

Stalag Luft III Tunnels

The classic Steve McQueen movie immortalized three tunnels at the notorious POW Stalag Luft III camp, built at the height of the Third Reich, 100 miles east of Berlin 70 years ago. Recently archeologists located the fourth tunnel which only a few former POWs knew about. To the untrained eye the location (shown below) looks like a building site. But this insignificant tunnel opening in the soft sand of western Poland represents one of the greatest examples of British wartime heroism. And the sensational story became the Hollywood classic, *The Great Escape*, starring Steve McQueen.



Frank Stone, seated, with Dr Tony Pollard on the site of George

Ten thousand prisoners were kept under German guns here on a 60-acre site ringed with a double barbed-wire fence and watchtowers. They slept in barrack huts raised off the ground so guards could spot potential tunnellers, but the Germans did not count on the audacity of British Spitfire pilot Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, played by Sir Richard Attenborough in the 1963 film. He was interned at the camp in March 1943. With him were about 2,000 other RAF officers, many of whom were seasoned escapers from other camps, with skills in tunnelling, forgery and manufacturing. From them Bushell hand-picked a team for his ambitious plan: to dig their way out of captivity.

Three tunnels nicknamed Tom, Dick and Harry were constructed 30ft underground using homemade tools. While Tom was discovered and destroyed by the Germans, Dick was used for storage. The third tunnel, Harry, became the stuff of folklore on the night of March 24, 1944, when Allied prisoners gathered in hut 104 before crawling along the 100ft tunnel to a brief taste of freedom. Only three escaped; 73 were rounded up by the Germans and 50 were summarily executed.

Few could have blamed their devastated comrades for sitting out the remainder of the war. Yet far from being dispirited, a few men began work on a fourth tunnel nicknamed 'George', which was kept so secret that only a handful of prisoners knew about it. Incredibly, George has just been uncovered after a team of engineers, archaeologists and historians excavated the site, a project filmed for a Channel 4 documentary Digging The Great Escape. 'You have to admire these men,' said chief archaeologist Dr Tony Pollard. 'The Germans believed that the deaths of those 50 men would have acted as a deterrent for future escapees. But these men were even more determined.'

With the archeologists at the site were two of them: Gordie King, 91, an RAF pilot who operated the pump providing the tunnel with fresh air on the night of the Great Escape, and Frank Stone, 89, a gunner who shared a room with the 'tunnel king' Wally Floody, an ex-miner in charge of the digging. They stand, heads bowed, reminiscing about their former colleagues. It is the first time Gordie, who was shot down on his first mission to Bremen in 1942, has returned to the camp since he and the remaining prisoners of war were marched out on January 27, 1945, as Russian forces approached.

'It has been very emotional,' he said. 'It brings back such bittersweet memories. I am amazed by everything they have found.' A widower with six children, he has vivid memories of working on tunnel Harry, performing guard duty and acting as a 'penguin' to disperse the sand excavated from the tunnels, whose entrances were hidden by the huts' stoves. They were called penguins because they waddled when they walked. 'We would put bags around our neck and down our trousers, fill them with excavated sand, then pull a string to release it on to the field where we played soccer, all in a very nonchalant way,' Gordie said.



Poignant memories: Frank Stone, left, and Gordie King with recovered artifacts including the pistol, below.



‘One of my jobs was to look out of the window at the main gate 24 hours a day and write down how many guards went in and out,’ he recalled. ‘Another was warning watch. If the Germans came into the compound, we would pull the laundry line down and everyone would stop what they were doing and resume normal duties. The guards were not exactly brilliant. They were taken from what we called 4F – not fit for frontline fighting. ‘I’m thrilled by it all,’ added Frank, who was shot down on his second mission: a bombing raid on Ludwigshafen oil refinery. ‘It’s like a war memorial for me. I don’t want people ever to forget the 50 men who died. The escape was thrilling and exciting but those men paid the price for it.’

Inevitably security tightened after the Great Escape and an inventory was taken by the Germans to gauge the extent of the operation. The roll- call of hidden items is astounding: 4,000 bedboards, 90 double bunk beds, 635 mattresses, 62 tables, 34 chairs, 76 benches, 3,424 towels, 2,000 knives and forks, 1,400 cans of Klim powdered milk, 300 metres of electric wire and 180 metres of rope.

To prevent further escape attempts, the Germans filled in Harry with sand. So effective was the cover-up that when the remaining prisoners wanted to build a memorial for the 50 men who died, the exact site of the tunnel could not be agreed on.

Now, for the first time in 66 years, the archaeologists have pinpointed the entrance shaft to Harry after compiling a map of the camp using aerial photography. What was most surprising for the team was the structure within the shaft. The bedboards were interlocked to line the tunnel but the sand was so soft that plaster and sandbags were used to prevent it engulfing the tunnel. Amazingly, the ventilation shaft, which was made out of discarded powdered milk tins, was still intact.



Prisoner of War: Frank, ringed, during his days in prison

Dr Pollard, 46, who co-founded Glasgow University's Centre for Battlefield Archaeology, said: 'I was surprised at just how emotional I became when we found Harry. We were the first people to see the tunnel in decades. But it came to a point when we realized we couldn't progress with the excavation. As soon as you drive a shaft into the sand, it is so soft it starts to collapse. It shows just how skilled those prisoners were.'

After abandoning Harry, the team set their sights on finding the secret fourth tunnel rumored to have been dug underneath the floorboards in the camp theatre. Using ground-scanning radar equipment, they found – beneath what would have been seat 13 – the trap door to a space that gave real insight into how the earlier tunnels would have been built. To the left, between the floor joists, was a storage area for equipment – Klim tins, tools, a trolley and the ventilation pump – and abandoned sand. A few feet away was the entrance to the tunnel shaft, and at its bottom a separate chamber, which archaeologists believe was the radio room. Down a single step lay the tunnel itself, intricately shored with bed boards, wired for light and equipped with the trademark trolley system used to shift both sand and men quickly and silently through the tunnels. It looked like a miniature railway with trolleys running on tracks linked by rope and pulled along by men at either end.



‘George turned out to be an absolute gem,’ explained Dr Pollard. ‘We found the shaft and excavated the tunnel which ran the entire length of the theatre. It was incredibly well preserved, with timber-lined walls, electrical wiring and homemade junction boxes, and was tall enough to walk through at a stoop. The craftsmanship is phenomenal. You can even see the groove on the top of the manhole cover, where it would swivel and slot into the floorboard above. ‘It was built at a time of heightened security at the camp. It is a fighting tunnel, not an escape tunnel. It was heading for the German compound from where the prisoners hoped to steal weapons and fight their way out. The men knew the end of the war was nigh and they were playing a dangerous game. To see what most of the prisoners never saw was a real thrill. The Germans obviously discovered Harry but they never had a clue about George.’

The massive collection of artifacts found inside the tunnel included trenching tools; a fat-burning lamp crafted from a Klim tin; solder made from the silver foil of cigarette packets for the wiring system; a belt buckle and briefcase handle from the escapers’ fake uniforms as well as a German gun near hut 104. They also uncovered the axle and wheels from one of the tunnel trolleys, identical to the one used in Harry, and the remains of an air pump; a kind of hand-operated bellows which drew fresh air from the surface down a duct to the tunnel. But the piece de resistance was a clandestine POW radio crafted from a biscuit box and cannibalized from two radios smuggled into the camp.



Tunnel vision: A tunnel reconstruction showing the trolley system tried out, below,, by Frank, 89

Frank was instrumental in making the coil for the radio, which he molded from an old 78 record. ‘I helped with the work on the construction of the radio, doing the soldering and things like that,’ he recalled, ‘cutting out bits of tins and whatever we needed for the equipment.’ Gordie added: ‘I remember one day walking around the camp with a friend when we saw this huge coil of wire. We grabbed it, covered it up with our coats and took it back to the hut. The Germans could not understand where the wire went. Until then we had had to rely on old tins of margarine with a wick in them, made from pajama cord, to light the tunnel, but they were smoky, used up oxygen and were continually getting knocked out.’

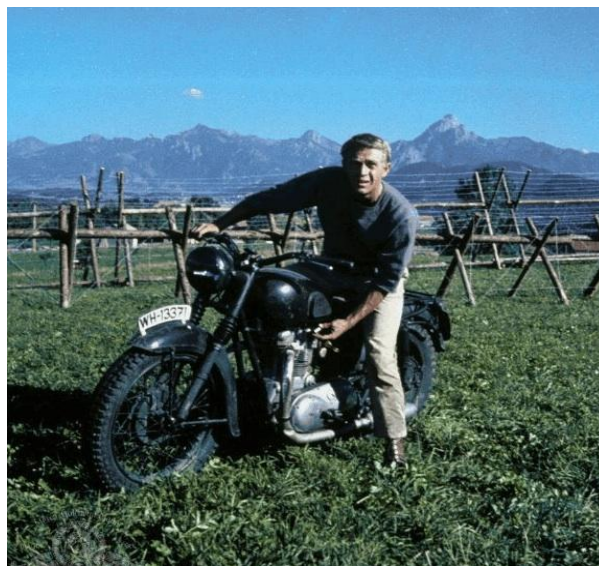
On the night of the Great Escape, 200 prisoners, allocated consecutive numbers, gathered in hut 104 to make their escape, each a few minutes apart. The leaders were dressed in German uniforms or specially tailored civvies and kitted out with maps, compasses and forged

documents. Gordie, who was slot 140, remembers sharing final words with many of the escapers, wishing them luck and complimenting them on ‘their impressive disguises’. ‘It was quite exciting,’ he said. ‘Only the key German-speaking officers, who had a good chance of bluffing their way through, were given documents and civilian uniforms. The rest of us were so-called hard-a**ers, who were expected to get out and run.’

According to Roger Bushell’s plan, thousands of German soldiers and police would be deployed to hunt the escapers, preventing them from fighting the Allies. But after 76 men had escaped, the remainder were caught leaving the tunnel by German guards. Seventy-three of the men who got away were rounded up over the next few weeks and 23 were returned to the camp. The other 50 were shot in the back of the head by the guards at the side of the road. Only three escapees, Norwegians Per Bergsland and Jens Muller, and Dutch fighter pilot Bram van der Stok, succeeded in reaching safety. Bergsland and Muller got to neutral Sweden and Van der Stok made it to Gibraltar via Holland and France.

‘Afterwards the morale in the camp was very depressed,’ said Frank, tears in his eyes. ‘It was eerie. We had a period of mourning and held a memorial service. People just wandered around the camp quietly.’ ‘A mass of doom enveloped the whole camp as so many of us had friends who were shot,’ added Gordie. ‘My close friend Jimmy Wernham, who came from the same town as me, was one of those who didn’t come back. ‘Before he went out, he took his ring off and gave it to his roommate Hap Geddes, who wasn’t going out, and said, “If anything happens to me, I want you to take this ring and give it to my fiancée.” After the war, Hap took the ring back to Dorothy and struck up a relationship with her. He ended up marrying her. He is still alive and living in Canada.’

Frank added: ‘I hope that what has been revealed will remind everybody what we went through and how we met the challenges. It was a privilege to be involved.’



War classic: Steve McQueen on the set of the classic movie, *The Great Escape*

[Source: ASMBA Veterans Blog reprint of Journalist, Author, and Genealogist Claudia Joseph article 19 Dec 2011
++]