

A TRUE STORY OF THE GREAT ESCAPE

Why a boy from Manly was executed on Hitler's personal orders

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Every family has its war hero. Ours was a ghost called John.

Squadron Leader John "Willy" Williams was a medical student and passionate Manly surfer turned World War 2 Ace. He's still easy enough to pick out in those blurred, black and white photos of khaki-clad Australian fighter pilots squinting into the desert sun; Willy had insisted on fighting his war in non-regulation attire and led his squadron into air combat over Libya and Egypt dressed in sandals and shorts.

It was something of a relief, then, that Willy survived being accidentally shot down over enemy lines in the Western Desert in late 1942 and ended up a POW in Stalag Luft III near the German-Polish border.

What happened inside the camp became a war legend; in a triumph of ingenuity, organization and sheer physical and mental endurance 76 POWs tunneled their way out of the supposedly "escape proof" camp under the German's noses.

In the Hollywood version of "The Great Escape", a character called "Willy", rubs shoulders with Steve McQueen and is last seen making his way to freedom - one of the three to survive the ensuing Nazi manhunt.

"It was exhilarating. It felt like liberation just to be on the other side of the fence," said RAF Squadron Leader, Bertram "Jimmy" James, who was led out of the tunnel by Willy, when I spoke to him in the UK by phone before his death in 2008. It was a moment he obviously still relished. The fear, extreme cold, fatigue and reprisals could wait.

Our Willy, too, was seen trekking off into distance with his escape partner, and former Sydney school mate and close friend, fellow fighter pilot, Flight Lieutenant Reg "Rusty" Keirath. Their route to Switzerland was via German-occupied Czechoslovakia, the last 20 kilometres to the Czech border slogged on foot through waist deep snow drifts.

And, Willy – or John as we called him at home despite his long standing school and airforce nickname -- did play a major role in the plotting and orchestrating the audacious escape; often sporting his threadbare shorts and sandals.

As chief supply officer, he was in charge of "scrounging" the four thousand or so bed boards used to shore up the ten metre deep, 111 metre long escape tunnel and a myriad of other materials; all without the guards realizing that anything was missing. Rusty worked closely with him. Willy has also been outside the camp "on walks", according to Jimmy, having used his school boy German to befriend the guards and talk his way onto work detail to a firsthand look at the forest.

When I asked Jimmy about their fears -- of the claustrophobia of a tunnel barely big enough to accommodate the wide shoulders of a large man, of the caves-in, stale air and the threat of discovery or recapture and reprisals -- he was taken aback. To survive psychologically as a POW life needed purpose. The prisoners in Stalag Luft III were all officers so they were not required

to work; which left some of the sharpest minds and most courageous characters idle to plot. And, escape was a duty, or at least you were expected to try, he said. "We were just push on kind of chaps really," Jimmy said of their formidable drive in the face of hunger, cold and their unknown future of incarceration.

Both Willy and Rusty were former students of Sydney Church of England Grammar School (SHORE) and both had flown in the same RAAF 450 squadron, the "Desert Harassers"; a unit well known by the Germans for their aggression and precision in the air. After Rusty was picked up by the Germans after bailing out into the sea and was reunited with Willy in the camp, they already shared the personal trust essential for Rusty's recruitment to such an intricate, clandestine operation.

The POW camp had been deliberately sited on sandy soil likely to cave-in, the ground was microphoned to detect any digging underground and heavy vehicles were driven around the camp to collapse any tunnels beneath. "Willy" and the carpenters worked for months on end in a small, cramped underground chamber, accessed via a concealed entrance under a stove. It was an operation which, in total, occupied 600 men, and had aimed to break 200 of them out; when no previous escape had involved more than a dozen prisoners. Willy and Rusty were escapees numbers 31 and 32; escape slots were allocated on rank, contribution to the construction and likelihood of success.

Of course, in the true story of the Great Escape neither Willy nor Rusty survived. (The film's producer never claimed it was historically correct; rather the characters were composites of the real men).

Within days of the breakout escapees all over Germany, and the handful, like Willy and Rusty, who had made it into the then Czechoslovakia, were being forced into Gestapo cars and driven hundreds of kilometers into remote forests. The escape had so enraged Hitler that he'd personally ordered the secret execution of 50 of the 73 recaptured men in flagrant violation of the Geneva Convention. Hitler's advisors knew this would be a shocking escalation of the conflict, so prepared thousands of fake communications suggesting the men had died while fighting their guards or running away.

When Willy was pushed out of a Gestapo car, probably somewhere near the small town of Most (then Reichenberg) he was 24-years-old. He had been training fighter pilots or flying combat mission for both the RAF then the RAAF since he was 18 years old. He'd been credited with four victories for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Every single week of his war he wrote home.

I always presumed, and in some ways hoped, that Willy and Rusty died together, probably with the fellow escapee pilots, the British Leslie Bull and Polish Jerry Mondshein; but all we know for certain is that the four men's bodies were brought in together for cremation in Most.

Of the "Most four" only Willy had reportedly been told they were not heading for a new prison camp, as the rules of engagement dictated, but were on their way to die.

In Sydney, the Great Escape was a "huge story", said his late brother David, in a lengthy discussion we had in 2006. But, with no word that Willy had been among the escapees there was still hope.

“I used to half worship him. Mum was incredibly attached to John (Willy) and had been incredibly affected by him signing up.”

When the family finally received confirmation of his shooting, there was not great outpouring of the grief, David said. There was no funeral, no memorial.

“It was a war, everybody had problems. I had mine, the bloke next to me might have had his own tragedy.”

“It was like the knight who went out in shining armour and then his horse comes back without a rider, it was an ordinary occurrence (in war). You just kept things to yourself.”

But, the loss, like a dank, invisible fog, settled anyway. My grandmother became chronically ill, virtually ignoring my then 14-year-old father, Owen, the youngest, and leaving him the somewhat erratic if well meaning care of his elder sister. She attended séances, like many bereaved mothers of the era, finding her son back riding the Manly waves through mediums. And, she fought a long personal battle to be awarded the Mothers’ Medal in recognition of her loss, failing because her son had been born in New Zealand and had served in the RAF, before the RAAF.

A massive war crimes investigation into the Great Escape murders followed the Allied victory. In the “exemplary justice” promised by the then British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden the “foul criminals” responsible for these “cold-blooded acts of butchery” were, indeed, relentlessly pursued across Europe. War crimes tribunals in Hamburg and Nuremburg sentenced 16 former Gestapo officers to death, another four were hanged in Czechoslovakia, and many more were jailed.

But, no one was ever located or brought to justice for the murders of the Most four.

Next weekend, a Czech Air Force fly-past and a Czech military band, will honour Willy, Rusty, Leslie and Jerry with the unveiling of permanent memorial in Most; on the 68th anniversary of the escape. We, the descendants, will be there. Then, in a hired minibus we’ll finally make our pilgrimage together, following in their ill fated footsteps.

“It is something which should have been done many years ago,” says organizer, Michal Holy, a Czech commercial pilot and amateur historian. But why single out these four men in a region devastated by the Nazi occupation of World War 2 and the austere Communist-era which followed?

“This was deliberate, calculated murder, not death on a battlefield in war,” says Holy.

How Michal found us, the relatives, spread out across the world and how we have since connected with each other is, in itself another fascinating story.

As the journalist in the family, I have always felt a great responsibility to tell Willy’s story; that was the only way it as ever going to matter.

Growing up “Uncle John/Willy” was ever present, if in the background. The “youngest squadron leader in history” is how I remember him, without being entirely clear on what history; at the time the life expectancy of the pilot of the leading aircraft in a combat formation was so short

that promotion through the ranks was alarming swift. Most of all I remember trying not to let my vivid young imagination stray into that dark, forest where the story ends.

My father, Owen, died relatively young, almost a quarter of a century ago. He was the fifth and youngest of the Williams kids. One by one his brothers had left, but the war ended before he was old enough to sign up. As an adult he and his third brother, Barry, too, favoured shorts and sandals and they both insisted on surfing at Manly all year around, without wetsuits. Dad would laugh in mid-winter, rain pouring down, and insist that “the sun was always shining” over that protected pocket in the southern corner of Manly Beach at the end of his childhood street.

When my uncle David passed away in 2006, the longest surviving Williams sibling, I became the de facto family custodian of Willy’s memory. The thread of memory was broken, there was now not a single family member left alive who had known Willy.

So, there was something incredibly poignant about the little box of personal effects and the big pile of fraying clippings and documents. I polished the small silver surfing trophy won on Dee Why Beach in the summer of 1935 as a member of the Australian champion junior surf boat crew and the silver school napkin ring with the old SHORE crest and put them on display at home.

In everybody’s story no matter how ordinary, there is always a particular fork in the road which leads down an unexpected path.

In the 1930s Manly was a sparkling antidote to the harsh daily reality of the Depression. The crystal clear waters were free. They said Manly kids swam almost as soon as they could walk and every year a marathon swim event offered a dazzling 500 pounds in prize money at a time when doctors, clerks and barristers were working on the roads just to buy vegetables and the odd piece of meat.

The Williams family, too, were living in somewhat reduced circumstances. Grandfather had been a successful architect in New Zealand and was very hard hit when spending on public buildings dried up. By the time the family moved to Manly they were all piled into a rented two bedroom flat a stone’s throw from the beach, the older boys happily sleeping on the verandah, and grandfather apparently selling off the NZ assets to pay the school fees.

A black and white photo in Manly Library shows Willy as a straight-backed member of the Manly swimming team which took out the NSW title in 1935, and others show him proudly carrying and riding his precious “tombstone”, one of the extremely heavy early wooden surfboards.

Behind this glistening, carefree beach scene, however, another story was building. At a talk at Queenscliff Surf Lifesaving Club the swimming local legend, Harry Hay, who had attended five Olympics as a swimmer or coach, declared the Berlin Games of 1936 “had surpassed all others”. He told the local lifesavers he’d been so impressed with the Hitler Youth movement that we should consider it a possible model to solve youth unemployment in Australia.

Another exceptionally talented and fit Manly surfer, of German background, who knew the family well told Willy that “Hitler would sort Australia out when he lands”, said David.

No one much took the German seriously except Willy. He left his first year of medicine at the University of Sydney to train in northern Scotland as a RAF pilot officer in late 1937. Later, my

grandmother and aunt would be called to give evidence in the secret courts which assessed the risk posed by enemy nationals, many of whom were interned. By then the Manly locals were busy sweeping their brief infatuation with the Hitler Youth under the carpet, and showing one particular German surfer the surf club door.

Willy's war and his escape can't be condensed into a few paragraphs. In his letters there's always an upbeat enough tone. But, he does plead with the family to stop "the kids", the two youngest sons, my Dad and Barry, from signing up and he does write often about missing his home; "There is only one of me and six of you, so how do you think I feel?"

To everyone else, however, as many letters from his RAF and RAAF colleagues suggest, he was usually playing the clown except in the air, where he was apparently a very serious and aggressive combat pilot.

Of course, said David; "Mother feared "the letter", then she got one in late 1942, so it was a relief that he had been shot down and was believed to be a POW.

"You had a pretty fair expectation that if came down alive he would be fairly treated. You would rather be down in Germany than in a Japanese camp.

"So we thought, he's down now, that's bloody bad luck. But eventually we'd see him at the end of the war.

"It's sad that the son who recognized the threat from Hitler was shot on Hitler's personal orders."

The Hollywood film of the "glorious saga" of the Great Escape has been played so many times since its release in 1963 that fiction and fact have blurred. But, to talk to anyone with a personal link to the escape about the film is to elicit the same response. "Hmmp, rubbish, rubbish," tutted, Jimmy James.

"It's a pity the Americans made it, they weren't even there," said Peter Keirath, Rusty's nephew in a recent discussion, suggesting the Brits would have at least made a more accurate job of it.

As Paul Brickhill, an Australian journalist and fellow pilot and POW, wrote in the original account of the Great Escape: "I suppose it's romantic now. It wasn't then. Life was too real, grim and earnest".

If I were the script writer I wouldn't have invented quite such a colourfully heroic role for Steve McQueen nor put him on a motorbike that none of the men actually rode, or allowed him to survive, while the Gestapo machine-gunned the faceless others off camera.

Everyone knows this is a story which doesn't end well. So for Willy, or John, as the family still calls him, I would fade to black, then cut back to an earlier scene.

He's in northern Scotland training new fighter pilots for the RAF. It's January, 1940 and it's freezing outside. He's exhausted after clocking up 120 hours on dual control aircraft and landing over and over again, blind in the snow. He's commandeered a scratchy gramophone. And, lately, he's been happily "stepping out" with Doreen on his days off. He's writing home.

“We went night flying in the snow the other night. There was a bright moon and the northern lights turned themselves on for a while. It was like a fairy landscape, everything seemed white and it was nearly as bright as daylight. The aeroplanes throw up great plumes of snow as they take off and the moon glinting on the fuselage looked like great shiny silver fish in leaping in the spraying surf....it was an unforgettable scene.

At the moment I am sitting before my fire in my room and listening to Tchaikovsky's 5th and feeling very content for once.”