

Colditz Castle prisoner of war camp became famous for the repeated and ingenious escape efforts undertaken by the prisoners. One of the most astonishing was that of Lieutenant Mike Sinclair, the man they called the Red Fox. Britain at War now brings that attempt to life as we re-trace his steps in pictures.



THE RUNNING OF

SCHLOSS COLDITZ, or *Oflag IV-C* as it had become, was a high security prisoner of war camp in Germany during the Second World War. Here were placed the most troublesome Allied prisoners – which meant the Germans really had put all their (bad) eggs in one basket. Among its inmates was Lieutenant Albert Michael 'Mike' Sinclair, who, with the 2nd Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps, had been captured in northern France.¹

In due course Sinclair was sent to *Stalag XXI-D* in northern Poland, but escaped in a handcart. He got as far as Bulgaria, having travelled through Slovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia, before he was recaptured. Sinclair had studied Modern Languages at Trinity College, Cambridge, and his linguistic skills helped him considerably.

MAIN PICTURE:
A view of Colditz Castle, the former *Oflag IV-C*, today.

(ALL IMAGES HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS UNLESS STATED OTHERWISE)

ABOVE LEFT:
Lieutenant Michael Sinclair, sometimes described as "the greatest escaper of them all", (COURTESY OF SCHLOSS COLDITZ)

On the way back to Germany Sinclair escaped from the train he was in through a toilet window. He was spotted and re-taken, having hurt his leg in the fall from the moving carriage. Seen as a difficult prisoner, Mike Sinclair was transported to Colditz in July 1942.

Very shortly after his arrival at Colditz Sinclair was informed that he was to be court-martialled for an offence he had committed in *Stalag XXI-D*. He was taken to the nearest large city, Leipzig, for trial. Inevitably, Sinclair seized the opportunity and escaped (once again through a toilet window) while in a hospital at Leipzig where he was being treated for sinusitis. A few days later he was captured in Cologne.

Back at Colditz, and after a period of solitary confinement, Sinclair made his next escape attempt. He slipped through

the German kitchens after lunch in the company of Dutch prisoner Charles Klein. They were both recaptured but not before they had reached Immendingen, close to the Swiss border in Baden-Württemberg.

THE FAKE FRANZ

Sinclair's next attempt was his most ambitious, and without question his most ingenious, to date. Sinclair was addicted to the 'escaping game', as his oldest companion Gris Davis-Scourfield recalled: "I would wake up in the middle of the night, as we were usually in the same room. Mike would be standing at the window just watching the sentries patrolling below, counting the number of seconds it took them to turn around and walk back on their beats. He was

OF THE RED FOX



LEFT:
Stabsfeldwebel
Fritz
Rothenberger,
or **Franz Joseph**
as he was more
commonly
known, sporting
his distinctive
moustache. Lt
Teddy Barton
laboured to
achieve the
same effect
for Sinclair
using shaving
brushes.

(COURTESY OF
SCHLOSS COLDITZ)

constantly looking for information that might be useful to him."

Sinclair's constant observing and thinking gave him the impetus for this next attempt, the idea for which he proposed in April 1943. It involved impersonating one of the best-known of the German guards, *Stabsfeldwebel* Fritz Rothenberger.

A decorated First World War veteran, Rothenberger was known to the prisoners and guards alike as 'Franz Joseph'.² His nickname arose because of his similarity with that of the late Austrian Emperor of the same name – ruddy complexion, puffy cheeks, grey hair, portly bearing and an enormous ginger-coloured, white-topped moustache which covered half his face. It was this last distinctive feature of the German NCO which lent itself to imitation.

One of Rothenberger's tasks each night, Sinclair had noted, was to inspect the sentries on the eastern terrace of the castle. He would undertake his rounds in the middle of the night to make sure they were alert and vigilant. The terrace was guarded by sentries posted 30 yards apart. Once he had completed his tour Rothenberger would leave through the terrace gate, which was manned by two guards – one who patrolled the catwalk above, the other who stood by the gate to allow guards and other personnel to pass through.

The plan devised by Sinclair (now called the 'Red Fox' by the Germans) and Lieutenant Monty Bissell was that Sinclair would impersonate Rothenberger and walk up to the two guards, telling them that there was a disturbance on the other side of the >>

THE ESCAPE ATTEMPT:

This room was used as the sick bay during Colditz Castle's time as a PoW camp, though during that period the arch in the foreground was actually a wall. It was from this area that Sinclair, Hyde-Thompson and Pope climbed out of a window to reach the terrace below.



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castle, and ordering them to hand over the gate key while they went back to the guardroom for further instructions. When the guards were away, two prisoners dressed as Germans would take their place at the gate. Bissell and Sinclair had calculated that it would take four and a half minutes for the sentry to march back to the guardroom, during which time 20 prisoners would swing down ropes from the castle windows and escape through the gate. If things went really well, a further ten would follow.

Obviously, the ruse would soon be discovered and then the guard and the real Rothenberger would come hurrying back. The two imitation guards would, by this time, also have taken off 'in pursuit' of the escapers. Though the

Germans would know that something had happened, they would not know how many prisoners had got away nor which direction – or directions – they had taken. This would give the escapees a good chance of getting far away before the Germans could hope to begin tracking them down.

The scheme obviously rested for its success upon how well Sinclair could impersonate Rothenberger. The prisoners had often observed the way in which the Germans obeyed instructions without question and it was hoped that this deference to rank would mean that the guards would immediately obey the fake Rothenberger without daring to challenge him in any way. This was not just a case of stereotyping, as one of the Germans, Peter Hoffman explained: "We

Having climbed out of a window in the officers' sick bay toilets, the three fake Germans found themselves on this stretch of terrace before making their way down the steps in the foreground.



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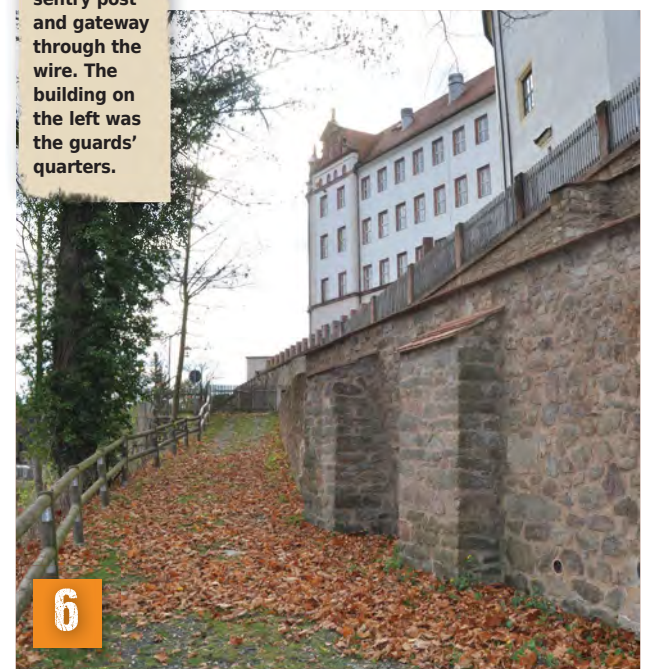
The final stretch of ground which the three escapers needed to cover to reach the sentry post and gateway through the wire. The building on the left was the guards' quarters.

were proud of our Prussian traditions. We all thought Rothenberger was a real German soldier. He had fought in the First World War, he had an Iron Cross – and his moustache. Of course, if he ordered one of us young ones to do something we would certainly do it."



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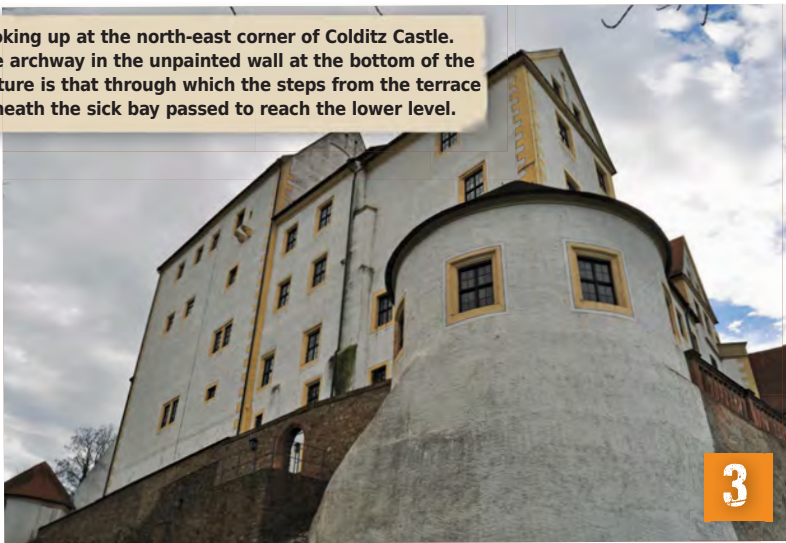
With everyone seemingly proceeding according to plan, Sinclair, Hyde-Thompson and Pope rounded this corner to head towards the sentry post and gap in the wire defences through which they would pass into the roadway that led away from the castle. A sentry post was positioned on the left hand side of this area. On the far side of the fence was a steep drop down to the stream below.



6

MOMENT BY MOMENT

Looking up at the north-east corner of Colditz Castle. The archway in the unpainted wall at the bottom of the picture is that through which the steps from the terrace beneath the sick bay passed to reach the lower level.



Having walked down the steps, passed through the archway (visible just before the round tower) and down the remaining steps, Sinclair, Hyde-Thompson and Pope found themselves on this lower, wider, terrace. They immediately walked towards our photographer's position, who in turn is standing in the general area where a sentry post was situated.

THE ESCAPE ACADEMY

To succeed, Sinclair's plan required considerable preparation. First of all, three German uniforms would be needed. As it was still cold at night, the Germans on duty wore greatcoats, so three of these were manufactured from blankets, which then had to be dyed the exact colour of grey. The insignia worn on the coats were made out of linoleum cut from the floor and painted with watercolours purchased in the canteen shop.

Altogether some 50 men of the so-called 'Escape Academy' were involved in preparing for the escape attempt. One of the next tasks was to forge Rothenberger's Iron Cross, which was prominently worn by the NCO. This was cast in zinc that had been stolen from the roof of the building. It was heated up on an open stove and was shaped with a broken table knife. Meanwhile, Rothenberger's hat was produced by the men who provided the theatre props for the plays and shows that the prisoners were allowed to perform. For this an RAF cap was dyed green and fitted with a peak.

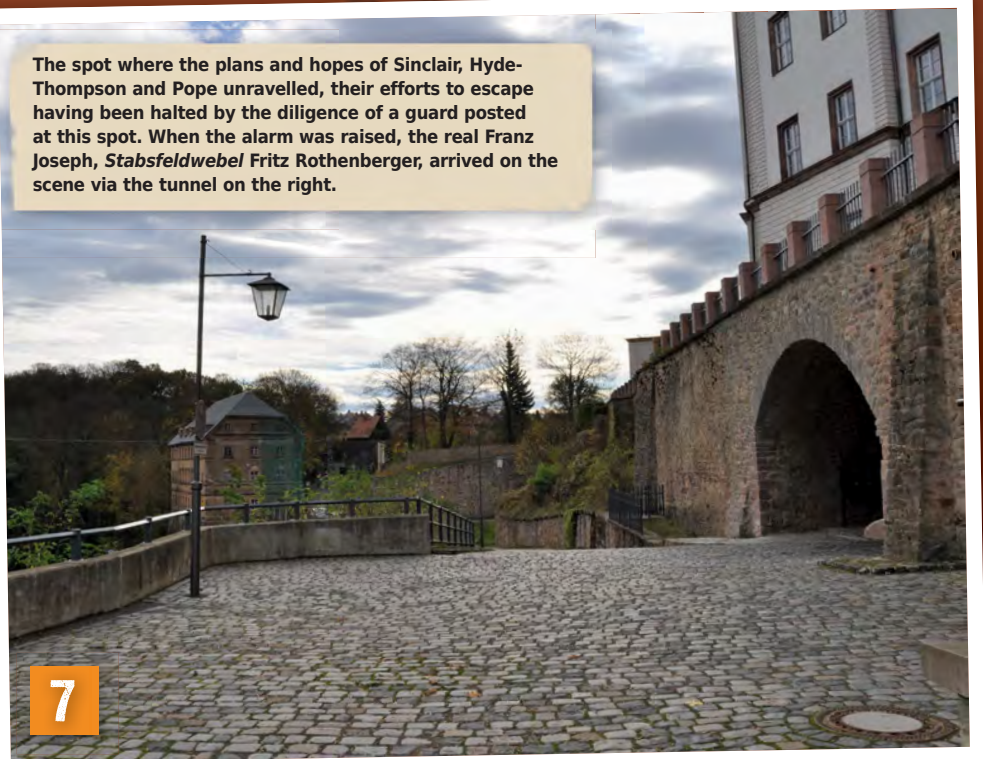
Next, two dummy rifles had to be manufactured for the fake guards. These were constructed of wood with the use of a home-made lathe. The 'rifle' barrels were polished with lead pencils, and both weapons were provided with scabbards, while the 'guards' also wore a holster and pistol. The attention to detail was remarkable, with triggers for the rifles cut out of tin and the rifle bolts fashioned from the PoWs' metal bedsteads.

Rothenberger's pistol was a Walther P38. Normally, of course, it was in its holster with just the black base of the magazine at the bottom of the handgrip being visible. So this was the only bit that had to be made. The holster itself was made from cardboard with stitching pencilled on and dyed a dull red to imitate leather.

While all this activity was taking place under the very noses of the Germans, Sinclair rehearsed his role as 'Franz Joseph'. He studied Rothenberger carefully as he strode around the camp, and under the

considered eye of the Colditz theatre impresario, Lieutenant Teddy Barton, Sinclair practised the German NCO's movements and mannerisms. Barton was also the man responsible for Sinclair's crowning glory—the great moustache. This he made out of shaving brushes. It took him 14 attempts until he was happy that he had created a satisfactory replica. The two false guards, Lieutenant John Hyde-Thompson and Captain Lance Pope, who both spoke German, also had to learn their parts well and be able to mimic the German drill. >>

The spot where the plans and hopes of Sinclair, Hyde-Thompson and Pope unravelled, their efforts to escape having been halted by the diligence of a guard posted at this spot. When the alarm was raised, the real Franz Joseph, *Stabsfeldwebel* Fritz Rothenberger, arrived on the scene via the tunnel on the right.



THE RUNNING OF THE RED FOX

Colditz Escape Step-by-Step



The view from the spot where Sinclair, Hyde-Thompson and Pope were challenged, looking back across where their last few steps had been — the gate on the right is positioned on the terrace up which they walked. The German sentry and wire were positioned in the immediate foreground.

Each pass had to bear a photograph of the individual carrying it. For this Major William Anderson built an imitation box Brownie camera out of an old cigar box with broken spectacles as the lenses. One of the German guards provided the film and developer, presumably in return for gifts from the Red Cross parcels which the prisoners received.

The preparations did not end there, as each escaper needed a map. These were copied from the few that had not been discovered by the Germans when new RAF prisoners arrived as maps were part of the RAF escapers' pack with which each crew member was issued.

The windows of the rooms where the prisoners were held were protected with iron bars and if the men were to escape through the windows the bars had to be cut beforehand. The windows were directly above the sentry on the terrace gate and so the cutting had to be carried out with the absolute minimum of noise. This painfully slow process was undertaken every night with the cut in each bar disguised with boot polish each morning. The bars were left with just a slither of metal until the night of the escape when the final cut would be carried out.

The final item needed was a camp pass. At each checkpoint the pass had to be shown. For security reasons the

colour of these changed every few days. As well as presenting his pass, anyone passing through a checkpoint would be asked the security code of the day, which was a number between one and 50. Clearly, information on these could only be obtained at the last minute. So, when everything was in place for the mass escape, Flight Lieutenant Cenek Chaloupka, a Czech airman, would swing into action. 'Checko' Chaloupka was an expert in blackmailing the guards. He would begin by talking to them, giving them coffee and cigarettes. Then he would give them little presents for their wife or children; they would exchange photographs and relationships would develop.



ABOVE: This fake officer's cap provides an example of the skill the prisoners displayed in fabricating replica German uniforms. On display in the castle's museum, it is a similar example to that worn by Sinclair.

THE CIGAR-BOX CAMERA

The scale of the prisoners' operation was astonishing, as it must be borne in mind that getting out of the camp was merely the first stage to success. Once the men were out into the German countryside they would need authentic looking civilian clothes as well as a full set of papers.

Making the civilian clothes was the responsibility of each individual included among the 30 potential escapers. The papers were produced by the camp's forgery department. One of those forgers was Kenneth Lee: "Every day we sat at a table opposite each other painstakingly copying the German Gothic script on the paper forms. We started in pencil then carefully went over the top of everything in Indian ink. The raw materials came from the canteen shop and I suppose it never occurred to the Germans that we might be able to use this for escaping purposes, they thought we were all drawing still lives. There was always a stooge at the window to warn us if the Germans were coming. We had a special hide under the table to put our equipment in, and I think it took about ten seconds to cover everything up and do something else. I spent over three years in the forgery department and we were never rumbled."³



The tunnel through which Rothenberger approached the melee caused by the guard detaining the impostors. It leads through to the half of the castle that, at the time, formed the German *Kommandantur*. Having been shot, Sinclair was left lying on the cobbles in the foreground for some ten minutes while the guards frantically ordered a snap *Appell*. The escape was foiled.

Once the two were comfortable with each other, Checko would ask for something in return from one of them — such as the loan of a camp pass. If the guard refused, Checko would let it be known that the Camp Commandant would be informed that the guard had been accepting gifts from the prisoners. The poor guard would be hooked. Once he had handed over one valuable item he would be in real trouble if his superiors found out, so the guard had no choice but to keep on handing Checko whatever he asked for.

THE CAMP COMMANDANT

Finally, everything was in place. It had taken many months of hard and careful work throughout the summer but by the beginning of September 1943, all was ready. D-Day was set for the 2nd.

After the 21.00 hours *Appell*, or roll call, when Rothenberger was reported to be safely in the guardroom, the would-be escapers left their quarters using a skeleton key. Having made their way down to the first floor, the three fake Germans were lowered into the sick bay.

"The escapers had cut the window grille in the toilet of the officers' sick bay," noted one of Colditz's guards, George Schaedlich, "and had, from this

...AND THE FINAL, FATAL RUN



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Looking down on the PoWs' sports ground alongside the eastern side of the castle, the scene of Sinclair's final, and fatal, escape attempt. The sports ground was surrounded by six-foot-tall barbed wire fences. An area of the slope where you can see the sheep was also included in the sports ground. Those prisoners held in solitary confinement had their own exercise area by the small bridge on the right.

corner, which no sentry could overlook, climbed down a short rope, hidden by the shadow. They had come down the steps behind the pavilion so that sentry 4 had to assume they had come from the guardhouse.⁴

The story of that night's action was later recorded by *Hauptmann* Reinhold Eggers, the Colditz Camp Commandant: "Round about midnight Franz Joseph [i.e. Sinclair] appeared on his usual rounds outside the castle walls, accompanied, however, by two sentries with slung rifles. He came to the last two of the guard posts on the east side of the castle. Here was the gate with the catwalk above it ... The height of the catwalk above the ground enabled him to look over the edge of the canteen terrace and survey what had till then been dead ground all along the foot of the building. The last two sentries, over the gate, and on the beat up to it, had been on duty for about 20 minutes.

"Franz Joseph dismissed the sentry below the catwalk with the remark, 'Your relief is early tonight. We have had an air-raid distant warning.' The guard was replaced by one of the men who had come with Franz Joseph but did not himself move off towards the guardroom, waiting apparently for his mate on the bridge above the gate to be relieved too and come back with him.

"The Sergeant-Major [still Sinclair] then went up to the bridge and relieved the last sentry, replacing him with the second man he had with him. The catwalk sentry, having been relieved, descended the steps from the gate and was just about to march off when, for no reason he could later define, he decided to ask Franz Joseph for his Sergeant-Major's pass."⁵

Some accounts state that it was at this point that Sinclair had, "slipped up, by missing a particular mannerism of Frank Josef. He made the mistake of not looking both sides of the catwalk before crossing. This was immediately picked up the guard, who was more astute than he had been given credit for."⁶

"For once someone obeyed the rules we had been trying to drill into our sentries for years," continued Eggers, "and obeyed it in spite of himself. "Are you daft?" asked Franz Joseph. "Don't you know your own Sergeant?" Faced with the choice of either persisting with the stubborn guard, or making a run for it with his two colleagues, Sinclair decided to continue with the façade. He became increasingly annoyed with the sentry and soon started yelling at him. The latter, however, stood his ground.

"The pass seemed in order, but, nevertheless, the guard had a vague suspicion and pressed his warning bell," continued Eggers. "He also covered Franz Joseph with his rifle and ordered him to put up his hands. Joseph cursed — not very fluently — but did indeed put his hands up. In due course a corporal and one man appeared from the guardroom in answer to the buzzer. Franz Joseph did not know the password when asked. The corporal drew his revolver and demanded Franz Joseph's. There was a struggle. The corporal swore later that Franz Joseph tried to draw his pistol [which of course was impossible]."

At this point, confusion reigned, with the German guards running around in panic and the NCOs unsure



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Looking down the length of the prisoners' sports ground at Colditz. The fence that Sinclair escaped over is roughly marked by the red dotted line. Having cleared the fence, Sinclair sprinted up the valley away from the direction of this photographer.

of the allegiance of the men under their command or who to believe. Suddenly, a shot rang out.

"Good God," said one of our three sentries present. 'You've shot our Sergeant-Major.', concluded Eggers in his account. "But it was Lieut. Michael Sinclair, in almost perfect disguise, who collapsed to the ground. The true Franz Joseph appeared next on the scene, having heard the shots."⁷

NOW OR NEVER

As the guards ordered an immediate *Appell* in the courtyard, Mike Sinclair was initially left lying on the ground. He was not, however, seriously wounded, his determination to escape as strong as ever. Consequently, just four months later in January 1944, he and Flight Lieutenant Jack Best slithered down a 90-foot home-made rope, cut through the perimeter fence and were out. Both were caught a few days later at Rheine on the Dutch border. >>

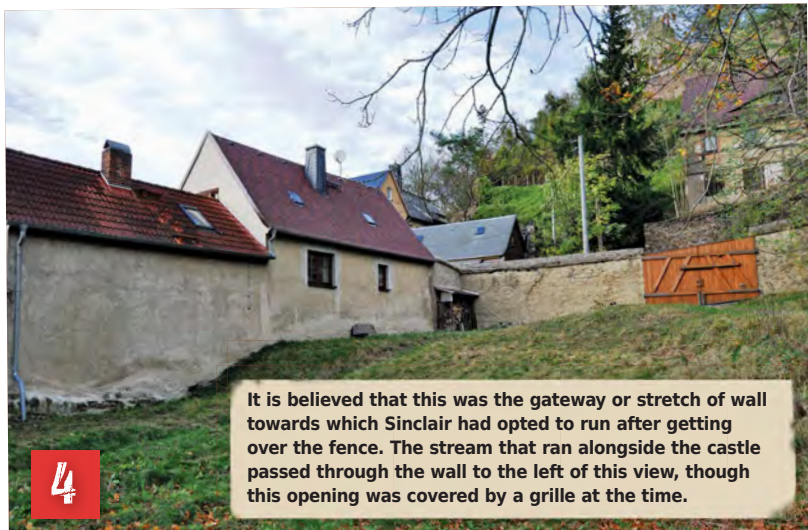
Once over the fence Sinclair initially ran across this stretch of ground. By the time he reached here, he was already being fired on, both by the guards behind him at the sports ground and others from the terrace at the top of the slope on the left. This was the same stretch of terrace over which his previous Franz Joseph escape attempt had passed.



3

THE RUNNING OF THE RED FOX

Colditz Escape Step-by-Step



It is believed that this was the gateway or stretch of wall towards which Sinclair had opted to run after getting over the fence. The stream that ran alongside the castle passed through the wall to the left of this view, though this opening was covered by a grille at the time.

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Sinclair remained undaunted and now planned his next attempt.

Below the castle was the park, a flat area of ground where each day for an hour the prisoners were allowed to exercise. In 1941 a French prisoner, Pierre Mairesse Lebrun, had been catapulted by his comrades over the eight-foot high perimeter barbed-wire fence and had then climbed the surrounding park wall and escaped. Mike Sinclair decided to try and emulate Lebrun's achievement, but he was determined to accomplish it alone so that on-one else could be blamed if the attempt went wrong.

Realistically, there was little chance of Sinclair getting over the wire unseen as, unlike Lebrun, he would have to climb the wire in full view of the German guards. Everyone in the camp knew that the end of the war was in sight but Sinclair remained determined to escape before then. By this time he had made eight unsuccessful attempts at trying to get back to the UK and the repeated failures had evidently worn him down

and he was no longer thinking logically.

On 25 September Sinclair went down to the park and walked round the inside of the perimeter with Lieutenant Grismond Davies-Scourfield. After around 30 minutes the guards had settled down and relaxed. At the most vulnerable point in the wire, Sinclair stopped and turned to his friend. Taking Davies-Scourfield by the hand he said quietly, "It's going to be now or never."

With that, he leapt onto the wire and began to climb for all he was worth. He managed to reach the top and was actually balanced with his legs either side of the wire before he was spotted by the guards. They shouted at him to "*Halt! Halt!*" and then "*Halt oder ich schiesse!*" – Halt or I shoot!⁸

Sinclair, though, swung his other leg over the wire and jumped to the ground. As he picked himself up the first shots rang out. Then he was off, running as quickly as he could up the hill towards the park wall. More shots followed as Sinclair approached the wall. But by this time the Germans had his range

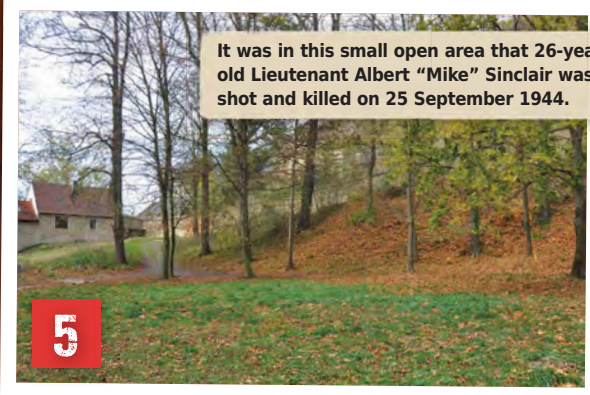
BOTTOM PIC: Although initially buried in a graveyard in Colditz, Sinclair's body was exhumed after the war and re-interred in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery. His grave can be seen at plot 10.L.14.

(COURTESY OF THE COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVE COMMISSION)

and a volley of shots splattered all around him. It was evident that there was no possibility of Sinclair climbing the wall and the next volley would be certain to strike him. He could have stopped, put his hands up and lived. Sinclair did not stop.

The next volley of shots rang out. Sinclair fell to his knees and then crumpled forwards. A bullet had struck him in the right elbow and glanced off striking him in the heart.

The 'Red Fox' had made his last run. Mike Sinclair was buried in the local cemetery on 28 September 1944. He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Order, being the only lieutenant to be awarded this decoration during the Second World War for an action while in captivity. ©



It was in this small open area that 26-year-old Lieutenant Albert "Mike" Sinclair was shot and killed on 25 September 1944.

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NOTES

1. Sinclair had been commissioned into the 2nd Battalion in July 1939.
2. Whilst Rothenberger's nickname is generally spelt as 'Franz Joseph' (see for example, Michael Booker, *Collecting Colditz and Its Secrets*, Grub Street, London, 2005), the Emperor's name is also spelt Franz Josef.
3. See Henry Chancellor's excellent book *Colditz, The Definitive History* (Coronet Books, London, 2002), pp.221-30.
4. Georg Martin Schaedlich, *Tales From Colditz Castle* (Thomas Schaedlich, Colditz, 2003), p.75.
5. Reinhold Eggers, *Colditz, The German Viewpoint* (New English Library, 1961), pp.150-2.
6. Anon, *Colditz: A Pictorial History* (Caxton Editions, London, 2001), p.122.
7. Reinhold Eggers, *ibid*, p.152.
8. Major P.R. Reid, *Colditz, The Full Story* (Pan Books, London, 2002), pp.243-4.

