

THE GREAT ESCAPE-WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

We've all seen the film "The Great Escape" which featured the breakout from the Sagan III (Luflag) POW Camp for Allied Airforce officers in Silesia, (Eastern part of Pre-1945 Germany), but how many of us were told about what the German authorities were doing apprehending the escapees on Hitler's special orders? The film simply showed a batch of POW's being shot at the side of a railway line by SS troopers, but it didn't happen like that!

What really happened was explained to a British Military Court, set up in Hamburg, Germany from the 1st July until the 3rd of September 1947. It was presided over by an army Major-General and consisted of three army and three RAF officers. The case was known as "The Stalag Luft III Case-Case No.62". The Court sat to hear the evidence of eighteen accused (mainly) Gestapo operatives from six regions who had between them shot in cold blood more than half of the escaped officers. The Prosecutor addressed the Court with the story as follows:

"During the night of 24/25th March 1944, eighty officers of the Allied Air Forces who were POW in the Stalag Luft III POW Camp. Sagan, Silesia, had escaped through an underground tunnel into the surrounding countryside, dressed in civilian clothes* and with forged documents which they had hoped would get them a passage to freedom.

Of these eighty men, four were quickly recaptured in the vicinity of the camp, and seventy six got away. Only three of these made it to freedom and one was never heard of again.

The remainder were recaptured in various localities. Only fifteen of these were returned to the Sagan Camp; four were sent to the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, Berlin; three were held by the Grenzpolizei/Gestapo/SD at Margaretten on the Swiss border and later sent to a civilian prison, and the remaining fifty were shot by the Gestapo".

Then the Court was told of the "Nitty-gritty" details of how the fifty men were disposed of.

Because of the high number of escapes by Allied POW's (it had been over 4,200 in 1943), authority for the recapture of them had been vested in Obergruppenführer Ernst Kaltenbrunner's SS-RSHA (Reich Security) and its Amt 5, the Criminal Police (KRIPO), headed by Gruppenführer Artur Nebe.

Immediately news the escape had been teleprinted to Berlin by the Breslau KRIPO (in whose region Sagan was located), orders went out to all KRIPO and GESTAPO heads throughout Germany, Austria and the occupied territories. Since the RSHA controlled all police outfits, photographs of all the escaped POW's was printed into police gazettes and widely distributed as a matter of urgency.

Upon being informed, Hitler immediately ordered that as a deterrent more than half of the officers recaptured were to be shot.

A "secret" order went out from Kaltenbrunner (a copy has never been found-but according to one of the defendants), read as follows:

'The frequent mass escapes of officer prisoners constitutes a real danger to the security of the State. I am disappointed by the inefficient security measures in various POW camps. The Führer has ordered that, as a deterrent, fifty of the eighty escaped prisoners will be shot. The recaptured officers will be handed over to AMT 4 (GESTAPO-headed by Müller) for interrogation after which they will be transferred to their original camp and shot on the way. The reason for shooting will be given as "shot while attempting to escape" or "shot while resisting", so that nothing can be proved at a later date. Prominent persons will be exempted. Their names are to be reported to me and my decision is to be awaited whether the same course of action will be taken'.

Thus, the KRIPO was tasked with apprehending the escapees. They were to hand over half of them to the GESTAPO for interrogation and shooting. Those detailed to do the shooting (with ranks up to Obersturmbannführer), were briefed as to their duties by a Gestapo Obersturmführer-Walter Scharwinkel, and pledged to absolute secrecy by handshakes and a reminder of their SS oath to the Führer.

Groups of GESTAPO operatives would then set out in cars under cover of darkness to fetch the POW's from local prisons where they were being held after recapture by the KRIPO.

After a short drive, and always near a crematorium, the cars would stop and the POW's told to get out "to relieve themselves". One GESTAPO operative would stay with the car to make sure that anyone in the vicinity couldn't witness the event, whilst the others shot the POW's in the back, usually between the shoulders, and then by "Coup de Grace" to finish them off. A local doctor would be summoned and made to sign the death certificate.

The POW's bodies were then cremated and the urn containing the ashes was sent to the Luftwaffe Commandant at the Sagan Camp. A report was then sent to GESTAPO HQ which stated 'Orders carried out-prisoner shot while attempting escape'.

Half of the escaped POW's had been recaptured in the Breslau region in which the Sagan Camp was located.

The sixteen GESTAPO/SD/KRIPO officers/NCO's responsible for the deaths of the fifty POW's were sentenced to death and hanged in Hamelin Prison. The two Grenzpolizei got ten years imprisonment and were released after two years! each.

The full report of the proceedings runs to 17 pages, and can be found in "The Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals-The UN War Crimes Commission, Vol.XI. London.HMSO.1949".

*** Under the Geneva Convention-POW's caught in civilian clothing and not in a recognisable uniform, and with forged documents-could be shot as spies This was a case of 'revenge by the victors'!**

Happy reading-Ian D. June 1992.

**Update:January 2009:For a very good account of the event and characters involved, see:
http://www.elsham.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/gt_esc/index.html**