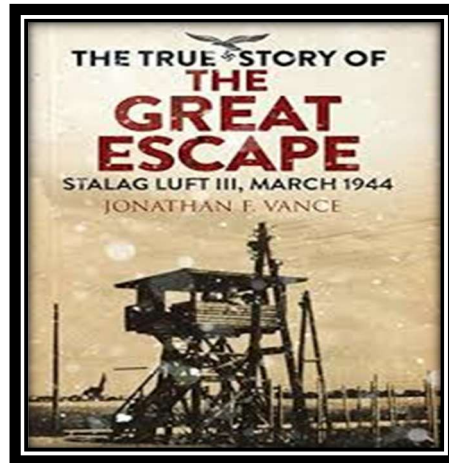


**REMEMBERING "THE GREAT ESCAPE"**  
**THE STORY OF 76 ALLIED AIRMEN THAT ESCAPED A NAZI**  
**POW CAMP-AT GREAT COST**  
**THE STORY HAS THREE PARTS**

**490**



SOURCE



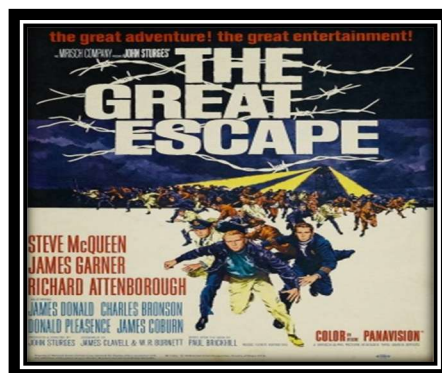
ARTICLE UPDATED

**AUG 29, 2018**

**PART ONE**

**THE 'SUMMARY'**

Today **(not actually today)** marks the anniversary of The Great Escape from Stalag Luft III, a prisoner of war camp during World War II. Stalag Luft III was in the German province of Lower Silesia near Sagan **(now Zagan, Poland)**. It housed captured air force servicemen and is best known for two prisoner escapes that took place by tunneling. The most well-known is The Great Escape in 1944. The escape was made famous by the book (1950) written by Paul Brickhill and the movie (1963) starring Steve McQueen, James Garner, David McCallum, and Charles Bronson.

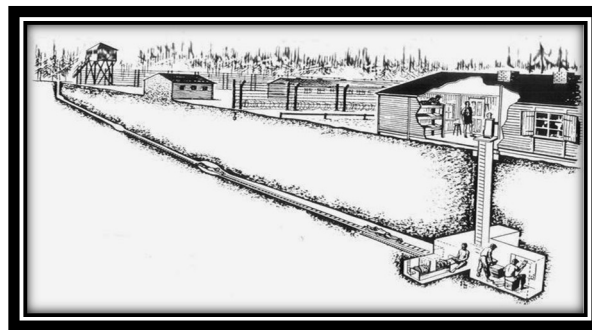


In the spring of 1943, Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, RAF conceived a plan for a major escape from the camp. He was able to instill a passionate determination into every man for their full energy into the escape. **The plan included the digging of multiple tunnels in case the German guards discovered one of them.** **He proposed to get 200 men out** with civilian clothes and forged papers.

More than 600 prisoners were involved in the construction of the tunnels. One tunnel, "Tom" began in a darkened corner next to a stove chimney.

Another tunnel, "Dick," had an entrance that was carefully hidden in a drain stump in a washroom. The third tunnel, "Harry," began under a stove. Each tunnel was dug long enough to end up deep into the forest next to the camp. The tunnels were ready in early 1944.

They wanted a moonless night for a cover of complete darkness. Friday, March 24, the escape attempt began. The first 100 men were known as "serial offenders," those who could speak German had a history of escapes plus 70 men who worked on the tunnels. The second 100 men were known as "hard-assers" because they were considered to have little chance of success because they were required to travel by night and spoke little or no German. The escape only allowed 10 men per hour. Of the 200 planned escapees, 76 managed to escape. 73 were eventually recaptured with 3 being completely successful. These men were Per Bergsland, a Norwegian pilot of No. 332 Squadron, RAF, Jens Muller, a Norwegian pilot of No. 331 Squadron, RAF, and Bram van der Stok, a Dutch pilot of No. 41 Squadron, RAF



The 73 men who were recaptured faced fierce punishment. Hitler ordered their executions as an example to other prisoners. Several officers of the camp argued against the executions as a violation of the Geneva Conventions. Hitler relented and ordered the execution of more than half of the recaptured escapees. 50 men would be executed including the mastermind, Roger Bushell. Brickhill, who would later write about the escape, was an Australian-born Spitfire pilot. He was known as a "stooge" during the escape. He was part of a relay team who alerted prisoners that German search teams had entered the camp. Brickhill suffered from claustrophobia and was unable to travel the tunnel. He would claim that this phobia probably saved his life. He would write the book which would bring the incident to wide public attention



THE ENTRANCE TO THE FAMOUS "HARRY" ESCAPE TUNNEL

Memorial markers are placed at the entrances and exits of each tunnel as well as a memorial remembering the 50 men who lost their lives.

While the film, “The Great Escape” took many compromises for commercial appeal, it was based on real events and some of the characters’ names were fictitious but amalgams of the real men involved in the escape attempt. Everyone remembers the big events of World War II. Let’s remember these men’s attempts at freedom for their courage and bravery, especially the fifty men who lost their lives.



THE EXIT OF TUNNEL “HARRY”

### THE STORY

Around 10:30 pm. on the cold, moonless night of March 24, 1944, Johnny Bull slowly peeked his head out of the ground and filled his lungs with freedom as he breathed in the frigid air. The sweat-soaked prisoner of war had just poked away at the last nine inches of grass and dirt atop a vertical shaft at the end of a tunnel that ran more than 30 feet below the oblivious Nazi guards patrolling the Stalag Luft III camp, which held thousands of Allied airmen captured by German forces in World War II.

The flyboys who bravely soared the skies had demonstrated courage and ingenuity below ground as well in toiling for nearly a year to construct a tunnel that would allow them to flee from captivity. The secret plan had been led and organized by Roger Bushell, a Royal Air Force pilot who had been shot down over France while assisting with the evacuation of Dunkirk. After Bushell, nicknamed “Big X,” escaped twice from a German prisoner of war camps, he was sent to what the Nazis believed to be one of their most secure facilities—Stalag Luft III. At this camp, 100 miles southeast of Berlin, the Nazis had taken measures to prevent tunneling, such as raising prisoners’ huts off the ground and burying microphones nine feet underground along the camp’s perimeter fence. In addition, the camp was built atop sandy ground through which it would be extremely difficult to tunnel. Still, Bushell would not be deterred.



THE STALAG LUFT 3 CAMP WHERE THE GREAT ESCAPE ATTEMPT TOOK PLACE IN MARCH 1944

In the spring of 1943, he and others began work on an audacious plan to construct three tunnels with the code names of Tom, Dick, and Harry that would stretch over 300 feet outside the camp's perimeter fence. Under the rules of engagement of the Geneva Conventions, the penalty for being caught, generally, 10 days in solitary confinement, was worth the risk.

Inside Hut 104, the prisoners of war building the Harry tunnel—who included many British airmen as well as Canadians, Australians, French, and other Allied pilots—toiled for days chipping away at the building support columns to avoid being seen working underneath the huts. From a trap door concealed below a heating stove always kept lit to discourage the Nazi guards from getting too close, they burrowed down 30 feet to be out of the range of the microphones.

Working in claustrophobic conditions, the prisoners excavated 100 tons of sand, which they stuffed bit by bit into concealed socks and discreetly sprinkled into the garden soil being raked by other prisoners. The diggers stripped to their long johns or took off all their clothes so that the bright golden sand wouldn't stain them and raise the suspicions of the German guards.

The prisoners scavenged and stole materials for the operation. They stripped 4,000 wooden bed boards to build ladders and shore up the sandy walls to prevent collapse. They stuffed 1,700 blankets against the walls to muffle sounds. They converted 1,400 powdered milk tin cans provided by the Red Cross into digging tools and lamps in which wicks fashioned from pajama cords were burned in mutton fat skimmed off the greasy soup they were served. Eventually, some prisoners stole a wire that they then hooked up to the camp's electrical supply to power a string of light bulbs in the tunnel. They fashioned a crude air pump system built in part with hockey sticks and constructed an underground trolley system pulled by ropes to transport the sand with **switchover stations named after two London landmarks—Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square**.



**TUNNEL HARRY'S PATH**

By March 24, 1944, Harry was complete and all that was left was for Bull to break through the last piece of earth. One by one, the prisoners, dressed in civilian clothes and carrying forged documents, lay down on the rope-operated wooden trolley and were pulled through the 2-foot square tunnel to their escape. The process was tedious. Fewer than a dozen men made it through every hour, and a 1-hour blackout during a midnight air raid also slowed the operation.

Around 5 AM., a German soldier on patrol nearly fell into the exit shaft and discovered the tunnel. The prisoners inside scrambled back to the hut and burned their forged documents, while the Nazis mobilized a massive manhunt. They erected roadblocks, increased border patrols, and searched hotels and farms. Within two weeks, the Nazis had recaptured 73 of the escapees. Only three men successfully fled to safety—two Norwegians who stowed away on a freighter to Sweden and a Dutchman who by rail and foot ended up in Gibraltar.

A furious Adolf Hitler personally ordered the execution of 50 of the escapees as a warning to other prisoners. In violation of the Geneva Conventions, the Gestapo drove the airmen, including Bushell and Bull, to remote locations and murdered them. It is said that due to the interference of Herman Göring, this number was reduced to 50. Field Marshal Keitel, Major-General Westhoff, and Major-General Graevenitz all argued against this order because it conflicted with the Geneva convention. "Escaping from prison camps has ceased to be a sport," read posters the Nazis put up in the POW camps to warn future escapees that they would be shot on sight.

In 1947, a military tribunal found 18 Nazi soldiers guilty of war crimes for shooting the recaptured prisoners of war, and 13 of them were executed.

Hollywood immortalized the breakout in the 1963 blockbuster "The Great Escape," which starred Steve McQueen, James Garner, Richard Attenborough, Charles Bronson, and James Coburn.

However, the real-life heroes are the ones being honored this week on the event's 70th anniversary.



Nationalities of the 50 executed	
	21 British
	6 Canadian
	6 Polish
	5 Australian
	3 South African
	2 New Zealanders
	2 Norwegian
	1 Belgian
	1 Czechoslovak
	1 Frenchman
	1 Greek
	1 Lithuanian

Yesterday, hundreds gathered in Zagan, Poland, to remember the victims and place wreaths at the exit point of the tunnel

Today, 50 serving Royal Air Force officers began a four-day, 105-mile march from the site of Stalag Luftig III to the British war cemetery in western Poland where the executed airmen are buried.

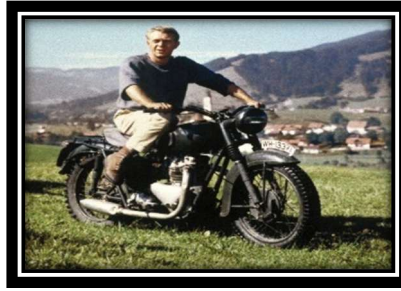


THE MEMORIAL IN ZAGAN, POLAND FOR THE 50 MURDERED BY THE NAZIS

A memorial for "The Fifty" was erected by the airmen of Stalag Luft III, and a special tomb was built by the prisoners in the shape of an altar for 50 urns with the ashes of those murdered. On three tablets are the names of the Fifty and their ranks. After the war, the urns were moved to Cytađela, a war cemetery in Poznań, also in Poland.

The motorcycles used during the chase scene in the film The Great Escape were 1961 Triumph TR6 Trophy models disguised as German BMW R75 motorcycles.

The star of the movie, Steve McQueen, did much of the riding for the film himself, although Bud Ekins performed the famous jump scene as McQueen's stunt double.



---

## **PART TWO**

### **THE GREAT ESCAPE FAILED. BUT IT WAS WORTH IT. SAY VETERANS 70 YEARS AFTER.**

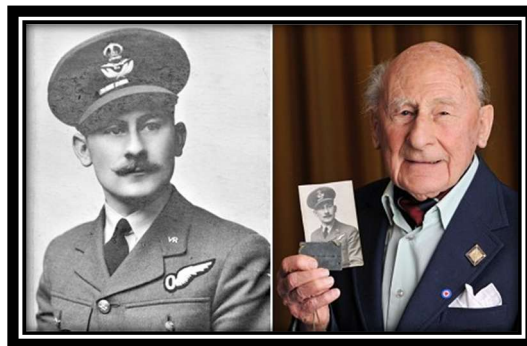
#### **VETERANS FROM THE GREAT ESCAPE CAMP SPEAK ABOUT THE BREAKOUT AHEAD OF THE 70<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY**

Two veterans from the prisoner of war camp from which the Great Escape was staged have spoken of the “audacious” and “morale-boosting” breakout, ahead of its 70th anniversary later this month.

Jack Lyon, 96, and Charles Clarke, 90, were both Second World War RAF officers who were shot down over enemy territory and imprisoned at Stalag Luft III, at Sagan, south-east Germany, at the time of the escape.

But Mr. Lyon - who operated as a “stooge”, keeping surveillance on the guards while the tunnels were dug and was waiting to make his getaway when the breakout was discovered - defended the mission.

Speaking at an event in central London last weekend to celebrate the anniversary, organized by the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, Mr. Lyon, who lives in East Sussex, said: “It was a costly operation but not necessarily unsuccessful.”



*World War II POW Jack Lyon, age 96, with his RAF photo and POW identification tag*

Once they were recaptured, 50 Allied POWs were executed by the Gestapo, but their astonishing bid for freedom from the camp, now in southeast Germany but now in Poland, was immortalized on the silver screen in the 1963 film *The Great Escape*.

'It did do a lot for morale, particularly for those prisoners who'd been there for a long time.

'They felt they were able to contribute something, even if they couldn't get out.

'They felt they could help in some way and trust me, in prison camps, morale is very important.'

The tunnel was discovered around six hours after the first man escaped.

---

### **PART 3**

#### **THE LAST REMAINING VETERAN WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE "GREAT ESCAPE" DIES AT 101**



Jack Lyon, one of the last veterans of World War Two's Great Escape died on March 8, 2019, at the age of 101 - just days before the 75th anniversary of the audacious getaway.

Lyon acted as a lookout during the escape but never made it outside the prison itself. The Nazis descended on the tunnel before he could make it out.

The former Royal Air Force navigator's life would have turned out much differently, were he just a few minutes ahead.

"Had I got out, I probably wouldn't be talking to you because my chances of getting home were virtually nil," Lyon said. "I was under no illusions about that."

You may have heard the story before. It was turned into a major motion picture starring Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, Richard Attenborough, James Garner, and a host of other Hollywood stars in 1963.

Jack Lyon, who was caught when the escape tunnel was uncovered, described the Hollywood film of the wartime escape as "absolute rubbish"

He said that no Americans were involved in the escape and the famous motorcycle from the film was not a part of the real event.

Air Vice Marshal David Murray is the chief executive of the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund (RAFBF). He said that Lyon belonged to a generation of veterans that we are losing as time passes. He said our current freedoms are the legacies of Lyon and his comrades.

To truly pay tribute to his memory and all this who have gone before him, we must never forget."



### **EXTRA'S**

The 1963 film The Great Escape was based on real events, and although some characters were fictitious many were based on real people or amalgams of several of those involved.

The film starred Steve McQueen as Captain Virgil Hilt, James Garner as Flight Lieutenant Robert Hendley, and Richard Attenborough as Squadron Leader Roger Bartlett, and was based on a book of the same name by Paul Brickhill.

Contrary to the film no American POWs were involved in the escape attempt, and there were no escapes by motorcycle or aircraft.

Hilt's dash for the border by motorcycle was added by request of McQueen, who did the stunt riding himself except for the final jump.

After viewing the rushes, Steve McQueen decided his part was minor and undeveloped. He was particularly upset that his character virtually disappears from the movie for about thirty minutes in the middle, so he walked out demanding re-writes.