

The Great Escapers

The Full Story of the Second World War's Most Remarkable Mass Escape

Tim Carroll



Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*



Per Ardua ad Astra
(Through adversity to the stars)

Motto of the Royal Air Force

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Most Remarkable Mass Escape

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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For Georgia and Patrick

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Preface

This book owes its origins to a 1999 television documentary series for the Learning Channel that I was a producer and director for. It included a short episode about the Great Escape that I felt had been inadequately illustrated – which, given the comical ineptitude of the team making it, came as no surprise. I was determined to produce a better account. In fact I had hoped to make a full-scale documentary for either the BBC or Channel 4 to accompany a book. I didn't get anybody to take up the idea, but am pleased to know that Mark Radice of Windfall Films succeeded where I failed. His programme, which I think pursues a highly intelligent 'angle', should be broadcast around the same time this book appears.

What intrigued me about the Great Escape was the sheer scale and complexity of the achievement. I grew up with the film *The Great Escape*, as did probably every child of my generation. One summer I set myself the task of producing an authentic British passport for myself. I reasoned that if some half-starved Allied officers could produce thousands of bogus identity papers amid the deprivations of a freezing Second World War prison camp, I could surely make myself a passport in the comfortable surroundings of my home and with all sorts of modern technology at my disposal. I was wrong, of course, and the final product of my summer's efforts was lamentable.

The question that comes up time and again about the Great Escape is: how on earth did they do it? By simplifying the story I don't think the Hollywood version of events casts much light on this question. I've discovered that the answer is a complicated one. On the one hand it was not quite so

difficult as it seemed. The officers imprisoned in Stalag Luft III, the German Air Force camp from which they escaped, were a privileged bunch, probably better treated than any other POWs in the European or Asian theatre. They were the elite of the Allied air forces and were treated as such. Their rations were good, and they were supplied with sporting equipment, books and materials to put on theatre productions that would have been the envy of many a regular soldier, whose treatment at the hands of the Germans was appalling.

It was not extraordinarily difficult for the officers to obtain the materials necessary for producing false identity cards. Their privileged status helped because the war, by the time of the Great Escape, had been going against Germany for some time and it was apparent to everybody that the Allies were going to win. Most of the German staff of Stalag Luft III were anxious to stay on the right side of the officers, many of whom had connections in high places and might reciprocate the favour in the post-war world. Many of the German security staff were impoverished and starving. It did not take a lot to win them over.

But, on the other hand, the Great Escape was an extraordinary achievement, far more so than it appears in the film. The figures who were involved in the prisoners' clandestine escape activities were extraordinary men; some, admittedly, because they came from wealthy and well-connected backgrounds, but most because they were an indomitable clan of adventure- and life-loving characters who all refused to accept captivity and were prepared to do anything to cock a snook at those who would oppress them.

It may come as a surprise to readers to learn that there were not just three tunnels, the famous Tom, Dick and Harry. There were 100 tunnels constructed in Stalag Luft III alone, and easily that amount in other Luftwaffe camps across occupied Europe. I've tried in my account to show just how indefatigable these men were in their desire to get out of

these camps at any cost. And the extraordinary number of tunnels they constructed is surely testimony to this.

There is a tragic side to the Great Escape, of course, but I don't think the tragedy should be exaggerated and I think those contemporary writers who strike a mawkish pose about 'the 50' who were murdered by the Germans, are letting the side down. They were brave men and their murders were dreadful. But they were in the middle of a brutal war in which many millions suffered far more heinous crimes. They were fighting men who had chosen to continue the war with the Germans from behind the barbed-wire confines of their camps. They were officers who were treated, for the most part, with extraordinary leniency by the enemy. They would be the last to complain about their treatment, I suspect.

In this book, I haven't succeeded in writing the comprehensive and definitive account that I had hoped for. But then I've discovered that there are so many stories associated with the Great Escape and Stalag Luft III, so many different angles and so many interesting avenues to go down, that it's an impossible task. I hope, though, that this is an interesting account that casts just a little light on this remarkable episode of our history.

Prologue

The Last of the Great Escapers

Today, in March 2004, sixty years after the Great Escape, there are only seven men still living who escaped out of the tunnel from Sagan on that fateful night. These are they, and their thoughts about the adventure that possibly shaped the rest of their lives.

Tony Bethell

Anthony Bethell was shot down flying a Mustang over Holland in December 1942.

My greatest thought about the Great Escape is one of admiration for the genius of so many people whose work made it possible. I started on it by spreading sand and looking out for goons before graduating to digging. When I first went down I thought I'd be claustrophobic but being surrounded by competent people put my mind at rest. I was stuck once, at Leicester Square, one of the halfway houses in the tunnel, and I've never been so terrified in my life. I was sweating with fear. I was pulled out after 30 minutes but it seemed like a year.

On the night of the escape my overriding thought was that I had a job to do. I had to lead ten people away from the tunnel to the forest. Once that was done and we finally got away ourselves there was a wonderful feeling of freedom in the forest, and sucking in the beautiful cold air. But it was very difficult country made terribly muddy with melting snow. We broke our own rule of not walking in daytime and got caught by a couple of goons who came out with the classic line, 'For you the war is over.' We had only made it 40 or 50 miles.

I was in the cooler at Sagan when I found out about the 50. I listened to the news in stark disbelief. It's a ghastly statistic: three people home and fifty shot. But it was a wartime situation and that sort of thing happens in war. You have to do what you have to do. Roger Bushell said the whole idea was to 'harass, confuse, and confound the enemy'. And that's exactly what we did.

Now aged 82, Tony lives in Canada with his second wife, to whom he has been married for 30 years. They have eight children between them and fourteen grandchildren.

Les Brodrick

Lesley Charles James Brodrick's Lancaster was shot down on the way back from a bombing raid over Stuttgart.

On the night of the escape there were 200 people all in their heavy coats and crowded into one hut that was quickly getting pretty hot. Apparently you could see the steam billowing out of the windows but thankfully the Germans didn't notice it. It was very exciting at first but that soon wore off because we were sitting there for hours on end waiting to go.

It was scary in the tunnel, to be honest. The majority of us had never been in it before and there was a little bit of panicking when some of us realised we suffered from acute claustrophobia. Once out, to be perfectly frank, my first thought was how blooming cold and miserable it was. Three of us had decided to 'hard-arse' it overland to Czechoslovakia, where it was suggested someone might help us.

Unfortunately we stopped to ask for help at a house that turned out to be a German soldiers' billet. Four Jerries came out and that was that. I was sent back to Sagan and given two weeks in the cooler. When I got out I heard about the 50. My two companions were among them. Frankly the only feeling I had was of how lucky I had been. Was it worth it? No, not really. Fifty men dead, and only a few months before the end of the war? No, it wasn't worth it.

Les returned to England and taught at a school in Canvey Island before moving to South Africa, where he now lives with his wife and two children.

Dick Churchill

Sidney Albion Churchill ended up in Sagan after his light bomber was shot down by a Messerschmitt 109 over Ludwigshafen in September 1940.

Unlike the film there were no Americans at all in the escape, which was a shame because they were actually very active in building the tunnel. But they were moved into the South Compound only a short time before we broke out. It was a shame for them. Roger Bushell was a man of

great determination. And our senior officer, 'Wings' Day, was a man who commanded such respect that if he had told us to storm the wire, a hundred of us would have done so without the slightest hesitation - even if it would have been a suicide mission. But I'd rather not dwell on what happened nearly 60 years ago. I'd rather concentrate on what my five grandchildren are going to do in their lives.

Dick, now 86, lives in Devon, England.

Sydney Dowse, MC

Nicknamed 'the laughing boy' for his jovial and easy-going bonhomie, Spitfire pilot Sydney Henstings Dowse was one of the chief diggers on 'Harry' and had already made two escape attempts.

I was determined to get out and cause the Germans as much trouble as possible. I was in charge of one of the main digging teams and thoroughly enjoyed being in the tunnel; we were doing something useful to the war effort after all, though I know some of the others didn't like it quite so much. In the film, the character played by '60s pop idol John Leyton was probably based on me, and my escaping partner Stanislaw 'Danny' Krol was played by Charles Bronson.

We were two of the first to get out. It was an absolutely fantastic feeling to be free. Danny was Polish so we headed towards Poland. But we were caught after 12 days. I was sent to Sachsenhausen, where I met Jimmy James and learnt that the 50 had been murdered, including Danny. It just made me want to escape again - which I did. The Great Escape was worth it. We caused havoc to the Germans and tied up thousands if not millions of them in the search for us.

After the war Sydney was an equerry to King George VI and worked in the Colonial Service. Now, aged 84, he divides his time between London and Monte Carlo.

Bertram 'Jimmy' James, MC

Jimmy James was flying a Wellington bomber when it was shot down in June 1940. His real name is Bertram but someone started calling him 'Jimmy' during his time in the RAF and it stuck. After being captured he was involved in no

less than 12 escape attempts, for which he was awarded the Military Cross and a Mention-in-Despatches.

When I got to the exit shaft I climbed up the ladder and the first thing I saw were stars. I thought of the RAF motto - *Per Ardua ad Astra* (through adversity to the stars). It was hard to imagine a more appropriate context for the motto at that moment. There had been much toil for all concerned, I thought, as I climbed the ladder to the stars. The cost was terrible. I lost some good friends in that escape. They were some of the finest men I've ever known. But then a lot of us lost our good friends in that war, didn't we . . .?

Now aged 89, Jimmy lives with his wife, Madge, in the pleasantly pastoral surroundings of Shropshire, where he is a regular on the golf courses and a stalwart of the community.

Paul Royle

Paul Gordon Royle was in the Royal Australian Air Force when he was shot down over France in 1940.

I did a lot of different jobs on the tunnel. A bit of digging, a bit of soil disposal, and keeping an eye out for goons. My only memory of the tunnel itself is the escape - never-ending darkness then suddenly someone pulls you up and you were free! I headed off south on foot through the woods and was caught the very next night. I was eventually sent back to the camp and thrown in the cooler for a fortnight. When I got out I discovered 50 of our friends had not returned.

I suppose my overall feeling was one of luck really. But as far as the whole thing goes, it never seemed so important to those who took part in it as it does to others. There were millions of people doing all sorts of things in that war and we were just a small part of it.

Paul worked in mining all over the world before settling down in Western Australia with his second wife. He has five children and five grandchildren.

Mike Shand

In the film, when the German guard stumbles on the open tunnel exit and catches the prisoners emerging, the one

who distracts him before running off into the woods was in reality New Zealander Michael Moray Shand. A Battle of Britain Spitfire pilot, Mike was the last to get away.

I didn't really know what was happening but I knew we'd been rumbled. I don't think the goon knew what was going on either. We all froze. Then, the minute he looked the other way, I made a run for the woods. That was it: we were out.

I hard-arsed it for a couple of days, heading for Czechoslovakia. But the local police caught me trying to jump a train. I was thrown in jail with what seemed like everyone else from Sagan. Eventually I was sent back to camp, where I presumed everyone else already was. But when I got there I discovered what had happened. It was a bit of a shock but my overall feeling, I have to be honest, was how lucky I was not to have been shot.

It was worth it. I don't think any of us thought we'd make it back to England. It was a ridiculous idea with police and Gestapo checkpoints on every other corner. In those conditions - the freezing nights, the bleak countryside - it was impossible to get across Germany without being noticed. But we had to do something. We did it to cause chaos behind enemy lines and that's exactly what we did.

After the war, Mike returned to his native New Zealand, where he lived as a farmer with his English wife, who died 14 years ago. Mike, 89, has two children.

Chapter One

For You the War is Over

The first Allied officer to fall into German hands was a New Zealand RAF airman who was shot down over the North Sea on 5 September 1939 - shortly after war was declared. Flying Officer Laurence Hugh Edwards was on a reconnaissance flight in an Anson aircraft of 206 Squadron when he fell prey to two German Bv 138 flying boats. The two other crew of the Anson were killed in the attack. The enemy aircraft landed alongside the wreckage floating in the sea and took Edwards prisoner. He was to be the first of a sprinkling of RAF officers to fall into enemy hands in the early days of the 'Phoney War'. By the end of the year, some 26 British and French officers and NCOs were quartered, first in a prison camp at Itzehoe near Hamburg, to which Edwards was dispatched, and shortly afterwards in Spangenberg Castle, a medieval fortress near Kassel which had been used to house prisoners since 1870. Itzehoe was a fairly comfortable camp with a relaxed regime, at which the officers all had their own rooms and were allowed to buy fresh fruit and produce from the locals. Spangenberg Castle, designated Oflag IXA/H ('Oflag' being a corruption of 'Offizierslager', meaning 'officers' prison'), was far more picturesque, with a moat, formidable stone walls and a cobbled courtyard; it was the quintessential medieval fortress. But the living conditions were hopelessly primitive. The officers shared a long dormitory equipped with little more than straw mattresses and a couple of oak tables. They were given miserable German Army rations, a far cry from the more generous (and healthy) helpings they had

been accustomed to in the officers' mess in Britain. Matters were made worse by the arrival of the bitter German winter. As the weather worsened it became too cold to venture outside, and the men mostly stayed inside playing cards and amusing themselves - or not - with whatever distractions they could find. It was a bleak portent of things to come as the very first Kriegies (derived from the German word for prisoners of war, Kriegsgefangenen) adapted to a way of life that would ultimately ensnare some 44,000 Allied airmen taken prisoner in occupied Europe.

The experience of airmen who fall into enemy hands is profoundly different to those of seamen and soldiers. The latter might be taken prisoner after a long struggle after possibly months at sea, or drudgery in the field. But airmen usually find themselves in enemy hands only hours after enjoying the comfort of their familiar surroundings: the mess and the local pub; the company of their girlfriends, wives and families. Most airmen, and particularly those who arrived in Germany at the start of the war, came from the sort of backgrounds where comfort was taken for granted. Yet one minute they are in the safe cocoon of their aircraft, which when thousands of feet above the ground gives exactly the feeling of limitless freedom that airmen crave, then the next they are plunged into a strange and unfamiliar land and are at the mercy of unknown people and an uncertain fate.

'It was quite a shock to suddenly realise you weren't going home and you faced an uncertain future in the hands of the Germans,' recalls General Albert Clark, who was one of the first Americans to be taken prisoner in the Second World War. Clark, nicknamed 'Bub' thanks to his youthful looks, was a lieutenant-colonel and second-in-command of the 1st US Fighter Group when he was shot down in his Spitfire 5B in July 1942. 'Today there is elaborate preparation for airmen should they be shot down, but then there was nothing.'

Airmen as a breed are not temperamentally well disposed to endure captivity. Most of them choose to fly because fighting in the sky offers them a sense of individuality that other forms of warfare deny them. The Second World War airman-writer Richard Hillary was typical of the breed. For the Australian-born Spitfire fighter, the war presented an opportunity to leave his distinctive mark on life. Even if it was in death. In an age of mechanised mass slaughter, his ambition was to fight 'with a maximum of individuality and a minimum of discipline'. In his classic account of aerial combat, *The Last Enemy*, Hillary wrote:

In a fighter plane, I believe, we have found a way to return to war as it ought to be, war which is individual combat between two people, in which one either kills or is killed. It's exciting, it's individual and it's disinterested. I shan't be sitting behind a long-range gun working out how to kill people 60 miles away. I shan't get maimed: either I shall get killed or I shall get a few pleasant putty medals and enjoy being stared at in a nightclub.

In that single passage Hillary summarises the mentality of warrior airmen better than the millions of other words written on the subject since men took to the skies. Not for airmen the rank conformity of army barrack life or cramped conditions of a life on the ocean waves. (Indeed to many soldiers and sailors, drudgery and conformity become such a fact of life that they often feel lost without it.) For airmen, however, to be suddenly caged and robbed of most freedom of movement is a particularly onerous burden to bear. Airmen are further distinguished from their land- and sea-bound comrades in arms in that almost all of them are very valuable individuals indeed, usually the product of much expensive training in the art of flying and navigating, or any of the other highly skilled abilities flying requires.

In the Battle of Britain planes were not a problem. Britain had the industrial capacity to produce more than she needed. The big problem was the supply of pilots. Pilots are

so valuable that their superiors will go to great lengths to get them back and, indeed, the British government created MI9, the clandestine escape and evasion organisation, in December 1939 with that purpose in mind.

Agents of MI9 were parachuted into occupied Europe to link up with the local resistance. Their task (initially) was to spirit downed airmen back to England before the Germans could get their hands on them. But fortunately few fighting men as a group can be more suited to escape than airmen. The sort of sharp mind it requires to understand the complexities of, for instance, astro-navigation is hardly going to be daunted by the prospect of building a simple tunnel. The sort of mentality that is happy fighting alone in the sky without the immediate support of comrades is not going to be oppressed by the long hours of solitude that are often the escaper's lot. Airmen are a clever and aggressive breed, who value their personal freedom above all else.

If airmen are highly individualistic creatures, they were at first treated in a highly individualistic fashion in the nascent conflict between Germany and Britain that had begun in September 1939. Two of the first RAF officers to be shot down over Germany in the Second World War were taken to meet air Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring himself. Squadron Leader Phil Murray and Pilot Officer Alfred 'Tommy' Thompson were on a leaflet-dropping raid over Berlin in a twin-engine Armstrong Whitley bomber of 102 Squadron when it crashed after its engines failed on 8 September 1939. (Thompson, a Canadian, was one of the first foreign fighters in the RAF, the son of an Ontario Member of Parliament. He went to England and joined the RAF in 1936, craving adventure and excitement.) One evening Thompson and Murray had been indulging in the usual light-hearted banter of aircrew on the tarmac of their base in Drifffield, Yorkshire. The next morning they woke up in the care of a few German guards who didn't quite know what to do with them. The two men were duly astonished to

be marched before the jovial figure of the air Reichsmarschall sitting, incongruously, behind a large desk on a raised platform in a forest clearing. The chief of the German Air Force was proudly displaying his medals on his barrel of a chest. The British officers saluted their superior officer, and Göring returned the compliment before politely engaging the men in small talk for 30 minutes or so. Göring was surprised to learn that Thompson was a Canadian, as Canada had yet to enter the war. It would not be the first time that the Germans would be taken aback by the multi-national coalition of countries and even races that seemed to be prepared to come to the support of the supposedly hated imperialist power of Great Britain. Indeed, if there was one thing that the Allied airmen of the Second World War shared more than a love of adventure it was their bewilderingly diverse ethnocentricity in an age long before the phrase 'multi-cultural' had been invented.

Göring made some high-minded references to chivalry displayed by Britain's Royal Flying Corps in what was still then called the Great War. He went on to make it clear that as long as Allied airmen were in Luftwaffe hands they could expect to be treated as gentlemen in this, the second major European conflict of the century. His extravagant display of gallantry was by no means unusual in the early stages of the war. In a Reich that was partly founded upon a series of bogus racial theories, British and later American airmen were seen as the sort of superior breed of human beings with whom Hitler would definitely like to stock his Aryan state. But as the war - and particularly the war in the air - was to progress, Allied airmen were not to be regarded quite as benignly when they fell into enemy hands. The Anglo-American aerial bombardment of Germany was to become unprecedented in scale. By the end of 1943 Allied airmen were thought of as Luftgangsters (terror fliers) and murderers of children and women, by many of the unfortunate victims of their bombs. It might have been a

case of the pot calling the kettle black, but it would not be an overstatement to say that by the end of the war many British and American bomber crews were also beginning to have misgivings about their task. It was this dramatic shift in perspective towards Richard Hillary's noble warrior airmen that contributed to one of the most heinous crimes against RAF fliers by the Nazi regime.

After their slightly surreal meeting with Göring, Murray and Thompson were dispatched to Itzehoe, where they met the New Zealander Hugh Edwards, brought down in his Anson over the North Sea. There were also two French airmen in the camp and some 600 Poles. Shortly thereafter the decision was made to keep captured fliers in their own separate prison camps, and the RAF men found themselves on the way to Spangenberg Castle, which was very quickly filling up with prisoners of war. (Among them were Gerry Booth and Larry Slattery, the first non-commissioned RAF prisoners of war, who had actually been shot down before Edwards the day after war was declared. The distinction is important because officers and NCOs would be kept separate from then on. Booth and Slattery met their fate in a bombing raid on Wilhelmshaven, which was more of a futile gesture than a serious military manoeuvre.) Among the new officers to arrive at Spangenberg was a congenial Irishman of the RAF's 57 Squadron of lumbering old Blenheim bombers that were mainly being used for reconnaissance duties. Mike Casey, who was just 21 when he was captured, spoke in a deep, attractive brogue but had been brought up in India, where his father had been a senior figure in the Indian Police. He was educated in England, where he mixed a love of sport with a devotion to religion. Sadly, but not untypically, Casey had been married less than a month when he was shot down by a German fighter over Emden in October 1939. The plane crashed into a field below. Typically, at that early stage of the war, the Blenheim crew did not harbour any ill-will towards their German

adversaries. As the fighter that had shot them down circled above their wrecked Blenheim, the crew gave the German pilot a friendly wave.

Shortly after Casey arrived he witnessed the arrival in mid-October of a familiar face. Wing Commander Harry Day had been in 57 Squadron with Casey. At 41 years of age, Day was one of the oldest RAF fliers. He would spend much of his war in German captivity and be pivotal to the escape activities of the Allied prisoners. A tall, balding and congenial character, he was known universally to his men as 'Wings' Day (not because of his 'wings', but after the RAF's anniversary day). He was old enough to be thought of by the younger men as an 'Uncle'.

Harry Melville Arbuthnot Day was born and brought up in Borneo, but educated in England. He joined the Royal Marines in the First World War and was decorated for gallantry after he rescued two crew members from below decks on a battleship, HMS *Britannia*, that had been torpedoed by a German submarine. Following the war, he continued to serve in the Marines, but after conceiving a love for flying, joined the newly formed RAF in which he became an ace fighter pilot and a noted stunt flier (leading the aerobatic flight at the Hendon Air Display in 1932). By the time hostilities broke out the second time around, Day was already in his 40s, an elderly man to the youthful fliers of the Air Force. He was sent to France commanding 57 Squadron. When he was shot down in October 1939 (as fate would have it, on Friday the 13th), Wings was flying one of the ancient old Blenheims on a reconnaissance flight in broad daylight over south-west Germany. He was a sitting duck flying in clear blue sky when three Messerschmitt 109 fighters set upon him. After checking that his crew had safely baled out, Wings followed suit, narrowly avoiding being burnt to death as he threw himself out of the escape hatch.

From the very start of his arrival on enemy soil Wings was treated with great courtesy. He landed in open countryside. As he was unclipping his parachute harness in a field, a local man arrived on the scene. 'Englander,' said Wings. The man grinned, held out his arm and shook his hand. Later, local villagers helped him clean up and treated his burns. Wings was billeted with a young German Army officer at his home nearby. At that stage of the war the Germans had not thought through their policy of dealing with prisoners of war and Wings was moved from one makeshift jail to another, rarely guarded properly, before he arrived at Spangenberg, where he immediately took on the role of Senior British Officer (SBO), a function he was to occupy in various camps for much of his Second World War career.

Day was a naturally courteous and chivalrous man. He took the attitude from an early date that the Germans should be treated exactly as the British officers would expect to be treated. He always insisted on a sharp turn-out for roll-call (or Appell as the Germans called it) and he snapped to salute a senior Luftwaffe officer just as sharply as he would have done an RAF one. However, there was no doubt in which direction his steely nerves were directed. On 11 November 1939 the British and French prisoners held a small ceremony to commemorate the end of the First World War. Wings made a moving declaration to the French officers. 'Nineteen-eighteen may seem a long way off to some of you. At the beginning of that year it looked as though we had lost the war. It may seem to some of you now that you have already lost this one. But we beat the Germans in 1918 and what you have already done will help to beat them again. For you the war is not over. *Vive la France* - and England.' Wings's sentiments were gratefully acknowledged by the French, but it was not long before the two nationalities were separated by the Germans.

As the Germans evolved their prisoner-of-war strategy, the Allied prisoners were not to suffer the deprivations of

Spangenberg for much longer. In the first two weeks of that December the Germans dispatched five Royal Air Force and French Air Force prisoners to a camp just beyond the outer suburbs of Frankfurt am Main. Wings Day was among them, as was Mike Casey. Dulag Luft, as it became known, was situated at the foot of the Taunus Mountains. It was the place that from then onwards most shot-down Allied officers would find themselves in before being dispatched to permanent camps across Germany. Dulag Luft was an abbreviation for Durchgangslager der Luftwaffe (transit camp of the Air Force). A former experimental agricultural centre on the outskirts of the small town of Oberursel, it consisted of a ramshackle collection of brick buildings lightly guarded by barbed-wire fencing. From December 1939 onwards, Dulag Luft would become the first point of call of most Allied airmen caught in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Wings Day became the SBO at Dulag Luft once more. He rapidly formulated policies for dealing with the new situation that the captives and their captors found themselves in. It was then that he confirmed his policy to observe the correct military courtesies towards the Germans, as the Geneva Convention required. It was Wings's belief that should he ever have to demand the rights of the much-abused international treaty be observed towards his officers, then he would be on much firmer ground if he had observed them himself. Another decision he took breached British military regulations, which stated categorically that parole was not to be granted under any circumstances. Day decided that the cramped conditions of Dulag Luft did justify giving parole in certain circumstances. His men would be driven mad unless they were allowed to leave their quarters occasionally.

Day could be excused his flagrant breach of orders. When the RAF men arrived at Dulag Luft in late 1939 and early 1940 the war didn't seem quite so real. There was an air of a charade about the whole thing. The war at that stage was,

after all, called the Phoney War. However, as the weeks turned into months the reality of war struck home. At first the officers were housed in the permanent brick buildings of what had once been the experimental farm. The living conditions were congenial. The prisoners lived in small rooms off a central corridor and were locked in at night but free to roam the buildings during the day. However, by the spring of 1940 a compound of timber barrack blocks had been constructed, and the men settled down into surroundings that would become familiar to all air force prisoner-of-war camps in Germany in the Second World War, as the conflict would become known. The compound of three barracks (East, West and Central) provided dormitories, cooking and cleaning facilities, and was surrounded by barbed-wire fencing and guardtowers. Even then, however, the regime was a comparatively lax one. There was still a faint hope that the Phoney War would not develop into a real one, and the bulk of what the RAF dropped over Germany was leaflets exhorting the population to rise up and throw Hitler out of office. All that changed with the Nazi onslaught on the Low Countries and the fall of France in the summer of 1940. In June of that year, with Britain standing alone and stubbornly defiant, the French airmen were separated from their British allies and deposited in their own camp. In July, Dulag Luft became an interrogation centre to which all British and most American airmen were sent immediately after they arrived in Germany.

Despite the seriousness of hostilities, however, Dulag Luft in the early years continued to be a home-from-home for most of its unfortunate inmates. They soon became familiar with the inedible German rations of (usually) ersatz coffee made from acorns and dry black bread of questionable provenance for breakfast, Sauerkraut soup and a portion of mouldy potatoes for lunch, followed by some sausage or a peculiar cheese made from fish by-products. It was the

Germans' standard diet for a non-working civilian, but at 800 calories per day it offered far less than the optimum 1,200 calories recommended for a normal healthy adult. But supplies of Red Cross parcels were plentiful and the Luftwaffe made sure their prisoners were well fed. In fact there were so many Red Cross parcels that the Germans gave banquets of four or five courses every two weeks just to keep the surplus down. There was plenty of wine and spirits, and culinary delicacies too, looted from occupied France. The Germans were unstinting in their generosity in dispensing these supplies among the prisoners for birthdays or farewell celebrations. And instead of ten to twelve officers per room, which became the norm in later camps, the rooms at Dulag Luft housed as little as two or four men. Walks out on parole were frequent for visits to church or recreational outings. It would have seemed remarkable to prisoners of a later stage of the war, but for the first two winters some officers enjoyed skiing holidays with their German counterparts. In the summer it was not unusual for the Kommandant to give permission for berry-picking excursions into the woods.

It was not just thanks to the Germans' benevolent spirits that these comfortable conditions prevailed in the early years at Dulag Luft. The Germans hoped that they could break the prisoners' will to fight. And they believed a congenial atmosphere was more conducive to their charges letting slip confidential information that would be useful to the Nazi war effort. It emerged later that the barracks were wired with secret microphones. Unfortunately for the Germans, however, it turned out the recordings they obtained proved to be almost unintelligible. It is unlikely that the German eavesdroppers obtained any useful information from this method. And it would soon become apparent to the Germans that, despite their best efforts to do so, the imprisoned airmen's combative mood was not sapped. Some prisoners, it is true, unashamedly took up the

offer to sit out the war quietly. But the majority devoted every waking moment to continuing the war from behind the wire.

This attitude was by no means disapproved of by the German Kommandant of Dulag Luft. Major Theo Rumpel was an aristocratic officer who had flown in Göring's squadron in the First World War. An engaging, courteous man, Rumpel was not by any stretch of the imagination a Nazi and didn't have the slightest sympathies for Hitler or his henchmen. But he was regarded as the best intelligence officer the Luftwaffe had, and he spoke almost perfect English. Consequently he had been persuaded to take on his present role. Rumpel was keen, as the air Reichsmarschall was, to continue the spirit of chivalry that he supposed bonded his men with those of the Allied air forces. He sometimes entertained officers to dinner at his own quarters and was always solicitous of their needs, sometimes sending them packets of fine cigarettes for special anniversaries. The British officers, in turn, returned the compliment, invariably writing Rumpel letters of gratitude for small favours he had bestowed on them.

It was soon clear that Dulag Luft was intended to be not an ordinary prisoner-of-war camp but a transit post. Newly captured airmen would be sent there initially for interrogation before being dispatched to one of several new camps the German armed forces were building in different parts of Germany and occupied Europe. To ease the transition, Rumpel appointed a Permanent Staff of some 25 British officers at Dulag Luft. Its function would be to liaise between the new RAF arrivals and the German officers. New prisoners were first interviewed by the Germans in the old brick agricultural buildings, which were rapidly being transformed into an interrogation facility. Under the Geneva Convention prisoners of war were required only to give their name, rank and serial number. The German interviewers tried to trick more information out of their charges. But in

these early days they had not developed the sophistry or duplicity in such techniques that were to be a hallmark of their efforts at Dulag Luft later. Afterwards the Allied prisoners were handed over to the Permanent Staff, which provided them with a Red Cross parcel and any clothing replacements they needed before giving them a welcoming meal. It was all very civilised. The permanent RAF staff were mostly selected from the older officers, who were presumed to have a sense of responsibility and more maturity than their hot-headed youthful comrades. Rumpel also demonstrated a marked preference for officers with blue blood in their family.

To Major Rumpel, Wings Day was the perfect embodiment of the English officer. And to his great delight the British SBO cultivated friendly relations with most of the German officers, not least the Kommandant. When Day asked Rumpel if he could have a cat for a companion, his German counterpart responded warmly by providing the British officer with a kitten. (Day promptly named it Ersatz as it was a substitute, like so much of what else the Germans provided their prisoners with.) It was not unusual for the senior German officers to take Wings out to dinner, and he was invited around to Rumpel's private quarters for dinner or drinks on many occasions. It was a comfortable relationship that was to be the source of some irritation to many other British officers who passed through Dulag Luft. Day and other members of the Permanent Staff were later openly accused of collaborating with the Germans or, at the very least, being a bit too friendly with them. What their accusers didn't realise was that the men were using their privileged position within the camp to plan and prepare what would become the first great escape from German captivity. Their apparently harmless excursions out on parole in fact provided them with valuable intelligence about the surrounding district. On one trip to a restaurant,