

## November 4, 2017 Meeting

**Topic:** *From Stalag Luft III to the Hamilton Lanc*

**Speakers:** Albert Wallace, RCAF (Ret'd);  
Author Barbara Trendos;  
John Bertram (moderator)

**Reporter:** Greg Winson

Chapter President, Sheldon Benner, opened the meeting by introducing the guest speakers Albert (Al) Wallace and his daughter, Barbara Trendos. Al will be speaking about his RCAF experiences and his flight courtesy of the Toronto Chapter in the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum's Lancaster Bomber last year. Barbara has written a book titled, "Survival," about her father's experiences. November's meeting was a conversation-style presentation featuring Albert (Al) Wallace, a retired WWII Air Force mid upper gunner. Accompanying Al was his daughter, author Barbara Trendos, and CAHS Toronto Chapter 1st vice-president John Bertram, who moderated the conversation.

John began by asking the audience if they had seen the 1963 movie *The Great Escape* starring Steve McQueen, to which most of the audience had, some having seen it several times. He then showed a trailer for the movie. While the movie contained many inaccuracies (escapees using airplanes and motorcycles, portraying Americans as key players in the escape, the pleasant spring weather with the Alps in the background), John said that he believes that we wouldn't be talking about the great escape today without the movie.



Speakers: Albert Wallace, RCAF (Ret'd) and author, Barbara Trendos  
Photo: Martin Keenan



Informal Panel Discussion moderated by John Bertram (Left) - Photo Credit - Martin Keenan

Al Wallace called the movie “magnificent movie entertainment” despite the many factual errors. He saw the movie when it first came out at the old 1350-seat University Theatre on Bloor Street along with 200 other prisoners-of-war. Most of the POWs that saw the film that day were very unhappy with the movie, noting the errors and events that didn’t really happen. John noted that Great Escape director John Sturges had tried to get the movie into production for several years, but was unable until the success of 1960’s The Magnificent Seven gave him the clout to get the film made. Despite the historical inaccuracy, when the film came out on Blu-Ray, the cover art still featured McQueen’s character Capt. Virgil Hilts riding a motorcycle. There was also a made-for-TV sequel to the original film, The Great Escape II: The Untold Story, which aired on NBC in November 1998. The sequel begins with the escape operation and continues the story with the investigation into the murders of 50 escapees by the Gestapo.

John then began some in-depth questioning into Al’s time in the Air Force. Before World War II, Al became a cadet with the Queen’s York Rangers Militia, 1<sup>st</sup> American regiment of the Canadian Militia at Fort York. When the war broke out, a 20-year-old Wallace was called from his full-time job at Loblaw’s Groceries to go on guard duty at the Welland Canal. “I had my uniform and my rifle but they didn’t give us any bullets,” Al recalled. This assignment only lasted for a week. Al then signed up for the Air Force after receiving a discharge from the Army. He was assigned for training at Exhibition Place, then known as No. 1 Manning Depot, in Toronto. Afterwards he was posted to the No. 1 Bombing & Gunnery School near Jarvis, Ontario. He initially served as ground crew working on the ranges, but aspired to be aircrew. Britain was desperately short of aircrew and Al was eventually accepted in June, 1942. After reaching England in the fall of 1942 and completing orientation, Al with the assistance of a friend went to RAF Leeming, in Yorkshire where he “crewed up” with a Halifax crew. Following Heavy Conversion Training he flew his first mission on Feb. 14, 1943 with RCAF 419 “Moose” Squadron.

Al was the mid upper gunner, one of seven crew members flying in a four-engine Mark II Halifax Bomber. On his 15<sup>th</sup> mission on May 12/13, 1943, Al’s plane was shot down over Duisburg, Germany. They were up at around 20,00 feet. “We dropped our bombs over Duisburg, but we had a hang-up – two clusters of incendiaries did not drop,” remembered Al. They were forced to repeat the run, at which point they were hit on their starboard wing. The plane immediately lost two engines, and the wing caught fire. The pilot and engineer quickly decided that the aircraft was doomed, so the order to bail out was given. Al put on his parachute and opened the hatch right behind the wing. “Everything was just totally black,” recalled Al. “We couldn’t see anything but darkness. I thought I was having a nightmare.” He plugged back into the intercom asked the pilot how high they were. He shouted back, “12,000 feet, WALLY. GET OUT, GET OUT.” Al then unplugged, and gave a little wiggle to get closer to the edge. The slipstream took care of the rest, sucking him out of the plane. Five of the seven crew members bailed out successfully. The plane’s pilot and wireless operator did not leave the plane and did not survive.

It wasn’t long before Wallace hit the ground with an easy landing. As he gathered up his parachute, he was intercepted by two local farmers who turned him over to the military police. One of them said, in English, “The war is over for you.” It was the only English spoken to Al. He was taken to a police station, nearly freezing to death in the sidecar of their motorcycle. He wasn’t kept in a cell, but was placed in between the desks of the two military policemen while they worked. About three weeks later, Al was moved to the Stalag Luft III prisoner of war camp in Sagan, Germany (modern day Żagań, Poland.) The site was chosen specifically by the Germans because of its sandy yellow soil that would stand out if disturbed. When Al arrived, he was given the serial number 1338 (the number of men in the camp at the time of his arrival) and assigned to the newly opened North Compound. The camp ultimately also had South, East and West compounds holding mainly American POWs. The total number of POWs at Stalag Luft III grew to almost 11,000 POWs by 1944/ 45. Within a few months, the number in the North Compound had risen to 1800.

There were 15 barrack blocks, with about 130 men in each block, with six men to a room to start. Later on this was increased to eight in a room. The barracks were uninsulated, with just one little washroom for 130 men. All were locked in tight after 9 p.m. “We were on parade twice a day, sometimes we were out the whole day,” Al recalled. “They kept us out there while they ripped our rooms apart trying to find any contraband we had.” The Germans only allowed prisoners of war to write three letters and three postcards a month. Al sent most of his allotment of letters to his Mom, who supplied him with the chocolate and cigarettes he craved.

Al was allocated a room with five South African officers who only spoke Afrikaans. This made him uncomfortable, and he asked the block captain to be moved to another room. After about six weeks, he was moved into a room in block 104, room 23. On the first day in his new room, a ‘2 bed board levy’ was imposed. He immediately suspected that something was up but didn’t say anything. As it turned out, the trapdoor to ‘Harry’, one of three escape tunnels (The tunnels were named Tom, Dick and Harry, so that the POWs would not accidentally say “Tunnel”) that were being dug out of Stalag Luft III was located in Al’s new room! He lived in the room for more than two weeks before finding out about the tunnel just eight feet from his bed. (The trap door was located under the stove.)

About a month after his move into block 104, Al was approached to be a ‘penguin’, to help move the sand out of the rooms and onto the grounds. The sand was carried via bags slung around their neck and down their pant legs. The bags had strings that allowed the men to pull a nail out of the sand bags, allowing the sand to be released at a trickle to avoid detection. The men moving the sand were known as penguins because of their gait. These missions usually took place when there was only one guard in the camp. The bright yellow sand brought up from the tunnels stood out like a sore thumb when dropped on the ground. “You had to be very careful to dispose of it around the camp, or try to kick it into the ground,” said Al. A common dumping ground was a small garden located behind their hut. Men like Al would release the sand while others were there with shovels to turn the soil. Al himself did not want to participate in the escape. Sagan was about 700 miles from England. Anyone trying to move around in Germany would be asked for identification every 200 yards, and Al did not speak German. He was happy to help others in the escape efforts.

The ‘great escape’ took place on the night of March 24, 1944. Seventy-six men escaped through ‘Harry’ that night. Three escapees managed to make their way back to England, seventy-three were recaptured, and 50 of the men were executed on the orders of Adolf Hitler. There is a painting of the memorial that was erected at Stalag Luft III, along with the names and pictures of the executed men in the mess of the Canadian Forces College. Tunnel HARRY was in fact the tunnel that was portrayed in the 1963 *The Great Escape* movie.

*Due to time constraints on the actual meeting held on November 4<sup>th</sup>, the following is a summary from “Survival” aimed at completing the story to May 2, 1945.*

John Bertram demonstrating the approximate size of the Stalag Luft III Tunnels - *Photo Credit - Martin Keenan*



On March 25<sup>th</sup> at about 5:00 AM, all hell broke loose at the camp when the guards discovered the breakout. All of the POWs were stripped and searched, ID's checked and then forced outside in the hard falling snow. German troops were called in and they searched everywhere for the tunnel entrance and finally found it in Room 104. A sense of gloom came over the compound now that the Kommandant must know how many POW's escaped. After Tunnel HARRY was flooded and then sealed up with concrete and sand, life resumed to a normal daily routine, if you could call life in a POW compound routine.

### **The First Forced March: January 27 to February 4, 1945**

In the early weeks of January 1945, things were not going well for Germany in many of the WWII battle areas. The Soviet offensive on the Eastern Front was a particular worry for the German High Command, since Warsaw had fallen to the Soviets on Jan. 19<sup>th</sup>. It was certainly looking more and more like the camp would have to be evacuated. On Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup> the POWs were given permission to make rucksacks to carry their belongings. This set off a frenzy of activity in preparing clothes, personal items and food for inclusion in the rucksacks. By this date, the Soviets were closer than 100 miles east of the camp. Guns and explosions were rumbling day and night, leaving no doubt that a march was very close. Finally, after several false starts, the order to evacuate was given and in the early hours of Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> the almost 11,000 POWs of Stalag Luft III began a long cold march to the west, with the column stretching out for miles. The POWs were told that they had to cover 75 kilometres in three days heading west with 17 kilometres to be covered the first day. Some POWs had to lighten their packs and the German civilians along the route eagerly picked up the discarded contents of food parcels and personal items. After one hour of walking in cold weather and snow a rest was called, but Al decided to keep his backpack on since it helped keep him warm and dry. The German civilians of the villages that the POWs passed through were friendly enough. As the march progressed more POWs became sick or died. Finally after marching in winter conditions and riding in wooden rail cattle cars for eight days, the balance of the POWs were settled in the new camp on Feb. 4/5. The new camp was called Margat M near the town of Tamstedt. Life once again settled into the dreary routine of a POW camp.



POWs marching out of Stalag Luft III under the eyes of German guards as the war is ending .

*Photo Courtesy - The Globe & Mail*

## The Second Forced March, April 10, 1945 to April 28, 1945

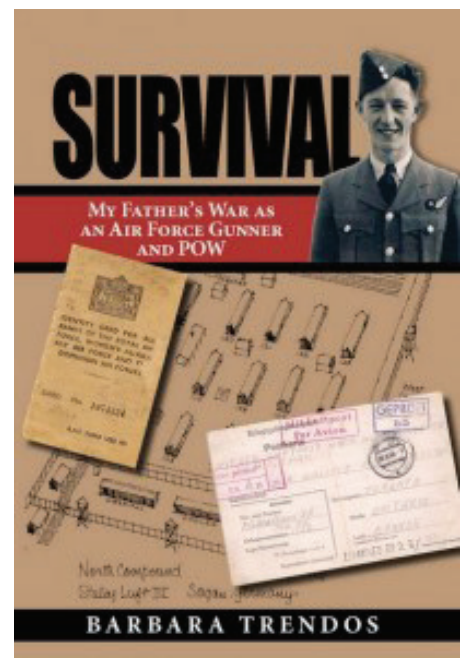
Al's group finally got the word to move out of Margat M / Tamstedt on April 10<sup>th</sup> and march to Lubeck near the Baltic Sea. This followed the recent moves of the allied forces in getting much closer to the camp. The greatest fear of making the journey on the way to Lubeck over open territory was being attacked and strafed by allied fighter aircraft which happened a few times with resulting casualties. This was on top of the POWs being tired, sick and wounded with dwindling supplies of food and Red Cross parcels. Al remained a prisoner-of-war until liberated at Camp Lubeck on May 2, 1945, by two British Churchill tanks, from an armoured regiment. An amusing event happened when the guards started to discard their uniforms, but the British "Tommys" had them all rounded up in short order. Very soon afterward Al found himself having his first Lancaster ride on the way back to England. His second Lancaster ride would come 70 years later!

## The making of "Survival"

Al's daughter Barb had known that her father had been in the Air Force and had been a prisoner of war. She became more aware when, during her university years, Al brought out a 'beat-up old file folder' with letters that he had written home, original telegrams, photographs and official correspondence. "I'm not sure why he chose that time, but I was intrigued and started to look through it, and it was fascinating," Barbara recalled. "I think it was the letters that really got my attention, because they were written in pencil on flimsy POW camp stationery." Al took the folder away when his daughter asked questions about the names of girls he had met along the way! Barbara originally didn't plan to write a book on Al's experiences in the war, but she continued to research and gather information. She was inspired to write the book after Al had given a talk to high school students in Leaside. The students wrote thank you letters to Wallace afterwards. The kids were interested, engaged, and wanted to hear more. Then she saw another log book compiled by another prisoner of war, and decided to tell her dad's story in a similar format. Barbara's resulting excellent book is appropriately titled, "Survival."

## One more flight in a bomber

More than 70 years after World War II, Al had the opportunity to fly in the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum Lancaster bomber over Toronto. Al was selected for the flight by the CAHS Toronto Chapter because of his service and experiences in the war and his ongoing volunteer work at Sunnybrook's veterans' hospital. The Chapter was awarded a seat on a Lancaster flight as compensation for the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum missing a scheduled dinner presentation to the Chapter. The meeting concluded with the Chapter members and guests being treated to the 'premiere' of a video showing Al on the flight. Following the meeting Al and Barbara held a book sale for "Survival." Many Chapter members availed themselves of the opportunity to purchase the book about Al Wallace's incredible WWII experiences, all of which has been expertly researched, written up and published by Barbara. If you wish to obtain your own copy please go to [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or [www.createspace.com](http://www.createspace.com) (Amazon's on-demand service).



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