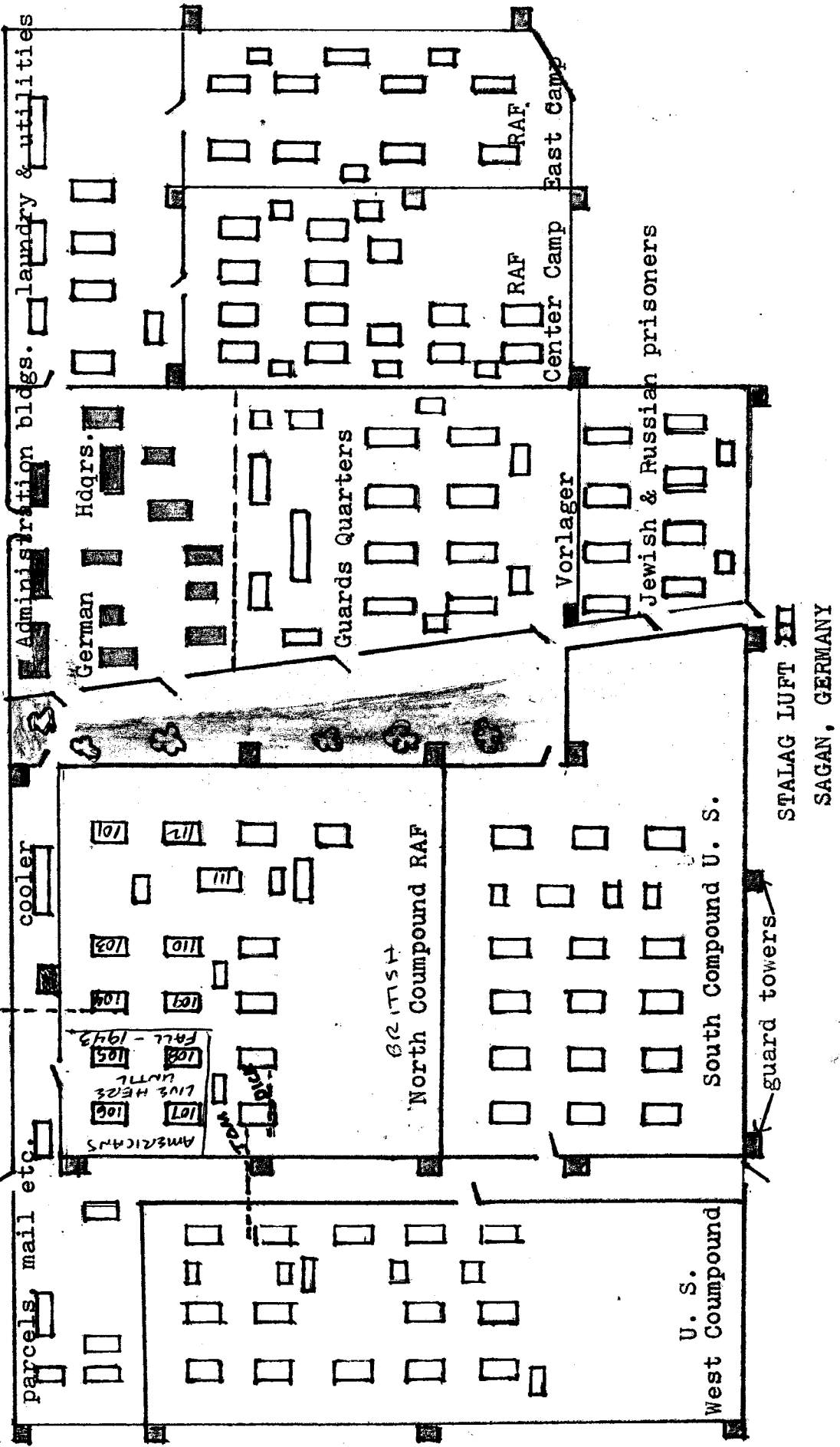


Heerth

HIGH-WAY



EARL HERR, CHET HOWER, BILL ROBERTS
 LIVED IN THE NORTH COMPOUND FOR
 THE FIRST COUPLE MONTHS OF
 IMPRISONMENT, BEFORE THE SOUTH

THE COST OF FREEDOM

STALAG LUFT III
SAGAN, GERMANY
1942---Jan. 29, 1945

One of the many Prisoner-of-War camps, "Kriegsgefangenen Stalag's", that were maintained by the German Airforce, "Luftwaffe", was Stalag Luft III, located about 90 miles southeast of Berlin. Only captured Allied Airforce Officers would be privileged to occupy this camp. There would be about 10,000 Allied Airmen lodged here before their hosts permitted them to move south.

At first the occupants were all British RAF "Royal Air Force", personnel. They were held in what later would become the Center and the East Compounds. As the popularity of dropping bombs on the European country side grew, the Germans were forced to build more accommodations for the increasing numbers of guests. Consequently a North Compound was constructed and the first U.S. airmen shot down and captured, joined their British comrades here.

The North Compound was four hundred yards square, bounded by two parallel eight foot barbed wire fences five feet apart and filled with coiled razor sharp concertina wire. Fifteen foot high sentry towers [goon boxes], mounted with search lights and machine-guns were spaced one hundred yards apart. They were manned by alert and sometimes vindictive guards twenty four hours a day. A warning rail only three foot high and ten yards inside the fence marked a no-mans land. Anyone caught in this area would be shot immediately without warning. The German vorlager [compound], was to the North with a highway running parallel to the fence. This vorlager also extended around on the East side. The West and South sides were the only logical direction to exit a tunnel into the inviting heavy woods. However the South side would soon be cleared to build a compound for U.S. airmen only.

Digging tunnels was a popular sport in all compounds and had proven to be a game with the Krieges and their captors. Although only about ten percent of the in-mates would indulge in such foolishness, it was a healthy way to expend excess energy without causing too much trouble. Up till now, there had been no completely successful tunnel project but there was always one working in all compounds.

When the first RAF personnel were moved into the newly opened North Compound, the Senior Ranking Officer, a Squadron Leader, was determined to lead a successful tunnel enterprise. Having already made two clever and daring, yet hopeless escapes, he was considered to be the most authoritative and determined on this subject. Having a nucleus of experienced tunneliers and escape artists at his disposal, he planned an ingenious approach to this endeavor. He would start three tunnels simultaneously. They would be known by

the code names, Tom, Dick and Harry. Tom and Dick would exit in the woods to the west. Harry was the most ambitious, being three times the length of the others and exiting in the woods across the highway to the north. These tunnels were always referred to by their code names, as we knew that even the walls had very big ears.

A survey was conducted through out the camp and those with special talents, such as pick-pockets, counterfeiters, etc., were in great demand. Those without special talents, but were willing were also assigned certain tasks. Miners, carpenters, electricians and engineers were good prospective tunnel workers. Tailors were very useful in converting Allied uniforms into business suits, German uniforms and foreign workers clothes. Artists were employed in forging fake identification papers and other related documents. German speaking Kriegas were given the difficult task of becoming friendly with a ferret [German Security Guard], and start him into accepting bribes, eventually this would result in forcing him to furnish badly needed items such as a camera, film [for ID pictures], radio and parts and other necessary contraband. This practice was referred to as "taming a goon", rather than the dirty word "blackmail". Others willing to cooperate were used as "penguins" to dispose of the tunnel sand in many ingenious ways. "stooges", were located through-out the compound to watch for ferrets and relay messages to the tunnel look-out if any were seen to be approaching any escape activity. All operations would cease until the all-clear signal was seen. This security system was dependent upon the stooges arranging abort [latrine], windows in a certain code memorized by the stooges and other workers.

In each block [barracks], there were some locations where tunnel entrances could be opened and used without detection. These places had concrete foundations that extended to within two or three feet below the ground surface. The wash room drain, kitchen stove base and the stove base in each room. These room stoves were just a fixture as no fuel was ever furnished.

Secret and well concealed trap doors had to be built first.

Tom's entrance started in the kitchen of block 123 beneath the cook stove where a 2x2x2 foot square of concrete was chipped out of the floor and replaced with a removable slab that was disguised to blend in with the rest of the floor. Tom would be two hundred feet long and exit in the woods on the west side.

Dick's trap door in block 122 was a work of art. In the wash-room was an iron grating through which drain water ran into a concrete well three feet deep. This sump never drained completely so there was always some water left standing in the bottom. One side of the well was chipped out and modified so it could be easily removed and replaced at will. Back in place with the cracks sealed with soap and wax, water in the bottom, grate back in place and even the keenest ferret would not suspect a thing. Dick was to be dug toward Tom and could either be joined with Tom's shaft or continue on to the woods to the west.

The third tunnel, Harry, would be the longest and the most ambitious. It would go north and must go beneath the highway, then exit in the woods three hundred feet away. It was started in room

23 of block 104. A heating stove stood on tiles imbedded in a concrete base about four feet square. The tiles were chipped free and reset in a concrete trap door. The cracks were concealed with a mixture of sand and dirt when replaced.

Now the tunneling was started. The German sound detectors would reach a depth of twenty-five feet, so the entrance shaft would go to thirty feet straight down where a large room was built. This was used for carpenters and operators of the ventilating equipment. Also to fill sacks and boxes of tunnel sand to be disposed of by one hundred to three hundred penguins.

The ventilating system was made by tin smiths who connected Red Cross dried milk and liver pate cans together using paper and margarine to seal the joints. This pipe was connected to a bellows made from scraps of canvas gathered through out the compound. The end of the pipe delivered fresh air to the diggers and was extended as the tunnel progressed. At the other end of the pipe a team of pumpers faithfully pumped the bellows to keep the diggers alive and healthy.

One day a bad cave-in occurred in Dick. The shaft was almost filled with sand, trapping a Canadian mining engineer who had designed all three tunnels. With a lot of frantic digging he was eventually uncovered before smothering.

The sides of the tunnels had to be completely shored with boards formerly used as bed slats to prevent cave-ins. With three tunnels going, this required many many bed slats. Although the majority of the personnel considered tunneling stupid and a waste of time, with a little persuasion from the right people they reluctantly agreed to donate some of their slats to the noble cause. This being a new compound there was a full compliment of bed slats to use. Never the less, there were many saggy bunks and some hammocks in the compound.

The tunnel sand was yellow and it was quite difficult to make it blend with the darker top soil. Many clever schemes emerged from this problem. Besides mixing it in on the sports field, the most popular was mixing it into the gardens that each room was required to cultivate. After a period of time and many tons of sand, the gardens outside of each window steadily grew in elevation. The other problem with the sand, while easily dug, it was very unstable and prone to cave-ins. This necessitated the constant shoring. The disposal crew "penguins," would wear a sausage sack down the inside of each pant leg. When these were filled with sand, he would casually walk to the disposal area. By pulling a string tied to the bottom of the sack, the sand would trickle out and be mixed into the existing soil.

The electricians gathered up odd pieces of wiring here and there, and by rearranging most of the camp wiring, accumulated enough to wire each of the tunnel shafts.

A trolley track was installed in each of the tunnels, using moldings borrowed from inconspicuous locations in the barracks. The trolley sand boxes were works of art. They had carved flanged wooden wheels fitted with "tires," cut from tin cans. The hubs had ball bearings smuggled in by a tame goon.

The lead digger lay full length on his side and one elbow, chopping away at the face, and pushing the sand back to the number two digger who lay in the opposite direction with his legs overlapping the legs of the lead digger. He would place the full sand box on the trolley, signal by pulling on a cord and the sand was transported to the work room. Here it would be put in penguin bags and sent to the top. Cave-ins were a constant danger, burying the lead digger, and number two would work frantically to uncover him. The men worked naked as it was stifling hot in the shaft. A shower was always available and the diggers would wash the tell tale sand off immediately upon surfacing.

The first sand was cut away May 4th, 1943, appropriately by Wally Flood, the master mind of all the tunnels. It was only fitting that Harry was the first to be started.

At this time, there were many Americans in the compound who worked in the escape organization. The all important security stooges were trained and over-seen by an American Colonel Clarke. Because of my injured back, I could only work as a penguin or stooge, and this for not an extended period of time.

After a month of digging; Tom, Dick and Harry were all about seventy feet long. This being the ideal time of the year for escaping, it was elected to concentrate on Tom as he had the shortest distance to go. A few days later they had reached the half way spot, so an enlarged half-way house was made so a man could turn around. This was judged to be about under the warning wire.

Many other projects were under way while the digging was taking place. The forgery department, comprised of about fifty men, would provide the escapees with forged identity cards and phony passports. It was named "Dean and Dawson," after the large English travel agency. Most of their badly needed supplies were being furnished by tamed goons. Pens, brushes and colored inks were also furnished by guards who had accepted coffee or chocolate once too often. The verboten [forbidden] camera and film was sometimes used to catch a ferret in the act of accepting goodies from a Kriegie. His goose was then cooked. The paper and the cards needed were either furnished by this way or taken from books in the library, furnished by the International YMCA. The tame goons papers were borrowed and copied to the slightest detail. Whole sheets of simulated typewriting were drawn by hand, complete with imperfect letters, bad shifts and strike-overs. Some documents required close printing and whorls of engraving. Bibles and linen covered books became identification books. One document needed to cross the Swiss border was so complicated, it took a master craftsman working four hours a day, one month to make one. Letter-heads were embossed with designs cut into tooth-brush handles. German eagles and swastikas were cut from rubber shoe heels.

An Australian kriegie was a crafty compass maker. The cases were made from broken phonograph records, The glass from broken windows and the needles from sewing needles charged by rubbing them on a magnet.

The tailor shops were running full time making civilian suits and copies of the Luftwaffe uniform from RAF uniforms. Many of the

American khaki shirts and pants were dyed and made into dapper business suits.

Map makers traced different maps and ran off copies on a kriegie made duplicator. The gelatin came from fruit jello and the ink from crushed lead of indelible pencils.

All in all, the compound was a bee-hive of activity. The Germans knew something big was taking place but couldn't pick up a clue as to what. They correctly surmised that Colonel Clarke was very important in the activity, so assigned a ferret to tail him where ever he went. After a day or two of this, two kriegies would tail the German tail. Knowing we were on to them, the tailing was discontinued and Colonel Clarke was allowed to go about his nefarious business.

A new compound was being constructed on the south side of the north compound, so this eliminated any activity in that direction. Not only that, but all of the Americans were to be moved into this compound upon completion. This was expected to happen about the first of September. If any Americans were going to profit from their work on the tunnels, they had to work fast. By the end of June, Tom had just reached the edge of the woods, so it was decided to dig straight up and break out. At this time, the Germans decided to build a west compound, and started clearing the woods back to fifty yards. The Americans wanted to go anyway, and take their chances of crawling to the new wood line.

During this hurry-up operation on Tom, the disposal of sand was top priority. Every conceivable idea was used. Some was carried in Red Cross boxes to Dick and stored temporarily. When Dick became full, it was stored under the bunks. It was only a matter of time until this would be discovered. After Tom was two hundred and sixty feet long, the inevitable happened. A ferret discovered the sand boxes under the bunks. A heavy transport wagon pulled by horses was brought in and driven all around the inside perimeter, hoping to cause the tunnel to collapse. Not accomplishing this, each block was systematically searched. The first search proved fruitless. Two days later another block to block search was called. The goons rushed into each block shouting "Aus, Aus mit uns" and the search was on. Finally a lucky ferret accidentally jabbed his probe rod into the edge of Tom's trap door. Tom was no more, the tunnel was loaded with dynamite and blown up, taking part of the building with it.

All the tunnel work was suspended, even though the goons thought they had solved their problem. Little did they know that two more tunnels were right under their noses.

While cooling off after the discovery of Tom, another escape was planned and executed. Three German rifles were carved out of wood, dyed and polished to look authentic. A "delousing parade," was a guarded party of kriegies who were taken into the German vorlager, stripped and dusted with delousing powder, then returned to the compound. Three kriegies in manufactured goon uniforms, carrying the wooden rifles marched twenty four other kriegies out the gate and to a short lived freedom. Twenty were quickly captured. The other three were gone several days. One was captured

while trying to cross the Swiss border. The other two were warming up a German airplane on a nearby airbase when detected and captured.

Tunneling was again started in January, 1944. As Dick's breakout point was now in the American West compound, only Harry remained. With the ground covered with snow, the sand could not be disposed of in the usual manner. One of the tunnelers remembered a deep excavation that was left under the kriegie built theater. This would accomodate tons of sand. A removable trap door was installed in the floor, and the disposal problem was solved. The Germans evidently didn't know of this or had forgotten for they never looked there. Thirty diggers working in two man teams, extended Harry about twelve feet per day. The first of February a half-way house was carved out at one hundred feet. The expected break-out point in the cover of the woods should be at about three hundred feet.

The digging conditions were the opposite of summer digging. Now the tunnel was cold and damp. To make matters worse they had no more electric wire to extend the lighting, so had to resort to using margarine lamps which caused the tunnel crews to cough up black phlem. Sand falls were a daily occurance.

A second half-way house was christened the middle of February at two hundred feet. It was calculated that this half-way house was under the far boundary.

Lady Luck smiled on them one day, when a party of German workers came in to hook-up loud speakers, so the insane ravings of Hitler and Goebbels could be broadcast through out the compound. Two inviting coils of electric wiring suddenly disappeared into thin air. The workers were afraid to report it, so nothing was done about it at that time. Later, when the wire was found in Harry by the Gestapo, three of these workers were shot. This good fortune afforded the entire shaft to be brightly lighted to the digging face. The Unter-Officier in charge of goon security knew something was amiss. The tunnel engineer, the penguin leader, security leader and ten of the key diggers were transferred to another Stalag many miles away, where I'm sure they continued their favorite game.

March 8, 1944 the last one hundred foot section was finished and a larger chamber was constructed at this end. Now the shaft was carved straight up to freedom. Ladders were fitted to the side as it progressed upward. When they hit tree roots they figured about two feet remained to the surface. The roof was boarded up and would be dug out the night of the break.

March 14 everything was go except the weather. It was decided to wait until all conditions were favorable. March 24th, Roger Bush gave the go for that night. Two hundred and twenty lucky people were slated to go out. Bush personally chose sixty workers, twenty more were picked by secret ballots and one hundred and forty names were drawn from a hat of about five hundred. Forty men would buy train tickets but the rest must walk across country toward the Czech border sixty miles away. All of the phony and forged documents had to be stamped and dated as of that date. Some escapees were to go out as foreign workers, some as neutrals, some

as German Officials, soldiers and civilians. All documents had to fit his disguise.

A digger climbed the Ladder to the Stars, and proceeded to dig the last two feet. Much to his surprise he found day-light at only three inches. This would be left until nightfall to open.

Each man would lie on a plank laid on top of the trolley boxes and be pulled to the face by the preceding escapee, who would then climb the ladder to freedom.

At 8:40 pm, March 24, 1944, the first escapee descended the ladder to the trolley below. He wore a natty civilian suit and carried a brief case. The second, dressed as a workman followed on his heels. Roger Bush, carrying an attache case and dressed in a gray herring-bone business suit, with black overcoat and hat was among the first five.

There was some delay when the roof boards would not come loose. Finally the hole was opened and sweet fresh air poured down the shaft to those waiting below. The digger cautiously stuck his head out and found he was ten feet short of the woods, and only fifteen yards from a sentry tower.

The first man crawled to a brushy fence paying out a cord as he went. The sentry guards were watching the compound with their searchlights and never looked back. Two sentries patrolled back and forth along the fence. When both were out of sight, the cord was tugged as a signal for the next man to pop out of the hole like a mole, and scurry to the woods. Only twenty men got out in the first hour. They were all going by train from the railway station at Sagan, a half a mile away. It became obvious that only a hundred men would get out before daylight. Two bad sand falls lost them about an hour and a half. The trolleys jumped the tracks and an air raid on Berlin ninety miles away, caused the electricity to go off. Lamps now had to be used which caused many more delays.

At about 4:30 am, the tower sentry shouted to a patrolling guard, who went up the tower ladder, and the sentry descended and walked toward the hole. When within four feet he turned around facing the fence and squatted down. After about five minutes he went back to his tower. At 5:am, it was decided that it was getting too light. Three more men could go, then the escape was over. As the third man disappeared down the tunnel, the crack of a rifle was heard. Two men had reached the fence line, another was crawling half way to it, and a fourth man had just emerged from the hole, when the signaler saw a guard approaching. He gave two quick tugs on the cord and they all froze. The guard walked to within eighteen inches of the hole, when he saw the man laying half-way to the fence. He raised his rifle to shoot and the signaler jumped to his feet and shouted "Nicht schlessen, Nicht schlessen posten," [Don't shoot, don't shoot guard], His shot went wild and the four kriegies raised their arms. Shining his flashlight down into the hole, he was locking in the face of the eighty-first escaper. He then blew his whistle, which brought guards running from all directions.

After ten and a half months, Harry's life was over. In block 104, kriegies were frantically burning papers, destroying equipment and hiding the civilian and other escape