

November Meeting



Speaker Ted Barris
Photo Credit - Neil McGavock

Topic: "*The Great Escape: A Canadian Story*"
Speaker: Ted Barris, Author/Historian
Reporter: Gord McNulty

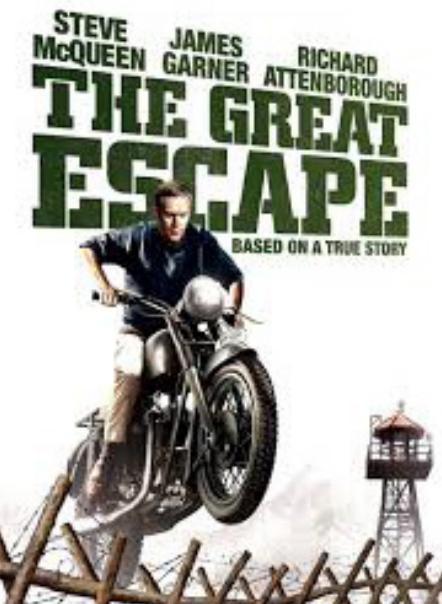
An excellent turnout of about 45 people, including seven guests, enjoyed Ted Barris' presentation on his book *The Great Escape: A Canadian Story*. CAHS Toronto Chapter President Sheldon Benner began with a moment of silence in honour of fallen soldiers Corporal Nathan Cirillo and Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent. Sheldon then introduced Ted, who spoke most recently to the Chapter at our Third Annual Dinner meeting in April, 2011. An accomplished journalist, author and broadcaster, Ted, of Uxbridge, is the author of 17 non-fiction books. During the past four decades, his writing has regularly appeared in the national press --- *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, as well as magazines as diverse as *Legion*, *Air Force*, *esprit de corps*, *Quill and Quire* and *Zoomer*. He has also worked as host/contributor for CBC Radio network programs and on TV Ontario.

Ted's books include a series on wartime Canada: *Juno: Canadians at D-Day, June 6, 1944*; *Days of Victory: Canadians Remember 1939-45*; *Behind the Glory: Canada's Role in the Allied Air War*; *Deadlock in Korea: Canadians at War, 1950-1953*; and *Victory at Vimy: Canada Comes of Age, April 9-12, 1917*. One of his books, *Making Music (Profiles from a Century of Canadian Music)* was co-authored with his father, Alex (1922-2004), a television actor, broadcast journalist and writer. A full-time professor of journalism at Centennial College, Ted is an active member of the RCAF Association, the CAHS, and an honorary member of the Korean War Veterans Association of Canada. In 2011 he received the Canadian Minister of Veterans' Affairs Commendation and in 2012 the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. Ted much appreciates that his selection for the Veterans' Affairs Commendation was decided not by the veterans affairs minister nor his department, but by veterans themselves.

In a dynamic presentation, Ted showed how many key players in the phenomenal Great Escape were Canadians. He contrasted the real story with Hollywood's film version. *The Great Escape* is the third most popular wartime movie ever made, probably after *The Longest Day* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Released in 1963, it culminated everything Hollywood stood for. Director John Sturges contacted Paul Brickhill, author of the 1951 book *The Great Escape*, and for ten years sought the film rights. Aiming for a blockbuster, he recruited "Hollywood hunks" such as Steve McQueen, James Garner, Richard Attenborough, Charles Bronson and James Coburn. Most of the stars were in their 30s or 40s. In reality, the prisoners of war who escaped were mainly in their teens and 20s. The film made \$11 million in its first year alone, compared to \$4 million to produce it.

Bavaria was chosen as the film location, enabling colourful scenes such as McQueen leaping over fences in a motorcycle to get to Switzerland. In fact, Stalag Luft III wasn't within 150 miles of any mountain but was near the town of Sagan, in western Poland, about 150 kilometres south-east of Berlin. The land is flat, with a forested area of pine trees around the camp. The film portrayed Bronson as a moody, schizophrenic 'tunnel king' --- an American with Polish roots in the Royal Air Force. Wrong! The man who designed the tunnels was Wally Floody, born in Chatham, raised in Toronto. As a youth, he went to the hard rock mines of Timmins and Kirkland Lake in north-central Ontario and learned how to design tunnels. The movie cast Garner as the 'scrounger,' who fleeced the German prison guards to get forged documents and tunnel building tools needed by the escape committee. He was also portrayed as an American in the RAF. Wrong again. The scrounger was Barry Davidson, born and raised in Calgary. He earned his pilot's wings in 1937, when he wrote General Chiang Kai-shek to request a role with the Chinese Nationalist Air Force. Kindly rejected, Davidson joined the RAF and was shot down in France. At Stalag Luft III, he scrounged a wide variety of items while stealing from and blackmailing guards. The movie portrayed Donald Pleasence as the forger, an even-tempered, soft-spoken British photographer and birder. Pleasence was the only man in the cast who had actually been shot down and served in a POW camp. In the film, he goes blind and is told that he can't go on the escape. But he joins the Garner character and they escape to an airport where they steal a plane that eventually runs out of fuel and crashes. That was all fiction. The real forger was Tony Pengelly. Born in Truro, NS, and raised in Weston, ON, he left a dysfunctional family in 1936-37. He went to England, joined the RAF and was shot down in November, 1940. An expert in photography, lithography and lexicography, he was in charge of 107 artists who worked on the forgery team.

The film also cast 1930s British movie idol Gordon Jackson as the intelligence chief. Wrong again. Among the intelligence officers was Kingsley Brown. Also born in Nova Scotia, he became a journalist working for *The Hamilton Spectator* and *The Halifax Chronicle*. In Halifax, Brown learned to fly and enlisted in the RCAF. He was shot down and escaped twice from Stalag Luft III. Ted noted the movie suggested the tunnelling effort was basically a madcap "add water and stir" thing. However, POWs were focused on the challenge of escape long before. At Stalag Luft I at Barth, Germany, four years before the Great Escape, POWs had tried to build no fewer than 47 tunnels. The soil was damp and the water table was high. Barry Davidson and Tony Pengelly were at Stalag I, along with Dick Bartlett, of Fort Qu'Appelle, Sask., who somehow smuggled parts for radio into the camp and developed a crystal set. At Luft I, they listened to BBC broadcasts nightly without the knowledge of the Germans. Bartlett became "the custodian of the canary (radio)" at Stalag Luft III. The Germans

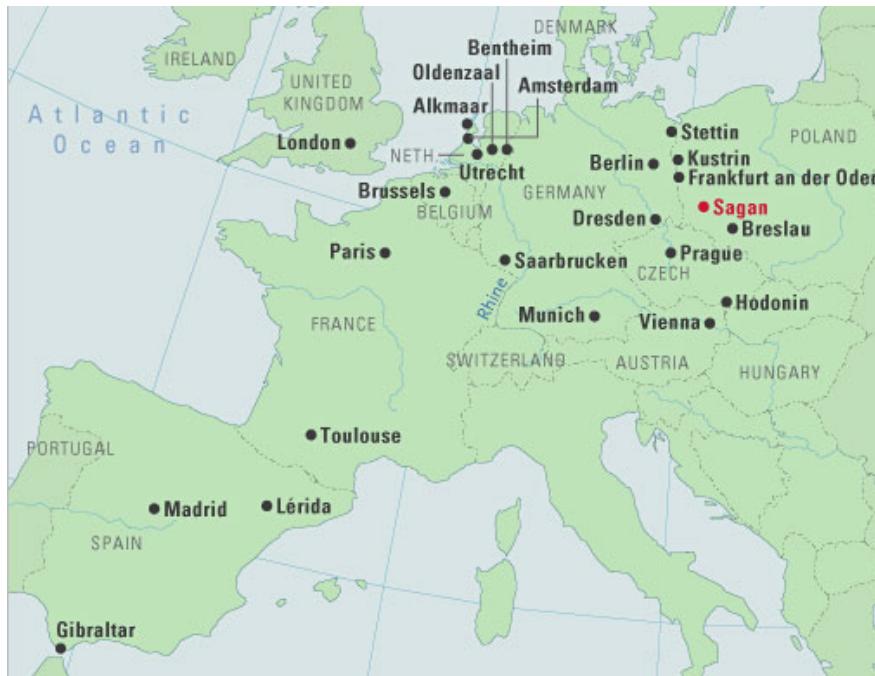


The Great Escape Movie Poster
Courtesy of Flickr



found every tunnel at Barth. As Pengelly explained, "At Barth, escaping was strictly private enterprise. But a man can't forge his own identity papers, dig his own tunnel, make his own wire clippers, escape clothes, maps (and) compass... from our futility, we knew we would have to organize to be successful." Collaboration was key to success. As Ted observed, that's "a very Canadian phenomenon."

At Stalag Luft III, the camp was essentially carved out of a pine forest and served by a railway. It opened in April, 1942, with about two or three thousand Allied air crew sent there. The Germans, worried about containing escapees from many different places in occupied Europe, housed all the escape artists in one place to make it inescapable. The flip side was that all of those 'brainiacs' would produce a master plan to escape. Stalag Luft III wasn't a concentration or death camp. It was run by the Luftwaffe. *Reichmarschall* Herman Goering upheld the Geneva Conventions, which simply required the POWs to report at 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Otherwise, they had time to clean their barracks, prepare meals, clean clothes, or read library books and courses. They also had time to build tunnels. Luftwaffe guards lived in a forested barracks area, with the commandant, responsible for four compounds --- East, Centre, North and South. In 1942, three POWs escaped the East Compound using a wooden horse. By 1943, the Germans had doubled the number of prisoners at Luft III, mainly Commonwealth with some Americans. In April, they opened the North Compound from where the Great Escape occurred. It was essentially for Commonwealth POWs, who offered to assist the Germans in constructing expanded barracks. The Germans readily welcomed the manpower. Many POWs left the East Compound to move to the North. Soon, when the Germans weren't looking, the POWs were calculating their escape. They actually stole diagrams for the sewage infrastructure in the North Compound, hoping that someone could squeeze through (which wasn't possible).



Escape Routes x 3
Courtesy Jonathan Vance University of Western Ontario

to carry 'leather' briefcases (really made of cardboard), to look like businesspeople. Conversant in different languages, they passed for civilians and were to buy tickets for the express trains. Six lines ran through the town, going northwest to Berlin or southeast to Breslau. The station was about two

The POWs moved into the expanded compound on Apr. 1, 1943. Within days, Roger Bushell arrived, having made a second attempt from another camp. He had been badly beaten by the Gestapo, and was determined to make life as miserable as he could for the guards. He vowed to get 300 men out, in three tunnels code-named "Tom," "Dick" and "Harry." The Americans were in the South Compound. The railway station became the objective of the first escapers on the overnight of March 24, 1944. The original escapers were to get to the station dressed in uniforms converted to civilian clothes. They were

kilometres from where the Hut 104 tunnel emerged. Just before the war, politicians recognized the need for civilians to get to the station without tripping over the track. So they built a tunnel under the tracks to the boarding platform --- how convenient for the escapers. On the night of the escape, Bob Van der Stok, a Dutchman in the RAF, got to the spot where the tunnel was, only to be met by a hand on his shoulder. He thought he had been caught, but the guard simply hustled him into the tunnel in case of an air raid. Van der Stok got to the train and was one of three POWs who actually returned to England.



Stalag Luft III Camp Building
Courtesy Imperial War Museum London

Red Cross parcels arrived in the East Compound. Officers were entitled to non-perishables such as canned meat, cigarettes, chocolate, and powdered milk (a product Klim, which is milk spelled backwards). The barracks huts were built of wood, accommodating 150 men each. They were set on concrete blocks so the anti-tunnelling guards or "ferrets" could spot any suspicious activity under them. Six chimneys were placed on solid concrete or stone foundations, about three or four feet deep in the ground, and three feet square. That's exactly where the diggers went. They went down another 30 feet. They had to avoid guards with dogs, doubled barbed wire, high fences, and a warning wire that put them at risk of being shot by tower sentries equipped with spotlights and armed with machine guns if they crossed it. They also went deep so they would not be heard by the ferrets, who could pick up sounds from microphones that ran 24/7. The exercise track was the safest place for the escape committee to talk. Danish-born Frank Sorensen, raised in Quebec, connected with RAF fighter pilot Roger Bushell, who was fluent in six languages but not Danish. Sorensen taught Bushell Danish as they walked. The roll call occurred in the exercise area, where sports were played. Roger Bushell decided the POWs would build the three tunnels. The Germans never found "Dick." It was "Harry" where the escape occurred on the night of March 24, 1944. Getting rid of the dirt was the first tunnelling challenge. A Royal Navy airman, Peter Fanshawe, devised a scheme whereby the POWs put dirt in pouches in their pant legs. The POWs could walk with their hands in their

pockets and pull a string that would allow the dirt to flow down the inside of the trousers and onto the ground. They were known as “penguins.” The sand on the surface was white and almost powdery, while the sand 30 feet below was yellow and much coarser. The penguins went to places where they could easily disperse the sand, including gardens. Yellow sand would quickly disappear into white.

George McGill, a Canadian in charge of diversions, created sports to divert the Germans who loved to watch. The POWs (*kriegsgefangenen*), who called themselves “krieges,” staged various diversions while the penguins worked. A large brick pit collected rain and served as a fire pool. Built by the Germans from tunnelled yellow sand, it left yellow sand around the perimeter. That helped the penguins to make the sand disappear. The psychological impact of imprisonment was significant. RCAF Spitfire pilot Don Edy wrote he doubted “if there is a lonelier feeling in the world than when first taken prisoner. Everything seems completely hopeless and the thought of being behind barbed wire for God knows long, maybe years, brings on an immediate depression.” The escape committee provided POWs a constructive diversion from being obsessed with somehow getting out. Wally Floody’s partners in the tunnel design/digging team included Hank Birkland, from Spearhill, Manitoba, who also had mining experience in B.C., and John Weir, of Toronto. An outdoorsman in his youth, Weir was shot down in a Spitfire and his eyelids were burned in the fire. That didn’t stop him from participating in digging seven tunnels at Stalag Luft I and three at Luft III. Weir was left-handed, so when Floody sent him into the tunnel, it tended to be dug to the left. When Weir finished, Floody sent right-handed Birkland, who dug to the right.

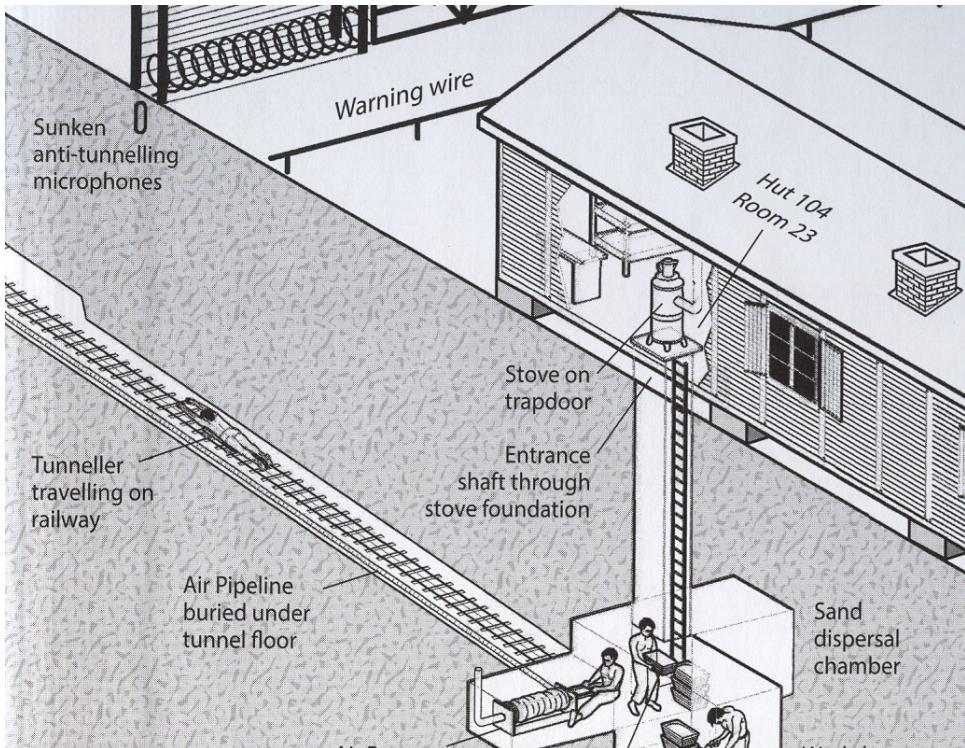
The entrance to “Harry” in Hut 104 began with a trap door. Ley Kenyon, a British commercial artist in the RAF, was the documentarian for the escape. His sketches were rolled into a pencil-sized cylinder and stuck inside the pendulum of a cuckoo clock, hidden in Tony Pengelly’s barracks. That was essentially the diary of the escape. One diagram showed how the stove below the chimney was removed. The stove sat on a trapdoor. At the base of the stove was a series of tiles, for protection against the stove burning. The POWs busted through the tiles into the wood to go through the concrete down to the ground. Three RAF officers, Polish, who were tilemen, immediately replaced the tiles with something that looked exactly the same so it looked as if nothing had happened. The tunnellers worked mostly naked, or nearly naked. If they went down in their street clothes, the yellow sand would stain their elbows and knees and alert the Germans. If they were naked, it was easier to hide though their elbows and knees might be stained yellow. In the winter, connecting tubes ran from the stove to the wall, so the stove was still generating smoke. The tunnel was 360 feet long and about 30 feet deep. All of the walls of sand had to be shored with wood. Every wooden bunk bed gave up some of its cross members. So the tunnel became the exact length of the bunk bed boards and was about two feet square. Tunnel sentries, called “stooges,” passed signals to one another. George Sweanor, a Port Hope native, was the duty pilot. He hung his laundry just inside the main gate and signalled according to how he hung his laundry. Other stooges closed or opened a drape, or lit a pipe. The final stooge would turn to Pat Langford, of Edmonton, or Hank Sprague, from Nelson, B.C., who protected the trapdoor to “Harry.” They could open or close the trap in less than 60 seconds. The wood in the walls and ladder was key to the strength of the tunnel. If it was rotten, it could break and the tunnel sand would pour in like water. There was a risk of suffocation in the tunnel. The sand was precarious and at times it would pile up on Floody and the other diggers, who could barely be pulled to safety by their tunnel mate to avoid suffocation.

Three rooms were at the base of the shaft. One was a workshop. A carpenter worked on the wood, creating edges to dovetail it with the bunk boards so they wouldn't need nails to interlock it. Everything was done to create the tunnel walls without using nails and the associated noise. The POWs built half-way houses at certain distances, enabling the men to crawl with a bit more room.

One half-way house was called Piccadilly House and another Leicester Square. Each carriage had a base on it: four

wheels made of wood, wrapped in tin, moving on railway tracks going the full length of the tunnel. Sand from the face of the tunnel would be put into a box on the trolley and hauled back to the base of the shaft. It was highly dangerous, as the diggers were essentially creating a cave-in. They didn't nail the wood together. It had to be held in place by the sand around it. Another room housed a little flatbed of wood, with a frame and a collapsible series of panels of burlap and leather. The bellows pumped air into the tunnel. Gordon King, of Winnipeg, pumped the bellows eight to ten hours a day. On the night of the escape, he pumped constantly. Air from the chimney was sucked down the shaft and pushed up the tunnel using empty Klim cans, soldered together to create a vital air duct. The duct was laid beneath the tracks for the full tunnel length, enabling the bellows to continually provide fresh air to the digger at the face of the tunnel. The exit shaft came up short. The Germans, knowing about the tunnelling but unable to find one, kept paring back the woods.

John Weir wrote 150 letters from Stalag Luft III to his fiance' Fran. All were censored, but his letters contained code. He kept asking for silk pyjamas, which Fran dutifully send to him. Ultimately, the diggers used them as uniforms. Silk fended off the yellow sand and was light enough to put on and take off quickly. Weir also asked for gramophone needles. The steel needles were magnetized and used to create a compass on a melted-down Bakelite (plastic) gramophone record base. Al Hake, an Australian airman, led the manufacturing team that produced 200 compasses. They proudly pressed an inscription in the bottom of the base: "Stalag Luft III. Accept no substitutes." Frank Sorensen wrote home to request a thesaurus dictionary. Every thesaurus has several pages of translation of common phrases to European languages. The thesaurus became the textbook for the men learning the skills of street talk. Airman and scholar Gordon Kidder, of St. Catharines, could speak fluent German. He led culture appreciation sessions, teaching the airmen perfect pronunciation. Kidder was among the 50 officers executed after the escape. It was, said Ted, "a horrible waste of a brilliant man." Ted visited



View of Tunnel Harry Shaft And Workshop
Illustration Courtesy Ted Barris

Stalag Luft III last March on the 70th anniversary of the escape, with Gord Kidder, Gordon's nephew who retraced his uncle's steps. What a moving occasion.

Kingsley Brown recalled his first night at Stalag Luft III in the East Barracks. He had nearly been overcome by the stench of body odours, clouds of cigarette smoke, and burning candles made from margarine and shoe polish. Despite the haze, he noticed the diggers at the opposite end of his room, where the stove had been moved to reveal a hole in the floor. Brown, thrilled at joining the underground operation, approached his superior Wing Commander Taffy Williams, who gave him a propaganda job. Inside one of the German jam jars he'd procured from a guard were several bumblebees, held inside by cheesecloth. Williams had kriegies capture the bees and pass them along for propaganda. He gave Brown gloves, telling him to open the jar and gently grab each bee by the wings. Williams then put a noose of thread on each bee; attached to the thread was a pennant-sized piece of tissue paper. Carefully written, in tiny script, was a message Germans discovering the bees would read: "Deutschland kaput," one side of the pennant said, and on the other, "Hitler kaput." The bee release was the first pushback by the POWs. Brown was then moved to the library, where he learned identities to steal for forged documents by scrutinizing corporate letters and magazines. The POWs stole from, or blackmailed, guards to get the typewriters they needed. They used paper made from the end paper of Bibles --- the same consistency of visas. They made hundreds of documents which looked exactly like the originals. Rob Buckham, an artist from Toronto, shot down, credited the Group of Seven for his skill as a forger. He worked with the forgers in a room where the compound orchestra rehearsed. If the stooges indicated trouble was coming, the forgers wrapped up, stowing their work in a violin case, and the rehearsal ended. The musicians left the hut with their instruments in hand; one carried his violin case, with forgeries enclosed, to Hut 104, where Tony Pengelly hid them in a removable wall board until the next forgery session.

John Colwell, a chicken farmer from Victoria, was the "tin man" who shaped sheet metal to create kitchen utensils. Claustrophobic, he didn't want to tunnel, but was a stooge. A short man, he could hide more easily from the tower sentries. George Harsh, an American in the RCAF, was born into a wealthy family. He became bored, fatally shot a store clerk and spent 12 years in a Georgia chain gang. He was pardoned, became a medic, went to Montreal and became a gunner until he was shot down. At Luft III, he became the head of security, managing the stooges. The officers built the North Compound theatre at Luft III in 1943, with seating for 350 on chairs made from Canadian Red Cross parcel boxes. Unlike all the other buildings, it had a brick foundation. The POWs staged a new production every week between September, 1943 and January, 1945...Shaw, Shakespeare, musical comedies, symphonic orchestra, etc. German officers enjoyed front-row seating. In January, 1944, three months before the escape, the POWs built a trapdoor in row 13. Every night, after the theatre closed, the penguins hid yellow sand into every nook and cranny of the theatre basement. Fifty tons of sand from "Harry" were buried in the last three months until the escape.

On the night of the escape, the POWs came up short of the woods. Whenever a sentry marched away, a POW would pull on the rope and the guy next in line would pop out of the tunnel, run into the woods and take off. This took place between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. on March 25, when a sentry saw something. He fired a shot and everything stopped. During those seven hours, 80 men escaped. Upon learning of it, an enraged Hitler demanded all of the escapers be recaptured and executed. He was reminded that such an order could imperil German POWs in Britain and North America. The Germans recaptured 77 of the 80 and decided to kill 50. While the movie had the 50 men machine-

gunned, in reality they died when Gestapo thugs took them out one or two at a time to murder them and cremate the bodies. A previously unpublished RAF interrogation document, which Ted obtained from a friend, showed that SS officer Arthur Nebe was tasked with choosing the 50 who would die. Twenty-seven escapers ultimately went back to Luft III. Nine of the 80 escapers were Canadians and six were murdered. Ironically, Nebe was killed later when the Gestapo felt he was complicit in the plot to kill Hitler. The men who would escape overland were called "hard-arsers," as opposed to those going to the train station. One hard-arsler Canadian, Keith "Skeets" Ogilvie, travelled 65 kilometres on foot before being recaptured and brought to Gestapo interrogators. He saw several of his cold, malnourished mates being led away, for what he assumed would be medical care. Instead, they were killed. RAF commandos traced all of those complicit in the murders. They were tried at Hamburg in 1946. All who were found guilty were executed.



The 50 Memorial
Photo Credit -en.wikipedia.org

Today, Poland reveres the monument to the Allied POWs at the site of Stalag Luft III as a piece of extraordinary history. A series of flat stone markers displays the names of the 50 executed air force officers. A replica of Hut 104 gives visitors an idea of the prisoners' experience. Ted noted 10,000 men remained at Luft III after the Great Escape, until January, 1945. As the Soviets moved west, the Germans scooped everyone up and took them as far

west as possible, hoping to use the POWs as collateral to negotiate their way out of the war. It became a horrible forced march, extending into May, in some of the worst territory and coldest winter of the war. The POWs, not nearly as fit and well-nourished as the tunnellers, were described by Ted as "the walking dead." Some Allied pilots mistook them as soldiers and they were strafed. Suddenly, on May 5-6, all of the German guards disappeared and 70,000 prisoners from across the Reich needed help to get home. Churchill ordered every available aircraft to liberate the men. Ted's exceptional presentation reflected the in-depth research which is his trademark. Chapter Volunteer Bob Winson thanked Ted, reminding the audience to visit Ted's website at www.tedbarris.com. Ted will host a Holland Liberation Tour in May, 2015, organized by Merit Travel Agency.