

PRISON ESCAPE-TUNNEL

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lamps and airline would be smothered, and No. 2, working fast, would have to find his pal's feet in inky blackness, and haul him back out of danger.

Getting rid of the sand was one of our biggest difficulties, especially after it began to snow. Some of it we put down Dick (the unfinished tunnel), and we put a lot under the camp theatre.

Up Above

Meantime, up above, hundreds of our own sentries—we called them stooges—were safeguarding our secret activities. All the snooping German ferrets were tailed. They could not move a foot without their actions being flashed to our various control points.

Tunnelling work was eventually helped when one rather light-fingered officer "picked up" about 600 feet of electric cable, and we installed an electric lighting system in Harry. Three German workmen were shot by their own people for their carelessness in losing that wire.

Over 200 officers were picked by secret ballot to attempt the escape. The date was not fixed in advance, and it was only

on the morning of March 24 that it was decided to break the tunnel that night.

Into the Open

The officers concerned assembled in Harry's hut. They had about 400 forged papers, civvy clothes, maps, compasses, iron rations made from our own recipes—and not bad either—plus other odd gadgets. A highly unfriendly country under a foot of snow was at the other end of the tunnel.

About 10 p.m. two experienced tunnellers dug out the last few inches into the open. They had a nasty shock. Calculations were a few feet short, and instead of being just inside a wood, they were on the edge, in the open, and a bare 15 yards from a German sentry-box and searchlight.

After that, the tension was rather terrific, as the chaps, quivering with excitement, muffled in heavy clothes with bulging pockets and blankets strapped round them, clambered on the trolleys one at a time, and went shooting off towards freedom.

There were inevitable complications. Several people were stuck in the tunnel because of all their bulging paraphernalia. This sort of thing caused a couple

of nasty falls of sand which blocked up the tunnel, nearly buried the lads, and had to be cleared under pretty nerve-racking conditions.

In the middle of it all our former colleagues in the R.A.F. arrived over Berlin on business. The sirens went; the hut shook with the bombs, and out went the electric lights in the tunnel. That caused a lovely shambles, and completely held up operations while the lamps, held ready for an emergency, were brought out and passed down the shaft and up to the two half-way houses in the tunnel.

Getting the chaps out with all these complications was a slower business than intended. Outside the tunnel mouth, and just inside the fringe of the wood, we had a stooge controlling the evacuation by rope signals.

About 4.55 a.m. it was starting to get light, and the controllers decided to pack up. The last man was just shooting off down the tunnel when a German patrolling sentry walked along the edge of the wood, stepped a foot from the tunnel mouth—almost fell down the thing—didn't see it—practically trod on one quaking escapee lying doggo in the snow just out of the hole—didn't see him either—but *did* see another lad crawling about 30 yards away.

The guard let out a howl, fired a shot that luckily missed, and the game was up. Within half-an-hour there was chaos in the camp; hordes of Germans with tommy guns, ferrets with drawn revolvers, and the *Kommandant* (a lovely sight, his face a sort of mottled puce) threatening to shoot two British officers himself on any provocation. He narrowly missed being shot later by his own people. He was court-martialled and given a pretty stiff sentence.

Of the 80 who went out through the tunnel, four were caught immediately. One by one, most of the others were rounded up, frost-bitten and completely exhausted. Three out of the 80 got back to England—some are still missing.

About a fortnight after the break, our new *Kommandant* told us that 50 had been shot—attempting, he said, to evade capture. I suppose the Germans thought the shooting would stop our escaping attempts, though if they did think that, I can only say they would have got a pretty hefty shock if they had seen the next tunnel we built.

Honestly, it was a beauty, but we were evacuated from the camp before we could finish it. And now I hope we are through with tunnels for good. I would much rather take a bus.

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