



Stalag Luft III

Project managers are always looking for short cuts, lessons learned from other projects that can help them with their current project. Mark has already been providing a view of the Titanic disaster and the fourth article in that series is elsewhere in this issue. He has also taken the lessons of the 'Great Escape' as a source of inspiration.

As November is the traditional month for commemorating those fallen or injured in conflict, there could be no more fitting month to start his series about those men whose project skills would be tested in the most extreme of circumstances. This article is taken from the www.lessons-from-history.com series whose mantra is 'lessons from the past that assist the projects of today to shape the world of tomorrow.'

Many younger people living today would not remember the Great Escape as a great war movie from the sixties let alone a real life event that actually happened, or even less so a project that embodies today's principles of project management. However, it warrants a second look as a project in its own class simply on the risks that were taken, the management of risk, and the lessons learned. How often do you come across a project where you are putting your life on the line with the outcome of a project? Whether knowingly or not, this is what happened in 1944, the prisoners-of-war (POWs) were absolutely committed to a cause to continue a fight as prisoners and cause maximum havoc within the enemy's backyard.

The film the 'Great Escape' (1963) has had mixed blessings for the ex-POWs of Stalag Luft III. It certainly brought attention to the escape and captivated its audience with its humour and action but it took poetic licence with the escape.

Many people will recollect the motorbike scene and Steve McQueen entangling in barb wire fences in an attempt to break across the Swiss border. But this is a very distorted view of the actual event as, by 1944, the US POWs had been segregated to a separate compound, and no motorbikes were ever used in the real escape. A train ride was the best transport most escapees could hope for.

A much bleaker journey

The reality of the event was much more mundane and far darker. For POW airmen just their initial journey into enemy captivity was a roller coaster ride of emotions. From the sudden shock of having to bail out at 18,000 feet, only hours after being in the safety of their billets, to avoiding injury in a risky parachute jump in the dark.

Things just got worse as the next step was to evade capture, not just from troops but from a very unsympathetic and hostile population that saw them as 'terror fliers.'

Going into hiding and then contacting an 'escape line' happened to just a lucky few. Most were inevitably captured and this is when the psychology of these airmen was pushed to the limits. This started with the demoralizing rounds of interrogation, all the time not knowing what had happened to their fellow aircrew, to being in a hopeless and dangerous situation.

A grim future

Once in a POW camp they suffered from very poor rations, overcrowding, the extremes of a seasonal climate, and being incarcerated for an unknown length of time. Malnourished and under constant threat of diseases, the airmen were dragged to the lowest of depths, so their will to resist was completely broken.

In addition, the authorities, through hard lessons of running POW camps, had done everything possible to make Stalag Luft III fully escape-proof, to discourage escapees from even thinking about it. From the geographic location

Project lessons from the Great Escape

by Mark Kozak-Holland

distanced from neutral countries, to locating the camps on sandy soils so any signs of digging would be a dead give away. Every detail of the camp had been thought through, from the construction of the huts on stilts to the burying of microphones beneath the camp's barbed-wire fences (at 33 ft, 10m) to pick up any underground noises.

For the POWs, under these dire circumstances, the easiest response would have been to resign to the situation and drift aimlessly through the war in captivity. But who could predict if and when the Allies would win?

Yet with very limited resources somehow the POWs in Stalag Luft III organized a project of staggering proportions. It is not a question of how did a project emerge but how could it emerge? The answer is complex. These were the hardened escapers, the finest from all camps, who had suffered years of oppression. Through the school of hard knocks they had seen countless escape attempts fail, learned their lessons, and had honed their skills.

What can we learn?

So how does this relate to the field of project management today? Many projects today are initiated with clear objectives, executive sponsorship, and healthy budgets, but they still fail. Other projects have no budgets and numerous obstacles in their way, and yet they succeed. This project can be viewed as one of these successes.

It is the story of true determination of individuals who reach an objective literally one step at a time. At each step there was a hurdle, some of these seemingly insurmountable. Yet the POWs took on every problem and doggedly wrestled it till a solution was found.

In researching this story one of the many surprises was the fact that the Great Escape encompassed everything we would encounter and do in a typical modern project today, exemplified by the nine project management knowledge areas of the PMI PMBoK. This was not something I had expected because the field of project management did not get established till well after WWII.

For example, cost management was a critical knowledge area. The POWs discovered they had one precious resource in the Red Cross parcels, foodstuffs that had not been seen in Germany in several years. The Escape Committee put the parcels under the auspices of the 'Supplies Department' who carefully cost budgeted what it was likely to need for the project. The foodstuffs were used to either incentivise POWs (project labour), or bribe/barter the guards for tools, materials, or goods.

Dr George McKiel (POW survivor) commented that many of the POWs taking part in the escape went into the business world after the war and had very successful careers. They leveraged the skills they had mastered as part of the project and escape.

This series of articles will look at the Great Escape through the lens of a modern project, and the project management knowledge areas, which should provide some lessons from the past to assist the projects of today to shape the world of tomorrow.

Mark Kozak-Holland's latest book in the Lessons-From-History series is titled 'Project Lessons from the Great Escape (Luft III)'

<http://www.mmpubs.com/books-LFH.html>. It draws parallels from this event in World War II to today's business challenges. Mark is a Senior Business Architect with HP Services and regularly

writes and speaks on the subject of emerging technologies and lessons that can be learned from historical projects. He can be contacted via his Web site at www.lessons-from-history.com or via email to mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca. For more information on the Great Escape Memorial Foundation see www.thegreatescapememorialproject.com



New UK memorial recalls those lost on duty since WWII

Every year the sales of Poppies and the memorial service at the Cenotaph in London are a stark reminder of those killed in two world wars. What is sometimes overlooked is that since 1948 some 16,000 servicemen and women have been killed in conflicts ranging from Korea and Northern Ireland to Iraq and Afghanistan today.

In 2005 an appeal was launched to raise £7 million to provide an Armed Forces Memorial for those killed on duty since the Second World War as well as members of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and the Merchant Navy who died supporting the Forces.

The completed Memorial was dedicated in the presence of the Queen on 12 October.

The project began in 2004 when Liam O'Connor architects and planning consultants won a competition to create the winning design. His team included Alan Baxter + Associates, consulting engineers, Thompson Cole Ltd, quantity surveyors, and the sculptor Ian Rank-Broadley.

The memorial is a stunning piece of architecture in its own right. It comprises two parts: a large earth mound in the form of a barrow or tumulus and a circular structure on top formed by curved Portland stone walls open at the east and west sides and with an obelisk at the western end.

At the heart of the memorial, situated at the centre of each of the two straight stone walls are the bronze sculptures by Ian Rank-Broadley.

Vice-Admiral Sir John Dunt, chairman of the Armed Forces Memorial Trustees, opened the ceremony and spoke of the sorrow and pride of the families of the deceased.

He said: 'I hope that those who have been bereaved and colleagues of those whose names are engraved find this a fitting place to remember and reflect.'

The memorial has space for 15,000 more names and sadly those spaces are already starting to be used.

The Armed Forces Memorial is situated at the National memorial Arboretum at Alrewas, near Lichfield in Staffordshire. It was reopened to the public at 9.00am on 29 October.

