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Their Duty Twice Over: Canadians in the Great Escape

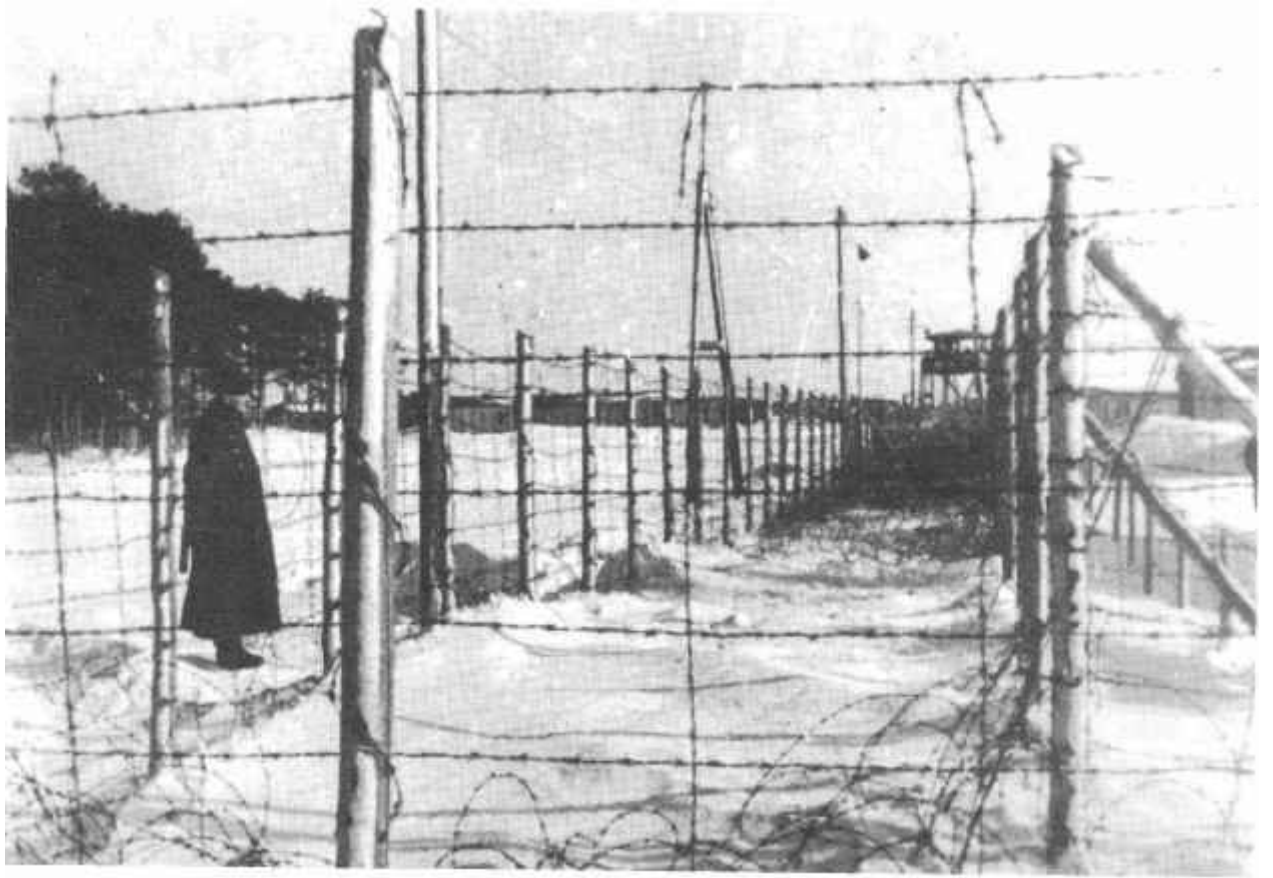
Jonathan F. Vance

The Great Escape of March 1944 was the culmination of over a year's planning and preparation by Allied airmen detained in Stalag Luft 3, a large prison camp in eastern Germany. The brainchild of a South African pilot, the plan called for the construction of three escape tunnels, code named Tom, Dick and Harry, which would be fully equipped with electricity, a vented air system, and trollies for travel to and from the face. Even if only one tunnel was used, the organizers believed that as many as 200 POWs, each outfitted with civilian clothes, travel documents, maps and foodstuffs, could get away from the camp. Most of these men would undoubtedly be recaptured in short order, but the disruption they would cause in occupied Europe was deemed sufficient to justify the attempt. When tunnel Harry finally broke through on the night of 24-25 March 1944, a series of misfortunes so delayed the operation that only 76 airmen were able to get away from the camp to temporary freedom. Three reached neutral territory and, as the escape planners had anticipated, the breakout sent shock waves through Nazi Germany. The ultimate outcome, though, was something none of the airmen could have foreseen: the summary execution of fifty of the recaptured escapers, including six Canadians.

Their indomitable courage, unquenchable hope, and supreme sacrifice had about it, even in these days of many patterns of heroism, something that was unique. Their freedom in a measure lost, they still fought on, doing their duty twice over.¹

At a July 1944 memorial service at St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church in London to honour the fifty airmen who lost their lives after the Great Escape from Stalag Luft 3, the RAF Chaplain-in-Chief was moved to make this comment on the spirit of the escapers. In March 1994 another memorial service marked the fiftieth anniversary of the escape and brought together the handful of remaining survivors as well as relatives of the fifty POWs executed after the breakout. Their thoughts returned to the prison camp at Sagan, now an overgrown meadow in southern Poland, which had been the site of a cooperative enterprise that brought together the talents of hundreds of airmen, including dozens of Canadians, from across the Allied world.

The nine Canadians who actually participated in the escape represented a cross-section of Canadian life. Alfred Thompson was the son of a politician from Penetanguishene and had the misfortune of being Canada's first POW. Tommy had left Ontario to join the RAF in 1936 but his flying war lasted just five days for he was shot down on a leaflet raid on 8 September 1939, before Canada even entered the war. Another bomber pilot was Pat Langford, the son of a forest ranger in Jasper National Park who spent part of the prewar period chauffeuring tourists around Lake Louise and the Yoho Valley in a big Packard touring car. Pat spent sixteen months as a flying instructor then, itching to get into action, wangled a transfer to an operational unit. His flying war was almost as short as Tommy Thompson's, for Langford was downed on only his second operation.²



Two views of Stalag Luft 3. (Author's collection)



Scottish-born Jimmy Wernham spent his youth in Winnipeg and Mine Centre in northern Ontario and, unable to find work after graduation from high school, drifted between the two places as the Depression ground on. He joined the RCAF in 1940 and flew operationally until June 1942, when his bomber was shot down during a raid on the Ruhr Valley.³ Hank Birkland, too, was a child of the Depression. Born in Spearhill, Manitoba, Birkland's family moved around in search of work and when Hank finished high school, he joined the thousands of other young Canadian men riding the railways in quest of employment. From Winnipeg, Birkland went east, to the mines of Sudbury but found no prospects there; he then headed west, to British Columbia, where he found work in a gold mine in the town of Sheep Creek. Birkland was a very tough customer who had nearly lost an arm in a truck accident before the war; when he was shot down over Dunkirk in November 1941, he piled his Spitfire into the beach at high speed after passing directly over a German flak tower. He spent weeks in hospital before being released to a permanent prison camp.⁴

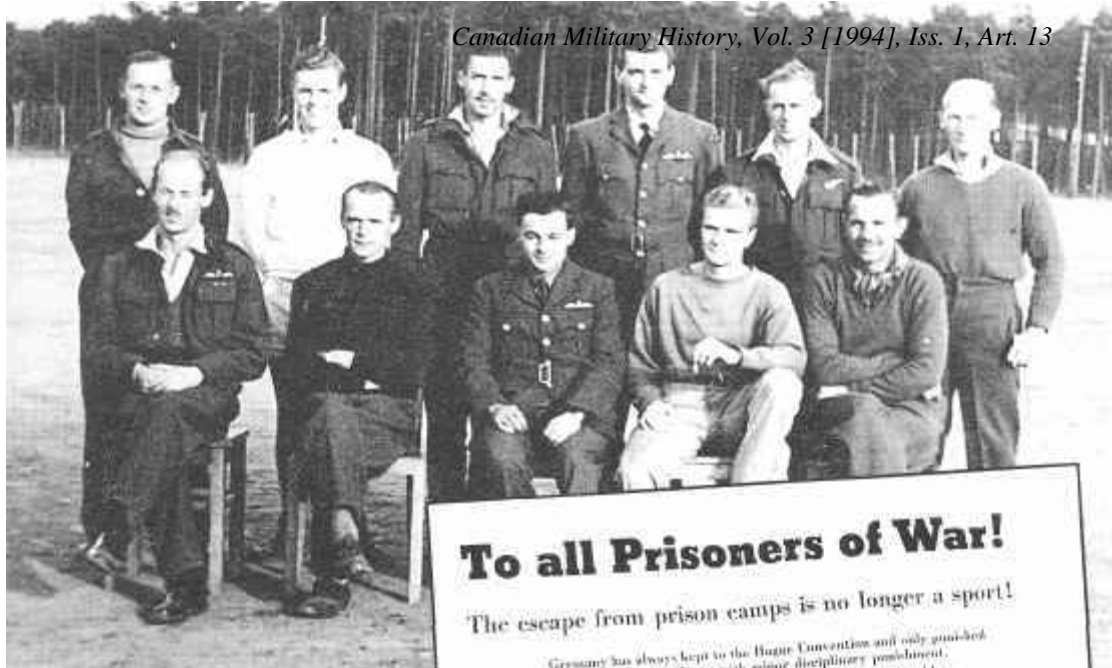
There were also two university men among the nine. Gordon Kidder, the son of a St. Catharines cannery manager, attended the University of Toronto and excelled in the study of languages, eventually being accepted to complete a Master's degree in German at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He was shot down in October 1942 on his ninth operation when the crew's flak-damaged Wellington crashed into the North Sea. George McGill was of a different stripe. He studied science at the University of Toronto but found more success in athletics; he was one of Hec Phillips' stars for the varsity track team, setting many records and winning the Ontario championship in the quarter-mile. McGill's hard luck began on his last flight in January 1942. Half-way through the bomb run over Wilhelmshaven, an anti-aircraft flare entered the bomb bay and ignited a terrific blaze. The pilot immediately ordered the crew to abandon ship but the second pilot was eventually able to subdue the fire and force the flare through a hole in the fuselage. The aircraft returned to England, leaving George McGill and his

crewmates drifting down towards German captivity.⁵

The last three Canadians were fighter pilots. Keith Ogilvie, a one-time Ottawa stockbroker, had flown with the RAF in the Battle of Britain; his greatest claim to fame before the escape was shooting down a German bomber about to release its load over Buckingham Palace. Bill Cameron, a self-professed immature and pessimistic loner from an Alberta farm, had been downed over Sicily in July 1943. Another veteran of the Mediterranean theatre was Windsor native George Wiley, who had difficulty passing for an eighteen-year-old. While flying Kittyhawks in the North African desert, George had landed in a minefield and badly fractured his leg and ankle; he survived that experience only to be shot down over Tunisia in March 1943.⁶

This very diverse group of Canadians eventually came together with hundreds of other Allied airmen at Stalag Luft 3, a huge Luftwaffe-operated prison camp near the Silesian city of Sagan, roughly halfway between Berlin and Breslau. Even before the airmen moved to the camp's new North Compound in April 1943, plans were well underway for what would become one of the largest escape operations of the war. South African-born Roger Bushell, a prewar barrister, skier and bon vivant, had hatched a scheme based on the construction of three huge escape tunnels, code-named Tom, Dick and Harry, which were intended to free as many as two hundred prisoners on the first night alone. Some, outfitted with tailored civilian suits and supplied with complete forged identity documents, would travel by train. The majority would strike out across country, likely to be recaptured fairly quickly; the nuisance value created by each escaper, however, was sufficient to justify the attempt.

Such an audacious plan demanded a massive mobilization of resources and X Organization, as the escape committee was known, canvassed the compound in search of anyone who had a skill to contribute. Gordon Kidder became a language instructor, coaching prospective escapers with phrases they could use to bluff their way out of trouble.



To all Prisoners of War!

The escape from prison camps is no longer a sport!

Germany has always kept to the Hague Convention and only punished recaptured prisoners of war with minor disciplinary punishment. Germany will still maintain these principles of international law. But England has besides fighting at the front in an honest manner instituted an illegal warfare in non-combat zones in the form of gangster operations, terror tactics and sabotage troops even up to the frontiers of Germany. They act in a captured secret and confidential English military pamphlet.

THE HANDBOOK OF MODERN IRREGULAR WARFARE:

... the days when we could practice the rules of sportsmanship are over. For the time being, every soldier must be a potential gangster and must be prepared to adopt their methods whenever necessary.

The spheres of operations should always include the enemy's own country, any occupied territory, and in certain circumstances, such neutral countries as he is using as a source of supply.

England has with these instructions opened up a new military form of gangster war!

Germany is determined to safeguard her homeland, and especially her war industry and production centres for the fighting fronts. Therefore, it has become necessary to create strictly forbidden zones, called death zones, in which all unauthorised movements will be immediately shot on sight.

Escaping prisoners of war, entering such death zones, will certainly lose their lives. They are therefore in constant danger of being mistaken for enemy agents or sabotage groups.

Urgent warning is given against making future escapes!

In plain English: Stay in the camp where you will be safe! Breaking out of it is now a damned dangerous act.

The chances of preserving your life are almost nil!

All police and military guards have been given the most strict orders to shoot on sight all suspicious persons.

Escaping from prison camps has ceased to be a sport!

Top: A group of JPOWs at Sagan, 1943. Seated second from right is A.B. Thompson, Canada's first POW.

Centre: This warning was posted in all German prison camps after the escape.

Bottom: A prisoners' dormitory, Sagan, 1943. Standing second from left is Pat Longford. Photos from author's collection.



Hank Birkland went underground and spent countless hours digging in the tunnels with shovels crafted from food tins or stove parts. His good friend Wally Floody, a hard-rock miner in northern Ontario before the war, supervised the engineering of Tom, Dick and Harry.⁷ Entry to those tunnels was gained through hidden trapdoors, one of which was controlled by Pat Langford; his job was to monitor all movement in and out of Harry, assist in the removal of bags of sand, and ensure that the trap was safely camouflaged after each use. George McGill supervised a team of look-outs, known as stooges, whose job it was to keep careful eye on the compound and give warning whenever one of the guards approached a work site.⁸ Other Canadians worked as penguins, carrying small loads of sand in hidden bags to be secreted around the compound. Some of these jobs may have been tedious, but each was vital to the success of the operation.

Through the summer of 1943 the three tunnels grew slowly in length. As each new section was completed, carpenters installed shoring frames to brace the tunnels, fitted air pipes to provide fresh air to the workers at the face, laid new rails for the small trolley cars that carried men and supplies back and forth from the entry shafts, and extended the electric cables which lit the tunnels.⁹ The work progressed well but not entirely without incident. In September tunnel Tom was discovered, more by accident than anything, after having reached a length of over 260 feet. It was a bitter blow but X Organization soon began to concentrate all efforts on tunnel Harry, with a view to breaking it as soon as the weather improved in the spring. By March 1944 Harry, at over 330 feet in length, was ready.

Dozens of Canadians drew spots among the two hundred names slated to escape on the night of 24-25 March 1944 but only nine would get a brief taste of freedom. It was a night of confusion and disappointment. Workers had trouble opening the trap of the tunnel, which had swelled due to dampness, and then discovered that the tunnel was short; its exit broke not under the cover of the fir trees ringing the camp but right out in the

open, perilously close to the perimeter wire. Then there were problems getting through the tunnel. The heavily-laden escapers found it difficult to squeeze through Harry, and many caused minor cave-ins as haversacks brushed against the shoring frames. By the time the escape was discovered at dawn by a wandering sentry, only seventy-six airmen had made it away from the camp. The last was Keith Ogilvie, who bolted into the forest as soon as he heard the gunshots which signalled the end of the Great Escape.¹⁰

Of the nine Canadians who broke out through Harry, only two travelled any distance from the camp. Gordon Kidder had teamed up with an English squadron leader and the pair were nearly arrested at Sagan train station when they were questioned by a member of the camp censor staff. Playing the part of Spanish labourers, they bluffed their way through and, with five other escapers, boarded a train for Breslau. Little is known of their subsequent travels but on 28 March the pair was recaptured at Hodonin in southern Moravia, not far from the Austrian border, after four days at large. Jimmy Wernham was one of the first walkers to leave the tunnel, emerging at 1:30 AM to join a party of twelve men purporting to be on leave from a local sawmill. The group took a local train to the town of Bober-Rohrsdorf, where they split up to cross the frontier into Czechoslovakia. Wernham and an American major, carrying papers identifying them as French volunteer workers, tried three times to purchase tickets to a station in the border zone but were arrested soon after the third attempt. Their escape had lasted a little over twelve hours.¹¹

The experiences of the other seven varied little from those of all the other walkers. Leaving the camp, they trudged through the deep snow, often covering no more than a few hundred yards each hour and becoming slowly weaker, wetter and more tired as time passed. Travelling singly or in small groups, they spent the daylight hours hidden in farm buildings, clumps of bushes or holes in the ground; each night they packed their meagre supplies and continued the trek away from Sagan. It soon became apparent that progress

across country was far too slow and many chose to chance the roads in hopes of making better time. Unfortunately, the area was teeming with local police and auxiliary soldiers and all of the walkers were recaptured within days of the escape.¹²

The fact that only three of the seventy-six airmen, a Dutchman and two Norwegians, reached neutral territory in no way diminished the impact of the escape, which created even greater disruption than Roger Bushell could have imagined. As many as 70,000 troops were diverted to track down the airmen, and Hitler, believing the escape to be a prelude to an uprising in eastern Europe, demanded that all of the recaptured POWs be summarily executed. His subordinates eventually convinced him to accept fifty as a more reasonable figure.¹³ The task of selecting the names of the condemned men was left to a *Kriminalpolizei* official, and included in his list were six Canadians: Hank Birkland, Gordon Kidder, Pat Langford, George McGill, Jimmy Wernham and George Wiley. The six were shot at various locations in the days after the escape and their ashes returned to Sagan for committal in a cairn constructed by their fellow prisoners.

Fifty years have now passed since the Great Escape and its tragic aftermath, yet the event continues to fascinate the public. John Sturges's 1963 motion picture created a whole generation whose view of the Great Escape was centred on Steve McQueen's mad motorcycle dash across the Bavarian Alps, while a vastly inferior 1988 television remake took Christopher Reeve out of a Superman suit and into a role that was even more patently absurd than McQueen's. The fifty airmen who lost their lives after the Great Escape, and the hundreds of others who worked on the tunnels, deserve better than **this**, and the fiftieth anniversary of the event provided an admirable opportunity to give them their due.

NOTES

1. London *Times*, 21 June 1944
2. Dennis Langford, Calgary, correspondence with author, 3 October 1984; Pat Langford Papers, in possession of Dennis Langford, Calgary, flying log book.
3. Marie Charleson, Nanaimo, correspondence with author, 30 May 1985; Angus MacLean, Belle River, PEI, correspondence with author, 21 May 1984.
4. Hans Birkland, interview by author, Scarborough, 1 June 1986.
5. Ferdinand Hamburger Jr. Archives, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore: Gordon Kidder file; Earl MacDonald, Pictou, NS, correspondence with author, 24 September 1985; George McGill Papers, in possession of Betty Gillies, Mississauga, undated clipping; *Toronto Star*, 13 January 1942.
6. Bill Cameron, Ottawa, correspondence with author, 18 January 1989; Al Shaw, Windsor, correspondence with author, 24 October 1985.
7. Harold Avery, St. Catherines, correspondence with author, undated [1984]; Paul Brickhill, *The Great Escape* (London: Faber, 1951), pp.45, 93.
8. Langford Papers, WCdr H.M.A. Day to Mr and Mrs Langford, 17 July 1945; George Harsh, *Lonesome Road* (London: Longman, 1972), pp.202-3; Public Record Office [PRO] WO 208/3283, "History of Stalag Luft 3, North Compound."
9. See Aidan Crawley, *Escape from Germany* (London: HMSO, 1985), ch. 25.
10. PRO WO 208/3329 #194, statement by A.K. Ogilvie.
11. Allen Andrews, *Exemplary Justice* (London: Harrap, 1976), pp.52, 103; B.A. James, *Moonless Night* (London: William Kimber, 1983), pp.101-8; PRO WO 208/3330 #535, statement by J.B. Dodge.
12. National Archives of Canada: Department of National Defence Records, series C2F, vol. 8024, f. 21/1, Testimonies of POWs who Escaped on March 25th, undated, statements by P. Royle, A.K. Ogilvie and R.A. Bethell.
13. International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals* (Nuremberg: IMT, 1947), 11:159; 15:439.

Jonathan Vance currently holds a SSHRC Post Doctoral Fellow at Wilfrid Laurier University. He is the author of *Objects of Concern: Providing for Canadians in Enemy Hands Through the 20th Century*, to be published by UBC Press in November 1994.