World War II: Interview with George McKiel — Prisoner of War in Stalag Luft III

Posted By HistoryNet Staff On 6/12/2006 @ 8:09 pm In Military History | No Comments

When the Germans established *Stalag Luft* III in a forest near what is now Zagan, Poland — a mere 90 miles southeast of Berlin — an indefatigable officer of Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) named Roger Bushell took the art of the prison break to a new level. Organizing a group of 600 men (out of nearly 10,000 prisoners) into an organization code-named 'X,' Bushell set them to work creating everything needed to mount a massive escape. Overall, the men dug three tunnels. On the evening of March 24, 1944, the tunnel code-named 'Harry' was 30 feet deep and extended 336 feet beyond the wire. Of the 220 men scheduled to crawl to freedom on that cold, snowy March night, only 76 officers managed to breach the wire. Seventy-three were recaptured. An enraged Adolf Hitler ordered them all shot, but at the behest of more levelheaded generals he modified his decree to 'more than half are to be shot and cremated.' The subsequent murder of 50 of the escapees horrified the world. Young Canadian bomber navigator George McKiel was there that night and saw it all. Now a retired doctor, he was interviewed by Doug Pricer at his home in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Military History: What were you doing when the war started?

McKiel: I was working in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada for the St. John Power Company. They had a generator there. I was a 15-year-old, fresh out of high school. I had the job as the kingpin for the chemistry of the boilers. I also had to do the switchboard and the statistics for the chief engineer. It was a lot of responsibility for a 15-year-old. I stayed with them until I was able to get into the air force.

MH: What were you trained to do?

McKiel: I was very keen to get into an aircrew. They trained me as a navigator. That was in 1942.

MH: Where did you go first?

McKiel: We were posted to the south of England, where they had rented 90 hotels in Bournemouth as a receiving depot for air force personnel. Then we were posted to a Canadian squadron up in Yorkshire.

MH: What were the circumstances surrounding your capture?

McKiel: We were sent to bomb the ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt. It was a priority target. They sent us on a raid at night when there was a three-quarter moon. We were flying Avro Lancasters. It was a long way into Schweinfurt. The Germans had fighters waiting in their own anti-aircraft over the target. One raked us from down below. He was equipped with cannons, so he did extensive damage. I could see from my navigator's position that the gas tanks were winding down — just emptying so fast. There was no way to get back to England. So I gave the pilot a course for Switzerland, hoping that we might stagger on there. But then another fighter came in for a second attack. We then realized that the plane was no longer airworthy, so we were ordered to bail out.

MH: Was yours the only plane hit?

McKiel: No. There were 73 of us shot down that night. The thing that bothered me more than anything was that they were Canadian-built Lancasters — they were just starting to arrive. This was in November 1943. Our squadron had received one, and that's the one that was lost. As she went down in flames and I parachuted down, all I could think was: 'Oh my God! There goes a million dollars!'

MH: What happened when you came down?

McKiel: I came down into a very densely wooded area. I had an escape kit that consisted of about $250 of currency to help us if we were in a tight situation, to do any bribing. It also contained some maps and some condensed rations that were like toothpaste in tubes. We also had some pills that would help keep us awake. I buried my parachute. We had very high winds that night, so we were scattered and I never was able to make contact with my crew. I took the insignia off my uniform and began traveling at night. I was able to steal a bicycle on the second day. That helped a bit — I made better time. Traveling at night was tough, and it was damn cold. Eventually, I made it to a barn one night to sleep. The next thing I know there is a pitchfork at my throat, and two local army *Wehrmacht* types — like home guard — took me in.

MH: You must have been terrified.

McKiel: Well, I didn't know at that time what was ahead. All I knew was that temporarily I was out of commission. The really satisfying thing about it all was that when we went into the house, I had all that money with me. I told myself that I wasn't going to let it fall into enemy hands. So I asked them if I could have a cigarette, and they let me. I went to the stove, dropped the money into the fire, lit my cigarette and told myself, 'At least that's a help!' As it turned out, I got to participate in many other underhanded pranks when I got to the camp.

MH: Where did they send you then?

McKiel: Well, they shipped me off to a main reception center in Frankfurt. There were other downed fliers there. We were there for about a week. Then they shipped us under guard on a train to *Stalag Luft* III. When I arrived at the camp, I was assigned to hut No. 104. As it turned out, that was very propitious. They had already spent some time digging three tunnels. They code-named them 'Tom,' 'Dick' and 'Harry.' Germans found one of them and destroyed it. Then the escape committee decided that the second one was not really suitable and that it would be best to concentrate on the one tunnel that was dubbed Harry. As it turned out, Harry was being dug in my hut.

MH: What was life like in the hut?

McKiel: There were somewhere between 100 to 120 officers in the hut. We were divided up into rooms, and each room had three-tier bunks. There was a small room at the end of the hut, and the senior officer was allocated that space. He happened to be a wing commander — Blake was his name — and my roommate said to me: 'You know we're having some trouble with the wing commander. He's getting rather uppity, and we really need to make him understand — he's a fairly recent prisoner himself. Would you play a little game with him?'

MH: What kind of game did you run by him?

McKiel: They gave me a battle dress with a higher rank than his and asked me to approach him. So I went along, but I was just in my 18th year. I told them that I didn't feel comfortable, but they said: 'Oh, sure you can. You're Bomber Command and he's Fighter Command — he won't know anything!' So I went along with it, but there were several decorations on the battle dress as well as a high rank. Anyway, we had a long talk, and the wing commander said: 'You know, George, I think it would be very sensible on your part if you took down your rank and take down your decorations and just try and be one of the boys. That way you're going to learn a lot because some of these boys have been here for four years or more.'

MH: He thought your uniform was real?

McKiel: Yes. I told the others, and they just rolled on the floor and said: 'It's working! It's working!'

MH: So they were using you to test the authenticity of their phony uniform?

McKiel: Yes. The outcome of it was that he junked the protocol. After the battle dress scam, they told me about the tunnel. It was across the corridor, just 12 feet away from my bunk.

MH: Would you describe it?

McKiel: Yes. What they had done was an ingenious piece of engineering. Each of the huts had a room with a small coal stove sitting on a slab of bricks. They had managed to put hinges on the stove so that it would fold back, and the tunnel went straight down through the bricks into the ground. At 30 feet down, it went out beyond the wire. I was rather impressed with it. It was really quite extraordinary because it not only went down for 30 feet but there was an enlargement at the bottom of the shaft where there were bellows for pumping air into the shaft. There was also a receiving area where they could accept the sand that had been dug from the face of the tunnel, and tracks that ran up to the face of the tunnel. The tracks were wooden rail lines that had been laid down. You lay on a trolley and a rope was used to pull you up to the face without disturbing any of the cribbing that lined the mineshaft.

MH: The X organization was quite large. Were you aware of how extensive it was?

McKiel: Well, I soon became aware because all of the people in my room in hut No. 104 were involved in some capacity with the tunnel. One of them was a carpenter working in the camp theater. He made a number of wooden supports to help shore up the tunnel because the soil was very soft. There was another one very skilled in sewing. He was busy sewing all the time, converting uniforms into either civilian clothes or into German-looking uniforms. There was another fellow who was a calligrapher. He was very good with a pen and cutting out stamps so that they could get really authentic-looking passes. They all had to be done very meticulously or the security people would tell the difference right away.

MH: Did you work in the tunnel?

McKiel: No, I didn't actually go down in the tunnel. My role was as a penguin. We penguins wore long pockets down our pant legs with a drawstring. When the sand was brought up, it had to be disposed of very discreetly because it had a different smell from the surface sand, and the dogs could pick it up. It was also a different color. So we would fill these pockets with sand and go out into the sports area or another part of the camp. Other men would create a diversion to distract the guards. They were always walking around the wire or watching from the control towers or 'goon boxes,' as we called them. Anyway, we'd pull the drawstrings and scuff the sand around and mix it into the ground. Sometimes we put the dirt in parts of the building, like the attic or hollow walls. That was more dangerous because they could find it easier.

MH: What were the guards like?

McKiel: The guards were actually very astute at times. They had been guarding prisoners long enough that they knew and anticipated many of the ways we would try to escape. Some were trained to come in and just wander around the camp. We called them ferrets. In the evening they would often crawl beneath the hut — there was a crawl space there — and they would listen to us in our huts. Many of them spoke enough English that they could understand us when we talked.

MH: What was it like for you, being in the camp?

McKiel: At first there was a period of depression and a lot of insecurities. But one adjusted. The camp itself was administrated by our own people. For example, when the Germans brought the rations in, we did our own rations distributions. We also had all kinds of diversion in our group — sports and activities. We had a very active school with lectures every day. So while a sort of emotional curtain came down when you were first incarcerated, you could say, 'Well, the doors may be closed, but there are still many windows open, and there are still opportunities.'

MH: What was the food like?

McKiel: The food was a disaster. We were the lowest of the low as far as the Germans were concerned. Gratefully, we got Red Cross parcels every week. They came from Britain, Australia, America, from everywhere. Then, as the war continued, bombing messed up the railroads and the rations were cut in half. We then realized how bad the food was for the German people. We started getting a lot of second-rate stuff, turnips, a lot of ersatz stuff — ersatz coffee, ersatz sugar, it just went on and on. We operated each room in the hut as a separate mess and tried to keep it sufficient. We had our own gardens for vegetables — but overall there was nothing to snack on. It got very desperate toward the end.

MH: Were you guarded by regular troops?

McKiel: Many of them were men who had been on the Eastern Front and had lost an arm or a leg, or were incapacitated in some fashion but were still able to do guard duty. In some cases, they were fairly friendly. Some of them had immigrated to Canada or the States before the war and then gone back to Germany earlier, when Germany seemed to be getting more prosperous. So they were perfectly fluent in English. We monitored them closely. The men who did the monitoring were called stooges. They watched for ferrets and for Germans who were getting too close. If we were working on the tunnel and they got too close, we could shut down the entire operation in less than 20 seconds. And that held true for all the other activities. We could close up the mapmaking, or passport printing or anything else.

MH: Were you a penguin all the time?

McKiel: No, I did duty as a stooge as well.

MH: What else did you do?

McKiel: I was very active in the theater. We had a very classy theater in the camp. One of the plays we did was *The Philadelphia Story*. I played Katharine Hepburn's role. It took me three months to learn to walk and talk like a woman! Actually, the theater played a vital role in the escape. We had a number of London West End producers, actors and technical people in the camp. So our productions were all very good, and the German officers always wanted to see our plays. We'd reserve the front two rows for them. So then we'd tell them that the play should be recorded for history. They'd always agree and give us film and let us take pictures. Of course, most of the film was used for making passport photos and documents.

MH: That is amazing. Did you know Roger Bushell?

McKiel: Oh yes. Roger was the 'Big X.' He had quite a reputation for escaping from various camps, and they finally sent him to *Stalag Luft* III because it was a new camp, and they had built it with great care and planning and thought that it was escape-proof. He was actually a student in Germany before the war. He was from South Africa, so he spoke Boer. He was quite fluent in German. He was a very bright fellow, and he ran a very tight ship. For example, when anyone came up with a plausible escape plan he would listen to it and criticize the plan and then approve or disapprove it. His word was pretty much law. He got a great deal of respect from the inmates and at the same time had a great deal of respect from the Germans. They really acknowledged that he was a dangerous individual, so he was watched in particular. He was very careful about his activities so they would not realize that something was cooking.

MH: He sounds like a hell of a guy.

McKiel: He was. And unfortunately he didn't make it. He had an excellent escape plan himself. He was going to head to Czechoslovakia and then get out through the Balkans. He would have made it, except at the border there was a minor discrepancy on one of the papers and he was caught.

MH: Did you also know Wally Floody?

McKiel: Oh, yes. He was a Canadian hard-rock miner from Sudbury, one of the main organizers of the tunneling. He was quite a large fellow, very tough physically and very smart. He really knew his stuff. I do not know how he overcame the claustrophobia in the tunnel, but he did. He was a very fine fellow — just passed away two years ago.

MH: When the tunnel was finished in March 1944, how were people selected to go?

McKiel: Well, there were about six people who had vital information and had very good escape plans and a very good chance of getting back to England. They were given the first six spots. The rest of us — anyone who had worked on the tunnel in any capacity — were put into a lottery. My number was 327, so I knew I was not going. They shunted all of us who were not going to another hut and had all of those who were going out crowd into hut No. 104, as carefully as could be done, so the Germans would not notice. We were on edge but quite optimistic. There were still some comical things that happened. There were several men who were traveling as German officers. One of them walked into a room and the men thought he was a real German and that they were caught. The disguise was that perfect. Well, when the Great Escape finally came, we had hoped to get 220 out. But various things went wrong. There was a snowstorm that night. There was a raid on Berlin, which meant that power was cut off.

MH: Why did that affect your progress?

McKiel: We'd been able to steal wire and string the whole tunnel with lights. When the power went off, we had to resort to fat-lamps instead. Things went much slower than we expected, and we only got 76 officers out. When they broke through they discovered that the tunnel was not as long as they had anticipated. It was about 60 feet short of the woods. As a result, about 3 in the morning a sentry who was supposed to be patrolling the wire decided that he had to have a pee. He went over to the edge of the woods, and no sooner had his pants open than out popped a head between his legs! He fired his rifle and we knew then that we'd been discovered.

MH: What happened when the alarm went up?

McKiel: The whole camp was taken out into the square, and they did a frantic counting, trying to establish how many had got out. They also sent someone through the tunnel from the opposite end (the exit), and he came out into our hut. The men who were in the tunnel at the time managed to get out, and they tried to mingle with the rest of us on the parade ground. But they were recognized too and put into the cooler.

MH: How did you learn of the men who were shot?

McKiel: The *Luftwaffe* had been responsible for the administration and guarding of the camp. When the escape took place, they were immediately replaced by the SS, who came in with submachine guns. About three weeks later, the senior British officer [SBO] was summoned by the new commandant. He took his adjunct, Bill Jennings, along with him. The commandant told the SBO that there was some sad news, that some of our officers had tried to escape and were shot in the process. When the SBO asked how many were wounded and was told none, he knew that they had been executed. We found out later that the Gestapo had carried out the executions. The men had been taken in small groups and shot in the back of the head and then cremated. It was a real shocker — just awful. The ashes were returned to us, and then, as a sort of gesture, the professional German officers allowed us to build a stone cairn in which we interred the ashes. It was their way of showing that they were opposed to what the SS had done.

MH: Was it all worth it?

McKiel: Well, part of our mission was to divert the Germans, and we did that. They had almost a million men out looking for the escapees within a day of the escape, so we felt that in itself was a sufficient diversion for the Germans. In that respect, we felt they paid a dear price — that we had done our jobs. But we paid a dear price, too. We had 50 good men executed, and that was a very painful thing indeed.

MH: How were you liberated?

McKiel: As the Russians approached in the spring of 1945, we could hear the artillery and see their spotter planes. We thought, 'Good, liberation at last.' But instead the Germans told us to be ready to move within 12 hours. They marched us for five days across country with all the other evacuees. The anarchy was extraordinary, with all the army units and tank corps busy moving ahead of the Russians. We crossed the Oder River to regroup. They took us to a marshaling yard and loaded us into cars designed for six horses. There were over 100 men in each car. They took us to a condemned navy camp up in Bremen. We were there until April. By that time we had established radio contact with London — we had smuggled along the components of a radio — and we got daily news.

MH: Did that inspire relief or other emotions?

McKiel: The Germans came and told us to get ready to move again. We said no, that we knew the British had crossed the Rhine and that we would not move again. They moved in SS troops with machine guns, so we moved. The only good thing at that point was that as we were marching, we went through areas where we could barter food from local villagers. We had lots of cigarettes we'd saved from Red Cross parcels. The last month of the war we ended up at the Baltic Sea. We were finally overrun by one of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's units — it was a Cheshire unit — and we were free. It was like being reborn!

MH: Have you ever been back?

McKiel: Oh yes. I went back 20 years later and couldn't find any of the camp at all. But I did locate the stone cairn — it was still there. You see, after the war the Russians took the area. When they did, they rebuilt the cairn. But later the Russians gave the area back to the Poles. A few years ago, Carrie Tobolski, the granddaughter of one of the officers who was shot, went back with her husband. They discovered the remains of the exit of the tunnel. They got the Polish officials to agree to donate the five acres of land. She and her husband established the Great Escape Memorial Project. We plan to make a peace park on the site. It will have a memorial, a meditation garden and a park. And of course, I went back this year for the 60th anniversary.

MH: What emotions did that visit inspire?

McKiel: It was surreal in many ways. The camp was no longer there, and yet we were able to pick out landmarks. I hiked the whole area and found the foundations of the water tank. I also found the actual foundation of hut No. 104 where I had lived. I paced out the path of the tunnel. We placed a monument at each end of the tunnel. The stone cairn was still there, and we believe the ashes of the men are still interred within. I stood there and thought to myself: 'Here I am 60 years later. I never thought this was going to happen.' I had lots of thoughts about the people who had been executed. They were no longer here — but I was. It touched me deeply. It was a very profound and emotional experience.

This article was written by Doug Pricer and originally published in the May 2005 issue of *Military History* magazine. For more great articles be sure to subscribe to *Military History* [1] magazine today!

Subscribe Today

[2]

Did you enjoy our article?
Read more in *Military History* magazine [2]
Subscribe online and save nearly 40%!!!

Pages: 1 2 [3] 3 [4] 4 [5]

Help HistoryNet by bookmarking to

 [6]  [7]  [8]  [9]  [10]  [11]  [12]  [13]  [14]  [15]  [16]  [17]

URLs in this post:

[1] *Military History*: **https://secure.palmcoastd.com/pcd/document?ikey=0942D9NBH**

[2] Image: **https://secure.palmcoastd.com/pcd/eServCart?iServ=MDk0MDA0MzgwNA==#militaryhistory**

[3] 2: **http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm/2**

[4] 3: **http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm/3**

[5] 4: **http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm/4**

[6] Image: **http://del.icio.us/post?url=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm&title=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III**

[7] Image: **http://digg.com/submit?phase=2&url=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm&title=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III**

[8] Image: **http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm&title=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III**

[9] Image: **http://www.technorati.com/faves?add=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm**

[10] Image: **http://myweb2.search.yahoo.com/myresults/bookmarklet?u=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm&t=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III**

[11] Image: **http://www.google.com/bookmarks/mark?op=edit&output=popup&bkmk=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm&title=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III**

[12] Image: **http://www.netscape.com/submit/?U=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm&T=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III**

[13] Image: **http://mystuff.ask.com/mysearch/QuickWebSave?v=1.2&t=webpages&title=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III&url=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm**

[14] Image: **https://favorites.live.com/quickadd.aspx?url=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm&title=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III**
[15] Image: **http://www.facebook.com/share.php?u=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm**
[16] Image: **http://www.myspace.com/Modules/PostTo/Pages/?t=World+War+II%3A+Interview+with+George+McKiel++%26%238212%3B+Prisoner+of+War+in+Stalag+Luft+III&c=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm**
[17] Image: **http://twitthis.com/twit?url=http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-george-mckiel-prisoner-of-war-in-stalag-luft-iii.htm**