"For you Tommy, the war is over". Not necessarily so. Escape and Evasion in Europe.
Peter H Liddle

It so happens that I have always been interested in captivity. I have never experienced it though my boarding school days offered me, I suspect, something kindred. My only time 'inside' shall we say, was visiting Armley gaol here in Leeds researching what it was like to be a conscientious objector in 1916-18 but I do remember long ago learning that the reality of captivity was not to be spoken of as if it were a one-dimensional experience. Telling me of his sojourn in Bavaria from 1915-18 a man related the ease with which on many nights he had got out of the barn in which he was locked after labouring in a farmer's fields, to sport with one or the other of the father's daughters. Of course I had to ask him, as I ask all former P.O.Ws - Did you attempt to escape? The silence on the tape in the Liddle Collection today doesn't reveal what his eyes told me 'what a bloody silly question'.

Peter H Liddle

With that to demonstrate my early fascination with the subject I would like to concentrate tonight on why, with what preparation, how and with what consequence did men risk escape in German-dominated Europe during the Second World War. Is it possible to build from several hundred P.O.W documented life stories in the Second World War Experience Centre, a picture of the escapee as a type - character, qualities - among so many newly in the bag, the men who would while others wouldn't plan, prepare and execute an escape and then what it took to evade swift recapture?

I think we need first of all to look at the reaction to capture and remind ourselves of the variation in that circumstances which might encourage or deter escape:

For the soldier at St Valery or Calais in June 1940, he was in all likelihood very tired, perhaps bewildered [How had it come to this?] and certainly, for many career officers, intensely frustrated at the abrupt termination of the prospect of service experience and advancement indeed usefulness in the overall war effort. With turbulent feelings of mystification over the evident defeat for some there was a degree of personal and collective shame. So, if you were not too tired, there's the stimulus for escape and there is some opportunity with so many to guard and remove from the Channel area by long marches and then train transportation to prepared or new P.O.W camps.

Chandos Blair has written and spoken of his state of shock, depression, even a sense of disgrace at his St Valery capture and of his immediately looking for a chance to escape. He took it but it was short-lived.

Padre Ledgerwood, a New Zealander voluntarily remaining with men in an 'other ranks' camp, wrote perceptively in 1944 of the impression he had of many captured with him from the campaign in Greece and Crete in 1941 and the transition from active service soldiering to prisoner of war status. Initially sunk into a torpor, then grappling with questions as to who was to blame? The officers? The government? God, who hadn't intervened?

In fact, to keep the record straight, the campaign in Greece and in Crete in 1941 and North Africa too in May/June 1942 had offered, as had St Valery, some fleeting opportunity for evasion of capture.

Here the help of an independent-minded courageous peasantry was vital. The great danger faced by Cretans in so doing was to be matched in the aid given to allied POWs by Italian peasants from the autumn of 1943 following the Italian Government's surrender but swift assumption of control by a German occupying force.

In Greece a soldier called Sabin taking to the mountains when his unit was virtually surrounded, soon deduced that to find locals who had been to America was helpful. Some English could be spoken and family photographs shown to women drew their sympathy and assistance – 'food, haircuts, blankets, shaves, shelter and news and even animals killed for them'.

In Crete those who were not evacuated by the Royal Navy had in some instances to wait for capture or attempt evasion on an island in the course of being occupied. The framework of their circumstances was severely limited but was not totally without hope.

Similarly, in May/June 1942 at Gazala and Tobruk in Libya, large numbers of British and Commonwealth troops were again put in the bag. The separation of officers and men was particularly a challenge to the morale of the latter, a challenge lived up to by NCOs who regularly feature with credit in memoirs of the 'other rank' prisoners, both with regard to morale on the march to camps and in the organisation of leisure activities thereafter.

Even from within the perimeter at Tobruk, events allowed some to escape East to rejoin the retreating British forces. An officer called Simmons imaginatively tried the deception of disguise as prisoners of the Germans under German guard, using uniforms available to them from their own captives. The scheme failed and with tragic development.

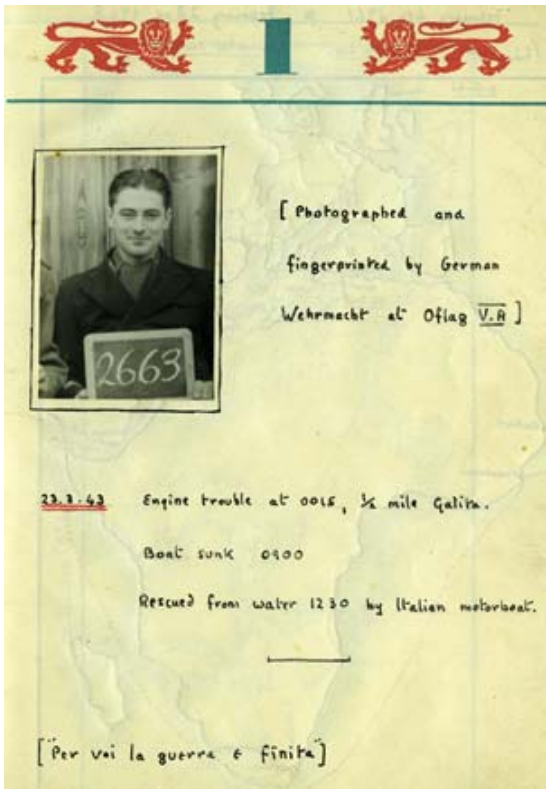
From Italy there are inspiring tales of food, shelter, clothes given to POWs by peasant people, the Contadini, few of whom are likely to have been fuelled by strong political antipathy to the Fascist regime. Such was not the case in one instance however, from which there was in fact a surprising romantic outcome. An anti-Fascist family helping both Italian Army deserters and evading POWs took a British officer named Goddard under its wing for a full year. A relationship developed with a daughter. They married and acquired a flat but were forced to 'go on the run' in heavy snow as the Germans engaged upon a major search of the area. In severe weather they became desperate fugitives. Shelter was given on a number of occasions but never for long and it was not until the last weeks of the war that American Jeeps and a column of German prisoners signalled the end of a shared ordeal.

A Page from Charles Cole's Prisoner of War log, held in the Centre's Collection. "Posten"

For men of the Royal and the Merchant Navy their capture was usually in circumstances which precluded any early opportunity of escape. From rafts or lifeboats after the destruction of their ship, probably weakened by exposure to the elements, parched, sunburned or sodden, disheartened and cold, perhaps covered in oil, capture in fact meant rescue and hope! The chance of freedom for the time being, if lit in the mind, would of necessity be for the back-burner.

An illustration of how even under severely adverse circumstances the spark of resistance for sailors was not entirely extinguished is the experience of Charles Coles, who had been in command of a Coastal Motor Boat off the coast of Libya. Failed engines forced the abandonment of the boat and an attempt to sink it. However one of their two dinghies sank

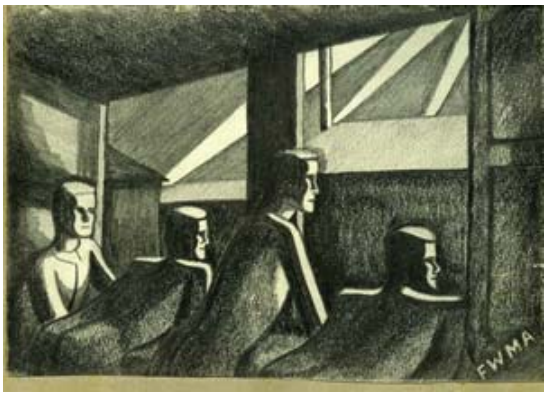
and they had to return to the waterlogged Motor Boat. A decision was taken to swim to an island nearby but some of the crew were drowned or came near it. They were rescued by Italian soldiers on a French fishing boat. Of the boat's crew of eleven, five had drowned.



Pages from Charles Cole's Prisoner of War log, held in the Centre's Collection.

The survivors planned to take over their rescue craft because the Italians wouldn't expect this from 'demoralised survivors'. However, this never happened because of the sheer congeniality of 'Il Capitano' as they talked and drank with him. It was felt that it wouldn't be cricket to assault their hospitable host and 'beat him on the head with his own wine bottle.'

Submarine Officer, Michael Kyrle-Pope had his craft sunk on the surface at night by the deliberate ramming action of an Italian destroyer. Officers and men took to the water, Kyrle-Pope striving to keep the head of a non-swimmer above the water. He failed in the attempt to save this man but the destroyer's ships' boats picked them up. They were treated well but of course escape was not in the equation.



Pages from Charles Cole's Prisoner of War log, held in the Centre's Collection.

Loftus Peyton-Jones in his first submarine command after distinguished service in surface craft in the Arctic, was unlucky in having his craft disabled by enemy air attack. He and his crew were captured. His journey from a camp at Padula to Bologna provided his first opportunity to escape but swift recapture followed upon exposure of his lack of a command of Italian. He attempted to put this right by intensive study and at the Italian surrender in September 1943 he evaded German transfer of prisoners from Bologna Northwards. Italian people sheltered him and his escape partners and carefully worked with them to improve their Italian. Moving South towards the allied lines he caught jaundice and needed nursing which again an Italian family provided. Italian Fascist and German SS searches came near to ending his endeavour but the Italian sheltering him, despite having to give up his deserter son, did not betray the Englishman. Small wonder Peyton-Jones recorded; 'I had unforgettable help'.

He and his compatriots made their way to the coast and managed to get a boat to an outlying island and in due course rejoin the allies. I am really happy to share with you the information that we have the peasant clothes in which this naval officer took steps to return to active service.

For aircrew P.O.Ws, in the main but not exclusively life-saved by parachute descent, again the circumstance was distinctly individual. Some were of course wounded or injured either in the destruction of the aircraft, getting out of the aircraft or in landing. In many cases capture was not immediate and attempted evasion held some attraction. Indeed it was officially expected and provided for. Aircrew were expensively trained, not expendable and had in most cases with them hidden escape aids – compasses and maps.

Alan Bryett, who was involved in the Great Escape from Sagan, Stalag Luft III, informed the Centre that he was captured in 1943 and then 'could see no end to the war ahead , no chance of freedom for four, five or six years' – a pressing motivation for a young man to escape!

There were still however deterrents, among them a potentially dangerous reception from German civilians; potential or actual victims of a bombing raid, vengeful spirits fuelled by their government propaganda and in a position to wreak some retribution. There were too, more mature Hitler Youth and a German Home Guard certainly not lacking in their morale. Capture by them, never mind the Gestapo, could be physically hazardous. But it seems reasonable to presume that most aircrew were almost spared the anxiety of a decision: they were either corralled quickly or they found themselves 'on the run.'

To land outside the Third Reich could offer some prospect of help despite the danger for the person offering aid. Harold Levy parachuted into Belgium from his stricken aircraft. He was Jewish but he had some protection in that he was uniformed; he staggered to a house and knocked. It was three o'clock in the morning. Eventually an old man came to the door, saw his uniform, stuck out his hand, drew Levy in and sat him down while the old man went upstairs and came down wearing a First World War Belgian helmet and marched forward and back across the room. Levy was 'on the run' but he had help. However in this case his freedom was fleeting. It lasted for eight days.

Hiding and receiving help, in all likelihood would mean being put in contact with Resistance personnel. On many occasions this saw men passed into the hands of those running escape lines but some evaders became totally involved in Resistance activities. American airman C.K Belton, parachuted from his stricken aircraft over Holland, soon met a civilian who took him to a farmhouse and then whisked him away to another farm by bicycle. Every item of clothing was changed, his identity as an airman dispensed with. Belton wanted to 'fight' even outside his trained environment, the air, and also without command of Dutch. 'I told the leader I could help'. His first actions, in resistance, killing a German and also a collaborator, won the trust of the group. He posed as deaf and dumb, served with the group and witnessed grim reprisals by the Germans before having help to cross the Rhine East to West and meet up with French Canadians in the allied advance.

Let us have no total preoccupation with successful 'derring-do' for the airman finding himself in occupied Europe. Pilot Melville Carson found himself the sole survivor of his bomber aircraft somehow alive in the cockpit, the crashing aircraft out of control as it approached the ground but by sheer chance meeting the ground at an angle and without a fiery explosion of fuel, ammunition and bombs. Carson's 'escape' was with his life and for a long time in hospital.

On to captivity itself. It is abundantly evident that until officers or men in their camps became organised in compensatory time-occupying, mentally or physically fulfilling activity in their camps – [education, entertainment, cultural activity, sport and yes escape activity], captivity was a boring, frustrating and deprived existence. The wire, watchtowers, guards and alien authority regimentation, were evidence of the loss of freedom and a purposeful existence. Certainly a sense of humour helped. With regard to sustenance, prisoners were soon to realise their dependence on Red Cross and personal food and cigarette parcels. German or Italian food issues were seen to be inadequate.

Even what might caustically be termed the 'benefit' of being a prisoner could, according to an individual's outlook, be seen in gloomy colours. A prisoner was largely out of danger: but was he not also useless? A prisoner had time for himself, time for leisure and self-education; but was also this not time to brood? A prisoner had time for friendships but what about those for whom this did not come naturally. If capture and imprisonment could stir the rebellious spirit of some, it exerted a more successfully repressive influence on far more. One man told me; 'I was too much of a coward to risk escape. We were very happy to be alive.' Rather harshly, Freddie Burnaby-Atkins thought that there were too many such people; 'disinterested or broken or lazy.'

Even for those with a compelling urge to escape there was a need for activities which fulfilled individual needs. Frederick Corfield, a determined if unsuccessful escaper, read all the Waverley novels, the complete works of Dickens and Tolstoy and Jane Austin. Until he was directed to the study of law he read so much on forestry and farming that he earned the nickname 'Dungy' Corfield!

Such occupations were for most men, officers and men 'in the ranks', absolutely critical in building up a self-protective wall against depression. The production of plays and pantomimes, the stimulus of art class paintings, study courses, yes and even to externally moderated exam level.

For those seriously engaged in escaping activities, camp recreation could run alongside their secret preparations. It could in fact be a helpful cover or a preparatory exercise: the learning of German most obviously and maintaining physical fitness.

A sidelight relating to this, is that it was perceived to be the case that the security exercised in camps for the 'other ranks' was poorer than that in which officers were held. Certainly this was the perception of escape-minded officers. Hence when, as was sometimes the case, the respective compounds were close, there was for the officer intending to escape, something to be gained by a physical exchange with a man 'in the ranks', with each assuming the other's identity.

Commando Officer Thomas MacPherson twice changed identities with men in adjacent 'other ranks' camps in escape attempts, in the second quite properly feeding the Camp Commandant's rabbits between the two perimeters of wire, cutting the outer wire and running to the lorry of a bribed contractor who took him quickly out of the immediate search area. From the contractors he had a contact in Gydnia and stayed with this family until a Swedish ship came to the port. He was instructed to climb up the gangway when the cranes stopped loading. The dockside lights came on as he was walking up so he stopped, got out sandwiches and commenced eating them, scarcely the actions of a stowaway. Perhaps aided by his sang froid, his fellow escapees climbed past him and all got aboard. They were hidden by a friendly seaman under coal and coaldust, the best place against sniffing search dogs. Some time after the ship docked in Sweden, MacPherson met the British Ambassador and later he was flown to the U.K. Here he had some reason to expect a War office job but by training and experience he was well-fitted for his destiny – an SOE agent in France!

So what about the determination to escape?

By definition, documentation on this is retrospective. It is in the memories of those who made repeated escapes and they have either written or spoken about this matter in interview. Clearly they were people who for a range of reasons were committed to escaping. One source suggests that they represented 5% of a camp community. Of that number some tried and tried again and some of them finished in Colditz the castle internment for persistent offenders and 'special persons', like Lord Harewood in whose home we are privileged to be. Some got killed in the attempt to escape and in the case of the Great Escape from Stalag Luft III, got executed on recapture, and just a small number managed that extraordinary achievement from German-occupied Europe, a 'home run' to freedom.

Quite apart from homesickness and lovesickness gnawing away at inaction, a sense of a serviceman's duty to escape was undoubtedly a motivation shared by many as was a sort of spiritual refusal to accept captivity. Then there was sheer boredom which for some was insufferable. One such soldier was John Jenkins, captured at Tobruk and interned in an Italian camp, who commented in his diary; 'By God life is monotonous'. In due course he was to be involved in a successful tunnel escape. There will always be those who are attracted by risk, adventure, the lure of rejecting restriction and pitting oneself against authority in a bid for freedom. While inertia dulled the initiative of many it sharpened the senses of a few. It seems to be akin to the instinct of a certain type of schoolboy who by careful planning and clandestine activity enjoys the satisfaction of outsmarting the authority, the bossy teacher.

Two things here might be usefully reaffirmed: the obsessive escaper was not only putting his life at risk but his equilibrium too and then there is the fact that escapers were not always a popular element in a camp. They brought down on everyone the interfering hand or mailed fist on life within the camp and for what purpose it was sometimes averred: not many ever made it home and it was at least arguable whether the German war effort were seriously disrupted following a POW break-out.

It is interesting to learn from some sources that at one camp, Stalag IVB at Moosburg, the elected POW representative there, the Man of Confidence as he was generically known, here a man called Meyers, was not in favour of escape and subsequently his reputation was seriously slurred by charges of his being in league with the German authorities over escaping activity in Moosburg. Moosburg veterans are aware of this charge but retort that Meyers was overwhelmingly re-elected as 'Man of Confidence' when challenged, and they see no substance in the charge of 'collaboration'.

The Planning of an escape.

Once incarcerated in a camp, a prisoner planning his freedom faced the challenge of getting over the wire, through the wire, under the wire, or, by deception, through the gate. In an 'other ranks' camp there was the possibility of escape from a work party something denied to officers by reason of Geneva Convention regulation precluding officer prisoners from being forced to work. Then there was the potential opportunity of escaping in transit from one camp to another or through the long-term and difficult path chosen by a very few to feign serious illness or even madness to achieve Red Cross supervised transfer to a neutral country.

Reference must be paid to the risk involved: a prisoner could be shot in making any attempt upon the wire by a camp guard sentry simply doing his duty. If the escapee were in a tunnel there were obvious risks there and he could be shot on emergence. Then jumping off a moving train, most probably at night to avoid detection but still risking a killing or disabling shot from an alert-guard and, perhaps more likely injury, in hitting an obstruction in the leap from the train.

With the risks 'the choices', if that were the right word: one could escape alone, with an accomplice or in a group attempt. In planning an escape there was a fundamental need for coordination. Every camp had its escape committee to vet plans put before them – primarily to ensure that new plans did not threaten existing approved schemes. The authority of the Escape Committee comes out clearly in John Muir's memories of Padula in Italy. He was refused permission to take advantage of a potential escape route and presumed that someone was ahead of him in that area. His persistence over escape attempts led to his transfer to the grim castle at Gavi. Here his reconnaissance survey led to a plan put to the Escape Committee but the decision was: 'yes, but not yet'. Again his scheme might have interfered with one already in place.

Muir's implementation of his plan two months later unhappily coincided with an SS take-over of the castle and after a three day concealment in a dungeon into which he had broken, the Germans themselves broke in and hauled him out.

To complete the record on Muir; he made his way out of a wooden railway carriage taking his fellow POWs to Germany and with others jumped out from the moving train. One man hit a signal as he jumped and was mortally injured, Muir's knees, hands and chest were all scraped and bruised but he and his partner Hugh Baker did reach Switzerland.

In a large undertaking like the Warburg 'over-the-wire escape', a meticulously planned as well as a thrilling exploit, key considerations were getting the materials to make the ladders and extensions to get over the wire, building and concealing them and then testing their practicability – major tasks before the event – with another key component too – achieving the lights blackout conceived by a scientifically perceptive prime mover in this escape attempt.

With coordination went preparation and this involved the support of others. From Stalag XVIIIA in Wolfsburg, Legerwood, the New Zealand Padre, recorded that maps were filched from the German Kommandant's office and from the walls of German-occupied barracks. Screw drivers, hacksaws blades, pliers and axeheads were removed from the machine shop. Then 'we tabulated information

regarding roads, bridges, rivers and streams, mountains and villages. We began to accumulate civilian clothes, men's and women's. We studied habits of Austrian peasantry and set down a minimum food supply for a fortnight on the road'. Ledgerwood noted what we would call today the 'take up' on German classes and the keenness to get fit for the road and the readiness to learn from the attempts of unsuccessful forerunners.

Camp forger, John Mansel, kept a diary which has the marvellous phrase in it 'I've no patience with these escapers. They merely disturb the peace and quiet of the camp', an extract written with the purpose of keeping the German censors off the scent of his escape activities fundamental to virtually every individual endeavour.

Naval Officer Michael Kyrle-Pope spent some of his time in his POW camp in Italy learning how to unlock and relock doors, by a variety of means making a collection of Italian uniforms and, like many others, using the guided 'exercise' walks under parole to survey the countryside around the camp. He also stole a map from an Italian film crew in the camp for Home Front propaganda purposes. A tunnel he was involved in opening up was discovered but he had also noticed dead ground – a few yards which could not be observed from the security posts. He made a step ladder and on a January night got over the wall and made for the coast, surprisingly his tracks through the snow not being followed. It was in attempting to steal some sort of boat to make for Yugoslavia that he was caught.

Michael was not finished with escaping. From a camp in Germany it was he who took the famous dummy 'Albert' to the washhouse to take the place of an escapee who did not return from the shower. The escaper, David James, was disguised and had forged papers as a Bulgarian Naval Officer, 'Ivan Buggerov'. I don't know if it were his pseudonym which caught James but he, Kyrle-Pope and another guilty party had to serve a thirty day imprisonment in an Italian fortress as a result of their exploit. In fact they were well treated, had a batman and 'we had three weeks of pleasant rest'. Kyrle-Pope was soon involved in tunnelling again.

Every escape, no less the solitary escapes, would need help. By marvellous distant deception, MI9 from London got into the camps food parcels which contained currency, compasses, hacksaws and goodness knows what else. Escape committees securely stored all such aids and coordinated the work of men with existing or developed skill in the production of a whole range of escape aids: forged identity papers, the manufacture of civilian shoes and clothes, hats, cases and other props for a 'traveller'. Maps showing routes and frontiers, possible crossing points, guard posts to avoid, railway stations, rivers, roads, places for potential concealment, all such information gleaned from the possession of existing maps and new information offered by those who returned after an attempt which had been foiled. Currency would be needed, German of course but also occupation currency. Tailors, carpenters, cartographers, forgers, language teachers, gadget makers but such a list by no means exhausts what would be needed. Tunnel soil disposers with drawstring bags within their trousers attempted to disguise their wobbly walk, penguin-like as they got rid of the tunnel sand or soil. The camp committees had to gather in chocolate and non-perishable concentrated food as well as currency for those whose scheme was authorised.

Observers had to watch from a position of concealment the movement of guards to signal times for action or a pause. Parties would be needed for diversionary activities. For a mass escape attempt one can imagine how many were involved in support activities. That reminds me that we should not be surprised by the seeming dominance of RAF personnel in escaping – yes, it does say something about what it takes to be an airman but also of Ministry of Defence priority in the wherewithal for escaping RAF aircrew not something which readily met the approval of Army and Navy personnel.

It should be made clear that in the big escape attempts there were other priorities to be considered not just the question of getting aircrew back. Those who had done the work of tunnelling – often, as it happened, Polish miners and engineers - had an accepted claim, then those who spoke German naturally, perhaps as a second language and those who were experienced in travel on the Continent, had a claim by reason of their increased chance of escape. This helps to account for Free French, Belgians, Dutch and Czechs or Poles being heavily involved in such escapes. It also helps to explain the significant statistic of a Dutchman and two Norwegians being the sole success stories in the Great Escape and, a sad parallel, the numbers of Europeans murdered on recapture against the lower number of British or Americans from a total of 50 executed.

Carrying out an escape attempt.

Of the more celebrated escape attempts I have to mention the 'Wooden Horse' success from Sagan, Stalag Luft III, because the famous film has made it so familiar. I mention it here briefly to record that Centre documentation shows the Escape Committee wrestling with a brilliant idea from two rather unpopular men, the relationship of this and the first gymnastic jumping team going on strike and needing replacement, was to find the Escape Committee more evidently back in control of the whole venture which in truth needed the help of so many. For example three civilian suits had to be made, a railway timetable secured, maps and money gathered in, then ingenious attempts to cover up from the Germans and delay their reaction to the fact that three men had got away and I haven't mentioned the men watching the guards, the gymnasts, and those dispersing the soil from the tunnel.

Of the Great Escape, famous and infamous, again the film, with whatever inaccuracy and embellishment still brilliantly captures that which is spell-bindingly exciting, admirable and tragic about the event. I am leaving it in its wealth of published detail except to share with you the memories of a tunneller from the same camp, William Ash. I don't think I have ever come across anywhere an account which conveys better the reality of tunnelling work. In his description he writes of a tunnel under the latrines at Schubin, not one of Sagan's tunnels;

> 'Entering the tunnel was a daily experience of horror. Each trip down required a little more courage, and the need to blot out the thought of all those tons of earth pressing down on you, knowing that a cave-in would leave us trapped, breathing mouthfuls of mud and unable to go backwards or forwards.
>
> The presence of light became important, not just to work by, but to steady our nerves and remind us that there was a world above with sky and fresh air, waiting for us to return.
>
> We worked on in stifling darkness, trying not to think about the amount of unstable earth directly above our heads. It is hard to convey the sense of claustrophobia that comes from an hour of stabbing away at a wall of Polish mud so narrow that you can only get one arm forward to work on the face and which stretches back behind you so far that it takes half an hour to wriggle back to safety and sanity at the tunnel start. The experience assaults every sense. We felt the cold clay around us, pressing in on us and seeping into our bones until we almost became part of the tunnel. The loss of sight in the darkness when the lights went out was total. No glimmer of light had penetrated that wall of mud in a million years. Even when the margarine lamp flickered, it only served to emphasise the blackness around it – what Milton once called "darkness visible".
>
> When a shower of earth fell from an unshored roof: it filled the mouth of an unfortunate digger, gaping wide for oxygen in the stale void of the tunnel.'

And now to the Warburg large-scale escape 'over the wire', Operation Olympia 30th August 1942, from Oflag VIB at Warburg. The first inspiration was that of finding a means to black out this camp's lights; then of gathering the timber for 12 foot ladders with extensions to permit crossing the wire and descending outside the perimeter. The effectiveness of the ladders had to be tested in the huts, the men trained to mount, cross and descend swiftly. On the actual night, additionally, they would be carrying packs of their evasion essentials.

There were to be four teams of ten to each of four ladders, the ladders, constructed of bed slats, had to be deconstructed to form, for example, book shelves against discovery. There was insufficient timber for further ladders. The noise of fabrication was to be deadened by loud music practice.

On the night in question following upon the fusing of the lights and the signal "Go! Go! Go!", though one ladder in the event collapsed, thirty men got out, three successfully completing the "home run".

One man, an officer L T 'Dick' Tomes, described the event as 'the most exciting thing I have ever done in my life'. He was free for ten days and eleven nights. His acute disappointment in being caught was later to have some soothing balm on learning that a guard had been convinced that the ladders must have been parachuted in.

Of such exploits by individuals, Jack Pringle made an escape from the forbidding Italian three level castle of Gavi, North of Genoa. In terms of physical challenge it rivals the Warburg escape. Pringle said later that he would never have made the attempt if he were to have any grasp of its physical appearance. He approached the castle when it was shrouded by rain and mist and his entering into it had been by underground passage way. Somehow he cut through many feet of granite – this taking some months – he swam a reservoir, got down to the next level roof where the guards were on a raised platform, jumped over a wall not knowing the distance to the ground. It was 25 feet but somehow it was effected without disaster. Pringle was what might be called a professional escapee. In retrospect he recognised that he always lacked something; sufficient food or foolproof documents but if anyone earned his place in Colditz the camp for 'bad boys', Pringle did. He had a distinct philosophy: if possible you should not have a companion. If you did, decisions had to be discussed and often there is no time for this. 'I was a professional soldier. I wanted to get back into action. This was the motivation but the adventures appealed to me. I am not a calculating person. I took things as they came concerning capture and any possible consequences.'

Another regular soldier with escape on his own in mind was similarly motivated, Seaforth Highlander, Chandos Blair. Blair's camp, Biberach, was 75 miles from Switzerland. He chose a main gate escape, studying the personnel and 'traffic' passing through the gate. The report he made on this successful escape still exists dating from December 1941. In sum the report states that the actual escape was based on his hiding under unused bed frames being stored in a garage outside the wire and with a mattress filled with escape gear. He had with him a pocket knife, a homemade compass, a 10 mile to the inch copied map, four boxes of matches, three handkerchiefs, shaving and washing kit, a watch, an old cigarette tin as a cup, half a loaf of German bread, two pounds of chocolate and the same of cheese, half a pound of dates and a tin of Horlicks tablets. Officers took the place of the 'other ranks' working party moving the beds, Blair, and his escape kit to the garage which was then locked late in the evening. Moving bales of straw helped him climb out of a high window in the garage and by good fortune an old cart underneath the window reduced the jump to the ground. He was free, his absence from the roll calls covered by various ruses.

It is not in the report but I like the expression he used in remembering his escape; for the first mile or so 'my feet never touched the ground'. The joy of freedom.

His plan was to travel only by night towards the Swiss frontier at Schaffhausen. He hid in woods and was plagued by mosquitoes and other insects during the frustrating night hours. At one stage, distrusting a railway line's bend away from his compass direction, he left its guidance only to reach a dense wood and swamp requiring a return to the railway line. A tree climb allowed him to reorientate himself but his progress was slow – twelve miles took three nights and his food supplies were well-diminished. He now took more risks walking down the line at night through stations rather than diverting around them. Once, discovered by a boy who quickly ran off, he shrewdly climbed high into a tree nearby being unseen when the boy returned accompanied. Much later, of his escape, he recalled; 'thoroughly enjoying being a hunted wild animal and the barking roe and foxes, grunting badgers, squealing wild boars, screeching owls, skirling buzzards as well as the friendly little birds and animals part of my life too for a week.'

On the eighth day he actually crossed the frontier without knowing that he had done so, attempting at night to find out which small town he was in. He was arrested by a guard stirred from his sleep. The guard was Swiss.

After interrogation he was allowed to telephone the British legation at Berne and though he had more hours of prison conditions and questioning to endure before cooperatively being handed over to the British military attaché. He was not yet fully in the clear. Switzerland's geographical position required an escorted but dangerous journey through Southern France, across the Pyrenees into Spain then to Gibraltar from whence he came home in style in a Sunderland Flying Boat by reason of the fact that an RAF pilot escapee needed a swift return. The Seaforth Highlander had made it and, as if to justify the risk and effort, he would serve with distinction in North West Europe in 1944/45.

Train escape was also in the vision of all those looking for weaknesses in the system which held them captive. As a matter of course vulnerable door or window opportunity would not be available so the ripping up of floorboards or a fleeting moment of guard inattention at a latrine stop were what was on offer. Dennis Simmons had noticed guards at either end of his train taking him from Italy to Germany, and no guards in the middle. By great fortune an iron tool was available to break up the floorboards. At each halt one or two made their way out and ran for it unseen from the train's extremities. Simmons and a colleague escaped in this manner, moved and rested, found South African soldiers who told them they could trust the Italian villagers. Indeed they could and they met two Italian airmen deserters with whom a real accord was reached. Ill-fate however stalked them. They were caught being fed in an Italian woman's cottage, one of the Italian airmen being forced to dig his own grave and then being shot.

On the subject of the support given to evaders from people in occupied Europe I would like to mention William Ash again, the American pilot flying with Canadians. He was shot down over the Pas de Calais in March 1942. He found a family and then other people prepared to keep him even under the terrible threat posed by the occupying force. Civilian clothes and hiding places were provided and then people actually in the Resistance escorted him to Lille and on to Paris. However, betrayal and capture lay ahead. Ash's experience as an evader in occupied France could be paralleled again and again. Stan Hope, an RAF navigator parachuting into Belgium from his engine-failed Mosquito was securely hidden by Belgian people, passed along an escape line through France to betrayal in the foothills of the Pyrenees.

"It happened one night"

The re-patriation question solved!!!

Well-justified suspicion exercised by leaders of the Resistance in Occupied Europe could lead to rigorous and time-taking testing of the authenticity of aircrew passed into their hands. Once tested and proved, British, Commonwealth and American airmen sometimes became involved with local group sabotage or information-gathering exercises. An Army officer, Griff Davies-Scourfield in an Eastern European escape became involved with the Home Army Resistance of Poles before his freedom was ended.

There are instances of imaginative ingenuity as well as the more spectacular fighting annals like that of Davies Schofield. RAF Padre Niel Nye, captured near Benghazi in North Africa, was involved in an escape attempt from Piacenza [before the Italian surrender] rolling a friend out a camp in a milk churn quite successfully until the lid came off.

Of the 'deception' escapes, Michael Sinclair's impersonation of a Colditz guard, familiar to all as 'Franz Josef' by reason of his moustache ended in dramatic failure when he and two officers also in 'German uniform' failed to convince two guards to be relieved and Sinclair's own challenge with a dummy pistol led to his being shot and wounded.

Also from Colditz, Airey Neave, in advance of his later success, nearly escaped dressed up as a German Corporal of the guard using a stolen tally plate to confirm his identification. A man called Boulay from the same castle was no more successful in an attempt disguised as a woman.

A different form of impersonation was that attempted by those feigning illness or madness in order to be transferred under Red Cross auspices to neutral Switzerland. Trained by Paddy Byrne in his 'lunacy school' in Sagan, three men and Byrne all fooled the Medical Commission which reviewed their cases and Richard Pape, successful too, undertook the dangerous course of deliberately developing the symptoms of kidney disease. In due course he got repatriation using blood and urine samples from a real sufferer but having had to induce symptoms of dizziness, swollen ankles and yellowing of the

skin, the latter two by towel-whipping of his ankles for hours, swallowing soap and rubbing his eyes with yellow crepe paper.

We must not neglect escape from work camps and in particular one which ultimately led to freedom. James Hall in the RAF, shot down over Holland in 1942 and transferred to a POW camp near Nuremberg, volunteered for farm work, fled from it, stole and assaulted someone to get his needs, reached France, linked himself to the Resistance, established a French identity with forged papers and was taught to spit disgustedly following any attempt to engage him in German conversation although I am surprised that this was considered to be a sound way of shielding his incapacity to converse in that language. He was provided with a new identity and false papers and the Resistance attempted to coordinate first a boat and then a seaplane evacuation for him. New papers again assisted him on his journey South West and a successful crossing of the Pyrenees. However, in Spain, unsympathetic authorities would not accept him as English and before release he was to spend fifteen weeks in an insanitary gaol.

Remaining with escapes from work camps, Eric de la Torre, a Commando captured on the St Nazaire Raid, managed three – none lasting more than a few days – first from a sawmill having smuggled in civilian clothes for a quick change and a walk off the site; second from a lumber enterprise in a forest, simply by walking off into the wood. He was punished for this by having to dig powdered lime without a mask. His third work camp escape was from farming and bribing a lorry driver so he could hide under sacks of potatoes.

Burnaby-Atkins had a nice phrase in his letter home to illustrate a possible consequence of both long captivity and ten days of exhaustingly tense evasion; 'We were caught near the border in fog by a single German. Looking back we realised we should have tackled him but I don't think we were feeling very aggressive.' This issue of vulnerability is nicely captured by Lawrence Bains in a recording of his feelings 'on the run' making it clear that active service was one thing, a collective experience, but evasion was "terribly personal you know".

Frederick Corfield who had good experience of evasion learned lessons from it: he aimed to avoid roads and villages and instead followed railway lines, electricity lines and made diversions around any communities. He recognised that he was tense on the run with natural noises alarming him as much as human, once mistaking a woodpecker for a woodcutter. Corfield chose to wear his army battledress protecting himself, so he thought, from the rough handling of those caught in civilian clothes.

A letter written after the event to the daughter of an RAF evader offers a clear indication of how airmen 'on the run' could be given shelter and handed on to those shadowy but inspiring figures who ran the escape lines along which men were guided, it was hoped, to liberty. Chance had led a French woman to her dangerous role in the Resistance. She encountered two airmen newly on the run. Mme Jeanne Delbruyere took Robert Brown and Jack Winterton, shot down en route to Frankfurt, to a wood for initial concealment and then to her house. She handed them on to others who took them to Brussels from where they were passed on by different people again through France, across the Pyrenees and finally to Gibraltar. Jeanne wrote of the coded radio messages from London which she learned had facilitated stages of the journey. On hearing of the men's successful return to England, Jeanne and her family were convinced that they must formally join the Resistance.

In such a way Jeanne's family became heavily involved in the celebrated Belgian-funded Comète Line of escape actively seeking out allied airmen on the run, taking them to secure shelter before setting them off on a homeward chain of assistance. In 1943 she and her husband were denounced by people with 'different loyalties'. Her husband was shot. She herself was interrogated by the Gestapo and dispatched first to Ravenbruck and then to Mauthausen. She survived. There could indeed be a heavy

price to pay for those in occupied Europe who helped the evaders but the Comète Line can lay claim to facilitating the safe return to the United Kingdom of over 800 allied service personnel, a phenomenal total.

Another such escape line was set up by the escapee George Grimson in trying to help others get to neutral Sweden by way of the Baltic ports from Heydekrug, Stalag Luft VI. Grimson recruited an of array of sympathetic fishermen, traders and Poles stretching to the port of Danzig to help numerous escapers through German territory to reach Sweden and on to Britain. Whilst escorting two escapees to Danzig the group was confronted by a German patrol, which arrested one, letting the other slip onto a Swedish trawler and ending in Grimson's ultimate selfless act of sacrificing his place on the boat for the slim chance of a rescue of the man retaken.

The price of failure.

The failure of an escape attempt would place months of work on uniforms and civilian clothing, forged papers and homemade compasses and other escape equipment into German hands, as well as giving the Germans an idea of what the prisoners were capable of and had access to. Alternatively, the sojourn out of the camp, no matter how brief, would also allow for gathering of vital information about the surrounding areas, troop placements and modifications of identity cards and passes.

For his ten day escape Burnaby-Atkins got ten days solitary confinement. He wrote to his family; 'There's nothing very heroic about it – we had a good run for our money.' He was involved in no further escape attempts. By contrast Jimmy James of the RAF recaptured from the Great Escape, was not summarily executed but sent to the concentration camp Sachsenhaussen. Remarkably he escaped from there and survived a further recapture.

Alistair Bannerman, captured, escaped and recaptured during the first days of the Normandy landings was informed by the Commandant of a temporary POW camp at Alençon that ten of them would be shot if anyone tried to escape. He soon came to judge that 'we were winning; an escape attempt was not worth the risk' and, as a pre-war actor, immersed himself in camp theatricals.

Davies-Scourfield's unsuccessful tunnel escape from Laufen resulted in forty-two days' solitary confinement but there is for 'the escaper' something generally applicable in this man's individual reaction to that; 'one did not much mind being locked up on one's own in a cell.'

George Millar's escape from the Italian camp at Padula led to his being severely beaten, thrown into a cell naked and bleeding badly. His treatment was no long-term deterrent. A subsequent escape took him to the Strasbourg underworld and hospitality in a brothel on his way through France to Spain, freedom and a return to France as an SOE agent.

It seems pretty clear that the potential consequences of failure will have deterred some engaged in screwing up their courage to make such an attempt. Certainly this was the case in the aftermath of the Great Escape. However, such thinking did not stay long in the mind of a special breed of man, who, come what may would try, try and try again.

I think we can agree that in most prisoners to a variable degree there lay a reason for him to end his subjection to enemy authority. Tonight I have emphasised service professionalism, incapacity to cope with unutterable boredom and spiritual rejection of the chains of captivity. There are so many factors which might have been added; the severance from comrades and friends, from young love and from loving families. Translating these and other motivations into an escape attempt, with danger, privation, failure and punishment in attendance, repeating that attempt and doing so again and again, such a man had what it took to be an escaper: imagination, ingenuity, the capacity carefully to consider and

meticulously to prepare, self -confidence, determination, adaptability, courage, endurance, special skills; natural and developed. The ingredient he could not knowingly bring to the challenge was perhaps the most vital of all – good luck – without which the best laid schemes would end in disaster.

For anyone interested in a careful examination of the luck factor in determining the fate of the POW, there are several hundred case studies in the Second World War Experience Centre. There is much digging to be done and you will need luck, luck which I sincerely hope will also attend the future of the Second World War Experience Centre.