and a fake bolt made of glass was used to refasten it. Under cover of darkness, the two Dutch officers then pushed up on the manhole cover, shattering the glass bolt and making their escape. The final part of the plan was to replace the original bolt and leave the Germans befuddled. The plan was enacted twice; the first two escapees were recaptured, but the second pair made it to freedom and became the first non-Frenchmen to beat Colditz.

C THE STUFFED MATTRESS FAILURE

THE FIRST BRITISH ESCAPE ATTEMPT CAME AGONISINGLY CLOSE TO SUCCESS

In May 1941, Lieutenant Peter Allan was chosen to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity to make a snap escape. While mattresses were being ferried out of the prisoners' quarters and loaded on to trucks, the British realised that a small man could be smuggled out inside one of them.

Peter Allan was chosen, not least because he had a passing resemblance to a member of the Hitler Youth, which had probably never been an advantage before. Allan's hair-raising escapades then included hitching a ride with a Gestapo officer, and after eight days he seemed to have scored an unlikely home run as he found his way into the American consulate in Vienna.

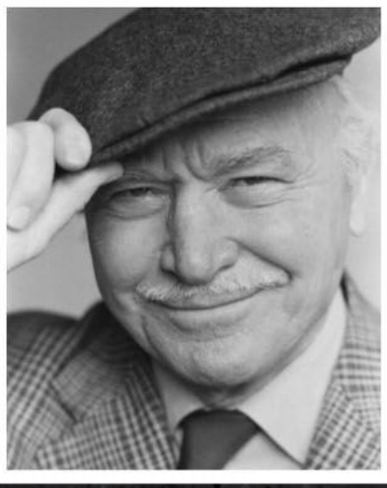
However, to Allan's dismay, the American consul refused to help and insisted that he left immediately, refusing even to give him money. Allan, by now exhausted, was forced to give himself up to the authorities and return to Colditz. Lack of planning (always a major problem with snap escapes) had proved his undoing.

D THE TIGHT SQUEEZE SUCCESS

IMPROVISATION WAS THE KEY TO THE MOST SUCCESSFUL BRITISH ESCAPE

One of the most successful escapes in the history of Colditz unfolded like a Sunday afternoon movie classic. The now former 'escape officer' Pat Reid headed a four-man British team that started their escape, on the night of 14 October 1942, in the POW kitchens. They had to navigate their way across the outer courtyard, where the shadow of a patrolling guard was etched into the floodlights on the ground. An elaborate scheme using the prisoners' orchestra was meant to alert the escapees when the guard had his back to them (the conductor, watching through a window, would instruct the orchestra to stop at the right moment), but this part of the plan failed and the men simply had to time their runs as best they could.

Finding their way into a cellar in the German garrison building, they then squeezed through an impossibly small vent to get out on the other side. Using ropes to descend three separate terraces, they finally split into pairs and headed for Switzerland, dressed in civilian clothes and carrying suitcases. All four men made it out, confirming the escape as the greatest single operation mounted by the British POWs at Colditz.



Left: Former British 'escape officer' Pat Reid in pictured in January 1985

E LEBRUN'S LEAP SUCCESS

THE MOST FAMOUS COLDITZ ESCAPE WAS ALSO THE SIMPLEST

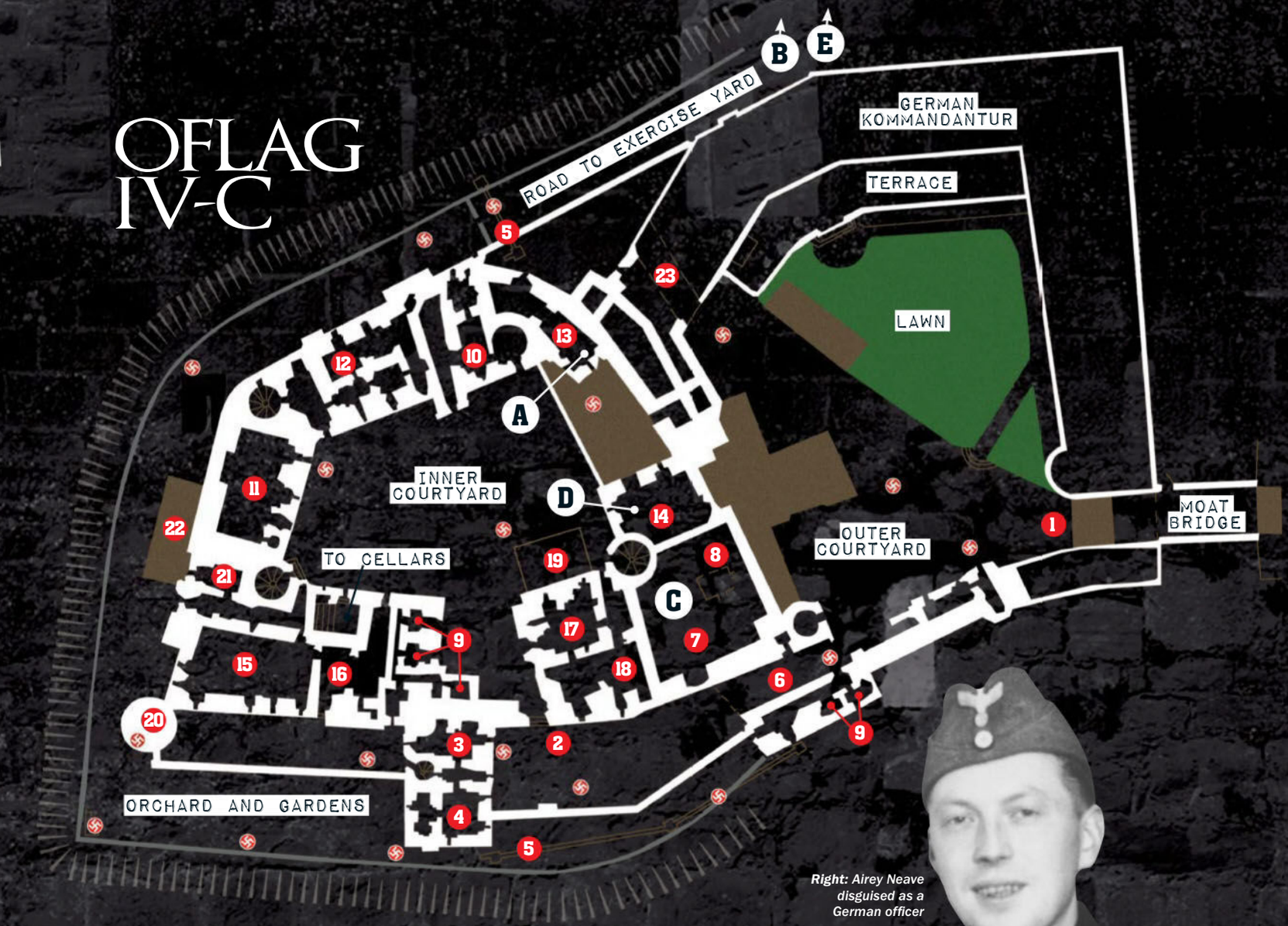
Although several escape attempts managed to get men outside the castle confines, subsequent recaptures of the fugitives meant that only two home runs had been scored when Pierre Mairesse Lebrun hatched the most daring and death-defying attempt ever seen at Colditz.

The bare bones of the plan sounded ridiculously simple – Lebrun would vault over the wire fence of the exercise enclosure with the help of a comrade, Lieutenant Odry. This first part fraught with danger and Lebrun knew that he would be a sitting duck for the guards while he climbed the park wall that was his next obstacle.

With chilling bravery, Lebrun zigzagged away from the guards, and then ran back and forth along the wall like a target in a fairground shooting gallery, allowing the guards to fire at him until they had emptied their magazines, whereupon he could climb the wall in safety. Lebrun covered the bulk of his journey to Switzerland on a stolen bicycle. The first three successful escape attempts had all involved single French officers. All the other nations were yet to open their accounts.

"LEBRUN ZIGZAGGED AWAY FROM THE GUARDS, AND THEN RAN BACK AND FORTH ALONG THE WALL LIKE A TARGET IN A FAIRGROUND SHOOTING GALLERY, ALLOWING THE GUARDS TO FIRE AT HIM UNTIL THEY HAD EMPTIED THEIR MAGAZINES"

OFLAG IV-C



KEY

01 MAIN GATE
02 ENTRANCE GATE
03 GUARD HOUSE
04 GUARD HOUSE
05 RAISED CATWALK
06 GERMAN QUARTERS
07 SENIOR OFFICERS' QUARTERS
08 ORDERLIES' QUARTERS
09 SOLITARY CONFINEMENT
10 PROMINENTE CELLS
11 CHAPEL
12 DENTIST
13 CANTEEN
14 PRISONERS' KITCHEN
15 SICK WARD
16 PARCELS OFFICE
17 SHOWER BATHS
18 THEATRE
19 DELOUSING SHED
20 ROUND TOWER
21 OFFICE
22 CLOTHES STORE
23 ARCHWAY
SENTRY

Right: Airey Neave disguised as a German officer

SUCCESS

THE BRITS OPEN THEIR ACCOUNT

A PLAY PROVIDED COVER FOR THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL BRITISH ESCAPE

Nobody felt the pressure to escape more keenly than the British, who had endured repeated failures while watching the French, Dutch and Poles find ways out. A successful escape was badly needed for morale, and a theatre production in January 1942 provided it.

Airey Neave and Dutch officer Tony Luteyn were the two-man team prepared for the attempt. The pair disappeared down a camouflaged trapdoor, accompanied by the British 'escape officer' Pat Reid.

As always, a healthy slice of luck was needed – at one stage the trio had to walk past an open door where a German guard sat with his back to them – but preparation was also important. Luteyn spoke German like a native, so the escapees dressed in home-made German uniforms (risking the firing squad if they were caught) and calmly walked out of Colditz as a pair of German officers, even pausing at one point to upbraid a guard for failing to salute them as they passed.

Two days later, the duo safely crossed the border into Switzerland. The Brits - with Dutch help - had chalked up their first win.

OFFIZIERSLAGER IV-C

THE LAYOUT OF COLDITZ OFFERED PERIL AND OPPORTUNITY IN EQUAL MEASURE, AS THE PRISONERS SOON FOUND OUT

'COLDITZ COCK'

The most imaginative escape plan of all sadly never reached fruition – the two-seat glider known as the 'Colditz Cock' was assembled above the Chapel with the help of a book, *Aircraft Design*, from the Colditz library. Colditz was liberated by the Americans before the glider was ready to fly.

INNER COURTYARD

Unless they were escorted to the exterior exercise areas, this was where the prisoners got the bulk of their physical activity and it could be a chaotic place with hundreds of prisoners engaged in various games. It was also the site of the regular, monotonous roll calls, or 'appells'.

THE 'PROMINENTES'

Colditz was also home to several 'VIP' prisoners (including Giles Romilly, Winston Churchill's nephew) who the Nazis believed could be valuable bargaining chips if the war went badly. They were housed in their own section of the castle.

CLOCK TOWER

The French tunnel known as 'Le Metro', which was intended to free as many as 200 men, started in the clock tower, moving down vertically through 85 feet. It then moved under the floor of the chapel. Digging noises from the tunnelling could frequently be heard, much to the chagrin of the guards.

RADIO

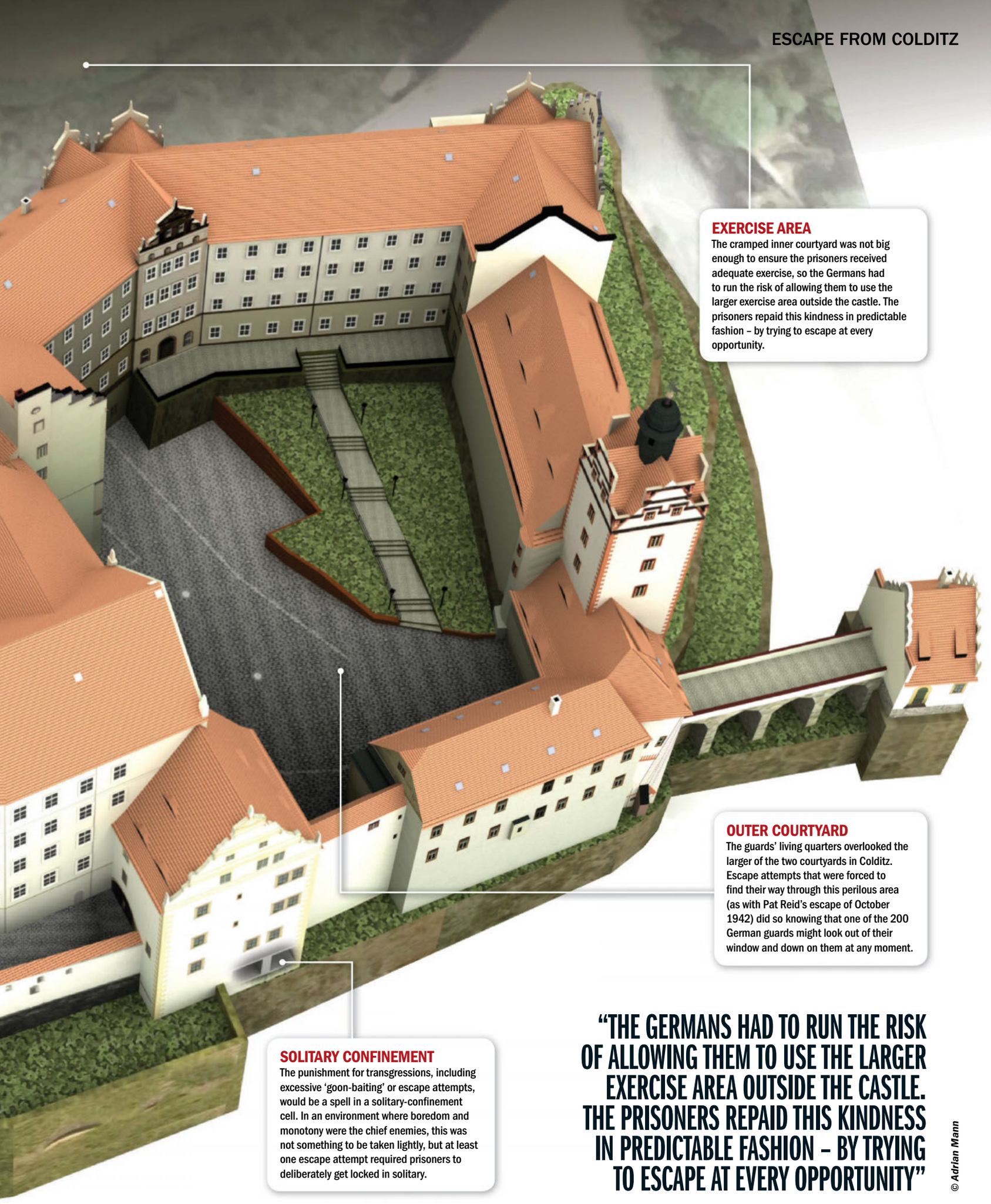
In the attic of the Kellerhaus building, the prisoners of Colditz housed one of their most closely guarded secrets – a radio that enabled them to listen to news broadcasts (and the occasional tennis match from Wimbledon) without the guards suspecting a thing. Only two men at a time were allowed to access the radio.

PARCELS OFFICE

Red Cross parcels were essential for the prisoners' physical and mental wellbeing and they were wary of taking any chances to jeopardise these precious deliveries. Parcels from home could be used to smuggle in maps, tools and information for prospective escape attempts.

THEATRE

This was valued by both the prisoners and their German guards as a source of diversion and entertainment, but the inmates were also constantly looking for possible escape routes. The theatre granted the British their first two escapes in January 1942.



EXERCISE AREA
The cramped inner courtyard was not big enough to ensure the prisoners received adequate exercise, so the Germans had to run the risk of allowing them to use the larger exercise area outside the castle. The prisoners repaid this kindness in predictable fashion – by trying to escape at every opportunity.

OUTER COURTYARD
The guards' living quarters overlooked the larger of the two courtyards in Colditz. Escape attempts that were forced to find their way through this perilous area (as with Pat Reid's escape of October 1942) did so knowing that one of the 200 German guards might look out of their window and down on them at any moment.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT
The punishment for transgressions, including excessive 'goon-baiting' or escape attempts, would be a spell in a solitary-confinement cell. In an environment where boredom and monotony were the chief enemies, this was not something to be taken lightly, but at least one escape attempt required prisoners to deliberately get locked in solitary.

"THE GERMANS HAD TO RUN THE RISK OF ALLOWING THEM TO USE THE LARGER EXERCISE AREA OUTSIDE THE CASTLE. THE PRISONERS REPAID THIS KINDNESS IN PREDICTABLE FASHION – BY TRYING TO ESCAPE AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY"

THE UNLOCKED DOOR SUCCESS

AFTER SEVERAL FAILURES, THE FIRST 'HOME RUN' WENT TO THE FRENCH

Four failed escape attempts had been made before the inmates of Colditz scored their first success. Two-man efforts had been the pattern until the French officer Alain Le Ray spotted a chance for a one-man 'snap escape'.

Le Ray had been playing a part in an elaborate tunnel escape plan, but he was eager to find a quicker way out of the castle. During regular spells of exercise outside, he spotted a building with an unlocked door. Le Ray realised that, if he timed his run perfectly on the walk back to the castle after exercise, he could bolt into the building while the nearest guard was out of view around a corner.

The simple plan worked, and on 11 April 1941, Good Friday, he found himself alone inside the building, stripping off his uniform to reveal civilian clothes underneath.

Following a number of train journeys and a hair-raising escape from a border patrol, an exhausted Le Ray made it across the Swiss border to freedom. He was the first man to escape from Colditz.

THE LOCKED CELLS FAILURE

GETTING OUT OF A CELL WAS NOT ENOUGH TO GUARANTEE A SUCCESSFUL ESCAPE

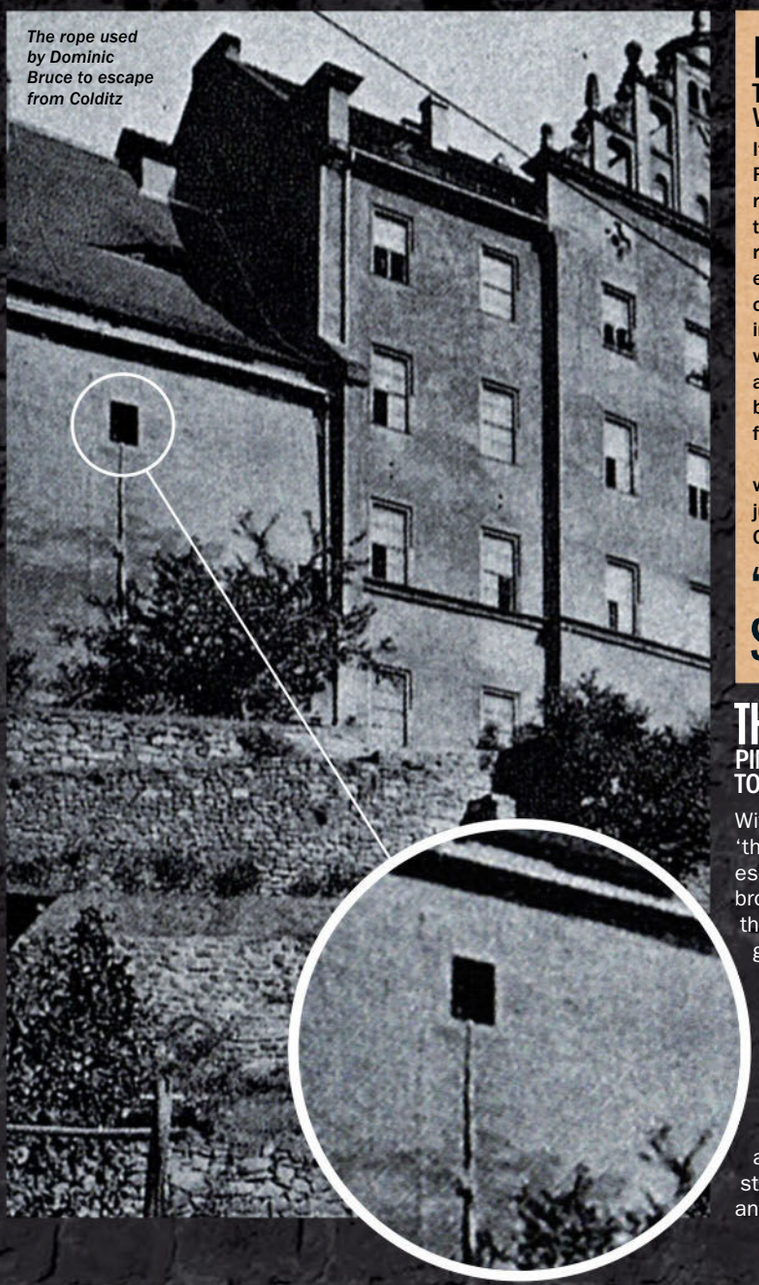
At the same time as Peter Allan was making his way to Vienna, Polish officers Miki Surmanowicz and Mietek Chmiel made their bid for freedom.

Surmanowicz and Chmiel were able to get themselves thrown into solitary confinement, where Surmanowicz used a lever (improvised from the furniture in his cell) to lift his cell door off its hinges. An expert lock-picker, he then found it easy to let his partner out of his cell and the pair locked their doors again before leaving.

The Poles then made their way along a four-inch ledge 40 feet off the ground and appeared to be on the verge of escape as they used a rope to climb 120 feet down the outside of the German guardhouse. At the last moment, however, a guard heard the sound of footfall on the wall outside and stuck his head out of a window in time to see the two would-be escapers.

The Germans were baffled as to how the Poles had escaped from their rooms without, apparently, opening the doors, but the gallant attempt was still a failure.

A prison cell in Colditz castle



The rope used by Dominic Bruce to escape from Colditz

LE METRO FAILURE

THE LARGEST ESCAPE EVER PLANNED CAME WITHIN TWO DAYS OF SUCCESS

If the combined British-Polish tunnel escape seemed ambitious, the French effort that started the same year was off the charts. The escape route started in the clock tower, 85 feet off the ground, and progressed through a wine cellar. Digging out of the cellar, which was accessed regularly by the guards, required a painstaking covering of tracks every evening, but the real work had only just begun. Originally hoping to be out by September 1941, the French ran into one problem after another, including oak beams, huge boulders and finally the seven foot-thick castle walls. The tunnel steadily grew and the French even rigged up lighting and an alarm system. The Germans were well aware that a tunnel was being built due to the almost ceaseless scraping noises, but they were unable to find where it was.

All of the incredible effort would have been worth it if the plan had worked: 200 French officers could have been sprung in one mad dash, but just two days before the new escape date of 17 January 1942, a surprise German inspection found the tunnel entrance and the plan was foiled.

"200 FRENCH OFFICERS COULD HAVE BEEN SPRUNG IN ONE MAD DASH"

THE MEDIUM-SIZED MAN FAILURE

PINT-SIZED DOMINIC BRUCE CAME WITHIN TOUCHING DISTANCE OF FREEDOM

With typical British humour, the diminutive Dominic Bruce was known as 'the medium-sized man', which made him the ideal candidate for a snap escape attempt in September 1942. A change of camp commandant brought a change of rules. The more severe newcomer insisted that the men give up much of their personal belongings, which were then gathered in boxes, including large Red Cross tea chests.

Seeing an opportunity to turn this petty gesture by the new commandant to their own advantage, the British managed to get Bruce into one of the chests. As the boxes were stored overnight within the German quarters, Bruce still had a lot of work to do, but his confidence was apparent in the jaunty message he scrawled on the chest before he left: "The air in Colditz no longer agrees with me. Farewell!"

Sadly, Bruce's confidence was misplaced. Despite making it as far as Danzig (covering part of the journey, in time-honoured fashion, on a stolen bicycle), his attempt to sneak onto a Swedish ship was detected and he was returned to Colditz.

THE COLDITZ VIPS

ALL INMATES AT COLDITZ WERE REMARKABLE IN THEIR OWN RIGHT, BUT SOME STOOD OUT EVEN AMONG THEIR ILLUSTRIOUS COMPANY

PIERRE MAIRESSE LEBRUN

THE GALLANT CAVALRYMAN

Lebrun had wasted no time on the outbreak of war, volunteering for dangerous missions and earning medals, including the Croix de Guerre, before his capture. As well as these noteworthy credentials, he also had an aristocratic air and was recognised as the smartest man in Colditz.

Lebrun made a big impression during his limited time at the castle – his elegance and cavalry-officer bearing made him an obvious leader among the French contingent. He had made a personal pledge that he would not remain captive for more than a year and he had already made one escape attempt (getting as far as the train station at Grossbothen before his luck ran out) when he hit on the idea of simply vaulting over the fence in the prisoners' exercise area.

Lebrun's sense of style extended to his leaving a note for the Germans, asking them to forward his personal effects. Commendably, they complied.

DAMIAEN VAN DOORNINCK

THE MASTER LOCKSMITH

Van Doorninck, with his long red beard, was something of a father figure at Colditz, not least because he was in his 40s and therefore considerably older than most of his fellow prisoners. He was also an educated man, who entertained himself (and his audiences) with lectures on subjects such as mathematics and cosmography. Not content with this, he repaired watches and was so good at it that even the guards brought their broken timepieces to him.

Van Doorninck's most telling contribution to life in Colditz, however, was his brilliance with locks. He invented a way of measuring the intricate workings of the cruciform locks used in Colditz, making it possible for him to manufacture keys to open any lock the prisoners needed to get through. Such was his importance, he refused to attempt to escape until he had trained someone else to measure the locks.

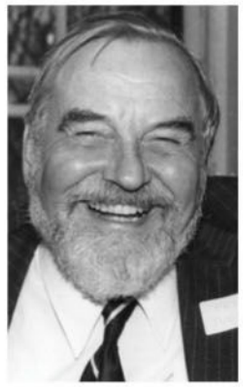
PAT REID

THE ESCAPE OFFICER

Reid was captured just outside Dunkirk and was among the first six British officers to be transferred to Colditz. Having already escaped from Laufen, Reid wasted little time in making his first attempt at Colditz, on 29 May 1941. It was a failure, and Reid soon found himself acting as the British 'escape officer', a crucial role by which the different nationalities (each with their own 'escape officer') co-ordinated escape attempts and made sure not to get in each other's way.

While 'escape officer', Reid was not allowed to attempt to escape himself, but his experience was invaluable in the planning of many schemes and it was necessary to get his permission before embarking on any plan.

Reid also attempted to send coded messages to his girlfriend, but she never understood what he was trying to say. He finally made it to freedom, after relinquishing his position as 'escape officer', in October 1942.



PETER TUNSTALL

THE MISCHIEVOUS PRANKSTER

Tunstall, often acting under orders from Douglas Bader, seemed to go out of his way to embody the British sense of mischief. He had been lectured by a veteran prison-breaker from World War I (Johnny Evans) and knew that if he couldn't escape, he must always be on the lookout for chances to create mayhem.

Tunstall's antics had a serious side as well, however. Creating havoc during roll-calls was the perfect way to disguise the fact that one or two officers were missing.

This tactic could not only be saved for occasions when someone had actually escaped, or the Germans would instantly realise what was going on. Tunstall was therefore trapped in the need to misbehave almost constantly.

Even the British eventually grew tired of Tunstall's steady stream of hijinks, and the Germans responded by putting him in solitary confinement for a combined total of 415 days, which was a record during the war.

DOUGLAS BADER

THE CELEBRITY

Bader was a larger-than-life character, famous before he even reached Colditz. After crashing in his Spitfire in August 1941 (the exact cause of his crash remains uncertain, and may have even been due to friendly fire), Bader wholeheartedly threw himself into his new duty – the need to escape from captivity, which inevitably saw him end up in Colditz. The Germans were in fact in awe of Bader's reputation and the guards reportedly saluted him when he arrived.

Bader never managed to escape from Colditz, but the Germans may well have wished he had. He was a perpetual nuisance and even exasperated the other British inmates.

As well as rubbing people up the wrong way, Bader also displayed a selfish streak, especially with regard to his medical orderly, Alec Ross. Selected for repatriation in 1943, Ross was due to go home until Bader intervened, wanting his personal 'lackey' to stay. Ross ended up staying imprisoned in Colditz for a further two years.