



Charge of the Wooden Horse brigade

A reunion of Stalag Luft III PoWs links two great escapes of the war. By Sally Jones

October 1943: the strains of a violin drift out into the compound where Allied prisoners-of-war are performing their final vaults after a two-hour gymnastics session. Then four men lift the vaulting horse and, staggering under its weight, manhandle it back into the barber shop.

The scene is concentration camp Stalag Luft III. A British RAF officer near the perimeter fence casually puts on his cap. The violinist inside nods briefly to the vaulters and, within seconds, they have lifted several floorboards and tipped up the horse. A filthy naked man wriggles from beneath it and down through the gap in the floor, while vaulters hand down sacks of sand to him from inside the horse. The violinist launches into a medley of sea shanties, while the vaulters roar out the words.

What the German guards patrolling outside on that October day did not know was that the endless vaulting was merely a cover for the ingenious construction of a tunnel, dug from beneath the horse and out under the fence. The choir practices were designed to conceal the sound of the tunneller dispersing the distinctive yellow sand he had unearthed.

Within days, three men, including the tunneller Eric Williams, had escaped along that narrow, airless passage and melted into the surrounding woodland, carrying civilian clothes and forged documents. Posing as foreign workers, all three men eventually arrived safely in neutral Sweden before returning to Britain.

The Wooden Horse breakout was arguably the most successful escape of the Second World War. Unlike the better-known Great Escape, a few months later from a nearby compound, where 50 prisoners were shot on Hitler's



JOHN LAWRENCE/THE KOSMOL COLLECTION

orders, there were no reprisals or executions.

On Tuesday, the former RAF officer who played the violin and acted as "Dispersal Stogie" will return to Stalag Luft III for a reunion with a handful of ex-RAF POWs, on the 65th anniversary of the Great Escape. Tom Wilson, now 88 and one of the last surviving Wooden Horse veterans, will be travelling with his German wife Gabi.

"We'll attend the unveiling of a memorial beside the entrance to 'Harry', one of the three Great Escape tunnels," he explains (the others were called 'Tom' and 'Dick'), "and visit the site of our own compound. It's now under thick woodland and almost unrecognisable. There's nothing



to show where the huts or the Wooden Horse tunnel were; the bed boards, used to shore up the sides and roof, will have rotted away by now.

"I still remember the ingenuity everyone showed though; planning every aspect of the escape with great care, even making ink for the forged documents by condensing smoke from burning cooking fat onto glass."

A former Sunday School teacher from Sutton Coldfield, Wilson joined the RAF in 1941 after rejecting the pacifism embraced by many of his contemporaries, because he already knew of the persecution of the German Jews. During his childhood, he had played with the sons of several refugees who were being looked



Horseplay: Tom Wilson and wife Gabi, left, with the violin he played during an escape from Stalag Luft III in 1943, a scene captured in the film 'The Wooden Horse', above. Below: Wilson in 1945 and his prison papers

after by Jewish friends, the Kahns.

Wilson, an electrical engineering graduate, became a navigator and "boffin" in Beaufighters and Wellington bombers, operating a radar lab on various missions, including one designed to discover how the enemy was jamming British electronic navigation, a role so secret his own crew did not know what he was doing.

On May 26 1943, his Wellington was shot down over The Hague and he was left unconscious and hanging over a canal before being captured and taken to Stalag Luft III in Silesia, now part of Poland.

"The Entertainments Officer greeted us," he remembers "and said 'Gentlemen, my job is to keep 1,500 officers here sane until the end of the war. If any of you can do anything at all in the entertainments field, it's your duty to help.' I signed up as a violinist in the prisoners' orchestra and bought a battered violin, which I then restored, crushing almonds for oil to clean it."

Wilson volunteered as a potential escapee and became a vaulter while Eric Williams and Mike Codner began tunnelling operations from beneath the horse, excavating tons of sand over several months, stuffed into sacks sewn from cut-off trouser legs, before being lugged back into the barber's shop to unload it.

To give them more time, the exhausted gymnasts often trained for four hours a day and Wilson

only began playing his violin to cover the sound of the sand disposal after a crashing fall tore his Achilles tendon. The pain was forgotten, however, when on October 29 1943, Williams, Codner and Ollie Philpott managed to break free.

"Although it was terrific that three men escaped successfully," admits Wilson, "the main point was to keep the Germans on the lookout; the fact that the ferrets [guards trained to detect tunnels] were having to police us and scramble around under huts rather than fighting on the Eastern front meant we were doing our job."

Despite the near-starvation conditions, Wilson, who was liberated in 1945 and later took a Cambridge degree in Russian and German, has never felt bitter towards his captors. In 1950, he married a young German, Gabriel Claessens, whom he had met two years earlier at the first international student seminar in Berlin. As headmaster of Coleshill Grammar School near Birmingham, he always considered shared languages as a way to foster understanding between the races and led groups of exchange students to Germany and Russia. Memories of the escape remain vivid, however.

"It was a huge morale boost for us," he recalls. "I still feel proud of what everyone achieved and the incredible teamwork needed in the Wooden Horse escape."