

GOON-BOX AT THE SOUTHEASTERN CORNER OF THE CAMP
IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM, HU 21018

IN BROAD DAYLIGHT



In September 1942 two Royal Air Force officers cut their way through the barbed wire fence of Stalag Luft III. *Charles Rollings* unravels the story about one of the most daredevil escapes during World War Two



ABOVE PILOT OFFICER MORRIS WILBUR ('FESS') FESSLER. AN AMERICAN FIGHTER PILOT FROM NO 71 ('EAGLE') SQUADRON WHO HAD BEEN A PRISONER SINCE OCTOBER 27, 1941. FESSLER ORIGINATED THE SCHEME TO CUT THROUGH THE WIRE

Stalag Luft III is now famous for the 'Wooden Horse' escape in 1943 and the 'Great Escape' the following year. Back in the scorching, fly-blown summer of 1942, though, the camp seemed escape-proof. Since its opening that March, only four of its 2,000 prisoners had made it beyond the wire; they had been recaptured within days, and three of them were now in Colditz – the Sonderlager, or special camp, for persistent escapers. The guards at Stalag Luft III joked that life in England was so bad that the RAF preferred to stay in Germany.

But the truth was that breaking out of the camp was a formidable task. Stalag Luft III consisted of two compounds, one for officers, one for NCOs, and a Vorlager, ▶



ABOVE FLYING OFFICER WILLIAM HENRY NICHOLS, WHO HAD ALSO BEEN IN NO 71 SQUADRON UNTIL BEING SHOT DOWN OVER FRANCE ON SEPTEMBER 7, 1941. WAS THE MAN FESSLER CHOSE TO ACCOMPANY HIM ON THE ESCAPE

“Two prisoners had, however, been working on an escape plan that involved no elaborate disguises and forged papers to fool the gate guards”

RIGHT LIEUTENANT COMMANDER J B ('JIMMY') BUCKLEY DSC, A NAVAL REGULAR IN THE FLEET AIR ARM AND HEAD OF ESCAPES IN THREE POW CAMPS IN SUCCESSION

or 'front-compound', for the guardhouse, cell block (or 'cooler'), sick quarters and the coal, clothing and Red Cross parcel stores. Each enclosure was surrounded by two parallel fences, ten feet apart and ten feet high, made of tightly woven barbed wire. Between them was a mass of concertina wire. Fifteen yards inside the inner fence was a knee-high warning rail, which one crossed only on pain of being shot. Sentry boxes stood on tall stilts at intervals along the fence, each equipped with a searchlight, a mounted machine gun and a telephone to the guardroom; each sentry, in addition, carried a rifle. The main gate was well guarded and all vehicles going out were thoroughly searched.

Tunnelling offered the best prospects of success, as the sandy soil was easy to dig. However, all the buildings in which a trap could be concealed were hundreds of feet from the fence, making tunnelling a major undertaking involving at least 20 men, working in shifts and taking weeks or potentially months to achieve. The Germans bragged that their camp was escape-proof, and the prisoners were beginning to believe them.

Two prisoners had, however, been working on an escape plan that involved no elaborate disguises

and forged papers to fool the gate guards, and no labour-intensive tunnelling. They would simply cut their way through the eastern barbed wire fence, in minutes, at the dead of night.

The originator of the scheme was Pilot Officer Morris Fessler, an American from No 71 ('Eagle') Squadron. He had noticed that the raised sentry-towers – known by the prisoners as 'goon-boxes' – were set outside the second fence. The goon-boxes along the eastern fence were about 300ft apart. He had a theory that when the sentries in these boxes looked along the fence, they could only see through the concertina wire between the two parallel fences up to about a 100ft. From there, the fence posts appeared closer together and obscured their vision. That meant a 100ft 'blind spot' between the two goon-boxes. The same would apply – even more so – for the outside sentry patrolling back and forth between each tower.

Fessler reckoned that under the right circumstances and with split-second timing, two men could leap over the warning rail, cross the no-man's-land to the first barbed wire fence, cut their way through to the outer fence and vanish into the woods beyond without being seen. He approached his American friend and room-mate, Flying Officer William Nichols, who had also served with No 71 Squadron.

Permission to escape

Nichols – known as 'Bill' or 'Nick' – was at once enthusiastic, but they would have to present the plan to the Escape Committee, as no such project could go ahead without its permission. They also had to make sure that their scheme did not clash with anyone else's as well as the fact that help with escape equipment may be needed.

Known as the 'X Organisation', the Escape Committee was chaired by Lieutenant Commander Jimmy Buckley DSC, who passed them on to Flight Lieutenant John Wilson, officer-in-charge of wire schemes, to assess its feasibility. Wilson had been a prisoner since March 1941 and had twice broken out of the camp at Barth on the Baltic coast, once by climbing over the barbed



BELOW AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF STALAG LUFT III, SHOWING THE OFFICERS' COMPOUND (RIGHT), THE NCO'S COMPOUND (LEFT) AND THE VORLAGER (TOP)



wire fence at night – hence his appointment as 'wire job' expert at Stalag Luft III.

Wilson introduced a new and apparently hare-brained twist to the plan by suggesting the operation take place in daylight. Reaching the wire at night – in the face of the searchlights, sentries armed to the teeth and guard dogs trained to kill – was extremely difficult and downright dangerous. As prisoners were allowed up to the warning rail during the day, on the other hand, all the would-be escapers had to do was step over it, walk up to the fence and lie down. Fessler and Nichols worked out that it would take 35 seconds to walk from the canteen door to the warning rail. Up to then their actions would not look suspicious and they had no need to worry about being in view of the sentries.

Except for the five seconds it took to jump the warning rail and cross the no-man's-land, they would be visible from the goon-boxes along

the eastern fence, another on the south-western fence, yet another on the far side of the compound, to the guard at the gate and to the sentries patrolling outside the fences, even the 'operational' stretch.

Once Fessler and Nichols were lying alongside the inner fence, they still ran the risk of being spotted by all but the goons in the watchtowers either side of them, although they would not be seen by the outside sentry provided he was near one of the two goon-boxes with his back turned. The two would-be escapers therefore timed the movements of each outside guard very carefully and noted their habits. They planned to select a day when a particularly slow specimen was on duty. It still gave them only three or four minutes at the most to cut through masses of barbed-wire and to emerge from the other side before he turned around and again faced in their direction. By that time, hopefully, the two would be upright and walking leisurely away from the fence and along the road to the woods north of the camp.

To avoid being spotted crossing the no-man's-land area and then lying alongside the fence, they had to distract the attention of all these guards from 'their' stretch of fence. This would require a series of elaborate diversions.

History of the Stalag

Stalag Luft III was opened in March 1942 to the south of Sagan with the intention of concentrating all RAF and USAAF prisoners of war in one camp under the authority of the Luftwaffe. Although the first air force camp, Stalag Luft I, at Barth on the Baltic coast, was completely cleared of prisoners, many were left behind in army camps as Luft III was too small to hold the rapidly rising number of prisoners.

It consisted of one compound for officers and another for NCOs. At the end of March 1943, a bigger compound was opened to the west. The old enclosure became known as East Compound, the NCOs' enclosure as Middle (or Centre) Compound, and the new cage as West Compound. In September 1943, a new enclosure was opened to the south and all USAAF officers were transferred there. From then on West Compound was known as North Compound and the American as South Compound.

In February 1944, a satellite camp was opened to the north of Sagan, and this was known as Belaria. Shortly afterwards yet another American compound was added to the main complex, called West Compound. At its peak, the Sagan POW complex held almost 11,000 prisoners. As the Red Army advanced westwards in January 1945 the entire POW complement – except for the sick and wounded – were evacuated in blizzard conditions.

When the Russians overran Stalag Luft III at the end of February, they looted the barracks and parcels stores, and used it as a DP camp. After the Potsdam Conference the German population was expelled and the town reoccupied by Poles. The prison camps were dismantled bit by bit as a ready supply of firewood until the remains were finally cleared away in 1947.

Jimmy Buckley approved of the plan, but suggested they test their theory by joining a party of prisoners helping to prepare a new compound, as the fence posts and goon-boxes were already in position. Climbing up the towers and looking along the fence, they noticed that about 25 yards from the tower the fence posts did indeed form a solid screen for about ten yards. It meant a sentry would be unable to see anyone standing against or laying alongside them. Buckley declared

himself satisfied and gave Fessler's scheme the go-ahead.

Scuppered plans

Stalag Luft III was the second camp opened by the Luftwaffe for Allied air force prisoners – the first had been at Barth in the summer of 1940 – Stalag Luft III stood on the southern outskirts of Sagan in Lower Silesia, where the only vista for miles around was a forest of spindly pine trees that stretched almost unbroken from German-occupied Poland,

BELOW A VIEW OF THE OFFICERS' COMPOUND FROM THE GOON-BOX IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SOUTHERN FENCE, SHOWING HOW THE GUARDS HAD AN ALMOST UNRESTRICTED VIEW OF THE ENTIRE STRETCH OF EASTERN WIRE



RIGHT RAF OFFICERS
HELP BUILD A
NEW COMPOUND
IMPERIAL WAR
MUSEUM, HU20939



“Shortly before Toft left for Sagan, three army officers, covered by an elaborate system of signals and diversions, had cut their way through the barbed wire in broad daylight”

through Czechoslovakia and into Yugoslavia. It had only been in existence for five months when, on the morning of August 27, 1942, the Germans announced that, as the camp was already overcrowded, a new compound was being built to the west. In the meantime, to make way for new prisoners, older inmates were invited to put their names down for transfer to an overflow camp.

The Germans then put a spoke in the escape plan by announcing that the first party of officers destined for the overflow camp, Oflag XXIB at Schubin, would depart on Saturday, September 5. The list included Fessler. The X Organisation was loath to mount the wire job before then because a Dutch fighter pilot, Flying Officer Albert van Rood, planned to take advantage of the confusion caused by the purge to walk through the gate that evening disguised as a security guard. As van Rood spoke fluent German and stood a good chance of getting out and making

a ‘home run’, Buckley did not want to do anything that would make the Germans more than usually alert. ‘X’ also had to wait for a day when the slow sentry was on duty. Clearly Fessler would have to bow out and let another officer take his place.

Buckley and Nichols chose an Irishman, Flight Lieutenant Kenneth Toft, who had previously been incarcerated at Oflag VIB, Warburg. Shortly before Toft left for Sagan, three army officers, covered by an elaborate system of signals and diversions, had cut their way through the barbed wire in broad daylight and Toft was among the score or so of RAF officers involved in the distractions.

Toft suggested a second series of diversions to cover him and Nichols when they emerged from the other side of the wire. Buckley gave the job of organising them and of co-ordinating the scheme to another Fleet Air Arm officer, Lieutenant Cecil Filmer DSC RN, who had considerable experience of planning escapes. As Filmer was another

due for departure for Schubin, however, Buckley himself would act as master of ceremonies on the day.

Nichols and Toft made their own wire-cutters, using iron tie-bars filched from their barracks, which they tempered with sugar and boiling hot water. To prevent the loose coils of barbed wire falling on them and trapping them between the two fences, they prepared pegs made from stolen wood. In a camp made mostly of pinewood, this commodity was not hard to find.

Once outside the camp they would pose as French prisoners. To the west of Stalag Luft III was another POW camp, Stalag VIIC, which accommodated a variety of nationalities. The French inmates were often permitted to walk unescorted along the roads surrounding the camps on their way to and from work in the local wood-mills, smallholdings and goods yards. It so happened that RAF prisoners were sometimes issued with French khaki uniforms

– minus brevet – to replace their own uniforms, which were often burned or ripped beyond repair when they were shot down. The two fugitives would don French army uniforms before their assault on the wire. All they had to do once outside was dust themselves down and walk nonchalantly towards the pinewoods.

From then on, they would hide by day and ride the rods at night, hoping to reach the Baltic ports. The X Organisation would provide concentrated food rations, maps and compasses.

They were still finalising the diversions with Filmer when Fessler left with first party for Schubin. Van Rood's walk-out went ahead that night as planned. Unfortunately, he was recaptured near the Swiss frontier; after two further escape attempts, he joined several other RAF officers in the naughty boys' camp at Colditz.

A scorching summer

As luck would have it, the wire job took place a mere day after Fessler's departure. The afternoon of Sunday, September 6, was hot and dry with a glaring sun. Most prisoners were sunbathing in the compound or relaxing on their bunks; some were strolling leisurely round the beaten

path inside the warning wire, others were half-heartedly playing some form of sport. The only German in the compound was the NCO who looked after the kitchen. The guards were listless – and the slow sentry was patrolling outside the stretch of fence opposite the canteen building.

At 1.20pm, Toft and Nichols gathered their kit, left the canteen and slowly walked towards the warning rail, all the time watching for a signal from Buckley, who was sitting on a tree stump in the northeastern quarter of the compound and pretending to read a book. Everyone concerned could see him and he had a good view of four goon-boxes and the gate leading to the Vorlager. Wing Commander Harry Day sat behind him. (Until recently he had been the Senior British Officer, or SBO; he had also been instrumental in setting up the X Organisation.)

What happened in the next ten minutes went unnoticed by the vast majority of inmates and the aftermath caught them completely by surprise.

At 1.43pm, Toft and Nichols were about halfway between the two sentry towers overlooking the northeast quarter of the compound when the slow sentry passed the



ABOVE THE COMMANDANT, OBERSTLEUTNANT FREIHERR FRANZ VON LINDEINER-WILDAU IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM, HU 1564

point where the wire was to be cut. Buckley set events in motion by blowing his nose with a big white handkerchief.

One prisoner engaged the attention of the sentry at the gate by playing an accordion in front of him and dancing a little jig. Another shouted up to the guard in the northeastern goon-box, asking whether he would phone the Kommandantur (German administrative compound) and arrange for an interview between the commandant, Oberstleutnant Freiherr Franz von Lindeiner-Wildau, and the new SBO, Group Captain Martin Massey DSO MC. The guard in the tower mid-way along the eastern fence was asked by another prisoner for permission to cross the warning rail to retrieve a football. For the towers along the southwestern fence a boxing match had been arranged in which there was to be a knock-out followed by a lot of cheering and splashing of water over the loser's face. The boxers were Flying

LEFT WING COMMANDER H M A DAY (LEFT) HAD BEEN THE MOST SENIOR OFFICER IN AIR FORCE POW CAMPS SINCE BEING SHOT DOWN IN OCTOBER 1939. IN SUMMER 1942 HE WAS SUPERSEDED BY GROUP CAPTAIN H M MASSEY DSO MC BUT CARRIED ON WITH MOST OF THE SBO'S DUTIES AND REMAINED A LEADING FIGURE IN ESCAPE PLANS AS HE WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN CREATING THE 'X ORGANISATION'. SERGEANT J A G DEANS (RIGHT) WAS THE 'MAN OF CONFIDENCE' IN THE ADJACENT NCO'S COMPOUND



BELOW RIGHT FROM WESTMOUNT, QUEBEC, FLYING OFFICER JOSEPH EDMUND TOBIN ASSELIN, HAD BEEN A SPITFIRE PILOT NO 92 SQUADRON AT BIGGIN HILL

BELOW MIDDLE PILOT OFFICER GEORGE EDWARDS MCGILL, FROM TORONTO, HAD SERVED AS AN OBSERVER WITH NO 103 SQUADRON, WHICH FLEW WELLINGTONS OUT OF ELSHAM WOLDS

BELOW A HOT SUMMER AFTERNOON AT STALAG LUFT III, LOCATED ON THE SOUTHERN OUTSKIRTS OF SAGAN, (NOW ŻAGÁN IN POLAND) GEORGE ARCHER

Officer Edmund Asselin RCAF and Pilot Officer George McGill, a Canadian in the RAF. ‘Eddy’ Asselin had been at Warburg with Ken Toft and was one of the camp’s tunnelling fraternity.

As an extra precaution, one of the prisoners in the cookhouse occupied the attention of the German NCO-in-charge by accusing him of cutting the rations – thus provoking an argument.

As soon as the diversions started, Toft and Nichols leapt across the warning rail and lay flat against the inner fence. Nichols handed over the wire-cutters, and Toft started to snip through the wire. As he progressed, Nichols handed him the little wooden pegs they had prepared and he propped up the loose coils of wire, forming a little passage through which they edged their way inch by inch.

It had been arranged that when Toft had parted the last strand, Nichols would raise his left thumb over his left shoulder and POW-watcher (or ‘stooge’) would blow his nose loudly as a signal to Buckley.

Distracting the guards

The boxing match inevitably proved to be the longest and most spectacular of the four diversions, drawing a crowd of noisy onlookers who thought it had been laid on for their entertainment. It was tough for Asselin and McGill.

The escape was expected to take only five minutes, but it dragged on to six, then seven – and they were

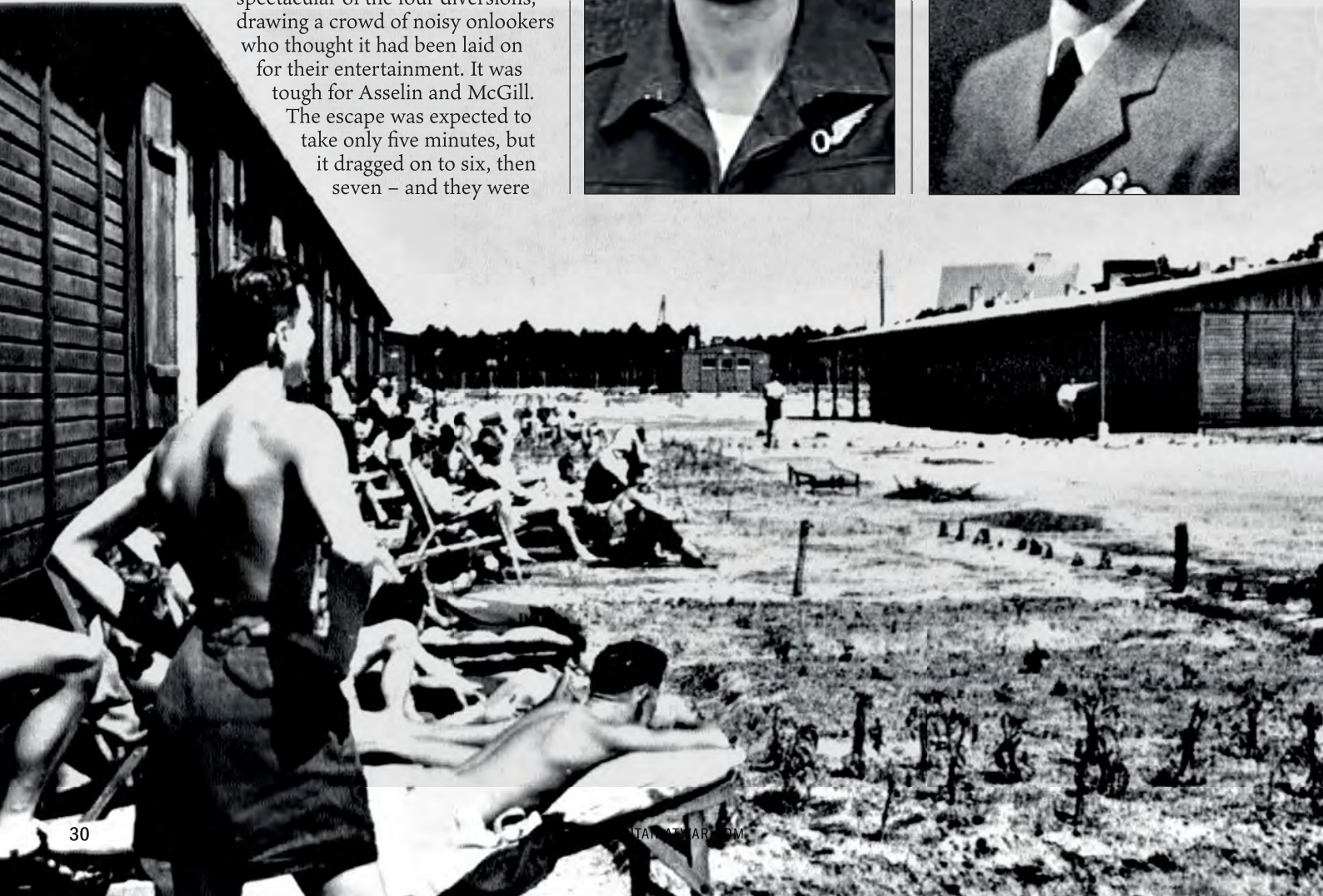
tired. But messages kept coming in: “Go on. They’re still in the wire.” “Go on. Carry on the fight.” Asselin and McGill smashed away at one another. The goons leaned out of their boxes, totally absorbed. “Go on. Hit harder,” shouted Buckley’s runners. “Not enough blood.”

Seven and a half minutes after the operation had commenced, Toft cut through the last strand of wire and passed the cutters to Nichols, who threw them back towards the warning rail. The stooge retrieved them and hid them under his tunic – and as soon as Nichols gave the thumbs-up, he blew his nose as arranged.

Buckley then gave the signal for the fresh diversions – the first sentry being engaged in conversation by Buckley himself;

the second being told that the SBO did not require an interview with the commandant after all; the third being pleaded with, again, for permission to retrieve the football; and the sentries in the goon-boxes to the south being entertained by another knock-out, much cheering and more water-splashing.

With the sentries distracted again, Toft and Nichols crawled out of the gap in the wire, stood up, dusted themselves down, stepped onto the road, and sauntered along it – passing a guard who looked at them suspiciously but made no attempt to stop them. Soon they joined the scattered groups of French POWs and German civilians out for their usual Sunday afternoon stroll.



Meanwhile, back in the compound, the two boxers wearily made their way to the washhouse and the excited spectators dispersed.

'Wings' Day had watched the entire affair with his heart in his mouth. The plan had worked perfectly, but when the two escapers were about ten yards into the woods, one of the watch-tower guards looked round, saw them, and raised his rifle. Wings started to get up, but Buckley, returning from the gates, motioned him to stop. The German had second thoughts and did nothing. Toft and Nichols disappeared, unaware of the incident.

"My God, Jimmy," Wings Day said, "you have nerve!"

"No," said Buckley. "The goon put his gun up rather half-heartedly, so I gambled on his doing nothing. I could see what was passing through his mind. 'If they are escaping prisoners, I will get a rocket for not seeing them sooner. So better do nothing. It cannot be pinned on me.'"

Toft and Nichols slogged through the woods for the rest of the day, trying to get as far away from Sagan as possible before hiding up until nightfall. However, back at the camp, their escape had been discovered within 15 minutes. The guard was being changed as usual – and, as the new guards marched by, they noticed the hole in the wire and raised the alarm. German officers and security personnel were soon examining the passage



that Toft and Nichols had made through the wire.

Most of the prisoners were still lying idly on their beds and did not even know an escape had been made. Then the compound adjutant, Squadron Leader Bill Jennens, stamped through the barrack blocks, banging on doors and bellowing: "They've made it... absolutely clear... cut right through, just like that!" They scurried in droves towards the eastern fence, where the German security personnel (known as 'ferrets' by the prisoners) were milling about with sniffer dogs and the sentry in each goon-box was agitatedly walking up and down and popping in and out of the shelter at the back.

A Bomber Command air gunner, Flight Lieutenant Eric Foster, later recalled: "The dogs were offered some of the escapees' clothing, and as we watched we expected the dogs to go through the hole and run down the outside of the wire. All they did was to go through the wire, turn round and come back again, accompanied by great cheers by ourselves."

As the Germans had no idea how many men had gone out, three other prisoners immediately volunteered to become 'ghosts' – hiding within the compound and absenting themselves from roll calls. The object was to fool the Germans into believing they, too, had escaped so that no one

ABOVE ONE OF THE MANY WAYS IN WHICH ESCAPE EQUIPMENT WAS CONCEALED
IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM, HU 21204

BELOW HOME-MADE WIRE-CUTTERS
IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM, HU 21208

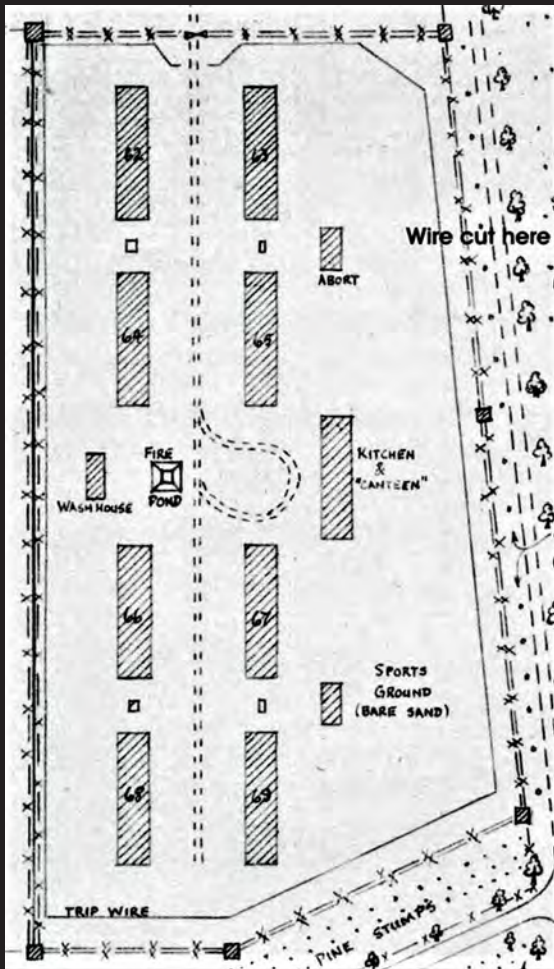
Escape Committee

The 'X Organisation' was formed in summer 1940 in Stalag Luft I, Barth, by the Senior British Officer, Squadron Leader Brian Paddon, with the express purpose of promoting and aiding escape efforts. At the same time an escape committee was formed by 'Wings' Day, the leader of the British Permanent Staff at Dulag Luft – the transit camp near Frankfurt am Main – with two aims: digging a tunnel through which they could escape and helping other prisoners to escape en route to permanent camps.

The first leader was Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, who was replaced in August by Lieutenant Commander Jimmy Buckley. When the British Permanent Staff from Dulag Luft were transferred to Barth after the mass tunnel escape in June 1941, they supplanted the X Organisation. Day appointed Jimmy Buckley as leader and upgraded it, setting up separate sections to cover the three main methods of escape: 'over' (over and through the wire), 'under' (tunnelling) and 'through' (walk-outs through the gates).

When the prisoners were transferred to Stalag Luft III, the X Organisation was re-established along the same lines, but as prisoners arrived from other, mainly army, camps they were absorbed into the organisation along with the escape expertise they had acquired. As new compounds were added, new X Organisations were created, until by July 1944 there were no fewer than six in existence.





ABOVE DETAILED MAP OF THE OFFICERS' COMPOUND, DRAWN BY A POW. THE SPOT WHERE THE WIRE WAS CUT IS INDICATED

RIGHT THIS SENTRY TOWER OVERLOOKED THE AREA WHERE, IN SUMMER 1943, A WOODEN VAULTING HORSE WOULD BE LOCATED TO DISGUISE THE ENTRANCE TO A TUNNEL THROUGH WHICH THREE OFFICERS ESCAPED

would search for them when they eventually did. It also gave them plenty of time to make plans. The three ghosts were Flight Lieutenants Norman Canton and Michael Casey, and Warrant Officer Arthur Johnson.

All three were well known to the ferrets, so they would have to spend their time hiding in a tunnel or remain constantly alert to avoid being seen. As snap roll calls were sometimes held during the night they had to be prepared to get out of their beds and hide at a moment's notice.

Bid for freedom

Toft and Nichols did not remain at large for long. After clearing the Sagan area, they hid until nightfall, when they travelled on foot in the direction of Cottbus to the west. At Forst, north of the spa town of Bad Muskau, they stole two overcoats and then boarded a goods train. The train thundered through Cottbus and Lübben towards Berlin, near which they jumped off. It was their second night of freedom.

“Henceforth, all sentry towers were constructed in this way, giving those manning them a clear view along the wire and making all future wire-jobs even more dangerous.”

Their arrival coincided with a hue and cry for escaped Russian POW slave workers, and all civilians were being stopped and interrogated. Mistaken for Russians, Toft and Nichols were questioned by the Gestapo and badly beaten up. Eventually they convinced the authorities that they were escaped POWs and were returned to Sagan for the customary fortnight in the cooler.

Oberst von Lindeiner showed his admiration on their first night in the cells by giving them a bottle of whisky. They were, however, put on the next purge to Schubin with the ‘boxer’, Eddy Asselin.

After about five weeks, one of the ‘ghosts’ – Mike Casey – was spotted by a ferret and apprehended. The other two – Canton and Johnson – escaped on the night of September 16/17, cutting through the wire into the Vorlager, then through

the main perimeter fence into the Kommandantur before climbing the outer wooden fence to temporary freedom. Recaptured within six days, they were escorted back to Stalag Luft III for the usual spell in the cells.

As a result of the Toft and Nichols venture, additional guards were put on patrol outside the wire and the goon-boxes were extended so that they projected out over the double fence. Henceforth, all sentry towers were constructed in this way, giving those manning them a clear view along the wire and consequently making all future wire jobs even more dangerous.

These innovations applied not only to Stalag Luft III but to every prison camp in Germany. A post-war report by British Intelligence estimated that they led to the equivalent of an entire division of German troops being tied down for the rest of the war. ●

