

Time Capsule by Randolph Rice

March 1944

2022 marks the 78th anniversary of “Operation 200” better known as the Great Escape. The operation involved over six hundred allied air personnel and the simultaneous construction of three tunnels Tom, Dick and Harry. Only Harry was used. The night of March 24/25 1944 was used for the escape because there was no moon.

Most every boy of my generation saw the 1963 film and was mesmerized by Steve McQueen’s motorcycle escape, not to mention an incredible cast of characters and their hijinks. The actual escape on that cold march evening was true. The film, a combination of fact and fiction. The film had two purposes: to bring to light an event that for the most part was unknown to the world and to pay tribute to the fifty allied Airman who made the ultimate sacrifice. The actual event also had two purposes: one to enable 200 allied airmen to escape and second to disrupt the German war effort by engaging maximum German resources to track down the escapees.

The leader of the Great Escape was Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, known as “Big X”. He had been shot down over France in 1940 and was well known to the Germans, particularly the Gestapo for organizing many escapes. He hated the Nazis with a vengeance and spoke fluent German, which he used to his advantage at every opportunity. He had been recaptured by the Gestapo while making his way through Czechoslovakia in the wake of Reinhardt Heydrich’s assassination and its sweep of resistance fighters during the spring of 1942. Upon his arrival at Stalag Luft 111, he immediately suspended all escape activities and assumed COMMAND and control by forming one unified escape committee. Why he was not sent to Colditz, a forlorn mountain Castle for dangerous troublesome allied POW' s remains a mystery.

What is little known is that members of the RCAF played significant roles in the Great Escape. For example, Flying Officer W.D.J. "Wally" MacCaw, by earning Big X's trust he was appointed security head of Hut 104, where tunnel Harry was used in the escape. Wally known as Little S had earned an early position in the escape lineup, however at the last minute he had a premonition and withdrew, giving his spot to another Canadian James Wernham, later one of the fifty murdered by the Gestapo.

Another key member of the escape committee was Flight Lieutenant Wally Floody shot down over France while flying a Spitfire on 27 October 1941. With Wally's background as a miner in Sudbury and over 40 tunnels dug in previous camps, Roger appointed him in charge of tunneling operations for the Great Escape. Just weeks before the escape, the Germans got wind something was up and Wally along with nineteen other POW's were transferred to another camp. He was replaced by digger Robert-per Ramsey who took over completion of Harry.

In the film, James Garner played the scrounger. In real life Pilot Officer Barry Davidson was the "Scrounger". He specialized in bribing and blackmailing the "Goons" and "Ferret" as prisoners called the guards and hut searchers. He acquired everything needed for the escape to succeed. Anything from paper and ink to railway time schedules and travel papers even a camera on loan and everything in between. He used the contents of red cross parcels to bribe the guards in a calm controlled way while at the same time making clear the Russian front awaited them if they reported anything.

Constantly under threat of being exposed, the guards were willing participants in the Great Escape.

In the end, Roger Bushell achieved his goal, but the cost was severe. Of the seventy six who made it out before the tunnel was discovered, 50 were captured and executed under orders of Hitler and his minions, 3 were successful and the remainder recaptured and returned to camp. Of the fifty murdered, six were Canadians as follows;

*Flying Officer Henry Birkland J.

*Flying Officer Gordon Kidder A.

*Flight Lieutenant Patrick Langford W.

*Flight Lieutenant George McGill E.

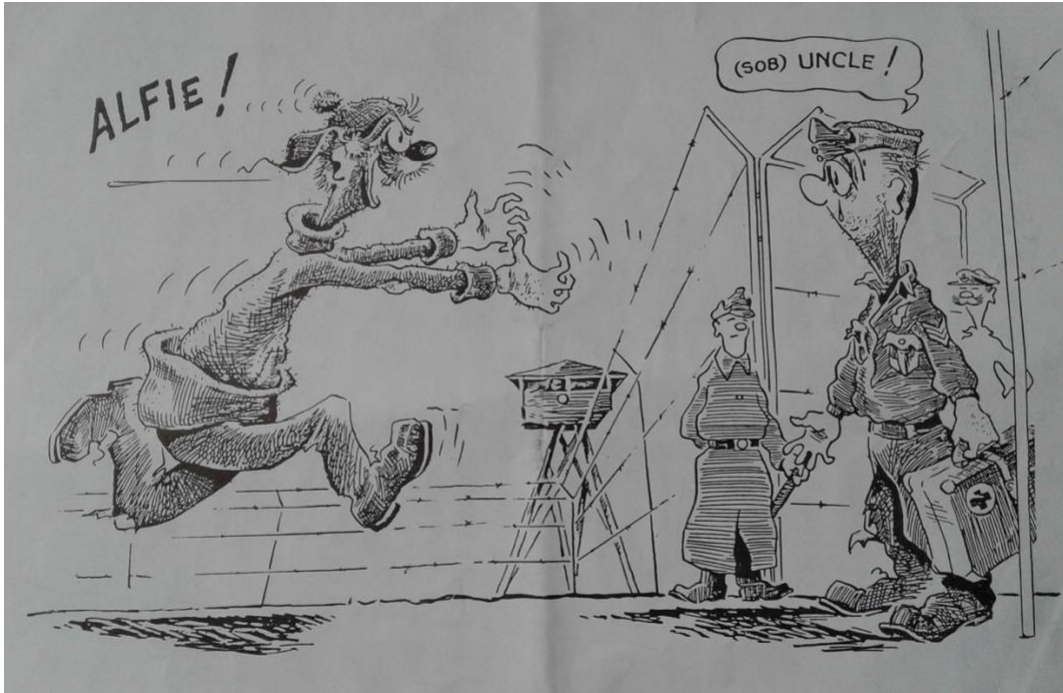
*Flight Lieutenant James Wernham C.

*Flight Lieutenant George Wiley W.

The senior officer in the camp held a parade and the names of the 50 were read out in public by the camp staff. The Germans claimed they had been shot while trying to escape.

Today a memorial exists in Sagan on the site of Stalag Luft 111 to honour their memory.

Lest We Forget.





Good luck
to Mr Rice
Dinner for you

S/ha
ret
40/89m
33c

KRIEGIE JOE

R.M. WOYCHUK

"KRIEGIE JOE"