

# Book Reviews

## The Last Escape

By John Nichol and Tony Rennell

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Reviewed by Seb Cox

The popular image of British Prisoners of War during the Second World War is still largely moulded by the portrayals on television and in Hollywood films.

Amongst the latter *The Great Escape* is by far the best known. It was loosely based on the events surrounding the mass breakout of British Commonwealth Air Force prisoners from Stalag Luft III at Sagan. Although the dreadful consequences of the breakout, whereby 50 of the escapees were murdered by the Gestapo, are related in the film they do not form the major part of the action.

The essence of the film, and that of previous feature films in the genre such as *The Wooden Horse*, is to concentrate on the PoW's attempts at escape.

At the time of writing a new ITV series has just started, again related to life in a PoW camp, and early indications are that yet again much of the action centres around escape-related activity and its dangers; with resourceful prisoners fooling witless or gullible authorities.

The dangers inherent in escaping, so dreadfully apparent in the case of Stalag Luft III, are usually

brought out in such programmes, but there is a tendency to portray camp life as in essence being a game played out between prisoners and guards, albeit dangerous in part, but essentially run on well understood lines, which in the case of Sagan were crossed, though not so much by the German military, as by the Gestapo.

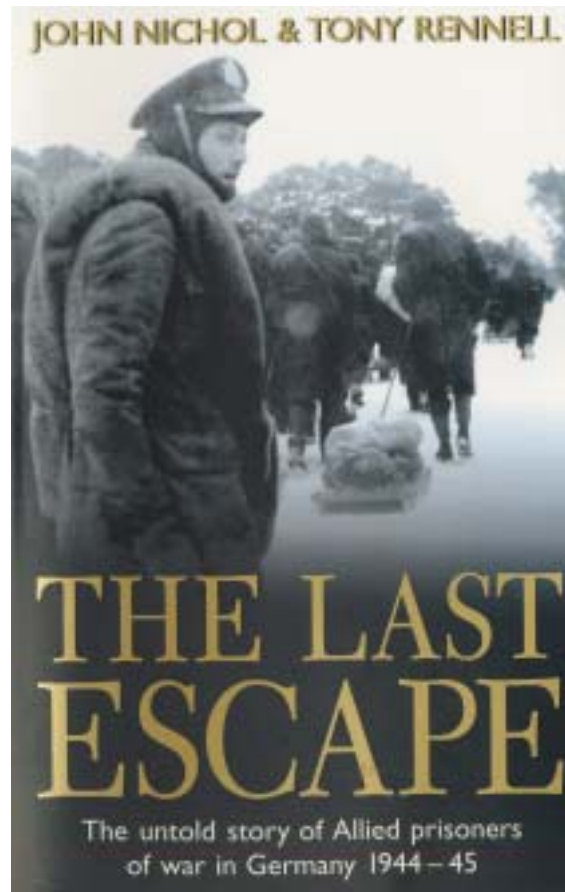
In reality, however, much of a prisoner's focus was not on escape at all, but on survival, with food highest on the list of priorities. Once the Allied armies had landed in Normandy the prisoners were instructed to abandon all attempts at escape in order to prevent further tragedies.

As Nazi Germany began to disintegrate under the pressure of Allied and Soviet armies and relentless strategic bombing, life for the prisoners, never remotely as cheerful as it appears on the screen, became increasingly fraught.

The twin threats to the prisoner were perceived to be German reprisal action, particularly by the SS or Gestapo rather than the Wehrmacht, and starvation and disease.

By early 1945 the Germans were faced with the problem of moving Allied prisoners away from the

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advancing Soviet armies. By the spring they faced the same problem in the West. The result was the evacuation of camps, firstly those in Poland and eastern Germany, and later those in the path of the Western Allies. The early evacuations were sometimes done by train, but as the Third Reich's transport system fell apart as a result of bombing the Germans resorted to forced marches.

Allied prisoners were herded across Germany in an increasingly disorganised and *ad hoc* fashion,

sleeping in barns, barracks, outhouses or the open fields, and moved from camp to camp. Stalag Luft III was evacuated in the middle of the night as the Soviet armies rapid rate of advance took the Germans by surprise.

In *The Last Escape* John Nichol, himself famously a guest of Saddam Hussein's 'goons' in the first Gulf War, and his co-author Tony Rennell set out to tell the story of these events. They cover in great detail the story both of those who went on these

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marches, and those who were left in the camps, the latter frequently because they were already physically incapable of moving.

They describe the harrowing conditions the men experienced in the camps and on the march. The constant hunger and the often desperate search for food, and the agonising plight of the sick and exhausted, made worse by the occasional brutality of some (though not all) of their captors. The added danger of misdirected air attack added to their worries.

Some columns of prisoners seem to have been known to Allied pilots, who buzzed the columns, without attacking, but the authors also describe the awful fate of some prisoners so tragically killed by mistake in the final days of the war when the marching columns were misidentified and attacked. Some temporary camps were also mistakenly strafed.

Some prisoners spent as much as three months on the road as the Germans desperately sought to keep them ahead of the advancing Soviet columns. They suffered all manner of privations, with frost-bite and dysentery as well as semi-starvation amongst their woes.

If the prisoners were wary of 'blue on blue' attacks, they were equally concerned at the reactions of their jailors. Whilst many German guards, particularly those who had been in the camps for a long time, became increasingly anxious to demonstrate to the prisoners their own humanity, the prisoners were gripped by fear of reprisal. In the event that a massacre began the prisoners in Sagan planned to attack the guards with their bare hands to try to seize weapons to fight back.

Although this nightmare scenario never came to pass, in at least one camp armed SS troops actually

appeared at the gate in the last chaotic days of the war, intent on a massacre. They were argued out of it by the elderly 'volksturm' guards; an action requiring no little courage on the latter's part. The prisoners had been determined to rush the gates had the massacre started, in the hope that some at least would have escaped.

As the situation became increasingly chaotic many prisoners escaped from columns, and in the final days of the war even took over the camps from their co-operative guards before Allied troops arrived.

In *The Last Escape* the story is well told, using a mixture of personal recollection and official documents. There are also some excellent photographs, including some which illustrate the straits to which many prisoners, especially those in certain camps, notably Fallingbostal, were reduced.

If one were to look at such photos without benefit of the caption one would assume that the prisoners were victims either from a concentration camp, or from the horrors of a Japanese camp. Fallingbostal was particularly badly affected because so many of the displaced PoWs, perhaps 100,000 or so of all nationalities, ended up there. Some prisoners lost a third or more of their body-weight and many weighed less than a hundred pounds on their release.

The book contains a discussion concerning the number of prisoners who died on the marches. This remains a subject of debate even amongst the PoWs, with one quoted as saying that he did not consider the term 'death march' appropriate and preferred the term 'misery walk'.

Perhaps in the context of the infamous death marches which took place in the Far East this is a realistic assessment. The authors of this study do

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try to come to a considered figure for the number of PoWs who died on the marches. They conclude that it was probably between 2,500 and 3,500, but admit that the evidence is sketchy and that it can only be a best guess.

They state that the Ministry of Defence cannot give them an accurate figure, and that the RAF, whilst it can give figures for killed, wounded, missing and prisoners, has no figure for deaths in captivity. Overall, this may be true, but the figures for Bomber Command, which represented a significant proportion of RAF PoWs, are known, and they suggest that those who think the higher estimates inaccurate may well be right.

According to the Official Historians, 9784 men from Bomber Command became PoWs, and of these 138 died in captivity. This represents a death rate from all causes of 1.3 per cent. As a high proportion of the fifty murdered Sagan prisoners (23 out of 50) were Bomber Command this is probably higher than the general average for British Commonwealth PoWs.

Applied to the most reliable figure for the number of British Commonwealth PoWs, this gives a figure of approximately 2200 deaths in captivity. As the author's quote the New Zealand official Historian as attributing a thousand Commonwealth PoW deaths to allied bombing attacks, this potentially brings the figure for Commonwealth deaths on the marches down to a thousand or so. It seems unlikely that American deaths exceeded those of the Commonwealth.

Two undoubted heroes emerge from the story, and neither was commissioned. One was Regimental Sergeant Major John Lord of the Parachute Regiment, captured at Arnhem, and incarcerated at Fallingbommel.

But even Lord's exceptional strength of character is eclipsed by that of an 'ordinary' RAF Sergeant, Jimmie 'Dixie' Deans, who by sheer force of personality and exceptional leadership skills undoubtedly prevented a far worse tragedy both on the marches and eventually at Fallingbommel.

Sadly, as the authors relate, the RAF, with almost purblind stupidity, refused to commission Deans after the war, and the only recognition he received for his exceptional leadership was an MBE.

This is a well researched and thoughtful study which should help to correct the over romanticised view of PoW life portrayed on film and television.

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