

THE GREAT ESCAPE

In Western literature on the Second World War, the story of *The Great Escape* has long been a popular subject. Numerous memoirs, historical studies, documentaries, and feature films have been devoted to it.

On the night of 24–25 March 1944, several dozen prisoners of war escaped from *Stalag Luft III*, a prisoner-of-war camp located about 160 km southeast of Berlin near the town of Sagan (now Żagań, Poland, in Silesia), where captured Allied airmen of various nationalities were held behind barbed wire. In fact, such escapes were not unusual — POWs always sought opportunities to break out and regain their freedom. Moreover, unlike Soviet prisoners of war, who faced the threat of execution if recaptured, Allied airmen generally risked far less: the Germans did not normally execute escaped airmen but usually transferred them to punishment camps.

Stalag Luft III was an officers-only camp administered by the *Luftwaffe*. By the end of the war, it held about 10,000 prisoners. Living conditions for the airmen were relatively good. They were adequately fed, were not required to perform hard labor, and were allowed to participate in sports, organize craft exhibitions, and stage theatrical performances. They also received Red Cross parcels and often ate better than their guards. Nevertheless, escape attempts through tunnels beneath the barbed-wire perimeter were frequent. For example, the leader of the group that organized *The Great Escape*, Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, had managed to reach Prague after an earlier escape in 1942 and was recaptured only during the extensive manhunt that followed the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. Remarkably, although the Czech family that had sheltered him was executed, both Bushell and his fellow escapee, the Czech "Jack" Zafuk, survived.

The Great Escape was prepared over a long period and meticulously planned in every detail. It is noteworthy that some of the guards assisted the prospective escapees by providing maps, railway timetables, blank identity documents, and other useful materials. Such assistance, however, was rarely free. The prisoners bribed the guards with cigarettes, coffee, and chocolate from their Red Cross parcels. At the same time, the camp authorities made every effort to prevent escapes. Among the guards was a specially trained team of tracker dogs that regularly searched the barracks and the camp grounds for tunnels. On many occasions they succeeded in discovering tunnels before they reached beyond the perimeter. Interestingly, there were several instances in which the authorities deliberately allowed a tunnel to be completed before destroying it, forcing the prisoners to begin digging all over again. As in any prison camp, there were also informers among the prisoners who reported escape plans to the camp administration.

In the spring of 1943, the prisoners began digging the tunnel that would eventually be used for *The Great Escape*. First, they excavated a shaft approximately nine metres deep in the corner of one of the barracks. From the bottom of this shaft, the main tunnel was driven through loose sandy soil. Because of the unstable ground, both the walls and the roof had to be heavily timbered using wooden slats taken from the prisoners' own beds. Excavated soil was removed in small carts running on wooden rails. The tunnel was equipped with ventilation, electric lighting, and other features typical of a professionally constructed underground passage.

In fact, the prisoners dug three separate tunnels in case one or two were discovered by the tracker dogs. As it happened, one of the tunnels was indeed found by the guards and destroyed. A second tunnel was abandoned and converted into a storage area for excavated soil and equipment needed for the escape. The prisoners ultimately concentrated their efforts on the tunnel known as "*Harry*", which eventually reached a length of approximately 105–110 meters. However, they had miscalculated the required distance. Although the tunnel extended about 30 metres beyond the



James Catanach
(born 28.11.1921).
445th squadron RAAF.
Shot down in 1942
over Norway on the
way to the USSR. Shot
on the 29.03.1944 by
a Gestapo man Post



John Williams
(born 06.05.1919).
450th squadron RAF.
Shot down and
imprisoned on the
06.05.1942. Shot on
the 29.03.1944 by a
Gestapo man Luxe



Albert Hake
(born 30.06.1916). 72nd
fighter squadron RAF.
Shot on the 04.04.1944
by Gestapo men Luxe
and Scharpwinkel



Reginald Kierath
(born 20.02.1915).
450th squadron
RAF. Shot down on
the 23.04.1943. Shot
on the 29.03.1944.
Murderer unknown

News of the execution of the captured airmen reached Great Britain in July 1944. In a statement to Parliament, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden declared that those responsible for ordering and carrying out the executions would be identified, brought to justice, and punished.



Frank MacKenna



After the end of the war, a Special Investigation Branch (SIB) team of the Royal Air Force, headed by Flight Lieutenant Frank McKenna (who died in April 2002), launched an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the escaped Allied airmen. Their painstaking work eventually led to the identification of many of those responsible. In February 1948, thirteen men directly involved in the executions were tried and hanged in Hamburg. Others who had participated in the events but had not personally taken part in the shootings received various terms of imprisonment. At least five Gestapo officers involved in the murders committed suicide either before their arrest or while in custody awaiting trial. One of the perpetrators, Police Commissioner Günther Absalon (photo on the left), died in a Soviet prison in May 1948. Several Gestapo officers from Breslau, including Lux, who was responsible for the execution of at least twenty-seven escaped airmen, among them the

Australians Williams and Hake, were killed during the final battles against Soviet forces in the closing days of the war. Three others were captured and executed by the Czechs.

The fate of the head of the Breslau Gestapo, Dr. Scharpwinkel, remained unknown for many years. (*It is interesting to speculate what field of study earned him his doctorate—or what illnesses he once treated.* — VK.) Scharpwinkel had personally participated in the execution of several Allied airmen, including the Australians. McKenna's investigation eventually led him to two possible witnesses to Scharpwinkel's presumed death. One was Gerda Sembrodt, a nurse at a military hospital in Breslau, and the other was her husband, a wounded German soldier being treated at the same hospital. They gave the following account:

On the day after the surrender of Breslau, either 10 or 11 May 1945, two Soviet officers entered the hospital reception area accompanied by Dr. Meling, the hospital's chief physician. They were joined by a Russian woman in civilian clothes carrying a revolver. She shouted, "Where is Captain Hagaman?" One of the wounded men answered, "I am." The woman rushed over, tore the blanket off him, and pointed her revolver at him.

"You're lying! You're Scharpwinkel, the head of the Breslau Gestapo. Get up!"

"I'm wounded—my leg is injured."

She pressed the revolver against his ear.

"If you don't stand up, you're dead."

The wounded man limped into the middle of the room, calling for Dr. Meling. It was futile: the doctor himself had been placed under arrest for harbouring him. Both men were forced out of the room.

"A minute or two later we heard a burst of machine-gun fire. Scharpwinkel had been shot."

Nevertheless, Gerda stated that she had never actually seen Scharpwinkel's body. Nor had anyone else seen any bodies or blood outside the hospital. She and her husband therefore assumed that the Soviets had taken the bodies away with them.

McKenna suspected that this account did not tell the whole story and concluded that Scharpwinkel had probably been taken into Soviet custody for further interrogation rather than executed on the spot. He was correct. The former Gestapo chief was in fact being held in Moscow. One of the SIB investigators, Maurice Cornish, spent three months there and interrogated Scharpwinkel twice in the presence of Soviet security officers fluent in both English and German. During these interviews, Scharpwinkel admitted his involvement in the execution of the Allied airmen.

The Soviet authorities, however, refused to hand him over to the British. They explained that they wished to exchange him for a certain "baron," the owner of a company in Cologne. The British Foreign Office requested information regarding the alleged crimes of this individual, but the Soviets declined to provide any details. As a result, the negotiations collapsed and the investigation came to a halt.

McKenna later discovered that the Soviets had in fact been seeking the extradition of Anton Kaindl, the former commandant of Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Although the British intelligence services had no objection to such an exchange, the Foreign Office rejected the proposal, declaring, "We do not barter human beings."

The Scharpwinkel case was effectively shelved. Nevertheless, during his interrogations in Moscow, he provided the British with valuable information by revealing that some of the recaptured escapees had been held at the Kiel Gestapo headquarters. This led investigators to pursue a new line of inquiry. By then, however, the head of the Kiel Gestapo, Friedrich Schmidt, and his deputy, Johannes Post, had disappeared. The investigators were able to locate only two truck drivers, Struve and Denkmann,

who had transported the bodies of the executed airmen to the crematorium. They directed the investigators to the home of Post's girlfriend, Marianna Heidt. She too had disappeared, but a photograph of the couple was found in the house.

In the summer of 1947, McKenna visited the internment camp at Minden, where suspected war criminals were being held. There, fortune finally smiled at him. He recognized, from the photograph recovered at Marianna Heidt's house, a prisoner who was living under the name Johannes Polman. The man was, in fact, Johannes Post. During interrogation, Post quickly abandoned any attempt at denial and admitted his involvement in the execution of several escaped Allied airmen, including Jim Catanach. He made the following statement:



Johannes Post

"For the glory of the Führer, I killed many subhumans. I killed non-Aryans, vagrants, Gypsies, Jews, and political undesirables. The Führer personally decorated me. My only regret is that I did not kill more. I wish I had had even more opportunities to kill people like you. You destroyed our cities and killed our women and children. Those terrorist airmen whom I shot were of no greater value to the Reich than all the other subhumans I killed."

Post was sentenced to death and executed by hanging.

There are two conflicting accounts of the fate of Dr. Scharpwinkel. According to the official statement issued by the Soviet authorities, he died in a Soviet prison in 1947. Other sources, however, claim that he later served in the administration of the Soviet occupation zone in eastern Germany. Perhaps one of the visitors to this website will be able to shed further light on his ultimate fate.

A. Burgess. *The Longest Tunnel*. 1990

[Rob Davis. The Great Escape](#)