

Wartime West Sussex 1939 - 1945

The Great Escape case study

Source K - Inside the barracks at Stalag Luft III from [historyonthenet.com](http://www.historyonthenet.com)

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World War Two - The Great Escape



The Great Escape, as it came to be known, was a mass escape attempt from the prisoner of war camp Stalag Luft III located near the Polish town of Zagan.

The purpose-built camp was opened in April 1942 and the Germans considered it to be practically escape-proof. Prisoners were fairly well treated and the [Geneva Convention](#) of 1929 regarding treatment of Prisoners of War was followed.

Housing and recreational facilities were considered to be better than those at many other German prisoner of war camps. The picture (right) shows the inside of one of the barracks at Stalag Luft III.



The camp housed mainly British and American airmen whose planes had crashed on [Axis](#) territory. The Germans generally captured prisoners with the words 'For you the war is over.' However, it was the sworn duty of all captured military personnel to continue to fight the enemy by surviving, communicating information and escaping. Many of the prisoners at Sagan were re-captured escapees. The Germans believed that security at the new camp was so tight that it would be impossible for anyone to escape.

Escape Committee

It was realised early on that for any escape attempt to succeed it had to be well planned and organised. The Prisoners at Sagan therefore established an escape committee. Chief escape officer was Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, a former escapee who had been recaptured several times. He was known as 'Big X'.

The committee decided to build three tunnels and the plan was to effect the escape of at least 200 prisoners. The tunnels were given the code names 'Tom', 'Dick' and 'Harry'. There were two main problems to be considered - How to get rid of the dirt that was dug away and how to prevent the tunnels from collapsing.

In order to prevent the tunnels from collapsing they had to be shored up with wood. The prisoners used bed boards for this task and as the tunnels grew longer and more wood was needed many prisoners found themselves sleeping uncomfortably on beds with little support. Some even converted their beds into hammocks. The picture (right) shows how the bed boards were used.



Getting rid of the dirt from the tunnels was problematic because the earth removed was a different colour to the earth around the camp. One method used was to construct long bags which could be filled with earth then