

Wartime West Sussex 1939 - 1945

The Great Escape case study

Summary of Leslie Speller's life:



Leslie was born on 15th Dec 1914 in Littlehampton, West Sussex. He went to Worthing High School for Boys. After leaving School he worked as a solicitors clerk in Arundel.

Leslie knew of Eileen Stone through her family who lived in Littlehampton, and he had seen her around the town. In February 1940 Eileen received a court summons for riding her bike without lights. It was Leslie's job, as clerk of the courts in Arundel, to send the summons to Eileen. He recognized her name and included a note with the summons, asking her to go to the cinema with him. Their

first date was on 15th March 1940. They went out again together many times until Leslie joined the RAF in May 1940.

Between June 1940 and June 1941 Leslie was sent away for RAF training. After training he was posted to the Middle East. He was shot down on 3rd May 1942 over Libya. He was wounded (burns to his hands and shrapnel in his back) and taken prisoner of war. Initially he was taken to a hospital run by Italian nuns.

In July 1942 German guards escorted Leslie to Stalag Luft III near Sagan, on the border between Germany and Poland. During his time in the camp Leslie went down the tunnel (Harry) to dig a couple of times, but he suffered from claustrophobia and so had to be allocated other escape tasks. He was involved with writing coded letters. He wrote these to Eileen using the code. They were intercepted by MI5, who decoded the information. He entered a draw to escape and was number 119. The tunnel (Harry) was discovered by the guards before his turn came. 76 Officers escaped. 73 were re-captured. The Gestapo shot 50 of the escapees.

Leslie remained in Stalag Luft III until February 8th 1945, when the German guards marched the remaining POWs (Most had already left on the forced march) back from the approaching U.S. forces. They walked across country to Stalag VIIa at Moosburg.

Leslie and his fellow POWs were liberated by U.S. troops on 29th April 1945 and he flew home to England on 9th May 1945.



Leslie and Eileen were married on 20th June 1945. Eileen made the dress herself from one of Leslie's parachutes.

Leslie and Eileen wrote to each other for over four years, despite only having known each other for a few months before Leslie went away. Over eighty of their letters survive. Leslie and Eileen were happily married for 52

years.