

LAST SURVIVOR TELLS REAL STORY OF THE GREAT ESCAPE



By **MATT BENDORIS**
CHIEF FEATURE WRITER

THE frail pensioner takes an age to shuffle from his electric wheelchair to the bench in the gardens of his nursing home.

At 96 years old Jack Harrison's body may be deteriorating, but his mind isn't.

The former RAF pilot is the last man standing from one of the most famous incidents of World War II - The Great Escape.

That's when inmates tunnelled their way out of Stalag Luft III prisoner of war camp in 1944 right under the noses of their Nazi guards.

Their actions were later immortalised in the screen classic The Great Escape starring Steve McQueen, James Garner and Richard Attenborough.

And since Jack's comrade Alex Lees - who helped scatter dirt dug from the tunnels in the camp's gardens - passed away earlier this year, Harrison is now the only survivor of the most audacious prison break in history.

It may have happened nearly 70 years ago, but Jack only has to shut his eyes to recall being back at the controls of his Lockheed Ventura on his first bombing raid.

He says: "I'd been working as a Latin and Classical teacher at Dornoch Academy in Sutherland when I was called up to the RAF."

"My first - and last - operation was in 1942 as part of a four-man crew bombing German supply ships at the Dutch port of Den Helder."

"I ended up 12 miles off target that day as my compass wasn't calibrated properly."

"It was supposed to be a surprise attack, but by this time they'd got wind of us."

"The flak and tracer bullets started buffeting the plane."

"The top machine gun turret got hit and my gunner Bill Atkinson was cut by the Perspex so we swapped places with the bellygun gunner to staunch his wounds."

Worry

"I was flying just six feet above the beach at this point - that's fine when you're over land but it's a different story over water."

"I started to weave to avoid the flak and did a slight turn and put my wing in the water."

"The sea came rushing over the top of the cockpit and we were going down, which was a worry for me as I can't swim."

"Suddenly we stopped sinking. We were resting on a mussel bank."

"Three of us got out, but we couldn't find Bill - I don't know whether he drowned or was killed in the crash."

Jack trails off, the memories of Bill's loss still too painful to bear.

He whispers: "For years I blamed myself for his death."

"It was just bad flying. I'd done very little practice over the sea."

"It's very deceptive and on a flat calm day as it was, it's so very hard to tell what height you are flying at."

"But we were eventually picked up by some fishermen, then a German boat pulled up with half a dozen rifles pointing at us and the officer issued the immortal words, 'For you ze war is over.'"

Jack was transferred to Stalag Luft III at Zagan, 100 miles from Berlin on the Polish border.

The 59-acre open-air prison housed 10,000 PoWs inside its five miles of perimeter fencing - but Jack was included in plans for a daring escape bid.

He became a personal assistant to RAF Squadron leader Roger Bushell - codenamed the Big X - the mastermind behind the escape.

The South African-born pilot was later played by Sir Richard Attenborough in the Hollywood film version, released in 1963.

Bushell organised the dig of



BRAVE... Jack as a pilot and the Stalag Luft III camp

We didn't just break free... we humiliated Hitler and gave the Nazis a bloody nose

three tunnels - Tom, Dick and Harry - from the accommodation huts past the perimeter fence.

Jack said: "My job was as Bushell's runner. We were based in block 104, where our tunnel Harry began."

"Harry was the only one that wasn't discovered by the Nazis, because its entrance was hidden underneath the stove."

"We'd carry the sand away in cardboard boxes and down the prisoners' trouser legs to dissipate it around the camp."

"Unfortunately, earth at 30ft down is a different colour from the stuff on the surface, so they just had to shuffle it around to mix it in."

Every minute detail of the escape was planned in military fashion and they even had forged

papers for the PoWs' new identities on the outside.

Jack smiles: "I was to be a Hungarian electrician so I became Aleksander Regenyi, who was employed by a German firm."

Harry was completed on the evening of March 24, 1944, when 200 officers assembled to escape.

Pilot Officer Jack recalls: "The prisoners from Block 109 were ordered to report to Block 104."

"It got pretty crowded, but their job was to occupy our beds to fool the Germans."

Only 76 made it to freedom before the escape was rumbled.

Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was so humiliated by the break-out he personally ordered the executions of 50 of the Allies.

Jack sighs: "I guess it was a blessing in disguise I never made

it through as most were shot, including Roger Bushell."

"But the main purpose wasn't just to escape. It was to outfox the Germans."

"It was a huge moral victory. It humiliated Hitler and gave the Nazis a bloody nose."

Jack, though, was still haunted by his gunner Bill's death.

Fire

He said: "I couldn't sleep properly for years. The guilt was eating away at me."

A squadron leader, who was also a prisoner, interviewed me and reckoned as we'd been under fire, one of the controls may have been damaged in the attack. I was absolved of any pilot error."

"I don't know about that. I

think they were just trying to make me feel better."

But after 67 years being tortured by Bill's death, Jack may have finally found an answer from another famous WWII incident - the Dam Busters.

That was when the 617 Squadron dropped special bouncing bombs to destroy German dams in the Ruhr valley in 1943.

Jack said: "I'm reading a book and have discovered they had the same problem flying over water."

"They solved it by shining two lights in a V down onto the surface. That way they could tell they were at the right height."

"It won't bring Bill back, but it's a possible explanation - and it's finally given me some peace of mind after all these years."

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NEPHEW'S ON THE RUN



AFTER the war Jack returned to a full and happy life in his home city of Glasgow.

He married twice, had two children, resumed his teaching career and even became a marathon runner - in his SEVENTIES.

He said: "I did my first, the Glasgow marathon, when I was 73 and then three more."

Jack is now backing his great nephew Craig Manson, left, from Denny, Stirlingshire, as the 29-year-old runs in next month's Great Scottish Run to raise funds for Erskine Home - the charity for ex-servicemen and women.

To sponsor Craig visit www.justgiving.com/craig-manson

DARING PLAN THAT INSPIRED HIT FILM

By **MARC DEANIE**

THE Great Escape was a mass attempt by Allied prisoners of war to break out of the imposing Stalag Luft III camp in Poland.

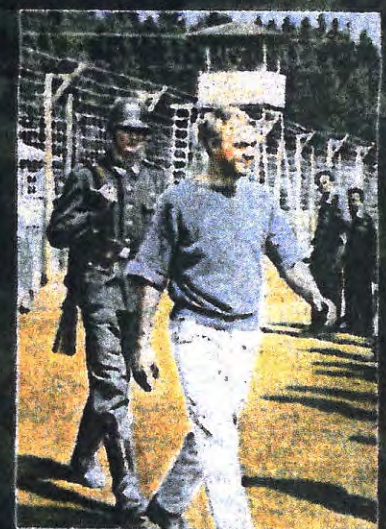
The bleak fortress - which is translated as 'permanent camp for airmen' - had been opened in April 1942 and was considered by the Germans to be virtually escape proof.

But on March 24, 1944, 200 men led by squadron leader Roger Bushell attempted to flee through one of the tunnels they had dug, that was nicknamed Harry.

At 4.45am the next morning it was discovered by guards - but not before 76 daring PoWs had vanished into the Polish countryside under cover of darkness.

However, all but three were recaptured and 50 were executed under Hitler's instructions while those left alive were sent to other camps.

Incredibly, the German leader ordered thousands of police, Nazi youths and soldiers to forget about war



STAR... Steve McQueen

duties and focus on finding the final runaways. But the trio made it to freedom and the story inspired the 1950 novel The Great Escape, written by Australian Paul Brickhill.

The valiant tale caught the public's imagination, though, when it was turned into a film starring Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson and Richard Attenborough.

Its release in 1963 earned a whopping \$5.5million - and a place in movie history for the scene where McQueen tried in vain to escape into Switzerland on a stolen motorcycle.

Further interest saw The Great Escape II: The Untold Story air as a TV series in 1988, starring Superman star Christopher Reeve.

The film's theme tune, written by American Elmer Bernstein, has also become a popular chant among England fans and has featured on The Simpsons, Reservoir Dogs and Charlie's Angels.

And over half a century later The Great Escape has inspired albums by Blur and The Rifles, a song by We Are Scientists and an Xbox game.