



The Great Escape: A Canadian Story

Ted Barris

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A unique retelling of WWII's most dramatic escape, told through first-hand recollections of the soldiers who experienced it.

On the night of March 24, 1944, 80 Commonwealth airmen crawled through a 336-foot-long tunnel and slipped into the forest beyond the wire of Stalag Luft III, a German POW compound near Sagan, Poland. The event became known as 8220;The Great Escape,8220; an intricate breakout more than a year in the making, involving as many as 2,000 POWs working with extraordinary coordination, intelligence, and daring. Yet within a few days, all but three of the escapees were recaptured. Subsequently, 50 were murdered, cremated, and buried in a remote corner of the prison camp.

But most don't know the real story behind The Great Escape. Now, on the eve of its 70th anniversary, Ted Barris writes of the key players in the escape attempt, those who got away, those who didn't, and their families at home.

Barris marshals groundbreaking research into a compelling firsthand account. For the first time, *The Great Escape* retells one of the most astonishing episodes in WWII directly through the eyes of those who experienced it.

Joint Winner of the Libris Award for Non-Fiction Book of the Year 2014

Globe and Mail Bestseller

Toronto Star Bestseller

The Great Escape: A Canadian Story Details

Date : Published October 5th 2013 by Dundurn (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9781771022729

Author : Ted Barris

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Cultural, Canada, War, World War II

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From Reader Review The Great Escape: A Canadian Story for online ebook

Raimo Wirkkala says

This is a very welcome addition to the many accounts already published of my favourite World War II story. It was a pleasure to meet the many Canadians who contributed so much to the effort.

Joan says

It was great to read the real story of The Great Escape and how Canadians played a major role in all aspects. Many of the escape's key players-the tunnel designer, excavators, forgers, scroungers, security and intelligence personnel, keeper of the secret radio and lots of security "stooges" and sand-dispersal "penguins" were Canadians. Five Canadians were also murdered by the Gestapo when they shot 50. Don't get me wrong, The Great Escape is one of my favorite all time movies, I've seen it about 100 times....lol....but it was unfortunate that the Americans felt that the only way it would be a hit was to americanize it. The Steve McQueen character didn't even exist and that was one of my fav. roles. If you are interested in this type of history then I highly recommend this book. Very good read.

Bev Walkling says

I grew up reading World War 2 (and one) escape books from the bookshelves of my father who served with the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps overseas during the war. My uncle was captured in the Liri Valley in Italy and was sent to a German POW camp. I had the privilege of talking with him about his experiences. I have seen the movie "The Great Escape" countless times and it's follow-up tv special which focused on seeing that justice took place after the war, and so I was drawn to this book.

This is not a book that you can sit down and read quickly. It is meticulously researched and loaded with names and details even as to how much was used in terms of supplies like wires, to build the tunnels. (The amounts are incredible and go to show the great resourcefulness of the prisoners) The book is more than just the story of the escape, however, it is also a history of Stalag Luft 3. It clearly details the day to day life of the POW's. Sources are clearly documented and there is a good selection of photo's at the end of the book. My one complaint about these is that the Kindle version doesn't show them side by side the way a hardcover book would and this means that for some of them the description of what the pictures show is not on the same page as the picture is.

If you are interested in World War 2 history or history of escape, then this is a must read for you. If you are a Canadian, it is particularly of interest because the movie so many has seen does not tell the full, true story of the importance of the Canadian POW's to making this escape happen.

Sharon Fournier says

great book

David G. says

It focuses on the 'Canadian connection' worthwhile reading.

Marc says

Great Escape; Great story; Great book. I've seen the movie many times (came out in 1963, the year of the Revolution-see my next book;-). But the movie was a Hollywood fabrication and we always knew that Canadians were really at the center of the story. The movie would never have sold out to American audiences unless their guys were the heroes. No one ever stole a motorcycle like McQueen's character but it does make great film.

Ted Barris tells the story through the participants: their back stories, capture stories and escape plan tasks. Unlike Hollywood, he includes all nationalities (Brits, Aussies, Danes/Swedes, Canuks and Yanks), with a bit of Canadian showing through. I've heard Barris for years on CBC and he has written lots of other books on Canadian military history. The story is compelling and even suspenseful, despite knowing the outcome. I did not know that the Nazi SS murdered almost 50 of the escapees.

Don Thompson says

I enjoyed this as I was totally unaware of the part Canadians played in the Air war which is very sad as my father in law was a tail gunner in Halifax's and Wellington's. The fact that so many planes were shot down and that in this one prison were over 600 Canadian POW's made that a whole lot clearer for me.

The other part was the 50 POW's from the great escape who were executed by the German Secret Service. One of the comments made was that the great escape was like parachuting 2 division of Paratroopers into Germany as it tied up so many troops. This is important note but sad that so many died and only 3 of the POW's actually escaped.

The only thing I would have liked would have been a little more on how this poor POW's rebuilt their lives on their return to Canada. It appears that they did not get much support from the Government and Country that they served and for whom they gave up so much. I guess as far as it goes our current Government has not improved or learnt lessons from the history and past experience on how to handle our current vet's coming back home.

a good book. Well worth reading.

Joseph Gambin says

Ted Barris tells an excellent story about the famous Great Escape from Stulag III during WWII. For those

who are only familiar of the story from the great film "The Great Escape," this book will tell you the more accurate version of the story complete with the actual main players in Organization X.

Ted Barris conducted excellent research relying on primary sources to give an accurate portrayal of the scheme to release numerous prisoners from a POW camp in Poland. The result is a great history that is easy to read.

This book would have been a four or five star book except for the first chapter. We Canadians get over sensitive when Hollywood changes the nationality of characters from our historical stories in order to sell movies to American audiences. Hollywood's job is to sell movies not tell accurate histories. Barris expresses this national insecurity by writing an entire chapter on how the movie did not give enough credit to Canada or Canadians. The inaccuracies in the film could have been explained by footnotes or within the text of the actual story. By dedicating the entire first chapter to these inaccuracies it seemed like a bunch of complaining that took away from the overall quality of the book

Jennifer says

During World War II many Allied soldiers were captured but the Axis (Germans) and held at POW camps. Many Canadian, American and UK fliers ended up together in Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Poland. Together these men managed to create a world that contained a library and theater, as well as hosting several sporting events from boxing to baseball and hockey games. The men in this camp became family to each other while they waited out the war and hoped for it to end. While learning languages, putting on plays, and playing sports entertained and lifted their spirits, these weren't their only activities. The men created a secret society, called X Organization, that organized the digging of escape tunnels, distractions, the disposal of dirt, forgery of documents, and the escape itself. On March 24, 1944, the men escaped. Of the approximate 2,000 men that aided in the tunnel's construction less than 200 went through the tunnel (named "Harry") to freedom. Their goal wasn't just to escape but to cause the Germans to utilize their armies, police, air force and other agencies to search for them – thus providing a distraction so the Allies could press further into German territory and maybe cause the war to end sooner. Unfortunately, an initial escape from the camp didn't actually mean freedom and many of the men were captured. Outraged at the complexity of the escape and the amount of men that managed to get through, the Gestapo shot about 50 of the men to send a message to the camp. A tragic but heroic true-life story about courage, strength, wits, and camaraderie.

Having never actually seen the movie "The Great Escape" I can honestly say that I didn't know much at all about this story prior to reading this book. Mr. Barris did an incredible job of bringing the men's stories to life from just before the war to their life in the camp and wrapping up with what happened to them after they were liberated. Considering other survival stories that I've read from this era, the men didn't have it as bad as many others did. They were fortunate to still be able to send and receive letters from family and to receive the Red Cross care parcels. Ingenuity was the men's best friend and when they needed something, it was made from anything from tin cans to scraps found around the camp. Their ability to organize to the extent that they did is awe-inspiring. Mr. Barris took the cold hard facts, photographs, diaries, letters, and interviews and has managed to combine them into an easy to read narrative. It is a spell-binding book that grabs hold of your attention and emotions and has you encouraging the men on from the beginning to the end. Heros like this aren't found very often or even given the credit that they are due. These men deserve that title and to be remembered for all that they accomplished.

Jean Moloney says

Meh, story dragged with all the back story of the prisoners. Felt too much like author had to acknowledge the background of every person who entered story (and there were many different characters). All the background just slowed the pace of the story so that it became lost.

Katharine_Ann says

"The Great Escape: A Canadian Story" takes an in-depth look at the Canadian role in the events of March 24, 1944. Yet what I found interesting about this book is that it is so much more than the Great Escape. The book covers time before the war, including brief histories on many of the key players and the events leading up to the men becoming prisoners of war. The book also follows those POWs past the Great Escape, through the end of the war and their tiring journey home. In between lies a gold mine of information, illuminating the life of a POW, activities in the compound, and the dozens of ingenious ways that POWs refurbished, retooled, and reengineered their surroundings to make life bearable and escape possible.

The opening chapters of the book provide a substantial amount of information. POW names, ranks, flight squadrons, and histories of Canadian roots all blur together. What surfaces from this deluge are individual stories of flight crews evacuating flaming bombers, stunning moments of men throwing themselves into the air or attempting to land their aircraft in any survivable way. Through the progression of the book, individual names begin to stand out, and by the end the book feels exactly as it should: like prisoners of war sitting with me and telling me their stories in their own voice.

This book is incredibly well researched, and I learned a great deal from the information contained within its pages. Barris is a champion for Canadian POWs and strives to tell their story with the greatest amount of respect and awe. "The Great Escape: A Canadian Story" is a humbling reading experience for Canadians and a wonderful historical resource for all.

John says

The book delivers on the title, a Canadian perspective of the Great Escape. It tells the stories of a number of Canadian airmen at Stalag Luft III, including their before-and-after lives. They came from all over the country, and, when the survivors came home, many suffered for years what we now call PTSD. The Canadians played some pivotal roles in this escape, and earlier ones that Barris mentions. The magnificent 1963 movie, with Steve McQueen et al, was biased with a number of fictional American characters, and Barris' tends to over-emphasize the Canadian role, but the subtitle, "A Canadian Story", tells all. That said, there are a number of books on the story as a whole, and that it was largely an all-Commonwealth effort. Readers seeking a wider view can look to those.

Overall, it is great Canadian history, very well-researched, and a terrific read.

Shirley Schwartz says

I don't often read non-fiction books, but when I was told about this one I had to read it. We had just finished

watching the movie The Great Escape, so that was fresh in my mind when I began. This is the true story of what happened on March 24, 1944 at German Prisoner of War Camp (Stalag Luft II). That was the day that 80 prisoners escaped from the camp after crawling through a 365 foot long underground tunnel. This book explains the whole massive and incredible escape plan. The 2,000 plus prisoners at the camp were officers and enlisted men was made up of airmen who had been shot down in Germany. The book describes what life was like in the camp for the flyboys who had been captured. And it describes the incredible detail and the huge amount of planning and the work that went into this great escape plan. Contrary to the movie, though the escape was planned and executed by mostly RAF officers and enlisted men. The British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand airmen were the ones that were involved in this incredible attempt. There were some other nationalities including Americans, involved, but this was a RAF-led attempt. These were brave and very talented men and reading about this huge WWII escape left me in awe of all these men, as well as any other soldiers that were held in German prisoner of war camps.

John says

Even though this is a well known story I still picked up a ton of information I hadn't heard before. Of course being Canadian it was great to get a Canadian perspective.

Chuck Slack says

As a Canadian whose father was an airplane mechanic in the RCAF during the Battle of Britain this story needed to be told. From a Canadian perspective this book shows the bravery, tenacity, and creativity that Canadians contributed to the war.

This is a very well told story. Well researched, presented, and concluded. I highly recommend it.
