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-POW’s 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 barbed 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 U.S. POW’s 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 escapes 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 rollercoaster 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 escapes from even thinking about it. From the geographic location
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.

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