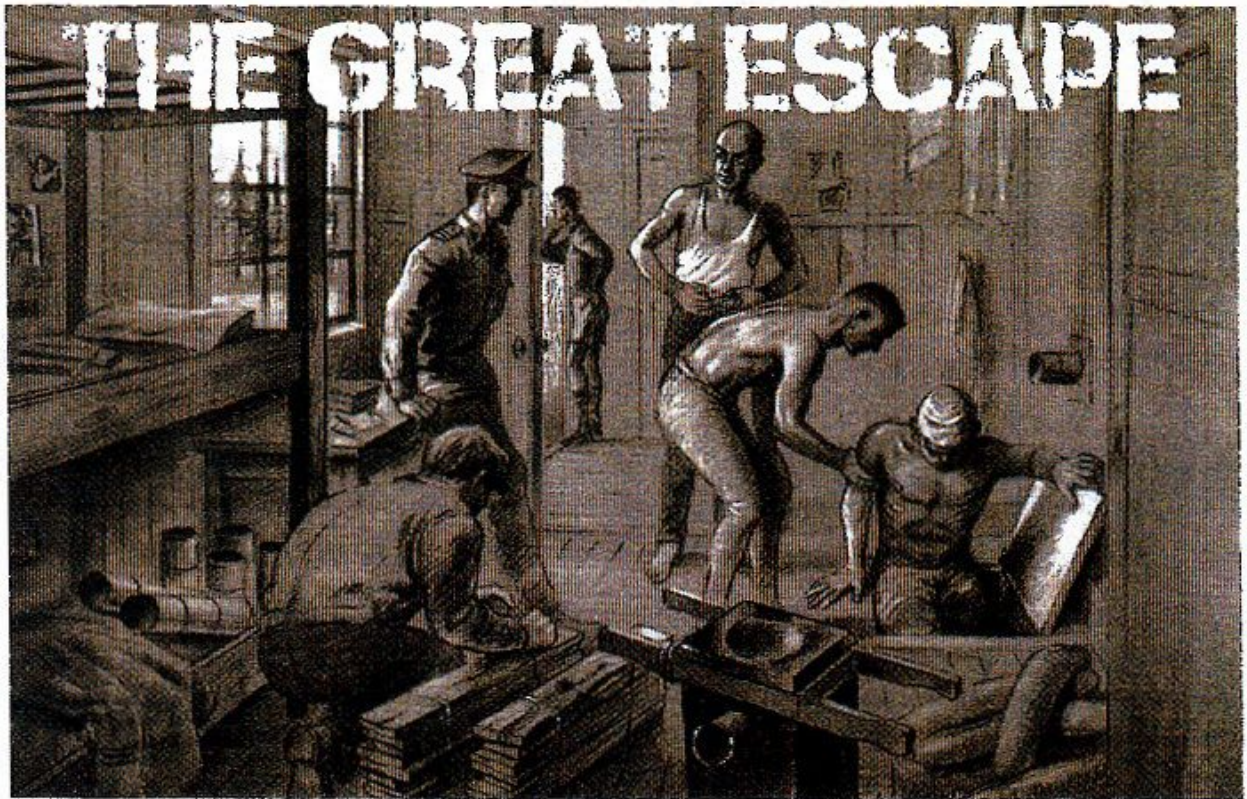




THE NATIONAL AIR FORCE MUSEUM OF CANADA  
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During the night of March 24/25 1944, history created a backdrop for the stuff that, with a generous portion of fiction, Hollywood dreams are made of. For most people today, "The Great Escape" elicits a movie memory that culminates in an epic motorcycle chase on a warm, sunny day at the foot of the Swiss Alps.

For 76 Allied Prisoners of War (POWs) who managed to escape from Stalag Luft III (a German POW camp for members of the air force), the reality of that night was a cold, wintery, moonless landscape, deep in enemy territory and far from neutral Switzerland. Their dreams were to survive the war and see their loved ones again. Three made it home. Tragically of the 73 recaptured POWs only 23 would find their way back to camp. The remaining 50 were ordered executed in an attempt to discourage future escape activities. Among the group of 50 were six Canadians.

Hundreds of Stalag Luft III POWs had been part of the elaborate escape plan, devised and set in motion by RAF Spitfire pilot Roger Bushell. Organization X as they were called, set out to simultaneously dig four tunnels in hopes that one of them would lead the men if not home, then at least outside the wire long enough to create some chaos and divert enemy resources.

Due to the narrow confinements of the tunnels, only a small number of men could work underground at any given time. While the tunnel itself was crucial to the escape, its potential success also depended on a number of other factors that required the involvement of dozens of men. Uniforms needed to be disguised, maps and compasses were required for general directions, fake but authentic looking passes had to be forged,



tons of yellow sand had to be dispersed and above all, a security system was required to ensure that all activities ceased immediately whenever German guards got close to the "hot" zones.

In March of 1944 the tunnel they had nick-named "Harry" was finally considered long enough to begin work on the exit shaft. At 10 metres deep and over 100 metres long, the exit should have been located in a forest area a few meters north of the camp's outer fence line. Bushell estimated that up to 200 men might be able to move through the tunnel before sunrise.

A lottery system had been developed to draw names for the exit order. Those men who had made significant contributions to the escape planning and execution, as well as those who were fluent in

foreign languages were given the opportunity of an earlier number and thus a greater chance for successfully making it back home.

Unfortunately, passing through the tunnel ended up taking longer anticipated. A power outage due to an air raid meant men who had never been in the tunnel before had to navigate it in the dark. In addition, the exit shaft had come up a few metres short of the forest, leaving the men without any immediate cover and slowing down the final stage of the exodus. When a German guard on his rounds spotted a couple of escapers emerging from the exit hole, only 76 men had managed to get through the tunnel, nine of them Canadian.

The men came from many parts of Canada and had varied backgrounds. Their pre-war experience and abilities became a key part of the activities they provided for the escape committee. Within days of the escape six Canadians were recaptured, interrogated and murdered.

29-year-old **Gordon Kidder** from St. Catharines, Ontario, holding a BA in modern languages from the University of Toronto was fluent in French and German and spoke some Spanish. The escape committee believed that anyone who spoke foreign languages had a better chance of faking their identity outside the camp. Gordon quickly became a language instructor at Luft III, and he was among the first third of men who exited the tunnel.

**Hank Birkland**, born in 1917 to Norwegian immigrant farmers, had struggled to find meaningful employment in the years before the war. His search for work finally led him to the gold mines in Sheep Creek, British Columbia where he also returned to playing lacrosse and was given the nick name "Big Train". His physical strength and his mining experience made him an ideal POW camp tunneler.

**Patrick Langford**, age 24, grew up in Jasper Forest Park, Alberta and Yoho Park, BC. Pat was described as very fit with broad shoulders. In Hut 104, where the entrance to "Harry" was hidden under a stove, Langford was tasked with the role of trapführer (guardian). He had to be on constant alert for guards so he could warn those digging underground, close the trapdoor and return the stove to its normal position. Pat was able to perfect his work and complete all the steps in about 20 seconds.

**George McGill**, was born into a family of Toronto coal merchants in 1918. His true passion was running and in 1940 he was the Ontario Provincial Champion in the Quarter Mile. He was the only one in the group to have married prior to joining the war and he also had a young son named Peter. When his quick wit was noticed, the escape organization recruited George into the security department to help create and maintain an elaborate warning system.

24-year-old Scottish born **James Wernham** from Winnipeg who, like fellow escaper Hank Birkland, had felt the impact of the depression on his job prospects in the 1930s, saw the war as a way to contribute to society in a more meaningful way. James and Windsor native **George Wiley**, a young lad always in search of adventure and not yet 19 years when he joined the RCAF, became members of the theatre production group. Besides sporting events, theatre performances provided welcome distractions from the monotony of camp life. In the summer of 1943, the POWs at Luft III were permitted to build a theatre that could seat an audience of over 300. The empty space between the floor and the staggered seat rows provided a perfect hiding spot for the tons of yellow sand that needed dispersing. Rehearsals and set building served another purpose as it made traffic to the theatre less suspicious.

To date, no solid evidence has been uncovered as to why certain men were selected to be executed and others were returned to camp. One thing the three Canadian officers who survived had in common was that they had joined the RAF or RCAF prior to the war and thus may have been viewed as "career officers".

Ottawa native **Keith "Skeets" Ogilvie**, born in 1915, joined the RAF just prior to the war after the RCAF turned him down. His love for flying and outstanding abilities not only earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross but also a letter of commendation from Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands. Ogilvie's main job was that of parcel officer, ensuring proper distribution of Red Cross parcel contents and using them for bribes. Thanks to his quick wit he also befriended a German guard who temporarily "lost" his wallet including valuable pieces of identification. After the war, Ogilvie transferred to the RCAF where he continued his military career until 1963. He passed away in May 1998.

**Alfred Thompson**, also born in 1915, was a descendent of United Empire Loyalists who had come to southern Ontario in the early 1800's via New Brunswick. Flying had fascinated young Alfred long before the war and in 1936 he applied to the RAF for pilot training. Joining 102 Squadron, he was assigned to drop propaganda leaflets over Berlin on 8 September 1939. When he was shot down and taken prisoner, he became Canada's first POW. Ironically at that time Canada had not yet declared war. As a result, he spent the duration of the war in various German camps and once liberated, he was unable to compete with other pilots for a post war career in the RCAF. Following his father's footsteps, Alfred studied law, became a lawyer and later Crown Attorney. He passed away one day after his 70th birthday in August 1985.

**William Cameron** hailed from a farm outside of Stony Plain in Alberta where he was born in 1920. His grandparents had left Ontario in the 1870s and the family kept moving westward with the frontier, seizing the opportunity of homesteading. William was fascinated by airplanes and while visiting his uncle, jumped at the offer to take flying lessons. After high-school he joined the RCAF and with his previous flying experience was soon on track to become a Spitfire pilot. An inspiration to his younger brothers, three of them also signed up to support the war effort. After his return home, William pursued a university education in Vancouver but with his love of flying still strong, he became a flight instructor. He passed away in November 2000.

Many Canadian POWs participated in the escape preparations and diversions, but for numerous reasons were not able to utilize the tunnel. Featured in the exhibit are two prominent "Great Escape" Canadians whose contributions to the project were integral to its success. Seen digging his way forward, is "Tunnel King", Wally Floody and pumping the bellows is Scruffy Weir.

**Clarke Wallace (Wally) Floody**, the man considered most valuable to the creation of the tunnel, was born in 1918 in Chatham Ontario, but raised in Toronto. His love for the outdoors led him to work in Northern Ontario's mines. When war broke out Wally was determined to become a pilot. Already married, he was not the recruiting office's first pick, but by 1941 he was flying Spitfires with 401 Squadron. As a POW, his mining experience was deemed invaluable to tunnel digging and the escape plan. The Germans, suspecting his potential for tunnelling, transferred him to a different camp less than a month before the escape. He passed away on September 25, 1998.

Fellow Torontonians and 401 Squadron pilot **John Weir**, was born in 1919. His father, a retired army colonel, sent him to experience physical labour in Ontario's mines. In September 1939 he joined the RCAF and during a dress parade he was referred to as "rather scruffy looking". The name "**Scruffy**" stuck. Flying his Spitfire, he was shot down over Normandy in the fall of 1941 and suffered severe burns to his hands and face, leaving him without eyelids. As with Wally, his mining experience earned him a prominent role in the escape activities. In late 1943, a doctor determined that Scuffy would go blind if his eyes were not medically attended to. He agreed to be transferred to a German hospital for experimental skin grafts, a move that saved his eyesight and possibly his life. Scruffy lived a full life after the war, dying on September 20, 2009.

Neither Floody nor Weir were among those who exited from "Harry" that March night, but their diligence and ingenuity were assuredly the architecture of The Great Escape.