

SOME POW ESCAPES

"The big escape of prisoners from Island Farm occurred on the night of Saturday 10th March 1945..."

Less than four months after the first officer-prisoners had started arriving at Island Farm and two months after Darling had discovered the first of the paired tunnels, 70 prisoners escaped. (see Darling's theory of two tunnels - [Anti Escape plans](#))

Note From Brett Exton:

Whilst investigating the actual escape I have found that there are conflicting numbers quoted for the number of POWs to escape. However, the BBC News Report and several newspapers who reported the breakout all quoted 70.

The escape began around ten o'clock at night, after the final roll call and under the cover of noisy singing. A strict timetable was in place to ensure that each person turned up at the escape hut at the right time. A system of electric lights, tapped off the main supply, proved extremely useful, not only as lighting for the tunnel but also a means of warning when a guard was nearing the hut.

Hans Harzheim (Anti Tank Officer), Werner Zielasko (Unknown), Oswald Prior (U-Boat Commander) & Steffi Ehlert (Luftwaffe Pilot)

It was shortly after ten o'clock when the third escape group, Hans Harzheim and his three comrades, crept through the tunnel into the field beyond the wire. Once outside the camp they made straight for Merthyr Mawr Road (Approximately 1 mile from the camp), where the car was parked as usual (Make: Austin 10. Licence Plate: DTG 688).



An example of an Austin 10

They didn't know it at the time, but it belonged to a doctor, Dr R. Baird Milne. Harzheim and Oswald Prior broke into the the vehicle whilst Zielasko and Steffi Ehlert, hurried to the nearby farm to syphon some petrol from the lorries.

When Harzheim tried to start the car the car failed to start and the escape party were conscious of making too much noise directly outside the vehicle owner's house. It was at this time that four guards from Island Farm were walking towards the camp. When Harzheim boldly asked them to give a hand they willingly gave the vehicle a push start and waved the POWs on their way !

With the car started, they drove along the A48 towards Cardiff (Cardiff is the capital of Wales and is about 20 miles from Island Farm). The four men had decided to make for Croydon, where they knew there was a large airport. It was shortly after midnight when they drove down Tumble Hill, with its hazardous bend at the bottom, and past the council houses of Ely at the Western approaches to Cardiff. Hopelessly lost, they decided to take a chance, and using the guise of being Norwegians they decided to ask a man walking along the pavement for directions. (This man was a tram driver going home after a late-night shift)

The tram driver was fooled by their guise of being Norwegians and decided that the best way to direct them was to accept a lift to the outskirts of Cardiff where upon, as he got out of the vehicle, he pointed them in the direction of Newport and then the Gloucester road.

Unfortunately, the POWs ran out of petrol somewhere between Chepstow and Gloucester, near the Forest-of-Dean and they had to abandon the car.

Special note from Brett Exton:

Whilst investigating this story, I found 2 conflicting locations for the place where the car was abandoned:

- **In a field near Two Bridges, just outside Blakeney, after trying unsuccessfully to break in to a garage. (Jackson, Robert. *A Taste Of Freedom*, 1964)**
- **Newnham-on-Severn (Daily Worker - Dated Monday March 12th 1945, & Daily Express -Dated Monday 12th March 1945)**

I am inclined to think that the Newnham-on-Severn is the correct location because it was reported far nearer the time of the escape rather than the year of Robert Jackson's book, 1964. Blakeney and Newham-on-Severn are only 4 miles apart using the A48 road which existed in 1945 and are approximately 70 miles from Bridgend.

Because day light was breaking they decided to hide in a thicket in the middle of a field until nightfall. However a herd of inquisitive cows insisted on following them. They crept out of their hiding place but were spotted by some farm workers. Later that day they were caught near Castle Bromwich, approximately 110 miles from Island Farm.

The four POWs said that they had made the last part of their journey via a goods train. They had not damaged the car and one of the German prisoners even apologised when he heard that it belonged to a doctor and offered to pay for the petrol !



- 1 = Island Farm, 2 = Blakeney, 3 = Newnham-On-Severn approximate distance covered using stolen car until it ran out of petrol and was abandoned
 4 = Castle Bromwich final location where the four POWs were apprehended. Distance covered by hiding away on a goods train

The Escape Continued...

For several hours the escape continued uninterrupted. They had lookouts posted to keep a wary eye on the guard who patrolled the escape tunnel exit section of the wire. If the guard approached the tunnel exit then the tunnel lights would be switched off to warn the men crawling inside the tunnel. When the light came on again, they knew it was safe to climb out of the tunnel exit.

Once out of the tunnel, they made their way along the newly ploughed field (ploughed only that day by Garfield Davies) to a tall tree 150 yards away which they had marked out as a rendezvous point. By 2:15am on the morning of the 11th March 1945, 65 men had escaped from Camp 198. The 67th POW to go into the tunnel was Hermann Schallenberg, a Luftwaffe officer. As he exited the tunnel and was making his way to the rendezvous point he heard a shout from a British guard followed by a shot. Allegedly, in the confusion which followed a British guard, who was giving chase, fell down the tunnel exit, much to the hilarity of a group of POWs who were hiding in the bushes. This gave the game away and the first eleven POWs were arrested.

The prisoner who was shot later received treatment at Bridgend General Hospital. His name was Lieutenant Tonnsman and, ironically he had no rightful part in the escape at all. He was, in simple terms, a gatecrasher, and it was his lack of basic preparation that had betrayed his presence to the guard. Tonnsman had been carrying a white kitbag - and this had shown up in the dark !!!

The first two POWs, who got away from the camp, to be caught were Karl Ludwig (S.S. officer) and Heinz Herzler (Unknown). They had planned to get aboard a truck, the type of which passed Island Farm most nights. These trucks were usually bound for Cardiff Docks where their contents were loaded on to ships and sent across the channel to France. Unfortunately, on the night of the escape, there were no trucks passing the camp. Failing to get aboard a truck the two POWs decided to try and catch a train at Bridgend railway station..

As Ludwig and Herzler made their way, they encountered a drunken man returning home. Ludwig and Herzler decided to hide in a nearby garden, but unfortunately the garden they chose to hide in belonged to the drunken man. As the man entered through the garden gate he decided that his call of nature was too great and decided to urinate into one of his garden bushes. Unfortunately, this was the hedge which Karl Ludwig happened to be hiding ! Having relieved himself the drunken man went into his house unaware that he had done something to an SS officer that many people in Britain would have given up 10 years of their lives to do!

Upon reaching Bridgend Railway station, the two men hid in a goods wagon, but the train's progress was slow and was, unbeknown to them, going in the wrong direction. When it stopped at a little marshalling yard they got off, tried to get their bearings but were lost. They had ended up in Llanharan only 8 miles from Bridgend. Hoping to reach a main road going to Cardiff they started walking and unfortunately encountered a policeman (PC Philip Baverstock) who was on patrol who arrested them.

In the police station, what intrigued Baverstock most, was the tail of a shirt. On it was a map, drawn with painstaking accuracy showing the main railway lines and ports in southern England and Northern France. During WWII all roadsigns across Great Britain had been deliberately removed in the hope that it would confuse the Germans if they ever invaded or parachuted in to Britain. However, when the POWs had been escorted to Island Farm initially, one of the POWs had noticed that a map of Great Britain, and its rail system, was on the wall in one of the railway carriages. Thinking that this map would prove useful, in the event of an escape, he had traced the map on to the tail of a shirt.

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Shirt Tail Map Drawing Found On A POW



Handkerchief Drawing Found On A POW

The whole of the Bridgend area became alive with people keen to capture a German prisoner. Two prisoners came across a girl guide camp and asked the way to Porthcawl. Their foreign accents gave them away and it wasn't long before they were captured in Danygraig Woods. The drama had an unforeseen result, for at the next Guide meeting fifteen new recruits turned up in the hope of more thrills in the future.

It was at Laleston, two miles west of Island Farm along the A48, that the most dramatic method of warning the population was employed. The church bells were rung for the first time since Winston Churchill had ruled in 1940 that they were to be used henceforth only as a warning that Britain had been invaded.

The sector commander of the Home Guard, in Bridgend, was Colonel William Llewellyn, who found the grounds of his large country house (Court Colman) being searched by policemen and soldiers. As a good patriot he didn't object, but thought it all rather a waste of time. "I could have told them there weren't any escaped prisoners there because my gamekeepers used to go around the covers first thing in the morning, and they could tell from footprints in the dew whether anything had happened overnight. They could read the signs, and what's more they were in the home guard too !"



Escape Tunnel Exit With Hut 9 Behind

The Great Escape - in Wales?

Monday 22 August 2011, 13:09

Stories about escaping from prisoner of war camps are legion. We all know about Colditz and the various other Stalag camps. And is there anyone out there who has not seen Steve McQueen try to jump that barbed wire on his motorbike in the film The Great Escape?



In May 1945, 66 German prisoners escaped from the Island Farm camp

The one thing all these stories have in common is that they are about British soldiers or airmen trying to escape from German camps. But during World War Two German soldiers were also kept in prisoner of war camps, in this country and in various parts of the British Commonwealth. And, like their British counterparts they, too, often attempted to escape.

The largest of these escape attempts actually took place in Wales. The camp was called Island Farm and it stood just off the main road outside Bridgend.

Island Farm camp was originally a series of huts built for women working in the munitions factory at Bridgend but few of the women liked the idea of living away from home and the camp was, first, underused and, then, left empty. It was next used as a base for American troops, prior to D-Day, but after the invasion of Europe on 6 June the camp was again abandoned, empty and without purpose.

With hundreds of Germans soon being captured on a daily basis in France and the Low Countries, it was decided to convert Island Farm into a prisoner of war camp. The theory might have been a good one but the execution was very wrong.

The camp was not even finished when many of the prisoners arrived at Bridgend towards the end of 1944. As a result, the prisoners were employed in adapting the hut accommodation and even in putting up the barbed wire entanglements, thus giving them a pretty good idea of the locality and of the camp defences.

Most of the camp guards were either old men or soldiers with little or no interest in doing much except sit out the war in as much comfort as possible. And yet the plan was to incarcerate as many as 1,500 prisoners in the camp.

The authorities might be excused from too much blame because, with the war almost over, conditions at Island Farm were probably far better than they were on the streets of Germany. Nobody, they thought, would be interested in escaping. There was one small flaw to that way of thinking: the prisoners at Bridgend were mostly fanatical Nazis and for many of them getting out of the camp and returning to Germany was of paramount importance.

It was inevitable that an escape attempt would be made. A tunnel was discovered by the guards in January 1945 but the prisoners did not give in. The original tunnel might even have been a decoy. Then, on the night of 10 May 1945, 66 prisoners made their bid for freedom through a second tunnel leading from the floor Hut Nine to a spot outside the barbed wire fence. It was the largest successful escape ever made by German prisoners of war in mainland Britain.

The tunnel stretched for over 60 feet and was even equipped with a basic ventilation system. When investigations were carried out it was discovered that the earth from the excavation had been taken out, yard by yard, and stored in one of the huts. The prisoners actually constructed a partition wall in front of the waste, in order to hide it.

The fact that nobody noticed the room had suddenly been reduced by 10 feet says, perhaps, as much about the quality of the guards and the slack nature of the watch they kept as it does about the ingenuity of the escapees.

Eleven Germans were quickly re-captured, one of them being shot and wounded by a guard. Road blocks and army patrols were immediately established across the surrounding area but many of the prisoners were already well away from Bridgend. Operating in escape groups of three, they were equipped with basic maps and compasses and most of them had supplies of food - pilfered from the camp food store - to stave off hunger as they tried to reach the coast and find a way back to Germany.

Their escape maps, however, were of little use. They had clearly been copied from the maps in the railway carriages that had brought the Germans to the Bridgend area, with the result that railway lines were shown but there was little or no acknowledgement of the road system. It caused more than a little confusion for the escapees.

Like all escapes from prisoner of war camps, German or British, there was a varying degree of success. Some prisoners were apprehended before they had gone 10 miles; some were found hiding in nearby woods with little idea where to go or what to do next. Others, however, managed to get as far as Birmingham and Southampton before they, too, were hauled in by the police or army.

The public was, understandably, terrified at the thought of dozens of Nazis adrift in south Wales. When a woman in Porthcawl was shot and fatally wounded, rumour said that it had been done by the escapees - in fact, it was her estranged lover who had carried out the killing.

Slowly but surely the escapees were recaptured. Not one of them managed to make good his escape and reach Germany. The last group, who were caught a week after the escape, had not even managed to get out of Wales. They were found in the Swansea Valley, tired and hungry and with very little idea where they were.

Following their re-capture the Germans came back to Island Farm. It was a brief sojourn. By the early spring of 1945 all the prisoners had been moved to other, perhaps more security conscious, prisons and Island Farm became a Special Camp, designed to hold only senior officers. Several significant German Generals were subsequently held there, the most notable being Field marshal von Rundstedt.

Island Farm prisoner of war camp closed down in the summer of 1948, three years after the end of the war. By then, of course, the men held in the camp were allowed considerably more

freedom than those who had planned and carried out the Welsh Great Escape. In fact, several of them forged friendships - and even found wives - in the locality and settled down to make their homes in the area.

The huts of Island Farm have now virtually disappeared although, several years ago, the discovery of wall paintings made by the prisoners did bring the escape back into the limelight for a brief period. The escape remains a fascinating and most unusual episode in Welsh history.

Seventy-Six: The Great Escape



Colonel Von Lindeiner (Courtesy Wikipedia)

Stalag Luft III, built to house imprisoned Allied airmen during World War II, was supposed to be inescapable. The camp was located deep in Nazi territory in what is now Żagań, Poland. The Germans had purposefully constructed the camp on a sandy area that would make tunneling practically impossible. If tunneling began the sand would have to be dispersed. The top soil in the prison was much darker and as a result the sand would stand out like a sore thumb if dispersed there. Sand also has a tendency to collapse on diggers, as the prisoners would later find out. Then there was the matter of how long a tunnel would have to be. The blocks (huts housing prisoners) were positioned far from the wire fence so that should tunneling even be slightly successful the prisoners would have a long way to dig. Microphones were buried in the dirt to monitor any digging activities forcing diggers to go deep down to escape their observation. The blocks were built on stilts so tunneling through the floor proved a challenge. It would seem that escape truly was impossible.

Having said all that life at the camp wasn't entirely awful. There were many different types of recreational activities available to the prisoners. The camp kommandant was a reluctant Nazi by the name of Colonel Friedrich-Wilhelm von Lindeiner-Wildau. Von Lindeiner treated the prisoners with genuine courtesy. He believed that if prisoners were treated right, they would be less inclined to escape. He did this at the risk of irking his less-understanding superiors.

In April 1942 the first prisoners were brought to Stalag Luft III. Almost immediately escape plans were being made. But it wasn't until early 1943 that the "professional" planning began.

Mastermind Roger Bushell was named “Big X” of the escape committee X-Organization. Bushell wanted to take 200 men out of camp. His main goal was to create such a havoc in Nazi territory that thousands of Germans would be tied up trying to locate the escapees. Plans were made for three tunnels named Tom, Dick and Harry which were all to be dug from the North Compound. Each had a trap door which was ingeniously hidden. Harry’s trapdoor was under a stove, Dick’s under a washroom drain, and Tom’s in a dark corner.



Roger Bushell, right (Courtesy Wikipedia).

Besides digging there were a great many other things that warranted careful planning. Documentation (forgeries), clothing, maps, compasses were all manufactured. On each of the 200 compasses Australian Albert Hake made sure they bore the inscription, “Made in Stalag Luft III. Patent Pending”. Things that couldn’t readily be acquired were sometimes got by means of bribery. There were some guards, however, who readily supplied prisoners with what they wanted. A complex security system was set up by prisoners who put the Germans under surveillance. For the most part it was successful.

The digging of the three tunnels went along well. The problem of dispersing the sand had been solved with the use “trouser bags”; dirt filled bags worn in one’s trousers. The men went out to the compound and released the dirt in the prisoners’ gardens while another man worked to mix the sand in with the garden soil. When the Germans eventually became wise to the prisoners’ dispersal of the sand, Dick became a dumping ground for it as well as a storage for other escape supplies. With the sand having a tendency to collapse the diggers shored the tunnels up with wood. Boards commandeered from bunks made up for most of the shoring. Klim cans were used to make fat candles and for a ventilation system which helped circulate oxygen in the long tunnels.

When it became apparent that American prisoners were going to be moved to a newly constructed South Compound, digging operations were stepped up at the risk of Tom being discovered (Dick and Harry were abandoned for the time being). Since the American prisoners had worked just as hard as their Allied comrades no one thought it fair that they should be left out. Some Americans balked at the idea. The Germans already knew there was a tunnel being dug they just hadn’t found it yet. With increased digging activities there was more of a chance for a slip up. But the digging continued. At one time Block 123, where Tom was located, was subjected to a five hour search which revealed nothing. It wouldn’t be until Tom was a few feet short from

freedom that it was accidentally discovered. The Germans were flabbergasted by the ingenuity that went into the tunnel.



Harry (Courtesy Wikipedia)

With Tom gone the prisoners turned their attention to Harry. They managed to get some electrical lighting in the tunnel by tapping into the camp's electricity. Canadian Red Noble was the man to thank for this as he had stolen the electrical wire.

By 1944 escape wasn't such a good idea. Outside of the prison camp even civilians were becoming extremely hostile towards the allied airmen who were bombarding Germany. Other orders had been issued for escape prisoners to be handed over to the Gestapo once recaptured. The kommandant thought enough of his prisoners to let them know of the changing attitudes. He wasn't always taken seriously. Surely it was just another ploy by von Lindeiner to discourage escapes.

March 24 was the escape date. In the time leading up to escape 200 men worked to get their new identities straight and plan their escape routes. Although it wasn't likely all 200 men would be able to escape 200 were nonetheless ready that night. They gathered in Block 104 which housed Harry. Much to their observing comrades' horrors there were so many men in 104 that puffs of steam were escaping from the hut. They prayed the Germans wouldn't notice.

It wasn't until they dug the tunnel exit that night that the men noticed they had come up 25 feet short of the woods. Delay after delay made for slow escapes. At about 5 a.m. a guard made an unexpected detour towards the exit. As he neared a movement in the woods caught his attention as two men fled. The guard took aim and prepared to fire when another man jumped out of the woods yelling not to shoot. The game was up. Four men were forced to give themselves up having been unable to make a run for it. Back in 104 prisoners began burning their papers while awaiting discovery. The next morning it was learned 76 men had escaped. The kommandant was

livid saying “You have no idea what you have done”. He sent so many men to the cooler that some had to be turned away because there wasn’t any room for them.



Bram van der Stock made it to freedom (Courtesy Wikipedia)

As Bushell had hoped it would the escape triggered a national search. For most recapture was imminent and unavoidable. Many prisoners were caught not long after escaping. In all, only three would make it to freedom. Another 23 would be sent back to Stalag Luft III or to concentration camps. Sadly, fifty would be executed, among them Bushell. Adolph Hitler had originally wanted all 76 executed upon recapture but was convinced to whittle the number down to 50. The remains of the 50 men were cremated and sent back in urns to the men of Stalag Luft III. Von Lindeiner (he was later relieved of his command) was kind enough to purchase materials for the prisoners to build a memorial to the 50.

Please view this link for an interactive map of Harry.

THE FERRETS STRIKE

by Jonathan F. Vance

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With the break drawing nearer, Jimmy Catanach, Alan Righetti, and a few other Australians got together over a homemade Ouija board and tried to unlock the secrets of the future. There were some feeble attempts at ventriloquism and a few knocks on the table that no one was willing to admit to, but the only information the board provided was that they would probably have bully

beef fritters for dinner the next day.

At about the same time, Johnny Pohe was able to slip one past the censors. "Glowing pictures of a POW's life have been published in England and perhaps New Zealand," he wrote to his family, "and you can believe them as being *tito*." Since none of the camp censors spoke Maori, they didn't realize that *tito* meant "lies."

However, it was not smooth sailing everywhere. Dennis Cochran shared a room with a few Englishmen, a Canadian, and a Brit from Uruguay, not all of whom understood the importance of Dennis's work as a contact. Whenever his tame goon came around, it was understood that the rest of the lads would wander away and let Dennis talk to his man in private. Unfortunately, one of the roommates considered his bunk to be his own personal, inviolable space and resented having to leave the room whenever the tame goon came around. Gradually a deep resentment developed between Cochran and his roommate, and one afternoon they had a heated argument. After the words ceased, the roommate brooded for a while and then came up behind Dennis and tapped him on the back. When Cochran turned, the other fellow slugged him nearly unconscious and returned to his bunk. The others in the room returned a few minutes later and found Dennis lying dazed and bleeding on the floor, his eyes badly bruised and nearly closed. He was definitely not in the best of shape to be traveling inconspicuously around wartime Germany.

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It was mild on the morning of February 20, as it had been for most of the New Year. Only for a short time had it been cold enough to freeze the camp ice rink. But that dull morning was even warmer than usual, for it was the day of the long-awaited draw for places in the tunnel.

There were 510 names in the draw altogether. The first 100 were specially selected by the escape leaders as those who had contributed the most or who had the best chance of escaping successfully, and the rest came from the complete roster of the organization's workers. In addition, eight names were put forward by the camp entertainment and administrative staffs. While these men hadn't assisted with the escape preparations, it was rightly decided that their valuable contributions to the running of the camp as a whole should be recognized.

The selection process consisted of a number of different draws. The first thirty names to be drawn for final exit order were those who, in the eyes of the organizers, had the best chance of escaping successfully. They would travel by train, without incriminating Red Cross food or large maps. After this group, the names of forty of the most prominent workers were put in, and twenty were drawn. Then the next thirty most prominent workers' names were put in and twenty drawn. To round out the first hundred, those names remaining from the earlier draws were put back in the hat and the last thirty spots allotted. Finally, the remaining four hundred ten names were put in and one hundred were drawn to complete the exit order.

Once the list of two hundred escapers had been established, it still had to be revised. On the night of the escape there would be men stationed at Piccadilly, Leicester Square, and the exit shaft to pull the escapers through the tunnel. These men were known as haulers, and each would pull through twenty escapers before going out himself. The final list had to be adjusted so that in each group of twenty, there were three experienced diggers to act as haulers. Red Noble and Shag Rees actually drew in the second hundred but were allotted numbers seventy-eight and seventy-nine so they could act as haulers. Ivo Tonder, Tony Bethell, and Bob Nelson were also assigned hauling duties.

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With the escapers having been notified of their final exit numbers, they could press on with their plans. Bill Fordyce had planned to go with Tom Leigh, an Australian-born ex-Halton apprentice who had been downed in 1941, but the latter drew in the 40s, while Bill drew number 86. Consequently he teamed up with Roy Langlois, who had also drawn a later number. Paul Royle drew number 55 and, since he had no particular plans, got in touch with number 54, who happened to be Edgar “Hunk” Humphreys, another Halton alumnus and a prisoner since December 1940. Hunk was glad to have some company, so they went from there. Others, believing that a single escaper would be less conspicuous, elected to travel alone. One of these was Flight Lieutenant Albert “Shorty” Armstrong, a Bolton native and electrical engineer by trade who was shot down in North Africa in August 1942. Shorty was one of the few hardarsers traveling alone but the prospect of a solitary trek didn’t bother him. On the contrary, he was anxious to get going.

When push finally came to shove, some of the escapers had attacks of nerves and asked to be removed from the list. Paul Brickhill had a spot in the second hundred and was allowed into Harry to get a feel for it. As soon as he got to the base of the entry shaft and looked up the tunnel, he knew he couldn’t go through with it—his claustrophobia was just too strong. Rather sheepishly, he went to Roger Bushell and gave his reasons for asking to be dropped from the list. Someone panicking in the tunnel on the night of the escape could be disastrous.

“Thanks for being so honest, Paul,” said Roger. “You’re the eleventh man to come off the list this morning.”

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With the draw completed, the idea of escape suddenly became more real for the prisoners, as they could actually see their chance to get out of the backwater of the prison camp. They had missed much over their years in captivity. Certainly prospects for promotion became dimmer with each passing month, and the more adventurous among them were missing combat action that they would likely never get the chance to see again. But more important, their lives were passing them by. The homes that each had left the day before his last operation were no longer the same. Dennis Cochran’s mother had died during his time in captivity, Johnny Stower’s mother was dangerously ill, and both of Bob Stewart’s sisters had died. Those men who had left fiancées at home, such as Cookie Long and Tom Leigh, found the separation very hard to bear.

As pieces of their old lives dropped away for some, others waited helplessly while their new lives went on without them. Pawel Tobolski had never seen his son, being raised by his wife in Scotland. His roommates often joked that it would be difficult to wean the lad of wearing kilts once they got back to Poland. Jack Grisman’s daughter, born on the last day of 1941, had just celebrated her second birthday and still had never seen her father. Her twin brother had died at birth, a loss that Marie Grisman had to bear alone. Things like this made up the real tragedy of captivity.

Others never stopped planning for the future. Brian Evans and Joan Cook had become officially engaged in 1943; Brian said that he would much rather have things for certain, rather than just an understanding. Tom Kirby-Green was looking forward to a new life with Maria in Tangier. He had inherited some land from a rich uncle and was planning to settle there after the war. He had no idea what they would do but was sure something would come along.

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However, there were still a few feet of sand separating the prisoners from freedom, and removing it was the first order of business. When Walter told Wally Valenta that Rubberneck was going on two weeks' leave at the beginning of March, the organizers saw their chance to finish Harry and get him completely sealed before the hated ferret returned. Then, the day before his leave, Rubberneck struck a parting blow. Without warning, he and a security officer, Broili, brought a party of guards into the compound and began calling names.

In all, nineteen officers were summoned, rigorously searched, and marched out the gates to Belaria, an auxiliary camp about five miles away. Purges were standard procedure, but this time the Germans had struck it lucky, for they picked some of the most important men in X Organization: Wally Floody, chief tunnel engineer; Peter Fanshawe, chief of dispersal; George Harsh, chief of security; Kingsley Brown; Bob Stanford-Tuck; Jim Tyrie; and thirteen others. The goons could hardly have picked better had they known the entire setup of X Organization.

It was a cruel blow, but because of the progress of the escape preparations, one that could be endured. Ker-Ramsay took over as chief tunnel engineer, and the seconds-in-command of the other departments could supervise the operations for the few days until the scheduled break. However, the disruption of travel plans was less easy to overcome, and some men were faced with the prospect of quick improvisation.

Gordon Brettell turned to roommate and fellow forger Henri Picard and worked out a new plan that took advantage of Picard's native tongue. They would travel to Danzig as French workers and look for a ship to take them to Sweden. Danzig was known to be full of French workers, so the two hoped for some help once they reached the port.

Tom Kirby-Green's partner had also been included in the purge, so he had to make other arrangements as well. Gordon Kidder had planned to travel with Dick Churchill as Romanian woodcutters, but X Organization decided that Kidder should team up with Kirby-Green, with the pair going as Spanish laborers. Dick Churchill agreed to the plan and linked up instead with Bob Nelson. The arrangement was satisfactory, though no one liked making such major changes at such a late date.

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Without his Russian-speaking partner, Roger Bushell first elected to travel alone and then decided to team up with Lieutenant Bernard Martial William Scheidhauer, a soft-spoken Free French officer who wasn't quite so English in appearance as Bob Tuck. About five feet, nine inches tall with clear blue eyes and chestnut hair, Bernard was one of X Organization's intelligence experts, specializing in his native land. More important, he knew one area of the border particularly well. His father had commanded a battalion of the Moroccan infantry regiment occupying the Palatinate after the First World War, and it was in Landau, near Saarbrücken, that Bernard was born on August 28, 1921.

His father retired while Bernard was still young and the family returned to their hometown of Brest, where Bernard went to high school. He was a charming boy, full of exuberance tempered with a dignified and almost aristocratic mien, and became popular at the Brest *lycée*. The young Scheidhauer was finishing at the lycée when German troops reached Brest in the summer of 1940. He had planned to take pilot training after graduation, but his father recommended that he try to escape to Britain, so Bernard headed south for Bayonne, hoping to reach England via

Gibraltar. He got no farther than St. Jean de Luz, though, and was forced to return to Brest.

Undaunted, Bernard arranged with five others to sail to England in a little boat called *La Petite Anna*. On October 19, 1940, they left the port of Douarnenez for Cornwall. A couple of days out, however, their craft ran into a gale, and they used the last of their fuel trying to ride it out. The storm passed, but the six were helpless and drifted for days. In time, their food and water ran out, and still they drifted. Finally, on the twelfth day, they were spotted by a Scottish freighter that picked them up, half dead from hunger, thirst, and exposure, and took them to England.

Less than a week after the ordeal, Bernard was accepted into the Free French Air Force. He completed flying training and in March 1942 was posted to 53 OTU. At the end of May he was hospitalized briefly after a flying accident, but on June 24 he was posted to the famed 242 Squadron, with which he flew his first operation. On September 4 Bernard was transferred to 131 (French) Squadron. The unit was busy with convoy patrols and cross-Channel sweeps that autumn, and Bernard completed more than forty sorties in only weeks.

On November 11, 1942, he and his unit took off from Westhampton in their Spitfires for a patrol over the Somme estuary. They found nothing, but on the way home ran into a towering bank of cumulus clouds. The first section of three aircraft swung to port and missed the bank, but Blue Section, with Bernard Scheidhauer flying in the number 3 spot, plunged into the clouds in a line astern. It was a pretty rough ride but didn't get too alarming until Bernard suddenly saw a tailplane loom up in front of him. Putting the nose down, he dove away to port but not before hearing a tremendous crash as he hit the aircraft. Emerging from the cloud at two thousand feet, Bernard was counting his blessings when his engine gave out. Then he noticed that a good eighteen inches were missing from his propeller blades. Without hesitation Scheidhauer abandoned his mortally wounded Spitfire, made an easy parachute descent, and clambered into his dinghy. He was later picked up, damp but unhurt, by a Royal Navy Walrus flying boat.

A week later, on November 18, Bernard was back in action, searching for trains on the Caen–Cherbourg railway line. He and his wingmate claimed hits on four locomotives, but on the way home, Bernard's Spitfire began to act up, likely damaged by debris from one of the trains. Realizing that he would never reach England, he turned toward the nearest land, which happened to be Jersey in the Channel Islands. He force-landed and was picked up by German soldiers.

His first interrogation was a bit hairy. Intrigued by the sound of his name, the interrogators became even more interested when they discovered that Bernard had been born in Germany. Making a note to that effect in their files, the Luftwaffe passed him on to Sagan.

Scheidhauer was glad to be of use to the intelligence section of X Organization, but it was his birthplace that attracted Roger's attention. As a boy, Bernard had played in the hills and fields around Landau and observed everything around him with the keen eye of youth. Something in his past might one day hold the key to a successful crossing into France.

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Before Rubberneck's chair was cold, the organization had been altered to compensate for the purge. Now there were more men working in the tunnel than ever before: two at the face; two in each of the halfway houses; and one at the entrance shaft. During the first nine days of March, they excavated the last 100 feet of tunnel, including an 18-foot-long chamber at the base of the exit shaft. On March 4, the workers dug a record 14 feet of tunnel. After the last chamber was finished, the surveyors went down and measured the tunnel carefully. They had calculated that

the distance to the edge of the woods was 335 feet, and their measurements indicated that Harry was 348 feet long from shaft to shaft. The exit should be well inside the trees.

Now came the tricky part. It was decided to dig upward almost to the surface, leaving two feet of earth to be removed on the night of the escape. The most experienced diggers did this work, because the risk of falls was great. It was such a tricky job that it took until March 14 to complete. Just after *Appell* on that day, Johnny Bull and Red Noble disappeared down the tunnel to dig the last few feet and shore up the roof of the exit shaft. As they clambered up the exit ladder, a deep and loud rumble ran through the tunnel.

“Jesus, what the bloody hell was that?” whispered Bull. Seconds later another rumble rolled around them as the two looked at each other quizzically. Noble was the first to speak.

“Must have been something driving along that road. Either that was a helluva loud truck or we’re awful damn close to the road!” said the Canadian. “We’d better get this little job done and have a word with Roger.”

Before starting to dig up, Johnny took a broken fencing foil and poked it upward to measure the amount of soil they had to remove. It was then that he got the second shock of the day. The foil went no more than six inches before breaking the surface. He climbed back down to where Red squatted with the tools.

“There’s maybe six inches of topsoil between us and the great outdoors,” he said hurriedly. “It’s bloody lucky I didn’t start right in with the shovel.” Johnny climbed back up the ladder to wedge a couple of bedboards in as a ceiling and then packed the sand behind them. Red passed up the last of the braces, and the exit was made secure in the event of a wandering goon treading on it.

The two worked in silence, both thinking about the discoveries they had made. The fact that the tunnel came so close to the surface was worrying but not particularly dangerous. Six inches of dirt should be enough to prevent the trap from sounding hollow if a sentry stepped on it. The rumble of trucks was considerably more alarming, though. If the trucks were as close as they sounded, the tunnel exit was less than twenty feet from the road, in the middle of an open field. That meant that Harry could be at least thirty feet short.

That night the escape leaders discussed the discovery. Again, they went over the measurements taken by the surveying teams, and the mathematical types returned to Harry to confirm their calculations. Everything seemed to check out, and the loud rumble was put down to the properties of the sand.

After Johnny and Red left the tunnel, everything that was not absolutely essential was taken out and either burned or stored down Dick. Pat Langford sealed the trap and then scrubbed the floor around it so the boards would swell and close any cracks. He would do the same chore twice a day until the tunnel broke. The following day, Rubberneck returned from leave and announced his arrival by descending on 104 with a party of ferrets. As usual, they found nothing.

With the sealing of Harry, a mood of excited anticipation gripped the camp. Many prisoners couldn’t help but let it slip into their letters home. “The vital day for which we are all keenly waiting,” wrote Brian Evans to his fiancée, Joan, “is even nearer than we actually think.” Tim Walenn wrote to his brother, “We are all expecting to be home in a few months.” John F. Williams was a bit more practical and asked his parents not to send any more cigarettes or tobacco, while Henri Picard told his family that he wouldn’t need any more drawing materials for the time being.

Still, it was crucial that a show of normalcy be kept up. Ian Cross took time out from tidying up the dispersal areas under the theater to go across to East Compound for a soccer match. There he chatted with his old friend and escape partner Robert Kee and talked excitedly about the coming break. *Arsenic and Old Lace* was playing in the camp theater, and Tony Hayter was planning the year's garden. There appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary at all.

New prisoners were coming into Sagan every day, and one of the purges from Dulag Luft included a recently captured Canadian named Freiburger.

"Freiburger . . ." intoned the duty officer approvingly. "That is a good German name."

"Well, I'm from Canada," replied the newcomer without so much as a pause, "and that's where all the good Germans are!"

*

The morning of March 20 was bitterly cold and windy and, as was often the case on mornings like that, early appell was held not on the parade ground but in the open space between the first two rows of huts. The men piled slowly out of the huts and took their places; Alex Cassie, Des Plunkett, and the other Amiable Lunatics straggled to their spots between Huts 103 and 110, chatting and laughing while they waited for the duty officer. Tim Walenn wasn't with them that morning. For the past few days, he had been staying in his bunk during appell to be counted on the sick list. The real purpose behind this was so he could keep an eye on the bulky bag of rubber stamps used by Dean and Dawson. Strictly speaking, they should have been stored down Dick at all times, and there would have been hell to pay had Bushell learned of the practice. But Tim was concerned with the amount of work still to be done and decided that the process of getting the stamps in and out of Dick consumed too much valuable time. All over the compound there were similar breaches of security, done solely for the sake of speed.

Plunkett and Cassie were chatting happily about the progress of preparations when a posse of guards doubled into the compound and encircled Hut 120. Obviously a search was planned.

"Well, that's a bit hard," said Alex with a groan. "Now I suppose we'll be standing out here for hours. At least we've got our showers on this morning—that'll give us a bit of a break!"

Suddenly, Plunkett went deathly pale and grabbed Cassie's arm, his other hand frozen in his tunic pocket. "Oh, Christ," he said with a gasp, "my map book! I must have left it on my bed. It's got the names of everyone who's going out and the maps they'll need." For a moment, Plunkett was frantic. If that little notebook fell into German hands, it would ruin the entire escape. And poor Des alone would be to blame.

However, Plunkett was nothing if not a realist and he collected himself quickly. His mind went to work, trying to arrange a plan to retrieve the valuable book. In a surprisingly short time, he was outlining his scheme to Alex. It all hinged on two things: the fact that Tim Walenn was still inside the hut; and their scheduled shower party. Soon Des had gathered a few others from the hut and put the plan in motion.

Very casually and with a jaunty whistle, he sauntered over to Hut 120 and called to the guard in their room. He politely told the goon that this hut was scheduled to go to the shower block that morning but hadn't taken their shower kit with them on appell. Would the guard be so kind as to retrieve his from his locker and pass it out to him? All the way down the hut, others asked the

same question, and soon various guards were passing out small bags and bundles.

As Plunkett's guard called his superior for permission, Des quickly whispered to Walenn, who was on his bunk directly under the window, about the book and asked him to pitch it out when the opportunity arose. The guard turned back to Des and said he would pass out the necessary supplies. Plunkett smiled his thanks and directed the guard to his locker out in the corridor. As soon as the guard left the room, Tim bounced off the bed and grabbed the map book. Thrusting it into the bag containing his rubber stamps, he tucked the lot into his shower bag and gave it to the guard when he returned from the corridor. The unwitting sentry then passed everything out the window to Des, who accepted the bundle gratefully and wandered back toward the firepool with the vital escape equipment stuffed safely inside his tunic. After that the Amiable Lunatics never mentioned the close call again; it was best forgotten.

*

With the tunnel now ready, the organizers had to decide on the best date for the break. Dark of the moon was at the end of the month, with the best days being the twenty-third to the twenty-fifth. The twenty-fifth was quickly dropped. Because it was a Saturday, the train travelers would have to contend with Sunday rail schedules. That left the night of the twenty-third or the night of the twenty-fourth. Since there was no difference between Friday and Saturday train schedules, either day would do.

However, there were still many final preparations to be made. On March 20, Crump Ker-Ramsay inspected all the cases to be carried by the escapers to ensure that they would fit through the tunnel easily. Some of them were pretty beaten up, having been acquired in the early days at Schubin.

Then began a seemingly endless round of briefings. Beginning on the twenty-second, Crump and Johnny Marshall lectured all the escapers on how to get through the tunnel.

“Lie completely flat on the trolley,” boomed Marshall, “and for God’s sake keep your head down. There’s nothing to see so don’t bother looking up, because if you do, you’ll bash your head and bring everything down. Hold your cases straight out in front of you and keep your bloody elbows in or you’ll tear down a frame. And whatever you do, don’t tip the trolley!”

A hand came up timidly at the back of the room. “What happens if the trolley tips itself, Johnny?” asked one of the listeners. Johnny smiled and spoke soothingly, sensing some nervousness in the room.

“That shouldn’t happen if you do what I’ve told you to. But if it does, the first thing to remember is, don’t panic—as soon as you panic, you’re going to squirm around and knock a frame out. As carefully as you can, get off the trolley and crawl to the nearest halfway house. Don’t try to get back on the trolley, and don’t leave the trolley in the tunnel—pull it behind you! Any more questions?” Seeing none, Johnny wished the group well and cleared the room so that Crump could go over the whole thing again with the next lot.

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One of the most important briefings was given to the marshalers, those men appointed to guide groups of ten escapers away from the compound. Most were to go west, but there were also some groups going south along the railway line toward Tschiebsdorf. In some ways the marshalers were among the most vital cogs in the escape wheel. If they failed in their task and ran into trouble near the camp, the entire operation could be ruined. Because of this, Tony Bethell, Jack

Grisman, Hank Birkland, Larry Reavell-Carter, and the rest of the marshals listened to the briefing intently and went over the drill time and time again.

Each marshal would wait in the forest until his ten men had arrived and then strike off into the woods. Keen Type had given Marcel Zillessen complete information on the paths through the woods and how far the trees stretched in all directions, so they were able to get a pretty good idea of where to go. They first had to navigate around a small lighted compound a few hundred yards from the camp. It was thought to be either an ammunition dump or an electrical installation, but the organizers were certain that it should be avoided at all costs. Then the group had to get past the other compounds in the Sagan complex, cross a narrow road, and hit a branch of the railway line. They would follow this until they came to the main north-south line, where they would split up. The distance was just over a mile.

From there the escapers were on their own and had to find their own way around the various obstacles. Those continuing south would have to negotiate one main road and the small villages of Hermsdorf and Tschirndorf before coming to their first big hurdle, the main Berlin-Breslau autobahn. Escapers going west had to cope with Sorau, a largish town similar to Sagan in size, while those going east would have to deal with Sprottau, another good-sized town. Only those walking north had a relatively easy trip—that is until they reached the Oder River, roughly thirty miles north of Sagan. Information recently received in the camp revealed that the river was flooded and would likely be very difficult to cross.

Because of the importance of keeping to a schedule, the train travelers would make their own way through the forest and were given explicit instructions for the trek. They would have to walk northeast for about a quarter of a mile, and then look for a road that ran roughly northwest to southeast past the station. Beside this road was a fence that backed onto the station entrances. There were three possible entrances to the station. The most desirable was a path across the tracks to the east of the platforms, but if this proved impossible to use, there was an overhead walkway to the west of the station. Only if neither of these was available were the escapers to use the subway, which went under the tracks and came up in the main booking hall. This route was the busiest and therefore the most dangerous and was to be used only as a last resort.

In addition, each escaper was given a special briefing by one or more of the area experts, depending on the individual's travel plans. For instance, those traveling south to Czechoslovakia would hear from Wally Valenta or from another Czech officer who came from the Riesengebirge, the mountains that straddled the Czech-German frontier, who knew them as well as anyone. They were also taught to say in Czech, "I swear by the death of my mother that I am an English officer," and were assured that this oath would cause them to be believed anywhere in the country.

They were also briefed by Wing Commander John Ellis, an expert on outdoor survival who passed on tips to make a hardarser's journey more bearable. Those making for Switzerland listened to Roger Bushell and Johnny Stower, who spoke of their experiences at the border, and were given information about the location of guard posts on the frontier that Zillessen had obtained from Keen Type. That helpful ferret had also provided a list of the foods that could be obtained without ration cards and directions to the berths usually reserved for Swedish ships in Danzig and Stettin.

Finally, Roger met with all the escapers in the lavatory of 104. He spoke confidently of the arrangements made regarding the marshals and passed on some contact addresses. For those going south, there was the address of a baker just inside the Czech frontier and the name of the

hotelier in Prague who had helped Johnny Stower the previous year. Roger also gave out the address, sent in code to Schubin in 1942, of a brothel in Stettin that was frequented by Swedish sailors. He wished everyone well and then stayed to talk with each of the train travelers. Bushell reminded them of various German customs and gave out the available information about timetables and fares. Keen Type had provided details on all trains from the Sagan station and, from various sources, Valenta had been able to build up a complete schedule of times and prices. With this the train travelers could plan their itinerary even before leaving the camp.

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By this time, most of the material arrangements had been made. Nearly three thousand maps had been run off and sorted into groups, and Johnny Travis had made up metal water bottles from old food cans and solder. In Hut 112, Canton's chefs were busy mixing hundreds of four-ounce cans of escape mixture. There were two kinds, both made to the recipe of dietary expert David Lubbock: a mixture of sugar and cereal; and a precooked solid made of cocoa, chocolate, fat, sugar, and Klim. Each can of the precooked mixture was enough to provide the necessary nutrition for two days. The hardarsers were given six cans each, and the train travelers were offered four, although many decided against carrying the cans, which would instantly identify them as escaped POWs if they were searched.

As the escape drew nearer, many of the lads wrote home, some hoping it would be their last letter from captivity. "I've got an important part to play in one of our kriegie plays," wrote George Wiley to a friend in Canada, "and am a bit nervous about doing my part well . . . may see you sooner than expected."

By the morning of March 23 there was still a good six inches of snow on the ground, but the winter seemed to have broken at last. There was a new mildness in the air, and a very slight thaw had set in. Spring was clearly on its way. There was still a snap in the air, but it was more electricity than cold, for everyone knew that the break was due in the next couple of days. The opinion of the optimists was further borne out when the leaders of X Organization were seen making their way slowly and circuitously toward Hut 104 for another meeting. One of the men who walked up the steps to 104 was not a regular at those meetings and, to those who knew him, his presence was significant.

The new face was Flying Officer Len Hall, of the RAF Meteorological Branch, who had the dubious distinction of being one of the few officers in Sagan who had been sunk instead of shot down. The vessel taking him to England from Nigeria had been torpedoed in the Caribbean, and Len spent four weeks as a prisoner on a U-boat before getting back to dry land. The Germans evidently didn't know what to do with him because they moved him between Dulag Luft and a naval transit camp for almost two months before finally deciding to stick him in Luft III. The organization was glad of that decision, for they were in great need of a trained weather forecaster.

Since the kingpins of the organization all knew the score, the first questions went to Len.

"How do things look for the next couple of days, Len?" asked Roger quietly.

"Quite good, actually," began Len. "As you know, it's dark of the moon now, and there should be pretty good cloud for the next couple of nights to make it even darker. I'm afraid the temperature won't be too helpful, but you'll likely have a bit of wind to cover up the noises. That's the best I can do with what I have to go on."

“Can you give me anything longer-term?” queried Roger.

Len shook his head. “Sorry, Roger. This German weather can get damned nasty, and it’s still too early to say that the winter’s over for good.”

Roger grunted and looked around at his lieutenants. It was clear that he wanted to get moving. “Well, we’ll have to wait until tomorrow morning to decide for sure, but I think we should give it a go if the weather doesn’t change. Any objections?”

Everyone in the room knew Roger well enough to recognize when he had made up his mind, and this was one of those occasions. They all shook their heads. Tim Walenn said that he needed as much notice as possible to stamp and sign all of the forged documents, and Ker-Ramsay wanted at least half a day to make the final preparations in the tunnel. Aside from that, there was nothing further.

After the meeting broke up, Johnny Marshall hung back to have a word with Roger.

“What about the hardarsers, Roger?” he asked. “There’s still three feet of snow in the forests—they won’t stand a chance in those conditions.”

Bushell was firm. “It’s a chance they’ll have to take. We can’t risk keeping Harry until the next no-moon period. You’ve seen the trap—it’s warping more every day. We’re on borrowed time as it is. If we don’t move soon, the odds are that we’ll lose everything.”

“How about putting out some train travelers now, and closing Harry up until the weather improves? The walkers would have a much better chance in a month’s time.”

“Come on, Johnny,” said Roger. “You know the tunnel would never make it through a big search if we used it once. Besides, it’s got to be all or nothing. The entire plan depends on getting large numbers of escapers out in one go—a few train travelers just wouldn’t do.”

It was useless to discuss it further, especially since Marshall knew that all of Bushell’s points were valid. Still, the conversation forced Big X to reconsider the problem of the walkers, and after mulling it over for the afternoon, he sought the advice of Wings Day. He told Wings that he hated to make a decision that would jeopardize the hardarsers’ chances but that he saw no other alternatives.

Wings was quick with his reply. “We both know, Roger, that the odds are stacked against the hardarser at the best of times. We’ve both done our fair share of walking in the past—you know as well as I do that the odds are a thousand to one against, even in the best conditions. Besides, no one’s going to freeze to death—if things get bad they can just turn themselves in. It’s usually warm enough in the cooler!”

Roger smiled when he saw Wings’s big grin. “That’s bloody true enough!” he said grimly.

“In any case, there’s a bigger question here. You’ve said it yourself a dozen times that the greatest value in an escape is the number of chaps who get out in the first place, not the number who get home. Even if none of the hardarsers lasts two days, they’ll have had an impact just by getting outside the wire.”

Bushell was silent for a moment and then looked up and said simply, "Thanks, you're right," before wandering off to his hut.

Wings watched him stride across the compound and reflected on what the South African had been able to achieve. He had taken a camp full of very different characters and given them a uniting purpose. Soon he would turn loose up to two hundred escapers and, for the seventh time, Wings Day would be one of them.

There was a heavy snowstorm that night and the issue was again in doubt when the committee members met on the morning of the twenty-fourth to come to a decision. At 11:30 A.M., they gathered in a room in Hut 101. Just ten minutes later, they all emerged again. It was on.

Tim Walenn went straight off to start date-stamping and signing the papers. This job had to be left until the very last minute so the escapers could get the greatest possible use out of their limited-time travel documents. Also, most of the documents had to be signed, including Roger Bushell's genuine visa, which he had procured in the course of one of his escapes. Cassie painted on the visa stamp in purplish pink watercolor and then signed it with the name of a chief of police whose real signature they had. Alex practiced the signature for two days so that he could get it just right.

Meanwhile, Crump went down Harry to do the final tunnel work. He started by hanging two blankets in the exit chamber to block the light and sound. As an added precaution, strips of cloth were nailed to the first and last fifty feet of trolley rail. Blankets were also spread on the floor of both the entry and exit shafts to deaden any sounds and were laid down in both halfway houses so that the haulers wouldn't get their clothes filthy. Next, extra lights were installed every twenty-five feet to give a bit more illumination to comfort those who were inclined toward claustrophobia. Finally, the trolleys had to be modified to handle the large number of men who would be using them. Extra planks were added on top to provide a better platform for the escapers to lie on, and four hundred feet of one-inch-thick manila rope intended for the camp's boxing ring was taken down and attached to the trolleys. Finally, four twisted shoring boards were replaced and a specially constructed wooden shovel was taken to the exit shaft for use in breaking the tunnel.

Meanwhile, the Little X's were making their way around the various departments of the organization to pick up all of the gear for the escapers in their hut. They had already grilled each escaper and carefully examined his clothing, luggage, and papers and now had to hand over the bundle of gear and a few last bits of advice. The Little X's also gave each man explicit instructions on when and how to go to Hut 104. For days before the escape, watchers had kept a tally on the number of men going in and out of the block on a normal day. To avoid an increase in traffic on the day of the escape, these figures were used to arrive at a series of routes and timetables. There was a thirty-second interval between movements, and each escaper had a specific time and direction to go. When he got to 104, he would be directed to a bunk to wait for his number to come up. The regular occupant of that bunk would then make his way to the other fellow's hut and remain there until the following morning.

Around the camp, tension was mounting. There were a few more forced grins, and many of the kriegies tried to calm their nerves with meaningless conversation. Len Hall's afternoon meteorology class was noticeably smaller than on previous days, and there were fewer people hanging around the theater. The night before had seen a dress rehearsal of the new production of *Pygmalion*, with Roger Bushell as Professor Henry Higgins. An understudy waited in the wings, lest the star be unavailable.

Back in his room, Hank Birkland hunched over one last letter to his family. "I got a letter last month to which I will not be able to reply," he wrote in his typical straightforward style. "I am not in a position to carry on a letter-for-letter correspondence for long."

Just after six, a few men gathered in Johnny Travis's room for a last supper of bully beef fritters and barley glop, a mixture of barley, Klim, sugar, and raisins. Roger Bushell, Bob van der Stok, Digger McIntosh, and Shorty Armstrong were all there, but there was little conversation. No one seemed to have much of an appetite, despite Travis's guarantee that the feast would keep you filled for days.

In Hut 112, George Wiley was setting a few things straight before leaving for 104. Of all the escapers, George was the youngest-looking. Though he had turned twenty-two in January, his fair hair and gentle features made him look about sixteen, and George was used to jibes about the authorities having to let kids into the air force to do a man's job. This day, though, George's boyish face showed as much trepidation as excitement. He spoke no German and realized that his chances of making a clean escape were almost nil, especially as his leg was again giving him trouble in the cold. He expected to be picked up in the Sagan area and thought he would probably spend a week or two in the cooler before being put back in the compound.

As George was cleaning up his bunk, he chatted with Alan Righetti, who would be staying behind in 112. The Australian could tell that his roommate was uneasy and tried to buck him up with a few words of encouragement. Alan had been involved in a couple of breaks in Italy and knew what it was like for a first-time escaper in the hours before a break. George was comforted by Alan's words but as he got up to make his way to 104, the Canadian turned to his roommate and held out his watch and a few other things that he had collected over his year in captivity.

"Alan, if I don't make it," he began, "will you see that these things get back to my mother in Windsor?"

"Okay, George," said Alan quietly. "You sure you don't want to hang on to them? You may see her before I do!" he added cheerfully. Wiley smiled and clapped his pal on the back with a word of farewell. As he turned to leave the room, Righetti couldn't help but think that George Wiley looked so young and innocent to be heading out into the snowy unknown of a cold March night.

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As dusk fell, the exodus continued. Pulling on his greatcoat, Mike Casey bade farewell to his roommates in Hut 122. "I'm off, lads," he said with a wave. "It's about time for my run in the woods!" Mike reported to 122's controller, who consulted his time sheet, got the nod from his stooge, and pushed the Irishman out the door with a hearty clap on the back. Casey walked east, around the south end of Hut 121 and then entered 109 by the south door. He went directly to Room 17, where Wings Norman sat with another time sheet.

"Ah, Mike," said Norman cheerily, "spot on time as usual. Off you go, then, and don't get yourself into any trouble!" With a firm handshake, Mike was sent on his way. He continued up the corridor to the northern end of 109, where another stooge stood holding the door shut. He peeked through the crack and then quickly opened the door and gave Mike the thumbs-up as he passed. The Irishman crossed the path running beside the firepool and paused on the southern steps of Hut 104.

The door swung open and Casey reported to Dave Torrens, who gave him a room and bunk assignment. Mike had escaped before, but in his nearly five years as a prisoner, he had never seen anything quite like this. Inside the crowded hut was the oddest collection of characters, some in rough working clothes and others in smart business suits. Some were just standing and smoking, others were chatting softly, and two pairs were huddled over a game of bridge. Many just sat and said nothing, glancing up briefly with a smile as Mike passed.

Twice every minute, the door opened for another kriegie, who came in quietly and was checked off by Torrens. Everything had gone exactly according to plan so far. Then, at about a quarter to eight, the door opened again. Instantly, a hush fell over the corridor and Casey poked his head out of the room to see what was up. There, at the end of the hall, stood a Luftwaffe corporal.