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## Former POWs see replica 'Great Escape' hut unveiled in Poland

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18 Aug 08

**A small tri-Service team from the UK are celebrating the unveiling of a replica of the famous 'Great Escape' Hut in Zagan, Poland on Saturday, 16 August 2008.**



Half the size of the original, the replica of the famous 'Great Escape' hut at Stalag Luft III in Zagan, Poland nears completion

[Picture: Cpl Scott Robertson]

An enthusiastic team from RAF Leeming, assisted by a small group of Royal Engineers and a Royal Navy Chief Petty Officer, played a key role in the design and construction of the building. And former Stalag Luft III Prisoners of War, Air Commodore (Retired) Charles Clarke OBE, President of the Ex Prisoners of War Association, and Andrew Wiseman, were on hand to witness the opening of the replica hut, built on the site of prison camp Stalag Luft III.

Although it is only half the size of the original, it took two weeks to construct and is the result of

committed research and fundraising over a prolonged period. During the two-week build, the volunteer crew was split into teams Dick and Harry - each alternating between spending three days building and three days learning about the wider story of World War II at sites in Berlin, Krakow and Auschwitz.

Located next to the Great Escape Museum in Zagan, the hut will act as a permanent memorial to the bravery of allied personnel imprisoned in Stalag Luft III during World War II.

Sergeant Neil Galloway was part of the eleven-strong Leeming contingent taking part in the project:

"It's living history really, and to have a chance to take part in something like this is absolutely fantastic," he said. "There was a lot of good banter, a lot of hard work, blood, sweat and tears. The guys were excited to see the end of the hut - they can now see the fruits of their labours. The memories I will take away are of being here with the veterans, Charles and Andrew. It's a real honour and a privilege to be with them and listen to their stories."



Charles Clarke, a former prisoner of war at Stalag Luft III, opens the replica hut by cutting the barbed wire

[Picture: Cpl Scott Robertson]

Project 104 started two years ago, the brainchild of Dr Howard Tuck, Flight Lieutenant Tim Barlow, now based at RAF Halton, and the late Squadron Leader Jimmy James MC, following a visit to Zagan. Since then the team has raised £60,000 in donations with welcome support from Air Cdre Clarke.

Army Royal Engineer, Lieutenant Colonel Phil Westwood, was also brought on board quickly to ensure that the finished hut was built to a high technical specification and will stand as a memorial for years to come.

Flt Lt Barlow was thrilled to see the fruits of the team's hard work:

"It feels absolutely fantastic," explained Flt Lt Barlow. "It's the culmination of two years of really hard work, which has been over the last two weeks really quite exhausting. It's a relief to finish it in a way but it's also really a great honour to have led the team here and to see the finished article.

"I can't thank the team enough. The guys have worked really long hours over the last couple of weeks in the heat. The Royal Engineers under Lt Col Westwood have been brilliant. They've told everyone exactly what needs to be done and helped out on the ground and really made it happen."

For Flt Lt Barlow and his team, building a memorial to their military predecessors has huge importance:

"We should learn from the past, that's been one of the main parts of the trip. It's also about paying our respects to people like Charles Clarke and Andrew Wiseman who have come out here with us and given us their time. It's making sure we remember exactly what they did and that it's never forgotten.



Inside - how it would have looked when escape tunnel 'Harry' was dug  
[Picture: Cpl Scott Robertson]

"I can remember standing with Charles and Andrew back in December 2006 on the site when we were talking about the project - finding the site of Charles's room and seeing a tear come down his face. It makes my heart flutter and brings a tear to the eye."

Air Cdre Clarke and Andrew Wiseman were with the building team for the duration of the two-week project, along with Dr Tuck. During visits to historical sites they shared their knowledge and experience to give personnel a unique insight to the period. Air Cdre Clarke said:

"My original idea was to have the hut on the site of the original Hut 104, but I realised that it was quite isolated so I persuaded the museum to have it here. This room is very realistic, they have done a magnificent job.

"My aim is to arrange for a party of prisoners of war - they are all old and many of them are not able to walk - to come over for a few days so they can see this place. It's worth remembering the support the Ex Prisoners of War Association has given this project both financially and in every way."

The opening ceremony, the culmination of a multinational effort, saw military representatives from various nations, civic dignitaries, veterans plus family members of those imprisoned there during WWII. It culminated with a flypast by a Tornado GR4's from IX (B) Squadron based at RAF Marham in Norfolk. Sqn Ldr Jimmy James and James 'Cookie' Long, who both took part in the Great Escape, were part of IX Sqn. 'Cookie' was one of the 50 personnel recaptured and executed on Hitler's orders. Cookie's helmet goggles and scarf were flown in the lead aircraft in his honour.



Project Officer Flight Lieutenant Tim Barlow outside the completed replica  
[Picture: Cpl Scott Robertson]

The project would not have been possible without the input of the Army's Royal Engineers, who were on hand to keep RAF volunteers on the straight and narrow. Lt Col Westwood said:

"I came up with the concept of the hut and a Royal Engineer draftsman did the design work. We have had a Clerk of Works and Surveyor from the Royal Engineers here on site. Without them we would have been struggling to do it at all.

"The RAF volunteers have done absolutely brilliantly. We had little teach-ins at the start of every day to show them some of the skills they haven't done before but it's their commitment that's made them good. The morale is fantastic because they all want to be here and volunteered."

And while the hard work regarding the build of the hut may be over, some of those involved in the project are already moving on to its next stage:

"We've built the hut half-length and would like to do a half-length tunnel," Lt Col Westwood added. "Perhaps not quite as deep or as dangerous as the other one, but to give people a real experience of what it must have been like to go down the tunnel and escape from the other end. I've already sketched that plan but we just need a bit of funding."

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