

Great Escapers



forged, civilian clothes stitched together and other equipment such as compasses produced from whatever materials could be obtained.

It all took a highly skilled team of forgers, scroungers, tunnellers, engineers and planners.

The Germans were aware that something was going on but all their attempts to discover tunnels failed.

Weeks before the escape 19 leading suspects, including six of the ringleaders, were transferred to nearby camps. Despite this huge setback preparations continued.

On the night of the breakout the ground was covered in snow and almost immediately the escapers ran into trouble.

The first man through the tunnel popped his head above ground to discover that the exit was well short of the surrounding woodland which would have provided cover for the fleeing men.

Because of this the rate of escape was drastically slowed as each man had to wait for patrolling guards to be well out of range before making his dash

for the woods. Only 76 of the 220 men packed into Hut 104 escaped before the tunnel was discovered by the patrols and the alarm sounded.

The plan's leader was Squadron Leader Roger J Bushell, known as Big X, a compulsive escaper who had been warned that one more misdemeanour would result in him being shot.

Those among the men who spoke German and were experi-

'Hitler ordered escapers shot'

enced escapers who it felt stood a good chance of making it and those who had made the greatest contribution to the escape plan were given the best papers, clothes and a higher place in the exit order.

They were expected to travel by train, posing as foreign workers.

Those lower down the order were given only the most rudimentary false papers and

identities which forced them to travel by night and rest by day, often in freezing conditions. Germany was put on a state of national alert.

Troops, police, the Home Guard and the dreaded Gestapo joined the manhunt. Hitler ordered all the fugitives who were recaptured to be executed.

One by one the escapers were rounded up. Most were taken from civilian or military prisons, driven to remote locations and gunned down. Gestapo groups around Germany submitted almost identical reports that prisoners had been killed "trying to escape".

Of the 76 who escaped only three made it home. Of the others, 50 died at the hands of the Gestapo, 17 were returned to Stalag Luft III and six were sent to other prison camps.

Word reached Britain of the atrocity and in July 1944 Foreign Minister Anthony Eden told the House of Commons that the perpetrators of the crime would be brought to justice.

Nineteen years later the escape was the inspiration for

one of the most famous war films ever made. Headed by an all-star cast that included Richard Attenborough, Steve McQueen, James Garner and Donald Pleasence, *The Great Escape* brought the men's heroism to the world's attention.

It faithfully depicted many aspects of the escape and met with veterans' approval.

Richard Attenborough played Squadron Leader Bushell and most of the other characters

'Motorbike leap was fiction'

were based on amalgams of real people. But Hiltz, the character played by Steve McQueen, was a product of the scriptwriters' imagination, as was the famous motorbike stunt where he tried to vault a barbed wire fence.

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