THE GREAT ESCAPE

By Jan Heitmann

The history of Air Force captivity in Germany began on September 3, 1939, the day war was declared in Europe, when an RAF officer was shot down on a reconnaissance mission over the North Sea. His opponent, who flew a German seaplane, landed alongside the floating wreck and took the pilot prisoner. During the remainder of the year, a few more aircrews were shot down and captured and, by the end of 1939, a total of 13 were housed in a castle near the city of Kassel.

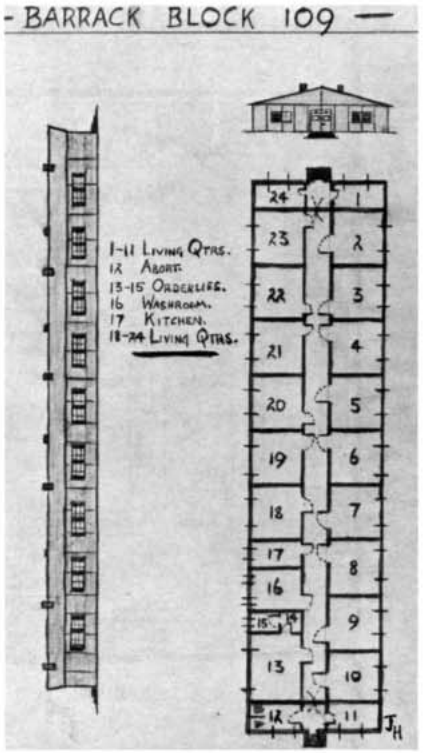
After the war, a myth grew up that, in these early days of the war, relations between the Germans and their air force prisoners had been one of great chivalry and that prison life in Luftwaffe PoW camps had been very comfortable. However, in practice, the life of an air force prisoner differed only little from that of the members of the other Services. The prisoners were housed in permanent brick buildings and were locked in cells, and prevented from any sort of communal life. It was not until the spring of 1940, that the permanent buildings were abandoned and the first wooden huts were built in small barbed wire enclosures.

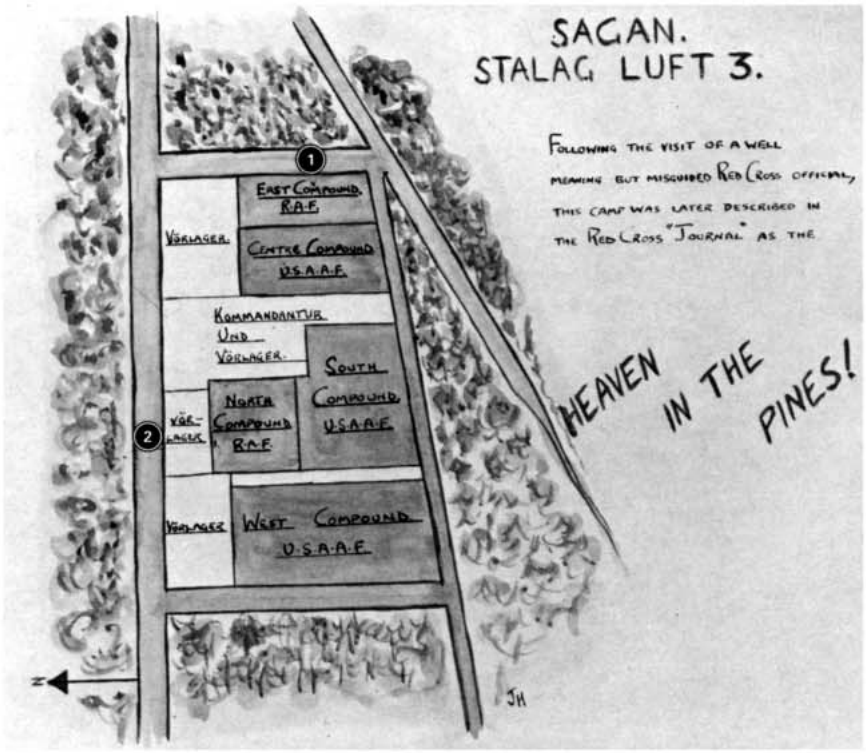
In April 1942, the Luftwaffe's most famous camp, Stalag Luft 3, was opened at Sagan in Lower Silesia, about 100 miles south-east of Berlin. Silesia is a historic region which is generally considered the basin of the upper and middle Oder river. Upper Silesia, the southern highland region bordering on the Sudetan mountains, was long second only to the Ruhr area as a major central-European military and political prize, largely because of its immense natural resources and industrial development. Frederick the Great battled the Habsburgs for control of Silesia from 1740 to 1763 and, at the end of the Seven Years' War, Prussia became ruler of the whole region. It remained in Prussian hands until 1919, when, under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, Upper Silesia, except for the extreme southern part, which became part of Czechoslovakia, was given to Poland. The opposition of Silesia's German population to live under foreign rule was so strong that a plebiscite under the League of Nations was held in 1921. The pro-German result prompted the Weimar Republic to demand the return of Upper Silesia. Poland, however, refused to surrender to the German demand. In the end, the League of Nations ruled on the matter and divided the area between the two claimants; the heavily industrialised southern section being awarded to Poland.

In 1942, it was intended to house all air force prisoners at Sagan and, by the end of that year, all but a few had been concentrated there. Sagan was the seat of a Duke of Courland, in the days when Courland was part of Russia, and the site of a battle where the Russians defeated Frederick the Great. During Napoleon's reign, Sagan came into the hands of a French family and a Duc de Sagan was still the owner of the château, which was built in French 18th century style, when war broke out in 1939. The Germans respected this title to ownership but requisitioned the property later in the war.

Around the château had grown up a small and rather uninteresting town, important only as a railway junction which provided railway connections to most parts of Germany and Eastern Europe. The surrounding country is flat, the horizon only broken by small woods. South of Sagan is a dense forest which runs unbroken for between 20 and 30 miles toward the Czechoslovakian border and spreads about the same distance east and west.

In June 1944, the Swiss Minister in Berlin was handed a Note in response to an enquiry he had made as the representative of the Protecting Power. This communication stated that 37 prisoners of British nationality, and 13 of other nationalities, who had escaped from Stalag Luft 3 had been shot while attempting to escape, and that urns containing their ashes had been returned to Sagan for burial. Those urns were interred within this memorial erected by the prisoners themselves in a secluded forest clearing outside the perimeter of the camp.





Stalag Luft 3 comprised several separate compounds, these sketches being made by John Hamilton who was quartered in Hut 109 in the North Compound. At first, each room was shared by six officers, but later this was increased to eight or ten. The East Compound (note that north is to the left) was the original Officers' Camp and was the scene of 'The Wooden Horse' escape [1] by Eric Williams (who also wrote the book of the same name), Oliver Philpot and Michael Codner in October 1943, and the North Compound that of 'The Great Escape' [2] in March 1944. (IWM)

Stalag Luft 3 was situated on the northern edge of this forest. A great clearing had been made in the trees and wooden huts had been built. Pre-fabricated and erected in sections, the huts were divided into rooms if meant for officers and divided in half if intended for NCOs. Each barrack hut measured about 160 feet by 40 feet, and contained a small kitchen in which tinned food could be heated and water boiled, and a primitive urinal, but there was neither running water nor drainage. The equipment never reached the standards the Germans themselves laid down and sanitation and drainage were poor. The floors, double-skinned as were the walls, were of wood laid on low piles about one foot clear of the ground. In the early months, a wooden skirting around the outside of the barracks closed this gap but was later removed because it enabled the prisoners to get under the floors without being seen.

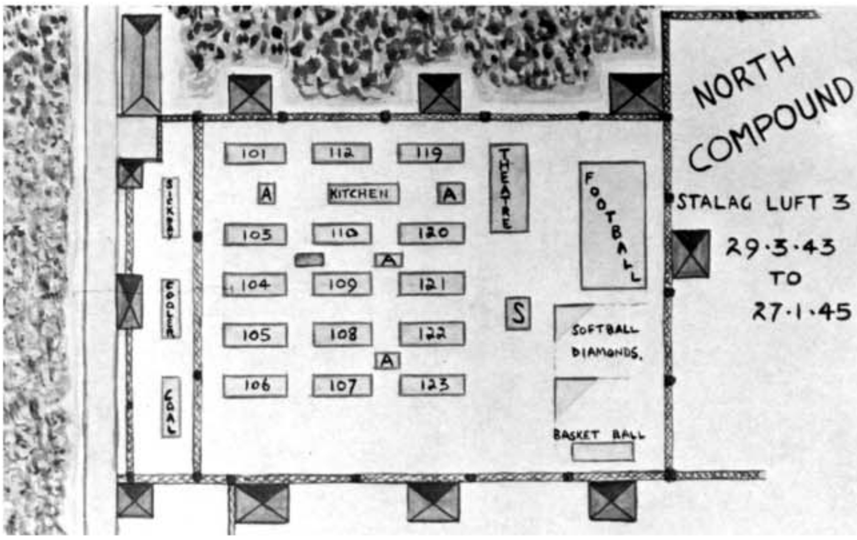
Into these barracks came air force prisoners from camps all over Germany. By the middle of the summer of 1942, there were more than 500 officers and 1,000 NCOs in what were known as the East and Centre Compounds. From its original two compounds, later housing 2,500 officers and NCOs, Stalag Luft 3 grew to six compounds, eventually housing some 10,000 officers and about 300 orderlies. The NCOs were evacuated in the summer of 1943 and thereafter had their separate history. When the numbers being shot down exceeded German expectations, other camps had soon to be built or re-opened. Stalag Luft 3, however, remained the chief camp for British and American air force officers until the evacuation in January 1945.

The defences of Stalag Luft 3 were quite usual and the German guards' sense of chivalry was governed mainly by circumstances. Many attempts to escape from the camp had taken place before the famous mass tunnel escape in March 1944. Proposals for tunnels came from almost every hut and, during the summer of 1942, at least 30 to 40 tunnels were begun from the various huts in the East Compound. However, all except one were unsuccessful, mainly due to the distance from the barracks to the wire, which was never less than 60 yards, and to the fact that all the entrances to the tunnels were underneath the barracks and only little effort was made to find new ways of disguising them. It was also nearly impossible to hide the great quantity of bright yellow sand which was excavated.

In the forest at Sagan, the sand under the topsoil went down to a depth of 78 feet before it reached water, but at a depth of between four and six feet there was an admixture of clay which was firm enough to allow tunnels to be driven through it without support. However, as ground microphones were already in operation, the prisoners had to dig below the layer of clay at a depth of 12 to 15 feet, and to shore up the tunnels with wood.

As one tunnel after another was discovered, the escape experts were forced to think again and to concentrate on ways and means of completing at least one or two tunnels and, in particular, on devising new and more entrances. One of the leading and most experienced experts in escape was the South African-born Squadron Leader Roger Bushell who had been exiled to Stalag Luft 3 after four previous escapes. Thick-set and of medium height, he was known as a flamboyant character. Bushell had been at Brazenose College, Oxford, in the early 'thirties, then became a barrister and joined No. 601 Squadron. As a pilot, he showed all

John Hamilton (standing, in the white shirt) with the occupants of rooms 6 and 7 of Hut 109 — a picture taken sometime in 1944. (IWM)



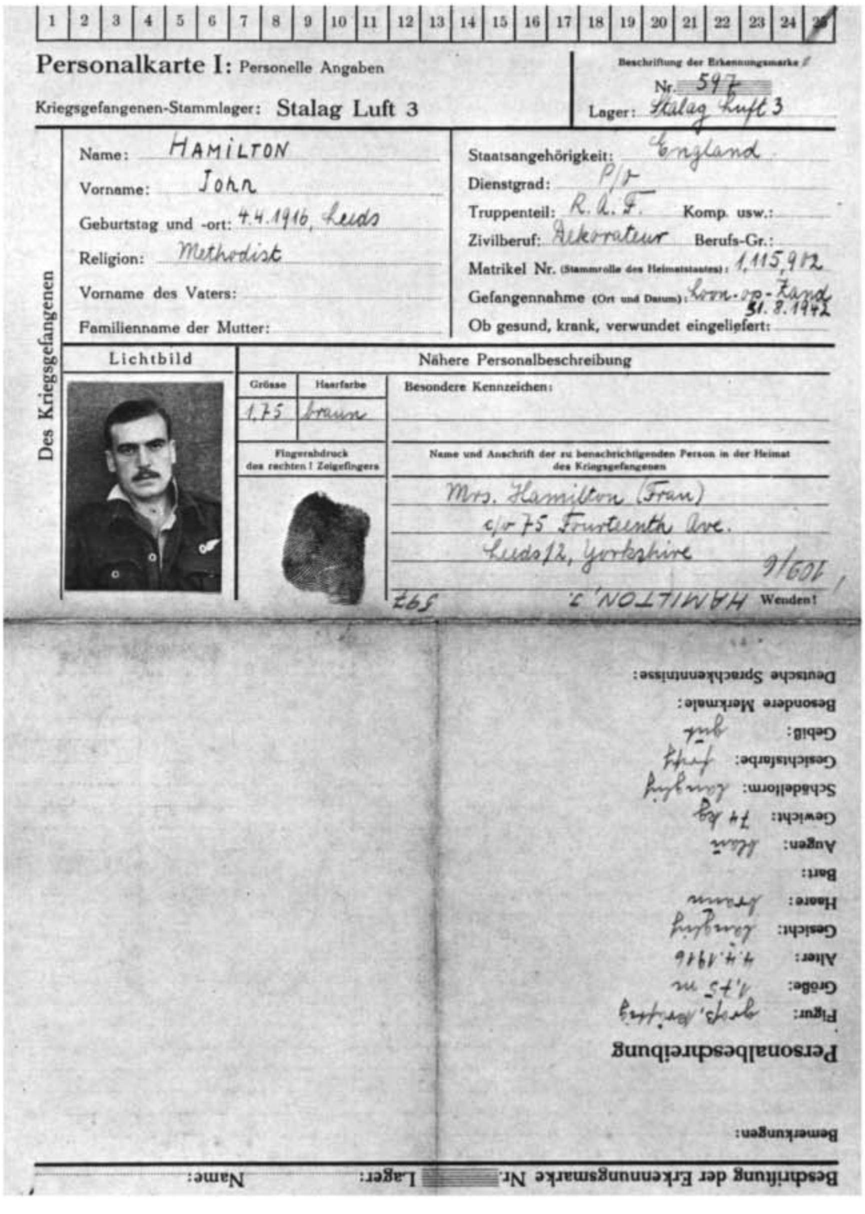
Left: **Roger Bushell, famed member of No. 601 Squadron and seen here in happier days with an Avro 504, was 'Big X' — the British escape officer for the North Compound.** *Above:* **Another illustration by John Hamilton who has added the dates of his own incarceration. (Charles E. Brown/IWM)**

the characteristics that he possessed in ordinary life and he proved to be a first-class leader of men. Early in 1940, he was given command of the RAF's top-scoring Spitfire squadron, No. 92, and was shot down shortly afterwards over the beaches of Dunkirk.

Bushell brought many special qualifications to his life as a PoW. Besides his ability of flying and skiing, he had acquired an intimate knowledge of sections of the German–Swiss border and had also made himself a first-class German speaker. From the moment he was captured, he did all he could to turn his qualities to account. He added to them an enormous knowledge of everything connected with escape and a remarkable power of organisation. In the early days of the escape organisation, he held the post of Intelligence Officer. Later, in Stalag Luft 3, he became Chief Executive in the East Compound, and later the officer in command of all the tunnelling operations in the North Compound, under Wing Commander, later Group Captain, H. M. A. Day as Chief Executive. There he had been planning a mass break-out for more than a year. Eventually, Roger Bushell was one of the first to leave the famous tunnel in March 1944, and one of those who subsequently lost their lives in the attempt.

Being in charge of the Escape Committee in Stalag Luft 3, code-named 'X', by the spring of 1943, Bushell, known as 'Big X', organised the simultaneous digging of three long tunnels, always referred to as 'Tom', 'Dick' and 'Harry' so that the word 'tunnel' would never be heard by any of the German guards. Tunnels were considered the best way of bringing about a mass escape and, taught by experience, the Committee had resolved to subordinate all other considerations to security. Too often, the tunnels had been betrayed by the guards discovering the sand which had been taken out of them.

Under Bushell's leadership, four important decisions were taken. The first was that tunnels were to be carried out as camp operations under direct control of the committee. Secondly, it was decided to start three tunnels in different parts of the camp simultaneously. Experience had shown that it was about thirty to one against any tunnel succeeding, but if three tunnels of elaborate construction and larger dimensions were dug at the same time, there was at least the chance that the Germans would not discover all of them. Thirdly, the direction of the tunnels had been fixed. The shortest distance lay to the west and it was decided to build two


1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

Personalkarte I: Personelle Angaben

Beschriftung der Erkennungsmarke Nr. 597

Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager: Stalag Luft 3

Lager: Stalag Luft 3

Name: HAMILTON

Vorname: John

Geburtstag und -ort: 4.4.1916, Leeds

Religion: Methodist

Vorname des Vaters:

Familienname der Mutter:

Staatsangehörigkeit: England

Dienstgrad: P/O

Truppenteil: R.A.F. Komp. usw.:

Zivilberuf: Dekorateur Berufs-Gr.:

Matrikel Nr. (Stammrolle des Heimatstaates): 1,115,912

Gefangennahme (Ort und Datum): Loon-op-Zand 31.8.1942

Ob gesund, krank, verwundet eingeliefert:

Des Kriegsgefangenen

Lichtbild

Nähere Personalbeschreibung

Grösse: 1,75 Haarfarbe: braun

Besondere Kennzeichen:

Fingerabdruck des rechten Zeigefingers

Name und Anschrift der zu benachrichtigenden Person in der Heimat des Kriegsgefangenen:

Mrs. Hamilton (Frau) c/o 75 Fourteenth Ave. Leeds 12, Yorkshire

597 HAMILTON J. 91601

Wenden!

Personalbeschreibung

Figur:

Grösse: 1,75 m

Alter: 4.4.1916

Gesicht:

Haare: braun

Bart:

Augen: blau

Gewicht: 74 kg

Schädelform:

Gesichtsfarbe:

Gebiß: gut

Besondere Merkmale:

Deutsche Sprachkenntnisse:

Bemerkungen:

Beschriftung der Erkennungsmarke Nr. Lager: Name:

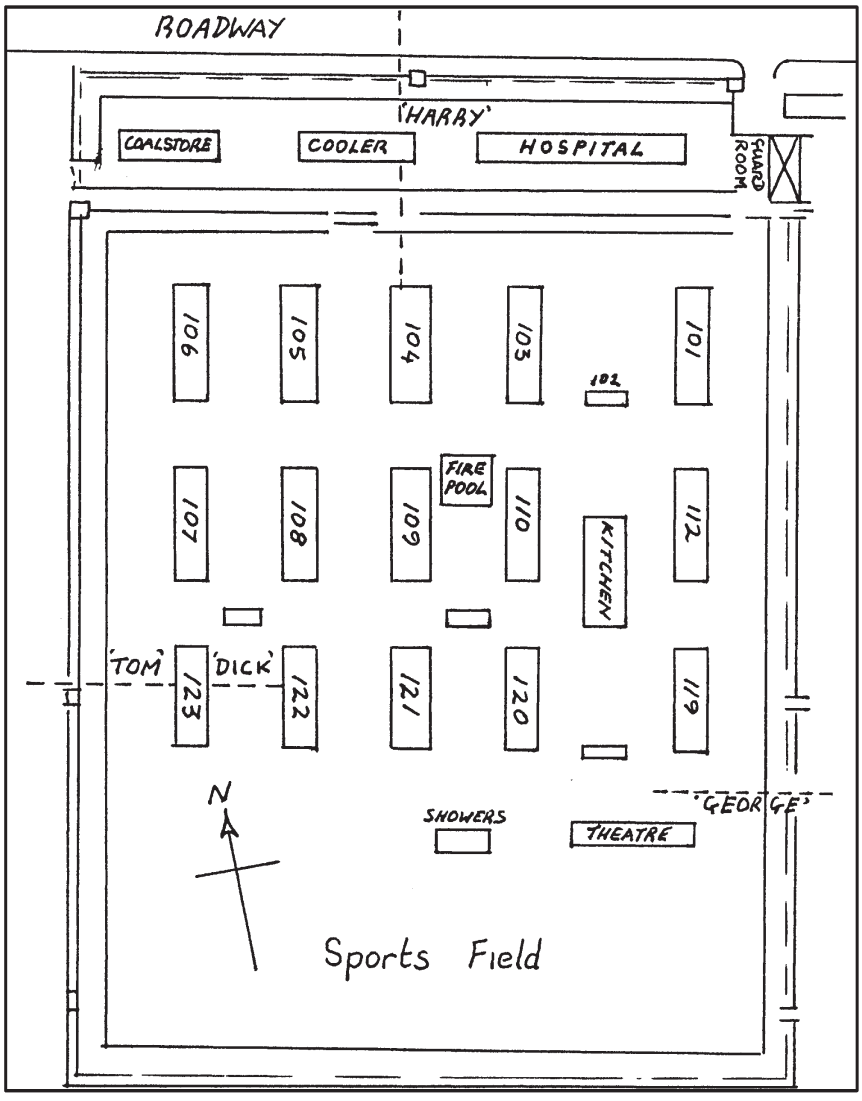
After he was liberated, John Hamilton was fortunate to obtain the original record wallet that the camp authorities had kept on him. (IWM)

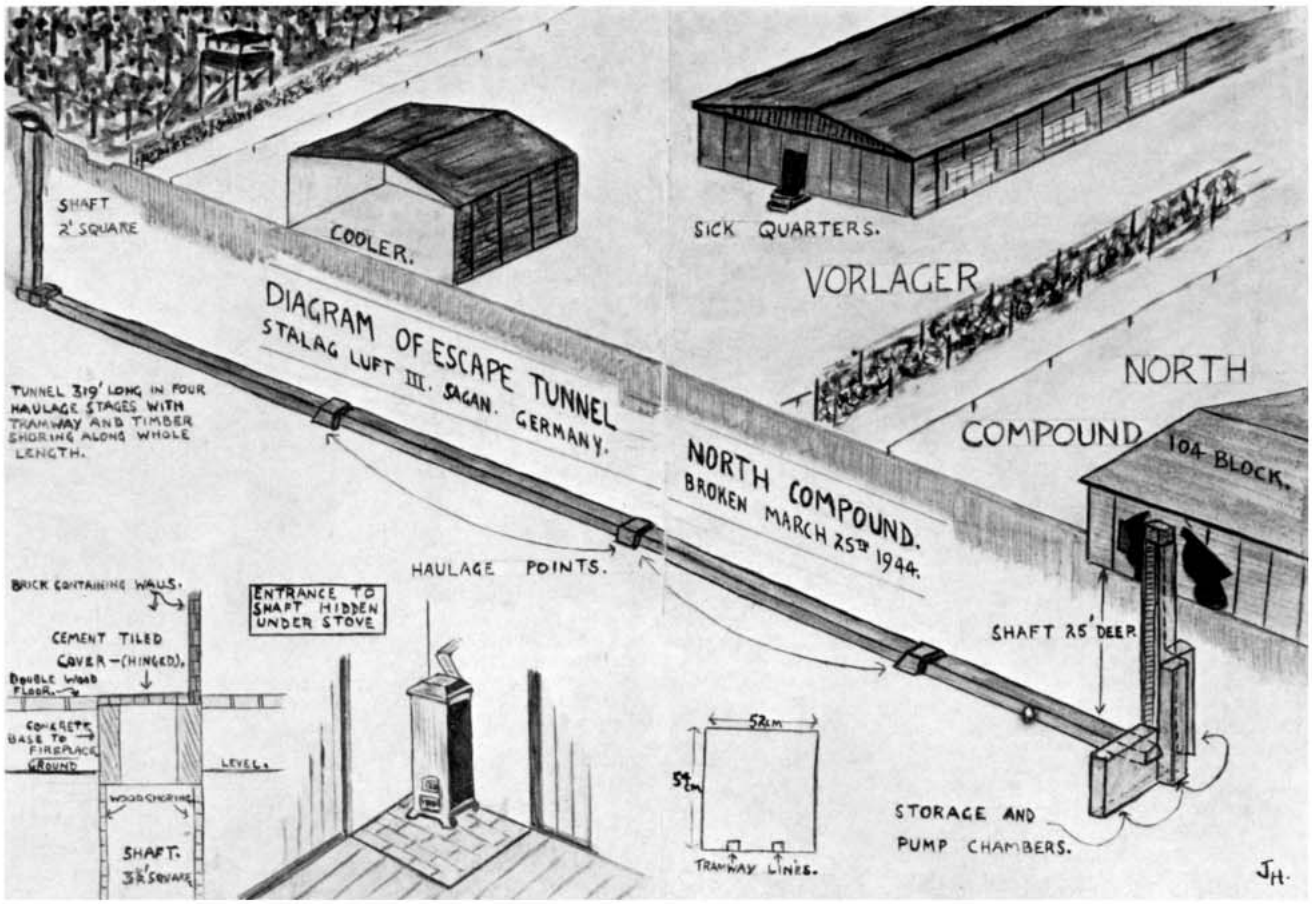
Eric Williams: 'The surface of the compound was a mixture of sand, powdered leaf-mould and dirt, which in the summer formed a thick layer of soft dust sometimes blown by the wind into a blinding cloud which hung like a pall across the camp. In the winter this dust was churned by the prisoners' feet into a grey sea of clinging mud. Under this top layer the subsoil was clean, hard yellow sand. Yellow when damp, but drying to a startling whiteness in the sun. The Germans knew that every tunnel carried its embarrassment of excavated sand and viewed each disturbance of this grey upper layer with suspicion. Every excavation made for a drain, rubbish pit or garden was carefully watched by the ferrets, or security guards. It was only by elaborate camouflage that the tell-tale yellow sand could be hidden in these places. The skin of grey dust formed one of the most effective defences of the camp.' *Right:* The Kommandant of Stalag Luft 3 was Oberst Friedrich von Lindeiner-Wildau, a veteran of the First World War and an officer of the old school. (IWM)

tunnels in that direction, one from a hut on the outside and the other from a hut more towards the centre of the camp. The third tunnel was to be built in a northerly direction from a barrack hut on the northern edge of the compound. Lastly, it was decided that if at any time during the course of operations the suspicion of the guards was aroused, work should be stopped immediately. Wally Floody, a Canadian fighter pilot, who had gained mining experience as an engineer, was put in charge of the digging operations, hence his nickname 'Tunnel King'.

On April 11, 1943, work began. The construction of the trap doors which disguised the entrances was one of the most dangerous phases of the tunnelling operation and was carried out by a group of Polish officers serving in the RAF, who were expert engineers. In the barracks, the floors of the wash-rooms and lavatories were concrete and the few feet around the iron stoves in the rooms were tiled and laid on brick foundations which went straight into the ground. This meant that when a guard went underneath a hut to search for a tunnel he could neither see nor penetrate into the section which these foundation walls enclosed.

Although hundreds of escape tunnels were planned and dozens started at Sagan, four major tunnels were dug from the North Compound which was surrounded by two barbed wire fences, each about nine feet high and some five feet apart, the space in between filled with coils of wire up to a height of about six feet. 'Tom' ran from Hut 123 towards the forest to the west but, despite all precautions, the tunnel, some 280 feet long and already up to the trees, was discovered accidentally by a German guard just before its completion. The tunnel dug from Hut 122 was named 'Dick' and, like 'Tom', it ran in a westerly direction. However, when the Germans started to cut trees to build the new West Compound, the tunnel was abandoned and used for the dispersal of the sand excavated from the other tunnels.





'Harry', the third tunnel, through which some 80 prisoners attempted to escape, started from Hut 104 and ran in a northerly direction. After the Great Escape, the tunnel was filled with sewage and its entrance and shaft were sealed with concrete. Another sketch by John Hamilton. (IWM)

'Tom' was dug from Hut 123, and the site chosen for the trap was in the concrete floor of a small passage next to the kitchen. Its construction meant cutting out a square of concrete and replacing it with another square of concrete which could be lifted easily. The square which covered the opening was fitted as tightly as possible, the cracks being concealed by cement covered with ordinary floor dust while the original concrete slab from the floor was broken up and powdered. Because it was a straight cut in a cement floor, this was the most precarious of the three traps.

The tunnel dug from Hut 122 was named 'Dick' and, like 'Tom', it ran in a westerly direction. Its trap, which was amongst the most ingenious ever constructed, was also cut through a concrete floor with the entrance in a sump under a wooden grating in the washroom. The sump was normally three-parts full of dirty water, thus providing almost perfect disguise. The trap was made by removing the side which had no pipes, replacing it by a concrete slab which could slide up and down. When fitted, the bottom and the sides were made watertight by using clay mixed with a small quantity of cement. When the sump was filled with water again, detection of the trap was virtually impossible.

'Harry', the third tunnel, which eventually was to become the prisoner's last hope, started from Hut 104 and ran in a northerly direction. In one room, the prisoners removed the stove and made an extension to its chimney so that it could be used even when not standing on its correct spot. All the tiles were lifted separately, cleaned and refitted in a wooden tray, which was hinged along one side so that when the stove was removed the whole section could be lifted cleanly in one piece.

With the traps for all three tunnels completed, the first and highly dangerous phase of the operation was finished. The second phase was the construction of the vertical shafts and the chambers at their base. Actually three chambers were required in each tunnel, one to house the air-pump, a second for storing sand until it could be dispersed, and a third for use as a workshop. The shafts were dropped down for 30 feet and were wood lined and shored, as were the tunnels. The wood for the shoring came from two sources. First, the prisoners stripped every bed and then they removed the lower half of the double-skinned floors in the barracks. Over 3,000 bedboards and floorboards vanished, undetected by the German guards, and were fashioned into box-frames for shuttering.

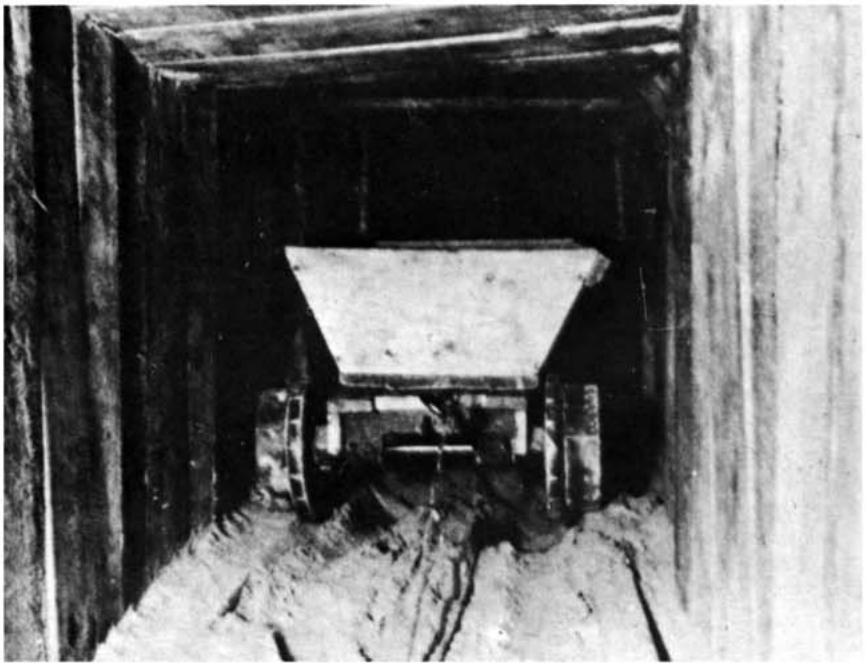
The final tunnel, code-named 'George', started off from a trap-door beneath the auditorium of the camp theatre (the building on the right standing parallel to the sports field). In January 1945, it was decided by the Escape Committee that the war had reached a stage which made escaping hardly worth while, and 'George', whose exit was beneath and beyond the wire, was sealed off. Eric Williams explained that 'fifteen feet inside the main fence was a single strand of barbed wire [which can be seen bottom right]. This was the trip-wire and anyone stepping over it was shot at by the guards. A narrow pathway trodden by the feet of the prisoners ran round the camp just inside the trip-wire. This was their exercise ground, known as the circuit. It had become a convention to walk round the circuit only in an anti-clockwise direction.' (IWM)

As at Colditz (see *After the Battle* No. 63), the camp authorities recorded the evidence after escape attempts although the photographs taken at Sagan are of poorer quality. Ventilation was provided by linking together dried milk tins. (IWM)

The tunnels were ventilated by air pumps, designed by a Norwegian pilot, and illuminated by electricity, the equipment being stolen and the current tapped from the camp supply. From old Red Cross dried milk tins air pipelines were made, which had secret intakes, and were taken along with a transferable nozzle, foot by foot, as the tunnels progressed, buried under the railway tracks on the tunnel floors. An underground trolley-railway running on rails made out of beading and battens, which were removed from the walls of the huts, served the whole length of the tunnels, using two interchange sections. These trolleys, which could carry 200lbs of sand, were designed not only to carry spoil but to transport workers as well. The diggers had to change trucks twice to go the full length of the tunnels and the trolleys with their flanged metal-tyred wheels, were hauled backwards and forwards by a rope made of plaited string. One man, lying full length, hacked away at the sand, while another digger, lying just behind, passed it back on the railway. Nearly every day, owing to the loose sand, there were dangerous falls which held up work badly. The men digging used to work naked or in long underpants because clothes would have restricted them and characteristic dirt stains would have alerted the Germans.

Getting rid of the bright yellow sand was one of the biggest problems. The sand from previous tunnels had usually been put underneath the barracks, but however carefully the sand was mixed with soil or covered over with the dry earth underneath the huts, it was invariably detected. Therefore, in this case it was decided that the ground underneath the huts was to be left undisturbed. Under these circumstances, the dispersal of so much sand was no simple matter. Prisoners carrying sand had to disguise their movements sufficiently well, and as far as possible sand was moved only during the mid-day meal period and in the evening, when there were only few Germans in the compound.

Lighting was by electricity tapped off the camp supply, but emergency illumination had to be on hand in case the power was cut — which is exactly what happened on the night of the big escape. (IWM)



Bed and floor boards were used to shore up the tunnels, the loose sand being transported in trucks. These were deadened by spreading blankets over the rails so that they would run silently. A rough calculation indicates that 'Harry' would have required the removal of around 100 cubic yards of spoil which then had to be disposed of within the compound. This job alone entailed the employment of over 250 prisoners. (IWM)

Sheer bad luck had revealed the existence of 'Tom' — a bitter blow to the Escape Committee as it had been driven nearly 100 yards from Hut 123 to the tree line and was almost ready for use. To the Germans it was a major coup — no wonder one of the guards nicknamed 'Rubberneck' looks pleased. (IWM)

At first, sand was carried in bags slung across the back of the carrier's neck and hanging on his chest underneath the battle-dress blouse, but this method proved unsatisfactory. Later, another method was adopted. Towels, which were issued to every prisoner, were made into narrow sacks. These sacks were hung on an adjustable sling. Each sack was slit up the side and fitted with three metal eyes and button-holes. The slit was closed by securing the eyes in the holes by a long pin which was attached to the top of the sack by a string. Simply by pulling on the string it was possible to open it. The slings were worn across the back of the neck so that the sacks hung inside the trouser legs above the knee. Using this method, the sand carriers, known as 'penguins', were constantly walking in full view of the guards and none was suspected.

The number of prisoners employed in the disposal of sand varied from 200 to 250. A separate team composed of up to 50 Americans supervised the camouflage of the sand after it had been deposited on the selected areas. There were many places which were suitable for the dumping of sand. In addition to the natural dumps such as sand heaps thrown up by drains or other legitimate excavations, there were patches of sand and gravel which had been exposed where tree stumps had been pulled up, several cleared areas where PoWs played deck-tennis or some other games, and gardens. New sand had either to be mixed thoroughly with what was already there or it had to be buried and covered completely with the top soil. At every dump there was a supervisor to ensure that no 'penguin' did his work superficially.

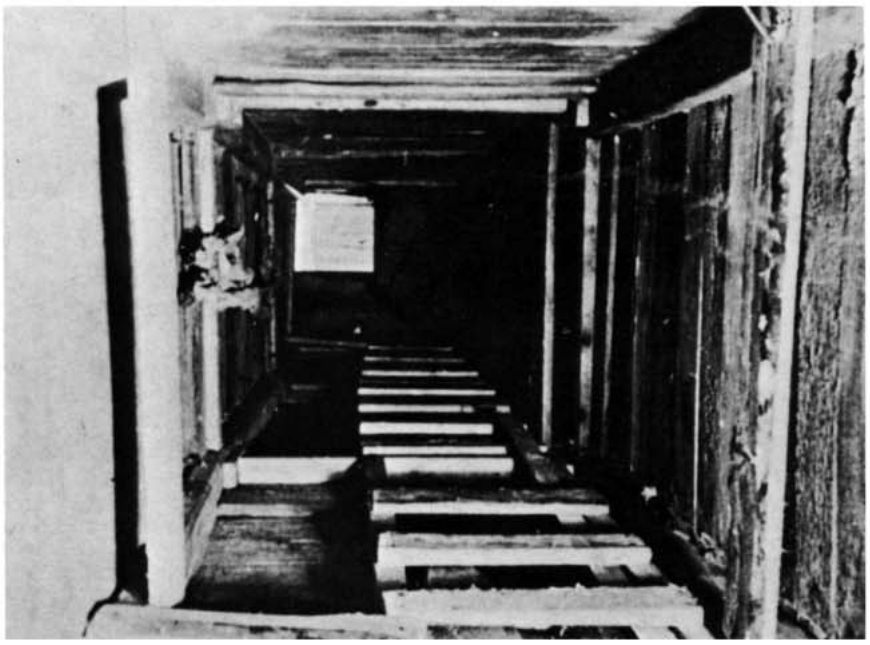
While the three tunnels were being dug slowly during the summer months, rumours had spread that another new compound was to be constructed to the west just where 'Tom' and 'Dick' were intended to break surface. When the Germans started to cut away the trees in the area in question, it became necessary to modify the tunnelling campaign. As the trap door of 'Tom' was the most vulnerable of all, 'X' decided, to complete 'Tom' at once. 'Harry' was closed for the moment and 'Dick', which was already 70 feet long, was abandoned and used for the dispersal of the sand excavated from 'Tom' because there was no chance of finishing 'Dick' before the new West Compound would be completed.

Meanwhile, up above, hundreds of PoW sentries, called 'stooges' and 'duty pilots', were safeguarding the escape activities. All the German guards were tailed around the clock so that they could not move an inch without their actions being flashed to the prisoners' various control points. However, despite all precautions, 'Tom' was discovered accidentally. With the tunnel 280 feet long, the diggers were beyond the original fringe of trees and needed to go only another 10 feet before cutting a vertical shaft to the surface. At that point, the Germans made some very thorough searches of Hut 123 but failed to find the trap until some civilian workmen, who were laying a drain-pipe, left their tools lying about. By pure chance, one of the guards picked up a pickaxe, then threw it away, but the point landed right on the edge of the trap door. 'Tom' was discovered. For the purpose of destroying the tunnel, a sapper was sent from one of the nearby Wehrmacht units, and he blew up the tunnel with dynamite, wrecking in the process parts of Hut 123, a watchtower, and one of the camp's water mains which served not only the prisoners but the German compound as well.

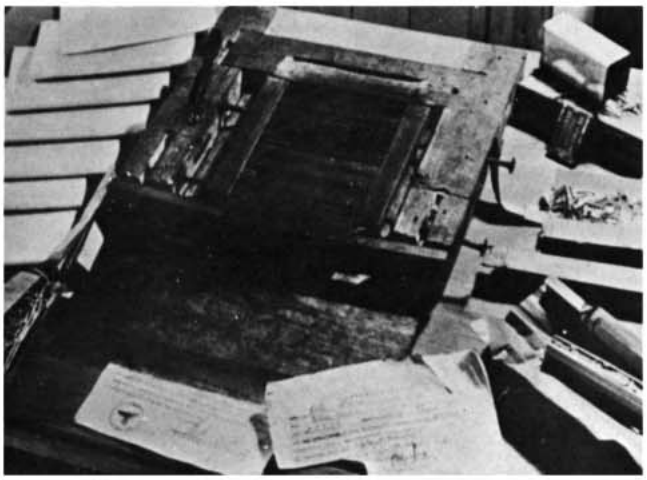
Two days after the discovery of 'Tom', work was resumed on 'Harry'. However, it quickly became obvious that the Germans, who spent much time in the compound and carried out regular careful searches, remained suspicious. This made tunnelling very dangerous and therefore, after a period of only four days, 'Big X' decided to cease all tunnelling operations for an indefinite period until German suspicions had been finally lulled. The winter passed comparatively uneventful, and it was not until January 1944 that excavation work restarted.

While the digging on 'Harry' progressed, lots of preparations for the mass escape had to be made. In total, 600 PoWs had a hand in the tunnelling and the many escape services. An Australian flight lieutenant ran a factory which made 200 compasses out of melted gramophone records and magnetised sewing needles. Another officer ran the forgery department which produced 400 forged passes, identity papers, and personal letters and industrial orders on embossed business notepaper. Even 'printed' and 'typed' characters in all these forged papers were painted by hand, including 'typewriting mistakes'. A former racing driver cut the rubber stamps for these passes out of linoleum and from the heels of boots, and embossed the handmade writing with the back of a toothbrush. All these items were carefully stored for the day of escape in a complex of safe-deposits. Genuine photographs for the passes were taken in a clandestine studio by a flight lieutenant, who was also the chief weather forecaster, with a camera blackmailed from a compromised German guard.

A Lithuanian pilot, Flight Lieutenant Romas Marcinkus, was the principal pumper of information from the Germans. He was intelligence expert for the Baltic and the Netherlands, intelligence and language adviser to the forgery department and a fund of knowledge on the economics, military dispositions and transport within Germany. Using German newspapers, which the censor allowed him, with a travel guide and a railway timetable, he compiled a dossier of the week-to-week changes in everyday German life, locations of industry, and the railway timings which were essential for a successful escape.



Official German picture taken looking back up the entry shaft to the trapdoor. (IWM)



Printing equipment and forged papers. Hundreds of sets of false documents had to be produced for the Great Escape. (IWM)

A map department produced over 1,000 detailed and extremely accurate four-colour maps. Others worked in the tailoring workshop which produced 50 full civilian suits from blankets for those going by train and other 'upper class' escapees, and dyed and re-worked uniforms into something sufficiently different. The department's best effort was the manufacture of a German Army uniform to be worn by a Pole who spoke fluent German. A considerable stock of genuine German money was slowly accumulated, so that tickets and food could be purchased. There was also a food factory which supplied each escapee with ten day's rations of a concentrated fudge made of sugar, cocoa, condensed milk, raisins, oats, margarine and chocolate.

Work both in the tunnel and on the surface went smoothly and the February moon period came and went without incident. On March 14, 1944, the last shift of diggers returned to the surface and the officer in charge of the trap sealed it to await the day for the tunnel to be used. Ideally, the night of escape needed to be moonless, with a strong wind to cover up the noise, not too cold, and without too much snow on the ground. The mass escape was planned for March 24 which would be moonless, and it was also a Friday. The next night was also moonless, but the trains would be running on weekend timetables which would severely handicap the escapees. The weather was bad but Roger Bushell decided that the occasion had to be seized, because the committee did not believe that security could hold out for another month.

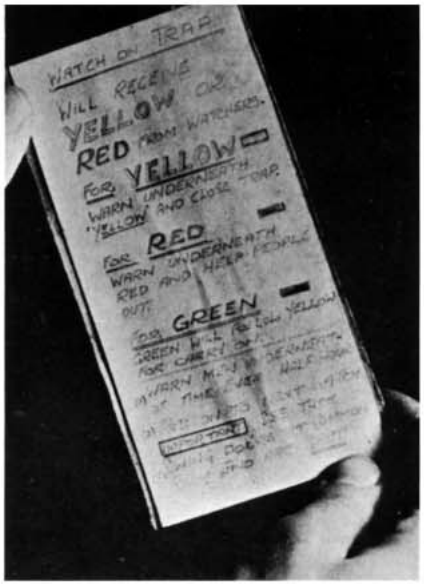
The date eventually decided on for the breakout had to be final. Whereas an operation even as vast as 'Overlord' could be postponed because of adverse conditions, this was not possible with the escape. The date stamps on 400 forged passes were one of the most critical factors, simply because they were not roughly stamped on in a second, as with genuine passes, but needed far more care when they were applied. A whole year's production would have been ruined by bearing the wrong stamp.

Even with a tunnel ready and waiting, escape was not quite so simple as might be imagined. Careful organisation was therefore necessary. The decisions Bushell had to make a fortnight ahead concerned the priority of those who were to go out; the equipment they were to take; how their arrival at the hut should be regulated; and how they should be passed through the tunnel and out at the other end with the least possible delay and with the least possible risk of any guards seeing them when they emerged. The escapees had to be fitted out with the correct clothes for the rôles they were playing; they had to be given time to learn their route, and they had to be word-perfect in their cover stories to cope with being challenged en route.

All 600 PoWs who had taken some part in the tunnelling and the escape preparations were considered eligible for a place in the escape. As some people had worked longer and harder than others, 'X' decided on certain priorities and the first places in the order of exit were specially selected. Then, about 200 officers were chosen by secret ballot, all in a precise order of exit.

On the chosen day, darkness fell at about 9 p.m. with dawn on the Saturday at about 5.30 a.m., so that there would be eight and a half hours during which the escape could be made. The collection of more than 200 extra people in a single hut needed careful planning and the prisoners concerned assembled undisturbed in Hut 104 right before zero hour.

At about 10 p.m., two experienced tunnellers broke through the last few inches. However, when the surface was reached, it was found that calculations were slightly adrift, and, instead of being just inside the wood, they were a few feet short. The exit shaft came up into open ground just a few yards from a German sentry box and searchlight. Bushell grimly decided to carry on, but the pace of the escape was slowed. The result was a serious delay in getting each man away from the exit and into cover. After that, the tension was electric, as the men, quivering with excitement, dressed in heavy clothes, clambered on the trolleys one at a time and went off towards the exit.



Left: **'Big X', right, pictured with Battle of Britain ace Bob Tuck. One of Roger Bushell's instructions for stooges** *(right)*, **detailed to keep a look-out when work was under way below ground, was also found by the Germans. (IWM)**

Left: **The stove in room 23 of Hut 104 which stood on the trapdoor covering the entrance to 'Harry'.** *Right:* **As photographed by the Germans after the escape attempt was foiled just before 5 a.m. on the morning of Saturday, March 25, 1944. (IWM)**

There were inevitable complications which hampered the operation. Several people became stuck in the tunnel because of their bulging baggage. This sort of thing caused several falls of sand which blocked the tunnel, nearly buried the men and had to be cleared under nerve-racking conditions. Thus, the rate of departure for the first one or two hours was only one man every 12 minutes. Then at about midnight came a most unwelcome interruption. The sirens sounded and the hut shook with the distant impact of bombs. Berlin was a little less than 100 miles away, and Sagan was often affected by diversionary flights coming down from the north, less so by the normal bomber stream converging on the capital. But on this particular day unforecast high winds scattered the bombers from their narrow stream and swept them east of Berlin. On any other occasion, a British raid on the Reich's nerve centre would have been greeted with cheers, but in this night it meant that all the lights in the camp went off, plunging the tunnel into darkness. Grease lamps, held ready for an emergency, were installed, but before the shafts and the tunnel could be sufficiently illuminated, another 35 minutes had been lost.

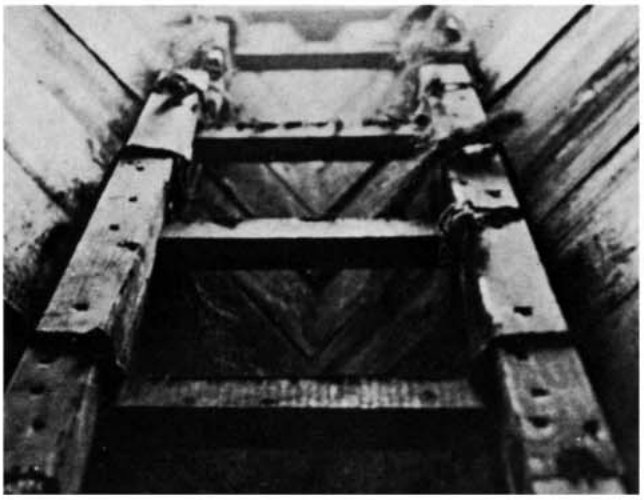
Shortly afterwards, further delays were caused by two shoring frames being knocked out of place, resulting in a serious cave-in. Owing to all these problems, the rate of departure, far from having increased, dropped to one man every 14 minutes and the control officer gave the order that no more men were to be taken into the tunnel. But even with this modification, it had already become clear that at least half of those who had drawn places would not be able to go and many were ordered back to bed.

At 4 a.m., the last change of guard took place among the sentries patrolling the wire, and 50 minutes later it was starting to get light. The officers in charge therefore announced that number 87 on the list would be the last man to go through the tunnel, to be followed by a closing-up party who would try to reseal the exit shaft in order to give the escapees a chance by delaying its discovery for as long as possible. There was also the faint hope that the tunnel might not be discovered and that it could be used again.

At 4.55 a.m. exactly, just as this very last man was disappearing down the entrance shaft, a German patrolling sentry walked along the edge of the wood. He was some distance away from the PoW controlling the tunnel exit but, for some reason, he was walking wide of his beat instead of close to the wire. If he kept on his chosen line he was bound to walk right on to the tunnel mouth. The controller himself and the man who had just came out lay prone and motionless. The sentry came on. He then stepped a foot from the tunnel mouth, almost fell in the hole, did not see it, practically trod on one of the escapees lying motionless in the snow, missing him by an even narrower margin, but spotted another prisoner about 30 yards away. In the brief moment when the German lifted his rifle and brought it into the ready, the leader of the last group emerged from behind the trees, waving his arms and shouting in German 'Don't shoot'. Then came the sound for which all had been waiting subconsciously throughout the night — a rifle shot. The shot missed. After a few seconds, the sentry recovered his senses, pulled out his torch, shone it down the hole and saw the man who was waiting his turn, the 80th man on the list. For two or three seconds there was dead silence. Then the guard blew his whistle and the game was up.

Within half an hour there was murderous chaos in the camp. The Germans were plainly in a state of great agitation. It was a tricky situation because the guards had their hands on the triggers while a full muster of the camp was called and a photographic check of every prisoner was completed to ascertain who had escaped. The total was 76, excluding the prisoners in the shaft and the three in the snow round the exit, who were immediately put in solitary confinement. One by one, most of the others were rounded up, frostbitten and completely exhausted. Of the 76 prisoners who escaped, three reached England, four were recaptured and sent to Sachsenhausen, two to Colditz, one was imprisoned in Berlin and another in the PoW camp at Barth on the Baltic coast, 15 were returned to Sagan and the remainder were shot. As a result of the escape, the camp Kommandant, Oberst Friedrich Wilhelm von Lindeiner-Wildau, and some of his officers were relieved and were put under immediate arrest.

Perhaps this Luftwaffe NCO was the last man through the tunnel, which had enabled 76 prisoners to escape the wire, before it was sealed. But this was no ordinary escape and the retribution was to be widespread. (IWM)

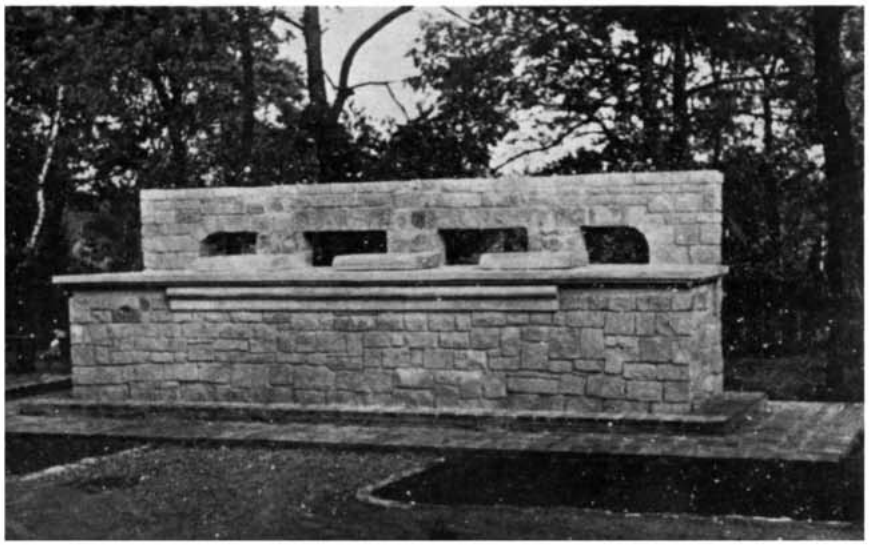


Three men were caught outside the exit and seven more in the tunnel, their footprints frozen in time in this 'scene of crime' photograph. Although they were given solitary confinement in the 'cooler', they were the fortunate ones.

Naturally, only very little was known in the camp of the progress of those who had escaped until some of them returned at the end of the first week in April and managed to smuggle notes out of their cells giving the names of others who had been seen in various other prisons. Once the initial agitated reaction of the camp authorities had died down, life for the prisoners settled back into something near the normal although there was an uneasy foreboding in everyone's mind that perhaps some particular reprisals might be on the way. One morning, the Senior British Officer, Group Captain Martin Massey, was summoned to the office of the new Kommandant, Oberst Braune. Also sent for was the interpreter, Squadron Leader 'Wank' Murray. At this meeting, a tight-lipped Braune informed Massey that he was ordered by the German High Command to state that of those officers who had succeeded in getting away, 41 had been shot while resisting arrest or in their endeavours to re-escape after having been arrested. Breathless with shock, Murray had some difficulty in conveying this statement in English. Immediately, Group Captain Massey guessed that something extremely serious had occurred, and he asked for repetition. Then he asked how many had been wounded. The stone-faced German officer, who appeared to be ill at ease, quoted the statement again, saying that he could add nothing further. Massey persisted in his question and Oberst Braune replied that he thought that none had been wounded. With that, the conversation was concluded.

It seemed obvious to Massey that the Kommandant was under orders not to tell the whole story but gradually it was pieced together in face of Massey's persistent demands, and from information obtained from the Germans on an unofficial basis. It was learned that Heinrich Himmler had personally decreed that 50 of those recaptured should be killed outright as a deterrent to future escape attempts. For the prisoners there was no doubt that the Luftwaffe, nominal guardians of Stalag Luft 3, were bitterly ashamed of what had taken place. The Luftwaffe High Command had apparently made strong protests, pointing out that not only was this contrary to the Geneva Convention but that they, as the captors, fully recognised the duty of attempting escape laid upon every Allied officer, and stressing that their own officers in Allied hands were under the same orders.

A few days later, a list of those who had been shot was given to the Senior British Officer and pinned up on the North Compound notice board. It gave 47 names to which three were added later. The list of the victims included the names of Roger Bushell and many other principal organisers of the escape. Shortly afterwards, some of the personal belongings of those who had been shot were returned and, towards the end of April, 50 cremation urns were brought into the camp, each of which bore the name of one of the victims. Now the camp authorities showed their sympathy and, in co-operation with the Senior British Officer, arrangements were made for the ashes of the murdered men to be buried. During the summer, permission was granted to build a stone memorial in the forest outside the camp in which the ashes, placed in three ornamental urns, could be kept and on which the names of the victims were engraved. A working party was allowed out under escort, and given materials to erect a memorial to their comrades. This was designed by a prisoner who had been an architect pre-war and was finished by the late summer of 1944. It was carefully tended by the prisoners while they remained at Sagan.



First to go was Oberst Lindeiner-Wildau, replaced by Oberst Braune *(left)*. To him fell the unpleasant duty of informing the Senior British Officer, Group Captain Martin Massey, that over 40 of those who had escaped had been shot 'resisting arrest'. By the end of April, the death toll had reached 50 and the cremated ashes had been delivered to Sagan. By now, the Luftwaffe camp administrators were as embarrassed over the massacre as the British were incensed, and facilities were given to the prisoners to construct a suitable burial tomb. A spot was chosen about mid-way between the town and the camp (see map page 22), and there a vaulted altar *(right)* was built in the forest. Three inscribed scrolls listed the dead, but these tablets were removed after the war on the orders of the Soviet occupation authorities.

While the monument was being erected, trials of the German staff of Stalag Luft 3 were taking place before courts martial in Breslau. Shortly after the escape, a team of Gestapo and SS men had arrived in the camp and carried out investigations which resulted in the court-martial of many of the German guards.

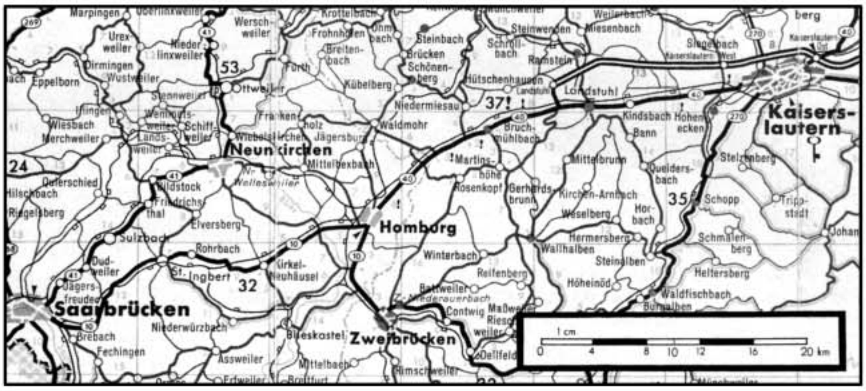
Two days after the escape, the 64-year-old camp Kommandant, a chivalrous veteran of the First World War, who had already formally requested that he should be court-martialled, was relieved of his post. Just before the escape, he had called the senior officers, chaplains and doctors to a conference and had given a sincere, though veiled, warning against mass escapes because the Gestapo had threatened to take matters into their own hands in the camps if such things occurred. Lindeiner was known as being pro-British, and he had in the past punished various members of the camp staff who had behaved incorrectly towards the prisoners. While he was under arrest, he suffered a heart attack and, much later, was tried by court-martial and sentenced to a year's imprisonment. Before his appeal was heard, he had a nervous breakdown and his recovery delayed the promulgation of the sentence into the period of the collapse of Germany so that he did not serve the sentence. All the other accused were also given terms of imprisonment. However, all the sentences were cut short by the end of the war when the Kommandant and his staff were brought to England for interrogation.

Tunnelling activity did not cease after the mass breakout of March 24 and the subsequent slaughter. Work continued on a tunnel, the 101st to be dug at Sagan, starting off from a trapdoor beneath the auditorium of the camp theatre. However, the purpose of the new tunnel was different. The new 'Big X' thought it likely that the Sagan area might become a battlefield and, although the Germans had given assurances that PoWs would be moved away in time, it was felt that in the deteriorating conditions in Germany, such an assurance might not be carried out. Thus 'George', as this final tunnel was codenamed, was intended as a means by which the imprisoned officers could carry out their own evacuation if necessary. When, in January 1945, it was decided that the war had reached a stage which made escaping hardly worth while, 'George', whose exit was beneath and beyond the wire, was sealed off.

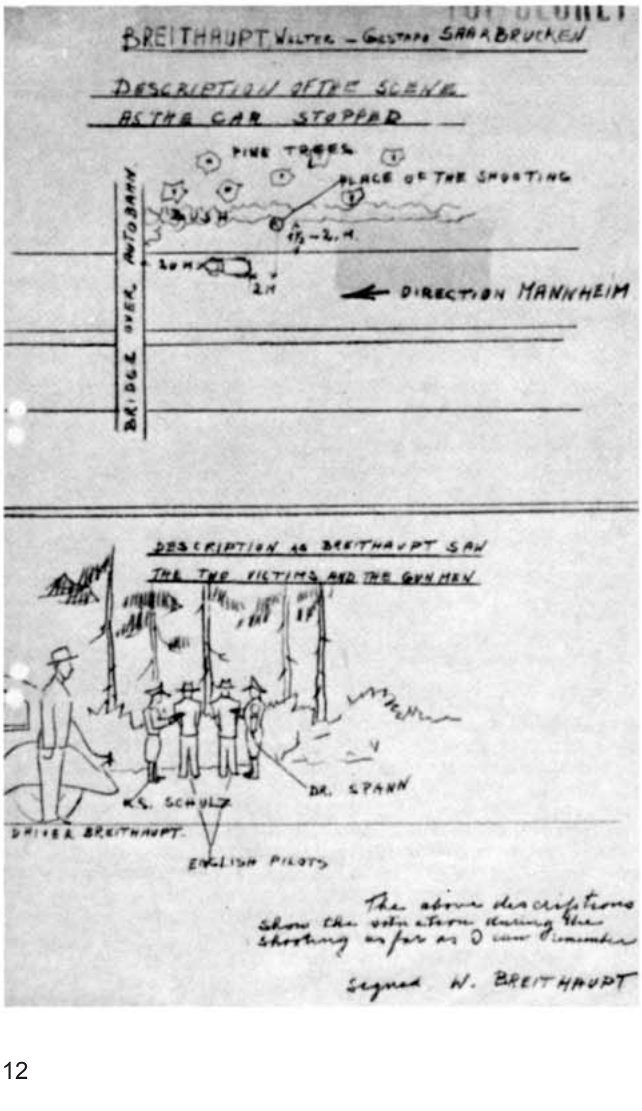
In the final phase of the war, Silesia became the scene of severe fighting. Many of the inhabitants fled westwards as the Soviet armies occupied the region. The week beginning January 21 saw a steady crescendo of events. On that day, a Russian tank unit crossed the River Oder to the north of Breslau only 50 miles from Sagan. The city had become a centre for refugees. Normally a town of 20,000 inhabitants, it was now said to be sheltering 100,000 people, and every day thousands more could be seen passing

When, as has been described, Monsieur Naville, the Swiss Minister in Berlin, was informed that 50 prisoners had been shot offering resistance to recapture, or while attempting to escape a second time, he frankly refused to believe what he had been told, all the more so when the Germans said that urns containing the ashes had been sent to Sagan for burial. M. Naville replied by stating that he was surprised that all the prisoners had been killed outright and that none had been wounded, and that the cremation was 'most unusual, the normal custom being to bury a prisoner in a coffin with military honours'. However, it was only after the war that the true circumstances came out. When interrogated, Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel, the chief of the OKW, explained that 'one morning it was reported to me that the escape had taken place and that about 15 of the officers had been recaptured in the vicinity of the camp. I did not intend to report this case at the midday conference at Berchtesgaden as it was the third mass escape within a very brief period.' However, Keitel said that Himmler (then dead, having committed suicide on May 23, 1945 — see *After the Battle* Nos. 14 and 17) had forestalled him and announced the escape to Hitler who, in a fury, ordered that any recaptured prisoners were to be handed over to the Sicherheitsdienst. Himmler then issued instructions to the Gestapo to make sure that each man was shot while attempting to escape. Martin Massey prepared this Roll of Honour to remember them. (IWM)

The majority of the prisoners were shot during a car journey when a halt was made on the pretence of giving the men an opportunity to relieve themselves. Typical is the fate which befell Roger Bushell. Recaptured at Saarbrücken with Lieutenant Bernard Scheidhauer of the Free French Air Force, they were taken to the local police prison for interrogation. A few days later, they were put in a car by the Saarbrücken Gestapo chief Kriminalsekretär Emil Schulz personally. They left in the company of another Gestapo officer, Dr Spann, and a driver, Walter Breithaupt. The two officers were told that they were being taken to Mannheim. After some 25 miles, soon after they reached the autobahn, Schulz ordered the car to stop. The two Gestapo men stepped out of the car and, having lit cigarettes, went a little to one side. After they had finished their smoke, Breithaupt was called from the car and the prisoners told to get out and relieve themselves. Bushell and Scheidhauer went towards some bushes to the rear of the car, with the two Gestapo officers following, each with their pistol in their hand. As the prisoners were walking, they were told that they would be shot if they tried to escape. The officers were just unbuttoning their trousers, with the two Germans standing close behind them, when Schulz gave the signal. Both fired one shot at the same time into the neck of each man. Bushell, hit in the spine, turned on his back, rocking back and forth in agony with his knees drawn up. Schulz got down on the ground and calmly waited until the dying man's temple came round against his pistol before pulling the trigger again.



In 1944, the autobahn had only been built as far west as Landstuhl, and the testimony obtained by Squadron Leader Francis McKenna from the driver, Breithaupt, indicates that they stopped just before the first bridge.



We retraced the route and slowly brought our car to a stop as the bridge came into view. A layby conveniently allowed us space to pull off the carriageway . . . and stretch our legs . . . as Roger Bushell must have done. There, at the back of the field, the pine trees still stood as in Breithaupt's sketch. A moment's quiet reflection . . . that here the Great Escape ended . . . but in a way 'Big X' could never have foreseen.

When the Soviets pulled out of that part of Silesia, the inscribed tablets were replaced on the tomb. This originally contained the ashes of the dead in individual urns but some of these urns were broken following liberation, allegedly by soldiers looking for gold. On the instructions of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, in 1948 the ashes of 48 dead were removed and buried in Poznan Old Garrison Cemetery where their permanent commemoration could be assured. (Prior to this transfer, the ashes of two of the dead had been removed: a British airman was interred in Berlin War Cemetery while the other was a Norwegian national repatriated to his homeland.) Those in unbroken urns were buried in identified graves. Of the rest, the tops of only four urns were found together with a considerable quantity of unidentified ashes and these were buried in a separate plot marked with 18 headstones, of which two bear two names. In 1994, Sidney Dowse, one of the Great Escapers who survived (see page 21), contacted the CWGC with evidence indicating that the dates of death on the headstones of 18 of the victims were incorrect. (The correct dates are included in the table below.)

PRISONERS OF WAR EXECUTED AFTER THE MASS ESCAPE ON MARCH 24/25, 1944
(All buried in Poznan Old Garrison Cemetery unless otherwise stated)

Service Number	*PoW Number*	*Rank*	*Name*	*Date of Death*	*RAF Unit Unless Otherwise Stated*	*Nationality*	*Force*	*Grave Location Plot/Row/Grave*
J/5233	689	Flt.Lt.	Birkland, H.	31.3.44	72 Sqdn.	Canadian	RCAF	7 C 3
61053	760	Flt.Lt.	Brettell, E. G., DFC	29.3.44	133 Sqdn.	British	RAF	Grave 9.A.
43932	667	Flt.Lt.	Bull, L. G. DFC	29.3.44	109 Sqdn.	British	RAF	7 C 1
90120	621	Sqdn.Ldr.	Bushell, R. J.	29.3.44	601 Sqdn.	British	RAF	Grave 9.A.
39024	24	Flt.Lt.	Casey, M. J.	31.3.44	57 Sqdn.	British	RAF	7 D 3
400364	702	Sqdn.Ldr.	Catanach, J., DFC	29.3.44	455 Sqdn. (RAAF)	Australian	RAAF	Grave 9.A.
413380	676	Flt.Lt.	Christensen, A. G.	29.3.44	26 Sqdn.	New Zealand	RNZAF	Grave 9.A.
122441	727	F.O.	Cochran, D. H.	31.3.44	10 OTU	British	RAF	Grave 9.A.
39305	2	Sqdn.Ldr.	Cross, I. K. P., DFC	31.3.44	103 Sqdn.	British	RAF	7 C 2
378	634	Lt.	Espelid, H.	29.3.44	33 Sqdn.	Norwegian	RNAF	Grave 9.A.
42745	456	Flt.Lt.	Evans, B. H.	31.3.44	49 Sqdn.	British	RAF	7 C 6
742	1264	Lt.	Fuglesang, N.		339 Sqdn.	Norwegian	RNAF	Returned to Norway
103275	118	Lt.	Gouws, J. S.	29.3.44	40 Sqdn. (SAAF)	South African	SAAF	Grave 9.A.
45148	673	Flt.Lt.	Grisman, W. J.	6.4.44	109 Sqdn.	British	RAF	8 C 4
60340	5	Flt.Lt.	Gunn, A. D.	6.4.44	1 PRU	British	RAF	8 D 7
403281	6	W.O.	Hake, A. H.	31.3.44	72 Sqdn.	Australian	RAAF	7 D 4
50896	1423	Flt.Lt.	Hall, C. P.	30.3.44	1 TRU	British	RAF	Grave 9.A.
42124	199	Flt.Lt.	Hayter, A. R. H.	6.4.44	148 Sqdn.	British	RAF	Grave 9.A.
44177	406	Flt.Lt.	Humphreys. E. S.	31.3.44	107 Sqdn.	British	RAF	8 C 5
J/10177	42822	Flt.Lt.	Kidder, G. A.	29.3.44	156 Sqdn.	Canadian	RCAF	8 D 5
402364	1268	Flt.Lt.	Kierath, R. V.	29.3.44	450 Sqdn. (RAAF)	Australian	RAAF	8 D 3
P.0109	42801	Major	Kiewnarski, A.	30.3.44	305 (Polish) Sqdn.	Polish	Polish Air Force	Grave 9.A.
39103	652	Sqdn.Ldr.	Kirby-Green, T. G.	29.3.44	40 Sqdn.	British	RAF	7 D 7
P.0243	678	Porucznik	Kolanowski, W.	31.3.44	301 (Polish) Sqdn.	Polish	Polish Air Force	7 C 5
P.0237	1392	Kapitan	Krol, S. Z.	12.4.44	74 Sqdn.	Polish	Polish Air Force	7 D 1
C/1631	710	Flt.Lt.	Langford, P. W.	31.3.44	16 OTU	Canadian	RCAF	7 C 7
46462	63	Flt.Lt.	Leigh, T. B.	31.3.44	76 Sqdn.	British	RAF	7 C 4
89375	522	Flt.Lt.	Long, J. L. R.	13.4.44	9 Sqdn.	British	RAF	8 D 6
95691	655	2nd Lt.	McGarr, C. A. N.	6.4.44	2 Sqdn. (SAAF)	South African	SAAF	7 D 6
J.5312	1431	Flt.Lt.	McGill, G. E.	31.3.44	103 Sqdn.	Canadian	RCAF	8 C 7
89580	19	Flt.Lt.	Marcinkus, R.	29.3.44	1 Sqdn.	Lithuanian	RAF	Grave 9.A.
103586	715	Flt.Lt.	Milford, H. J.	6.4.44	226 Sqdn.	British	RAF	Grave 9.A.
P.0913	680	Porucznik	Mondschein, J. T.	29.3.44	304 (Polish) Sqdn.	Polish	Polish Air Force	8 D 2
P.0740	23	Porucznik	Pawluk, K.	31.3.44	305 (Polish) Sqdn.	Polish	Polish Air Force	7 D 5
87693	685	Flt.Lt.	Picard, H. A.	29.3.44	350 (Belgian) Sqdn.	Belgian	RAF	Grave 9.A.
402894	2433	F.O.	Pohe, P. P.	31.3.44	51 Sqdn.	New Zealand	RNZAF	Grave 9.A.
30649	832	Sous Lt.	Scheidhauer, B. W. M. H.	29.3.44	131 Sqdn.	French	FFAF	Grave 9.A.
213	1822	W.O.	Scantzikas, S.	30.3.44	336 Sqdn. (RHAF)	Greek	RHAF	8 D 4
47431	712	Lt.	Stevens, R. J.	29.3.44	12 Sqdn. (SAAF)	South African	SAAF	Grave 9.A.
130452	1279	F.O.	Stewart, R. C.	31.3.44	77 Sqdn.	British	RAF	8 C 6
107520	836	Flt.Lt.	Stower, J. G.	31.3.44	142 Sqdn.	British	RAF	Grave 9.A.
123026	992	Flt.Lt.	Street, D. O.	6.4.44	207 Sqdn.	British	RAF	Berlin 1939-45 War Cemetery – 3 A 24
37658	388	Flt.Lt.	Swain, C. D.	31.3.44	105 Sqdn.	British	RAF	8 C 1
P.0375	300	Porucznik	Tobolski, A. F.	2.4.44	301 (Polish) Sqdn.	Polish	Polish Air Force	Grave 9.A.
82532	415	Flt.Lt.	Valenta, A.	31.3.44	311 (Czech) Sqdn.	Czech	RAF	Grave 9.A.
73022	3776	Flt. Lt.	Walenn, G. W.	29.3.44	25 OTU	British	RAF	Grave 9.A.
J/6144	564	Flt.Lt.	Wernham, J. C.	30.3.44	405 Sqdn. (RCAF)	Canadian	RCAF	8 C 2
J/7234	930	Flt.Lt.	Wiley, G. W.	31.3.44	112 Sqdn.	Canadian	RCAF	7 D 2
40652	838	Sqdn.Ldr.	Williams, J. E. A., DFC	29.3.44	450 Sqdn. (RAAF)	Australian	RAF	8 D 1
106173	216	Flt.Lt.	Williams, J. F.	6.4.44	107 Sqdn.	British	RAF	8 C 3

Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Scotland, chief of the War Crimes Investigation Unit responsible for pre-trial interrogation and the production of evidence, is seen here in July 1947 in the Curio-Haus at Hamburg, where he testified in the case of 18 Germans accused of the massacre. (AP)

through by rail and road. On January 25, it became certain that the Red Army had crossed the Oder at more than one point. Two days later, the whole of Stalag Luft 3 was hastily evacuated at three hours' notice in the face of the advancing Red Army, then only a few miles away to the east. The six compounds moved out in geographical order. The march was in westerly direction and the most westerly compounds left first. On February 2, most of the prisoners had reached Spremberg, some 70 miles south-east of Berlin, and were entrained for Bremen. However, the train arrived instead at Tarmstedt, some 15 miles to the north-east, and the column marched to a nearby camp. On April 9, the prisoners were ordered to move again. With the spearhead of the advancing British forces not far away, freedom was in sight at last. This time, they marched north-eastwards, crossed the Elbe at Hamburg, and on May 2 they were finally relieved by tanks of the 11th Armoured Division at Trenthorst-Wulmenau, a large estate halfway between Hamburg and Lübeck.

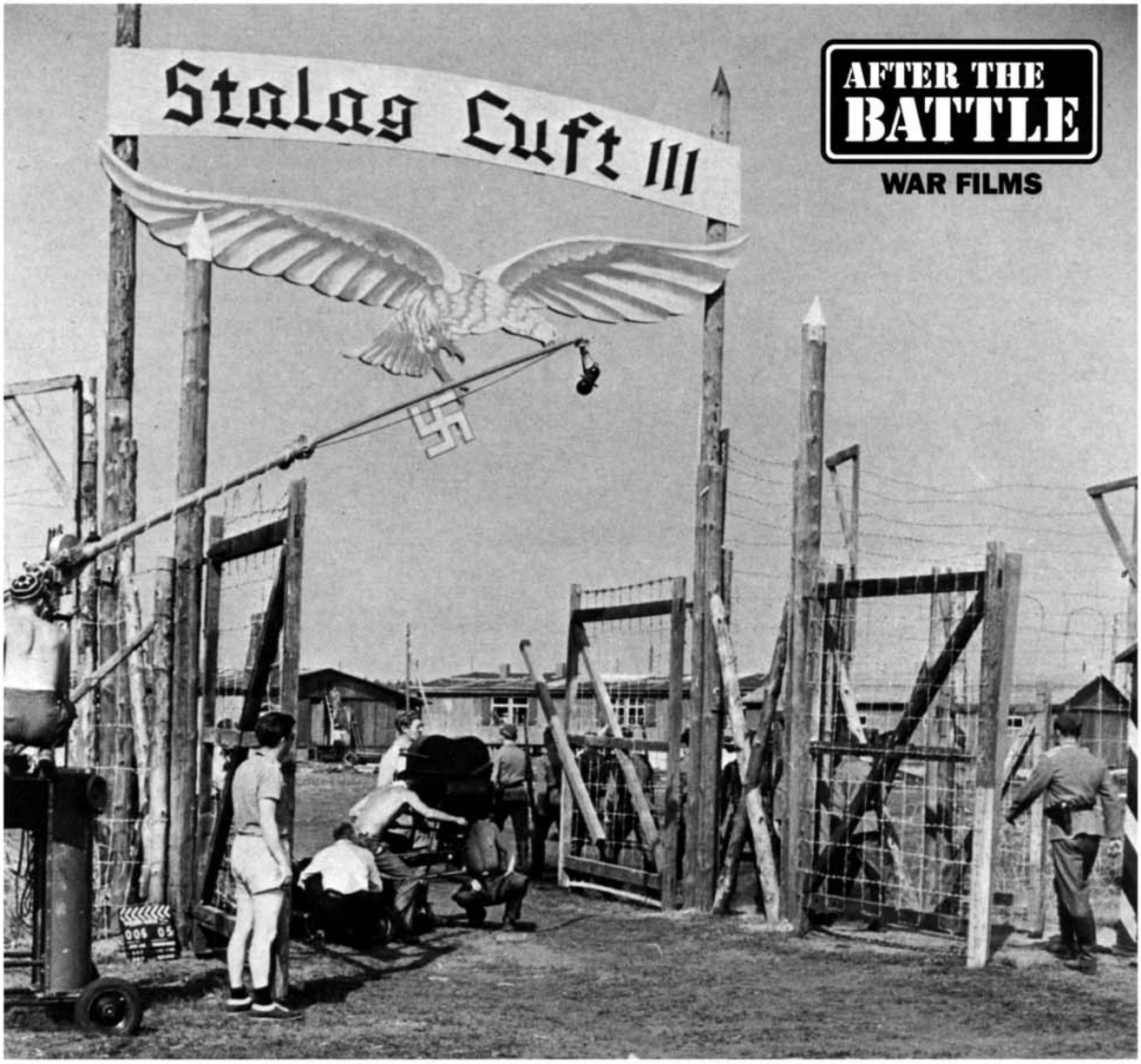
The war was over, but sealed in the minds of the former prisoners were the thoughts of 50 of their comrades being brutally shot. The officers had naturally only very limited knowledge of what had happened. On September 3, Squadron Leader Francis P. McKenna flew to Bückeburg, an airfield near Minden, 30 miles west of Hannover, to begin investigations. What had happened to the 50 escapees who had been murdered was pieced together, partly from evidence of those who were recaptured and survived, and also as a result of the indefatigable efforts of an investigation team which, from the moment the murders were known, was determined to try to bring to justice all those who had been directly involved in the killings. Under the personal direction of the Provost Marshal of the RAF, enquiries were begun in co-operation with the Judge Advocate General's War Crimes Section, Military Intelligence, United States Army War Crimes Liaison and the Czech and French War Crimes Commissions. The investigation team undertook a search through Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, France, Holland, and the Western Zones of Germany. Investigations took a full year and, after 60,000 Germans had been interrogated, the search was narrowed down to 319 people, 25 of whom were brought to Britain for further interrogation.

In 1947, 18 men were brought to trial at Hamburg, under the proceedings against war criminals instituted by the United Nations. After a trial lasting six weeks, 14 were sentenced to death by hanging, two to imprisonment for life and two to imprisonment for ten years. Two others committed suicide and the death of a third was established. A further two men were executed in Czechoslovakia after conviction for other war crimes and another was held in custody by the Czech government for war crimes against Czech nationals. Thus 24 of those involved in the murders had been accounted for. Those sentenced to death were hanged at Hameln prison on February 27, 1948. Meanwhile, enquiries continued in Germany. Another 28 individuals were known to have been directly concerned with the murders. Several were believed to be in the Russian Zone and it was also believed that the Poles had executed two more of the wanted men. However, the investigators did not close the file on Stalag Luft 3.

In a second trial, which took place in November 1948, one man was found not guilty. Another was found guilty and sentenced to death, but the verdict was quashed on review. At this time, the British Government passed through Parliament the suspension of the death sentence and so another death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Squadron Leader McKenna distributed thousands of photosets of 38 men still on his wanted list to the British, American and French occupation authorities and to the German civil police. Not all the men sought were guilty, but they might be able to provide useful information. Results were slowly forthcoming and many were traced, interviewed and released. During the late 'forties and the early 'fifties, more men were caught and put in prison, others were reported dead or committed suicide when arrested. Three men later were tried before German courts and were sentenced to imprisonment.

Of the 72 men indicted for killing and conspiracy to kill, contrary to the laws and usages of war, 21 were executed; 17 imprisoned; 11 committed suicide; 7 were untraced of whom 4 were presumed dead; 6 were killed in wartime; 5 were arrested, but for political reasons a charge was not proceeded with; one was arrested and not prosecuted but used as a material witness; 3 were acquitted, or the sentence quashed on review, and one remained free in Eastern Germany until his death. The resounding achievement of the Sagan executions investigation team, which had been responsible for some 100,000 interrogations and the physical arrest of many of the war criminals, was the moral victory.

The Curio-Haus on the Rothenbaumchaussee in Hamburg was built in 1911. Its libraries and auditoriums were used for educational purposes until 1933 when the building was taken over by the Nationalsozialisticher Lehrer-Bund (National Socialist Teacher Society). In 1945, the Curio-Haus was requisitioned by the British occupation authorities and it became the venue of more than 30 trials held by the War Crimes Court of the British occupation zone, including those against the guards of Neuengamme concentration camp; Generalfeldmarschal Erich von Manstein, convicted of being responsible for the deaths of partisans and Soviet PoWs; and Kapitänleutnant Heinz Eck, the commanding officer of *U-852*, who was sentenced to death for having ordered the killing of castaways. In 1947, 18 of those who were charged with the murder of the 50 PoWs from Sagan were indicted here and, after a trial lasting six weeks, 14 were sentenced to death by hanging, two to imprisonment for life, and two to imprisonment for ten years. Today, the building again houses a library and serves educational purposes, the actual courtroom, a former auditorium, now being used as a cafeteria for students of the nearby Hamburg University.



THE WOODEN HORSE/THE GREAT ESCAPE

By Trevor Popple

The Wooden Horse (1950) and *The Great Escape* (1963) are both significant war films primarily for two reasons. The former, with its modest production values, just happened to begin the series of prison camp pictures which seemed to stream steadily into British cinemas through the 'fifties, spilling into the mid-'sixties, whilst the latter, with its influx of American actors, wide-screen colour and lavish production values, came to be regarded by some as the apotheosis of the genre. More importantly, both the films were adapted from true accounts of escapes that had occurred in the same camp — Stalag Luft 3.

In addition, the timing of the two stories was interwoven. The three tunnels dug for what became the Great Escape — in anticipation of releasing several hundred prisoners — were started in early April 1943, and, whilst maximum co-ordinated effort was going into this mass escape, the 'X' committee, running the operation, recognised that there would still have to be other independent escape attempts so that camp activity would appear normal to the Germans. It was the Wooden Horse tunnel, dug in the summer of 1943, that fell into this category.

THE WOODEN HORSE

The Wooden Horse began as a book written by Flight Lieutenant Eric Williams, in which he recounted his own successful escape from the camp via a tunnel disguised by a wooden vaulting horse.

Production of the picture took place through the autumn of 1949 and, because the war had only been over for four years, it was therefore no revelation that of the twelve principal actors, all had been in the armed services, with three having been PoWs in reality.

The film's producer, Ian Dalrymple, having spent 25 years in the film industry as an editor, writer, director and producer, had been appointed producer for the Crown Film Unit in August 1940, and it was under his auspices that such wartime classics as *Target For Tonight*, *Fires Were Started*, *London Can Take It*, and *Coastal Command* had been produced.

Jack Lee — director of *The Wooden Horse* — had also been with the Crown Film Unit; he had edited *London Can Take It*, and co-directed *Coastal Command* and *Ordinary People*, amongst others.

The production plan was to build a replica of Stalag Luft 3 on location in Germany, and to shoot both exterior and interior scenes within it, weather permitting; to shoot other location scenes as required in Germany and Denmark, and to finish the picture in England at Shepperton Studios — principally the tunnelling scenes. Overall, about two thirds of the film was shot on location.

A section of Lüneburg Heath near the town of Soltau became the site for the replica prison camp — the location of the original being within the Soviet Zone at this time. Built and finished entirely with German labour, the project provided a temporary boost to the local economy. Art director William Kellner was assisted in the design of the set by the film's technical adviser, Wing Commander Ralph Ward, who had spent three years in Stalag Luft 3. He was also given a part in the picture as 'Stafford' the adjutant. Eric Williams — having been granted extended leave by his employers — was also on hand to give technical advice.

Eric Williams (holding file) with members of the cast and crew recreating *The Wooden Horse* in the replica camp built in 1949 at Soltau on Lüneburg Heath. L-R: Anthony Steel (playing Michael Codner but named 'John' in the film); director Jack Lee; Leo Genn, portraying Eric Williams ('Peter'); Williams; and technical adviser Wing Commander Ralph Ward who also appears in the film as the character 'Stafford'.

Crowd scenes within the compound — the 'Appells' in particular — were done with the aid of BAOR personnel, and men from RAF units. With the reduction of the Berlin Airlift, some officers gave up their leave to populate the camp, and other aircrews were granted special leave to become 'PoWs' by the AOC-in-C of the British Air Forces of Occupation, Air Marshal Thomas Williams. At one point, the production could boast seven ex-PoWs reliving past experiences in the replica stalag.

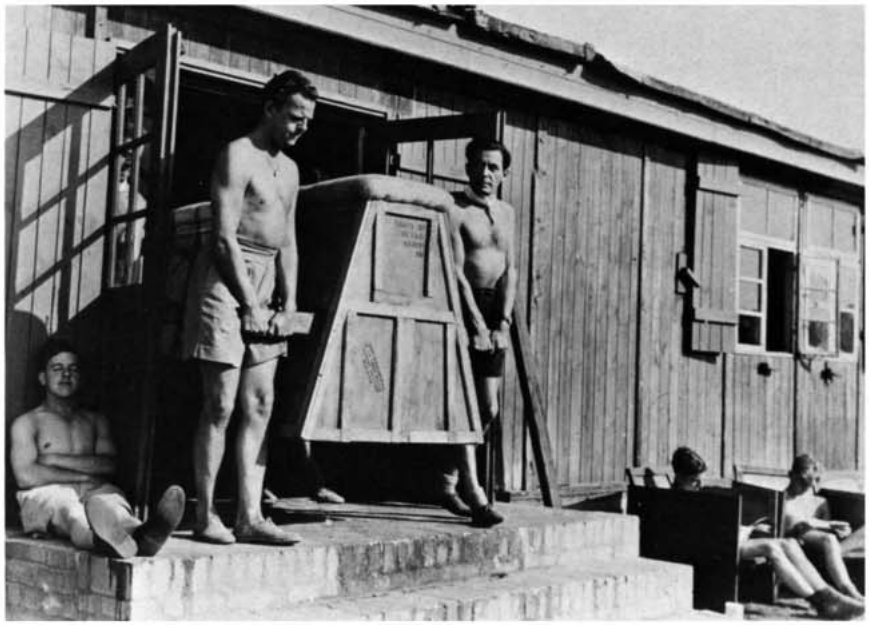
Casting the German rôles in the script was difficult; the producers wanted to use German actors, but in 1949 this was not easy in the occupied zone, due to a lack of intake into the profession over recent years. Consequently, with the exception of Franz Schafheitlin who played the camp commandant, it was necessary to cast from type: for example, Hans Meyer, who played Charlie, the head 'ferret', had once served in a German cavalry regiment, and was currently employed as a clerk with a British army unit. Officers and guards in the camp were played by ex-members of the Wehrmacht but, in the event, such authenticity was spoilt by the use of indifferent German uniforms — the real thing, not surprisingly, being unavailable in Germany at that time.

The principal street scenes after the escape were photographed in Lübeck. In reality this part of the story had taken place in Stettin but, like the real Stalag Luft 3, this town was also in the Soviet Zone. It was in the Lübeck sequence that a young Walter Gotell appeared — referred to in the cast list only as 'The Follower'. Due to his huge frame and menacing Slavic appearance, he subsequently enjoyed a rich career, playing both German or Russian 'heavies' — and became an essential 'face' in the Bond films.

As with Eric Williams' book, the names of the principal characters in the script (written in collusion with Dalrymple and Lee) were changed; consequently it was as 'Peter' that Leo Genn in effect portrayed Williams, and as 'John' that Anthony Steel played Williams' co-escapee, Michael Codner. David Tomlinson was cast as 'Phil', the third member of the escape.

Also included in the picture was a brief impersonation of the man who built the vaulting horse. He was Wing Commander Roger Maw, a self-appointed carpenter, and the source of much makeshift gadgetry within the camp. He was also noted for his flamboyant mode of dress. As he said: 'I thought I'd dress like a foreigner so that I wouldn't be noticed if I had to bale out. But I must have been dressed as the wrong sort of foreigner!' Indeed, he was: when captured he was wearing a bright yellow shirt with a large red handkerchief, grey flannel trousers, Egyptian sandals and pink socks. As with other real-life characters portrayed in the picture, Maw's name was changed, becoming 'Wings' Cameron, played by Russell Waters.

When *The Wooden Horse* was released at the end of July 1950, it met with general approval from the critics. And being the first of the genre, it could not fall foul of critical comparison with other escape pictures.



Left: **The third escaper, Oliver Philpot, simply 'Phil' in the film, was played by David Tomlinson seen carrying the vaulting horse with Leo Genn. The original horse had been built by Wing Commander Roger Maw** *(right)* **who had been shot down in August 1942 in the Western Desert while commanding No. 108 Squadron and sent to Stalag Luft 3 (not 'III' as painted on the sign over the entrance to the film camp shown on the previous page). Roger Maw died in August 1992 — his obituary in *The Times* described how the escape was inspired by Homer's story of how the Greeks used a wooden horse to infiltrate the city of Troy. 'The Stalag Luft 3 PoWs conceived the idea of using a vaulting-horse as a visual and psychological cover for the digging of an underground escape route. The camp carpenter declined to participate in the project, on the grounds that his equipment had been obtained on trust from the German authorities and was vital for the maintenance of camp morale. So Roger Maw — who had studied carpentry at school, had once built a three-wheel car and was a constant source of make-shift gadgetry in the camp — was recruited to construct the vaulting-horse.'**

'Using scrapwood, pieces of Red Cross food-parcel crates and the ends of beams surreptitiously sawn from the roofs of huts, he built a vaulting-frame which stood 4ft 6ins high and had a base covering an area of 5ft by 3ft. It was carried out each day to a point close to the camp perimeter wire and then used — in full view of the guards — ostensibly to improve the fitness of the prisoners. But while the prisoners' 'athletics team' performed their gymnastic routines, jumping and somersaulting on and over the vaulting-horse, fellow PoWs — hidden one by one in the horse — were secretly tunnelling to freedom underneath. They painstakingly dug their way towards the outside world before returning to the horse, ready to be carried back to their huts, minutes before the exercise period ended. The soil they removed as they tunnelled was meticulously collected and stored alongside the men as they were carried back. They used Maws's tools. He, meanwhile, had fashioned a replica set to display and fool the guards. Three prisoners managed to escape: Maw and the other members of the escape committee remained in the camp for another two years until liberated in 1945.'

Below: **The escape took place from the eastern end of the East Compound (see page 2) and Jan Heitmann visited the area in August 1991 when it was still a restricted military training area. 'Just like during the war, the warning signs reminded us that we were entering a military area and that we were "in danger of death" ', said Jan. 'Having been in military service in Germany, I knew that even in democratic states it can be dangerous to enter restricted military areas and we did not know for sure the attitude of the Poles. In the old days, their soldiers would not have hesitated to fire at invaders like us without warning. Now we hoped that they would give us a chance to surrender and explain before they brought their rifles to the ready. Knowing that at around 6 p.m. a good soldier is having his supper, I returned at about 5.30 p.m. I reached the camp area but then saw a Polish military truck emerging from the forest and turning my way. We took to our heels and managed to get to the car just in time. However, there were still photos to be taken so, with a throbbing heart, we returned two hours later. Fortunately we were not disturbed again.'**

The Great Escape **camp near Munich in 1962. Although this picture displays art director Fernando Carrere's replica 'Stalag Luft North' to good effect, it bore little relation to the layout of the real Stalag Luft 3.**

THE GREAT ESCAPE

The Great Escape, on the other hand, whilst fêted by many for its scale and spectacle, was also criticised for its very predictability, coming as it did in the wake of so many prison camp pictures.

For writer Paul Brickhill, *The Great Escape* was his third book to be adapted for the big screen — the other two being *The Dam Busters* (1954) — see *After the Battle* No. 10 — and *Reach For The Sky* (1956) — see *After the Battle* No. 35.

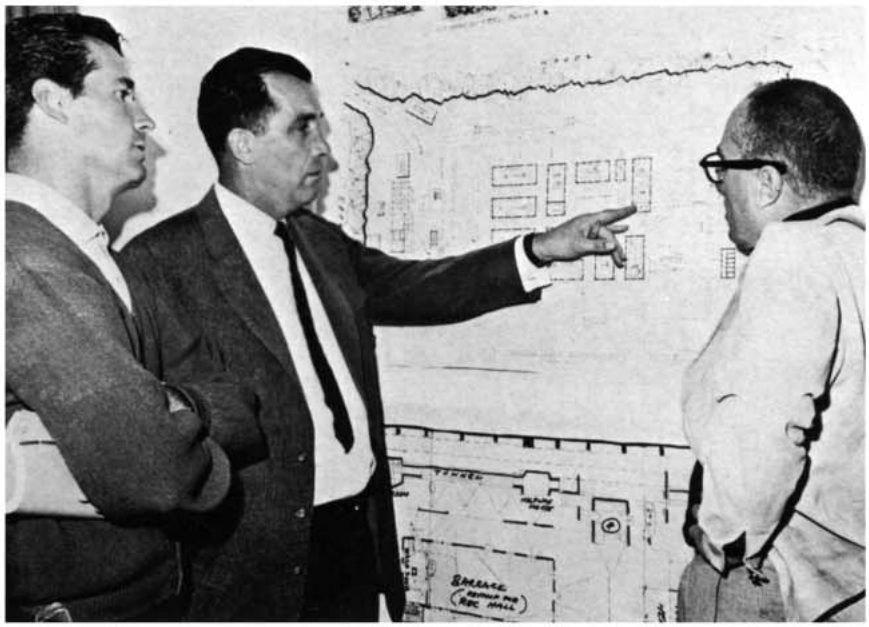
The beginnings of the book had been both unexpected and violent for Brickhill: on patrol over Tunisia in March 1943, a burst of fire from an enemy fighter had shattered the tail section of his Spitfire. He baled out and had the bad luck to parachute into the middle of a minefield. Taken into custody, he eventually finished up in Stalag Luft 3, and once there was drawn into the 'X' organisation, though Brickhill was denied his chance at freedom because he (together with three or four others) suffered from claustrophobia, and thus could not be allowed into the tunnel.

Producer/director John Sturges had bought the rights to Brickhill's book on behalf of himself and the Mirisch Corporation. He was well regarded for his films *Gunfight at the OK Corral, Bad Day at Black Rock* and *The Magnificent Seven*; in fact, three of the seven — Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson and James Coburn — played in *The Great Escape* alongside a predominantly British cast, in what was essentially a British story, though the latter pair played a Pole and an Australian respectively.

As with *The Wooden Horse*, Sturges' picture was photographed in Germany — during the summer of 1962 — utilising a specially built replica of the camp (called Stalag Luft North in the script) at a location near Munich. All the camp exteriors were shot here, with all the interiors being filmed at the Bavaria Studios, Munich. The Geiselgasteig area, with its magnificent mountain backdrop, also near Munich, was used for some exteriors — notably the now famous motorcycle chase featuring Steve McQueen.

By all accounts the motorcycle chase was not in the original script: the intended climax to the film was to be the shooting of the 50 Allied officers. McQueen's character was supposed to catch a train at Sagan along with a number of other escapees, but reportedly it was at a script conference, presided over by John Sturges, that McQueen proposed his escape by motorcycle. Sturges was receptive and, following a demonstration of riding skills by McQueen, agreed to a rewrite, in spite of potential insurance problems.

McQueen's prowess with a motorcycle was well known to his fans, and it soon became a 'fact' that he had done all the riding for the chase — the final leap over the barbed wire in particular. The way that the chase was photographed — invariably long shots bringing the rider from background into deep foreground — confirms that McQueen was doing the riding. However, that final leap over the wire has since been credited to two other riders. Malachy McCoy, McQueen's biographer, claims it for British scrambler



Wally Floody, the ex-PoW who was chief of tunnelling in 1943 (see page 4) and acted as technical adviser to the production, makes a point to producer/director John Sturges while James Garner, who plays 'Hendley' the scrounger, looks on.

Floody and Sturges discuss the finer points of the warning wire with Charles Bronson, John Leyton (in cap) and James Coburn who portray the three successful escapees (Jens Muller, Per Bergsland and Bram van der Stok). Lawrence Montaigne, who plays 'Haynes', a Canadian airman, and German actor Til Kiwe (previously seen in *The Longest Day* as Rommel's aide, Hellmuth Lang), stand on the right.

The 'penguin' method of sand dispersal, using sacks, which could be opened with a cord while hanging inside a prisoner's trousers, being demonstrated for Wally Floody's approval (see page 7).

Jeff Smith, but the popular consensus is that American Bud Ekins did it. He said he sold the bikes after the stunt.

Other than McQueen, playing Virgil Hilts 'The Cooler King', the film's two other principal performers were James Garner — known then for his rôle as TV's gambler Brett Maverick — and Richard Attenborough, who played 'Big X'. All the names of the real participants in the escape were changed in the film for dramatic considerations — or because of variations from fact. As a result, Attenborough's character — the key figure in the story — was changed from Squadron Leader Roger Bushell to Bartlett. Bushell's sister, Elizabeth, said of the actor's portrayal: '[Roger] had tremendous charisma — he wasn't a bit like the dour and short Richard Attenborough'. Group Captain Douglas Bader, who had been in Stalag Luft 3 prior to the break-out, enjoyed Attenborough's performance, but added that 'to anyone who knew Roger, an outstanding escaper, and a great organiser of escapes generally, the part must seem badly written'.

As with some of the cast of *The Wooden Horse,* the actor Donald Pleasence came to *The Great Escape* as an ex-PoW. As a Flying Officer serving as a wireless operator with No. 166 Squadron, operating Lancasters, he

Left: **The most successful trapdoor was that concealing 'Dick' in Hut 122. Its ingenious 'water trap' is recreated quite well . . . as is 'Harry's beneath the stove in Hut 104** *right* **although the hut numbers and tunnel names are confused in the film.**

'Sagan' railway station the morning after the break-out. Due to the tunnel running short of the trees, and the resultant congestion, many escapees missed their appointed train, with the consequence that they were left hanging around on the platforms. L-R: David McCallum as 'Ashley-Pitt'; James Garner ('Hendley') with Donald Pleasence ('Blythe'); and Lawrence Montaigne ('Haynes') with Tom Adams ('Nimmo').

'Herr Bartlett? Your German is good . . . and I hear also your French. Your arms up!' Karl Otto Alberty apprehends Richard Attenborough's Squadron Leader Bartlett. Alberty was one of a number of German actors who won a brief kind of fame as regulars in the American-made war epics of the 'sixties, appearing in *Battle of the Bulge* (1965), *Battle of Britain* (1969), and *Kelly's Heroes* (1970).

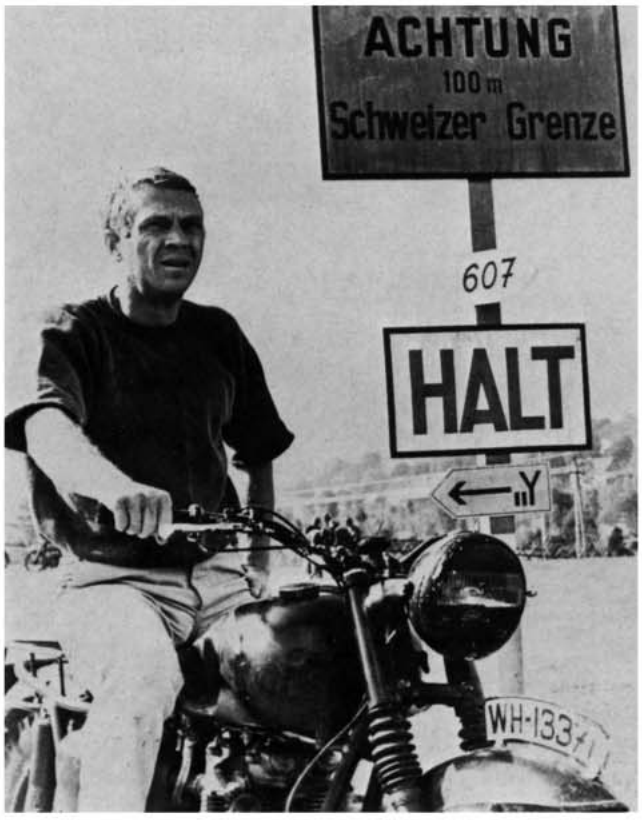
had been shot down on August 31, 1944 and taken prisoner. Pleasence plays the mild, inoffensive 'Colin Blythe', the 'X' committee's master forger, who loses his sight due to overwork preparing the mass of documents required for the escape. Taken under the wing of James Garner ('Hendley'), he is fatally shot after the light aircraft in which they are flying force-lands with engine trouble.

And it is the death of the harmless and helpless 'Blythe', blended with the deep remorse of 'Hendley', that produces a great and poignant moment in the picture, which up to that point is something of a schoolboy romp. It is the combination of this scene and McQueen's motorcycle antics which smothers the film's original climax — the murder of the 50 officers.

The Great Escape had its London premiere at the Odeon, Leicester Square on June 20, 1963. At this time, Steve McQueen was also featuring in another war picture, *The War Lover* — a deep love story, with the USAAF operating B-17s in England on the periphery.

Reporting for the *News of the World*, Douglas Bader wrote of *The Great Escape* that 'it is one of the best war films I have seen . . . and basically the film is true.' Speaking of Hannes Messemer's sympathetic performance as the camp commandant, he added: 'He is portrayed as a decent chap but I must confess that in the seven camps in which I was incarcerated, I never met one like him!'

Both *The Wooden Horse* and *The Great Escape* are seen from time to time on British television — particularly the latter which seemed to be aired during every Christmas holiday through the 1970s. However, *The Great Escape*, like so many wide-screen pictures, gets a rough deal on TV, being panned and scanned for a full screen image from grainy, and sometimes damaged, prints. As a consequence, about one third of the picture information is lost. The films are both presently available on video, with *The Great Escape* now released in a Special Collectors' wide-screen edition on both video and laser disc. Therefore, the best option for anyone interested in seeing these films in a pristine condition is to invest in the videos. After all, the pictures do represent the beginning and the end of the 'escape' genre of war films, and as such deserve a place in any video collection.



Unforgettable, even if not true. Steve McQueen seen as he is best remembered — as 'Hilts' the cooler king, the man who tried to outrun his pursuers and leap into Switzerland on a stolen German motorcycle. And it is this frenetic chase for which the film is primarily remembered. Exciting as it undeniably is, it is perhaps unfortunate that a picture which purports to relate (albeit dramatically enhanced) actual events should be hailed instead for a wholly fictitious episode introduced into the screenplay by one of the film's 'stars'. Two cycles were used: both British-made 1961 650cc Triumph models mocked up to represent the German army BMW machines, which were too heavy and rigid to make the jump safely.

THE GREAT ESCAPE PLUS 50

By Jan Bartelski

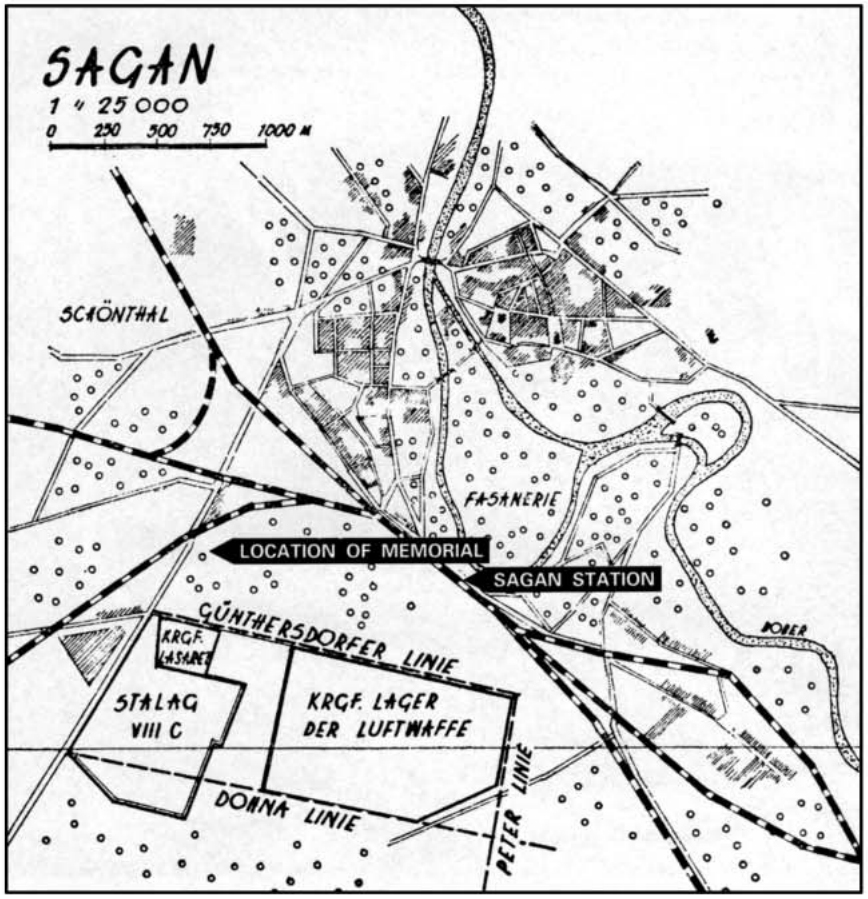
On March 28, 1994, 50 'pilgrims' set off from London City Airport on a sentimental return journey to Sagan but, from the 15 survivors of the Gestapo massacre still alive, only seven were able to make it. They were Sydney Dowse, Dennis Plunkett, Les Brodrick, Desmond Neely, Ray Wymeersch, Ivo Tonder and Bob Nelson. The rest consisted of other former inmates of Stalag Luft 3 or relatives of the murdered airmen. The 'pilgrims' had gathered from all over the world: from Australia, Britain, Canada, France, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The visit was organised by Andrew Wiseman, a former RAF navigator, himself an inmate of the camp. Andy, a retired BBC producer, visited Sagan three times previously in conjunction with the BBC 2 programme about the Great Escape, 'Going Underground', and was thus very knowledgeable and well able to guide the tour.

I was the only one without any connection with Stalag Luft 3 and I joined the pilgrimage at the suggestion of my old friend, Bob Nelson. A former colleague at KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Bob insisted that as Sagan is now in Poland, he needed help with the language and, anyway, it was time for me to look up the country of my birth after quite a few years of absence. Moreover, there was an obligation to remember the six Polish airmen victims so, when the Polish Air Force Association of Great Britain learnt of my intention to attend the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Great Escape, I was appointed their official representative. But, at that time, an obscure town in western Poland, now called Zagan, meant little to me.

A quick look at the map revealed that Zagan lies only 100 miles south-east of Berlin as the crow flies. Before the war, it was in German hands, therefore it never appeared in my geography books, but in 1945, with a stroke of Stalin's pen, the borders of Poland were shifted westwards and Zagan found itself in new hands. The entire German population was packed onto lorries and transferred to the DDR. New settlers, mainly from the part of Poland taken over by the USSR, began to drift in.

If one discounts the 80th man caught in the tunnel entrance and the three men who were captured after having just emerged, 76 prisoners escaped from the camp. There were therefore 26 survivors including the three who successfully made home runs to Britain (see page 19). Fifty years later, 15 members of the exclusive Great Escape 'club' were still alive, of whom seven were able to take part in an 'away run' back to the camp. As a memorial service had already been organised for the exact anniversary on Friday, March 24, at the RAF church of St Clement Danes in London, the trip to Poland took place the following Monday. *Top:* **Pictured beside a model of the North Compound in the Martyrdom Museum at Sagan are (L–R) Dennis Plunkett, Sydney Dowse, Ivo Tonder (Czechoslovakia), Ray van Wymeersch (France), Les Brodrick, and Bob Nelson.** *Above:* **The museum, built on the site of Stalag VIIIC, has very few exhibits on the Great Escape although the balance is due to be redressed. (All pictures by Julian Wiseman and Jan Bartelski.)**



After the war, Silesia was ceded to Poland under the terms of the Potsdam Agreement. Most of the German population emigrated to Germany or was forced to leave and was largely replaced by Poles. The area, today Polish Slask, is corresponding to the modern Polish provinces of Wroclaw (formerly Breslau), Opole (formerly Oppeln), and Katowice (formerly Kattowitz). On this German plan of 1943, Stalag Luft 3 is designated 'KR[iegs]G[e]F[angenen] LAGER DER LUFTWAFFE'. (OKBZH Archives)

The whole area west of the pre-war German-Polish border was now renamed 'The Recovered Territories', as parts had belonged to Poland a few centuries back, although this description could hardly apply to Zagan with its multi-national heritage.

At Berlin's Tempelhof Airport, we boarded a Polish bus and two locally rented cars. I was assigned to one car, my companions being Nick Pollet, Rex Austen from Australia, and Dr Eric Stephenson. On crossing the Polish border, one could not help being amazed by the queues of lorries, several miles long, waiting on both sides for customs clearance. The lorries were doubled up on the motorway with only a narrow lane left for passing traffic.

My first surprise on noticing the name Żagań on a road sign was that with the 'Z' and 'n' having accents above them, it should really be pronounced Dgagan, the 'D' spoken softly and the 'n' at the end sounding like the 'n' in Compiégne. However, all my efforts to teach my companions a proper pronunciation were in vain, and to the veteran PoWs it will always be plain 'Sagan'.

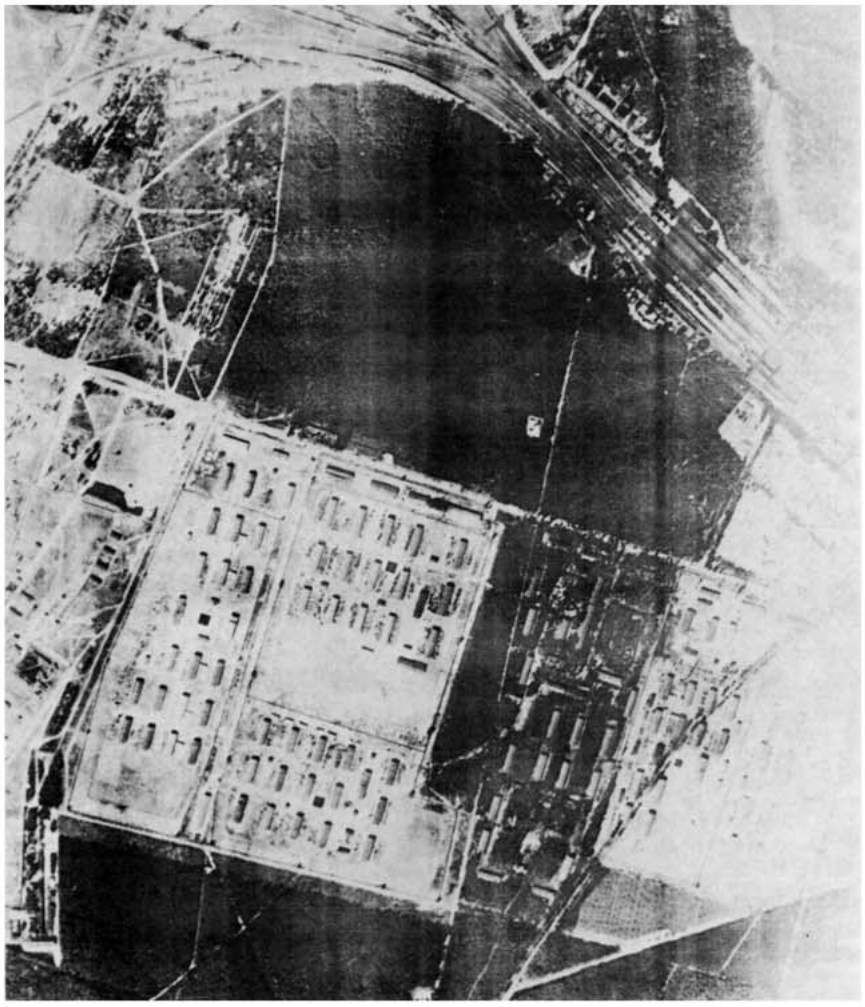
On approaching the town, it became evident why in 1939 this area had been selected for a mammoth complex of PoW camps. A sandy infertile soil, lacking agriculture, and with only an occasional patch of thin forest, offered few opportunities for prisoners on the run to hide.

Bob Nelson was right about needing an interpreter. Apart from Andy Wiseman, whose parents are Polish, I was the only one who was able to communicate with the hotel staff. The building was very old and, by Western standards, austere, and somewhat dilapidated, but it still possessed a certain aura.

All our dinners and lunches were arranged in the Officers' Mess of the Polish 11th Armoured Division, as it was the only place large enough to cater for the whole group.

A comprehensive programme was arranged for our two-day stay. It began with a visit to the Martyrdom Museum of Allied PoWs. The local authorities treated the presence of the former inmates of Stalag Luft 3 with great reverence. All traffic on the road from Zagan to the museum, situated about two kilometres away, was halted until our convoy had passed, a gesture which greatly impressed the 'pilgrims'. The museum, opened in 1971, is situated on the site of Stalag VIIIC, the first camp to be erected in this area in 1939. Originally, the museum was mainly dedicated to the 50,000 Russian prisoners who died in the camp from starvation and ill-treatment, and most of the exhibits reflect their fate. A large map displayed on one wall showed the complex of various camps and its satellites with a peak capacity of 300,000. Stalag Luft 3, with just over 10,000 airmen, appears to have been a drop in the ocean.

The curator apologised for the lack of exhibits depicting Stalag Luft 3 and, after taking me on one side, in guarded words he explained that the 'previous' authorities, meaning the Communist government, did not attach much importance to the memories of what they regarded as a camp for 'imperialistic officers'. However, he said that efforts



had been made recently to remedy the situation, but, as the area where Stalag Luft 3 was located had been under strict army control until two years before, with no one allowed to visit the area, there had not been much time to comb it properly for relics. Fortunately, some of the ex-PoWs had brought their own mementoes which they donated to the museum or had photocopied for display.

After the visit, we departed for the nearby military cemetery where an official ceremony was scheduled to take place. Here stands the impressive monument erected to commemorate the massacre of the airmen, and other memorials are dedicated to the inmates of Stalag VIIIC and another to the victims of World War I.

The ceremony was arranged by the 11th Armoured Division, which has its headquarters in Zagan, and was attended by all its high-ranking officers, the Mayor of Zagan, and many local organisations, including school children. After the laying of numerous wreaths, a roll-call of the dead followed. As the names were read out by John Casson, a former Fleet Air Arm lieutenant commander, the assembled soldiers responded with 'Let them rest in peace' in Polish. John, son of Dame Sybil Thorndike, the famous actress, was a leading figure in the camp's theatrical activities. The ceremony ended with a rifle volley but, as the soldiers cocked their weapons, which happened to be aimed in our direction, some of the 'pilgrims' must have recollected how often the German guards also pointed their weapons at them near this spot. Luckily, the rifles were quickly lifted above their heads and fired, leaving all of us greatly relieved.

The memorial in the foreground is inscribed 'Erected by the prisoners of war of the Allied Air Forces in honoured memory of their comrades who died at Stalag Luft 3 during the war, AD1939 194– Per Ardua ad Astra'.

Back where it all started — the site of Hut 104. Now all seven escapers (including Desmond Neely, missing in the picture on page 21) are assembled together on the spot where they made their bid for freedom 50 years before.

The next item on our itinerary was for the former inmates of Stalag Luft 3 to inspect what remained of the North Compound where 50 years ago 'Harry' had led some of them to a glimpse of freedom. Again, all traffic was stopped as we drove to the remains of the camp. However, the first impression was disappointing. The site, overgrown by silver birches, displayed hardly any evidence of the former camp, and nothing appeared to be left of the barracks, the guard-houses or the fences. Luckily, Sydney Dowse, who had visited Zagan with the BBC crew, was able to point out what remained of the famous Hut 104, and he and the other six survivors gathered round the remaining bricks of the stove base, under which the tunnel was started, for a photograph.

Later, we drove to the railway station. Unlike the virtual extinction of Stalag Luft 3, the station, the last landmark to all PoWs on the way to captivity, was a more familiar sight because nothing had changed since the wartime days, and we were shown the famous ticket office, situated in a passage under the rail tracks, where the lucky ones bought their train tickets after the Great Escape.

In the afternoon, the pilgrims were treated to a tour of the old Talleyrand castle, now Zagan's Palace of Culture. We found the Palace in immaculate condition, a contrast to the town which still displays many wartime scars. A specially-arranged concert was an indication of the important rôle music plays

The railway station — the main route used by many of the escapers to get away from Sagan — lies just a quarter of a mile north of the camp.

in Polish life. In the evening, a banquet was held in honour of the 'pilgrims' by Mayor Janusz Bujak. Considering that Zagan is a small town with only 28,000 inhabitants, the financial burden of this one event must have absorbed quite a large part of the Mayor's allocation for his PR duties.

Next morning was left free for our own activities. A bus tour of the town was arranged for those who wanted to see something of Zagan, but on my car companions' minds was only one urge — another visit to Stalag Luft 3. A second inspection of the North Compound proved much more revealing. This time, we identified the brick foundations on which the wooden huts and the theatre had been erected, and it was even possible to locate the fire pool, although it now looked much smaller than their memories had recalled. One discovery was very, very exciting — a shallow dip which had developed in the road running along the North Compound. With the tunnel exit having been blown up by the Germans shortly

Although the main entrance lay north of the line, the prisoners knew that a rear entrance *(left)* **led via a subway under the tracks to the booking hall** *(right)*. **However, the subway was protected by a storm porch and, in the darkness, most of the escapers could not find the entrance. In June 1944, *After the Battle* reader Peter Bradley travelled all the way from Australia to picture the station, including the porch on the south side, on his own 50th anniversary tour to Europe.**

Left: **Nick Pollet, a former Stalag Luft 3 inmate but not one of the Great Escapers, found this electrical insulator in the undergrowth, but an amazing discovery was this dip in the road** *(right)* **where 'Harry' has subsided.** *Below:* **Of the camp itself, only rubble from the footings of the huts remains, the whole area now being covered with new tree growth.**

after the Great Escape, the section of the tunnel beneath the road would have collapsed. The dip could be noticed thanks to the recent rains which had deposited dark silt in the depression in the asphalt surface. My companions found the discovery so absorbing that they were prepared to forego lunch, and Nick Pollet was also rewarded by his perseverance in combing the undergrowth under the silver birches when he found a porcelain insulator on which electric wires were strung to stop escapes over the fence.

It is not easy to piece together what had happened to Stalag Luft 3 and the other camps after the war. Zagan was overrun by the Red Army in January 1945 and there are many signs that fighting actually took place right on the site by the remains of numerous trenches. Later, German prisoners-of-war were kept in the camp until they were transferred to Russia. When the Polish population started to move in, with a dire shortage of fuel, the barracks were most likely torn down for firewood and anything of value stolen.

That afternoon, we left for Poznan to attend a ceremony scheduled for the next morning at the British Military Cemetery where the ashes of the airmen shot by the Gestapo are now interred. Again, the local authorities attached great importance to our visit, and the bus was met by a police car on the city outskirts and escorted to our hotel, where we were met by members of the diplomatic corps from several nations.

The British Military Cemetery is located in a park dedicated to the wartime Polish-Soviet brotherhood-in-arms, next to a cemetery for Soviet soldiers. This time the predominant military contingent came from the Polish Air Force in Poznan, but all civil and ex-combatant organisations were represented, including the Polish Underground.

The 'pilgrims' were overwhelmed by their reception in Poland which seemed to echo an old Polish proverb — 'Guest home, God home', and local newspapers and radio were full of reports of the 50th anniversary of this historic event, in a surprising revelation of just how much the country revered the Great Escape.

Above: **But during Peter Bradley's exploration of the area, he came up with an even more amazing discovery: the 'cooler'!**

Overleaf: **The graves in Poznan — the former Prussian town of Posen — last resting place of the dead since 1948.**