

Escapes from Castle Colditz

Escapes from Castle Colditz

The “impregnable” prison was surprisingly leaky
By [Beyond Band of Brothers Tours](#)

Castle Colditz is a fortress of medieval origins in eastern Germany and one of the best-known POW camps of World War II. Before the war, the Nazis used it as a political prison for communists, homosexuals and Jews. Once the war broke out, it hosted *Oflag IV-C (Offizierslager, officers' camp)*, a camp for holding prominent prisoners, including relatives of Winston Churchill and King George VI, and “incorrigible” POWs who had an extensive history of escape attempts elsewhere.



A dramatic night photo of Castle Colditz from 1943

The castle was chosen because of its location: perched high atop a cliff and overlooking a river, it seemed impossible to escape from. Even if someone got away, they would still be hundreds of miles from the nearest safe border. In spite of the difficulties, and because most inmates were veteran escapees, more escape attempts succeeded here than at any other camp. The number of “home runs,” getting home to one’s own country, was somewhere between 15 and over 30. The number of people who were recaptured only after getting out of the castle was considerably higher. A local photographer made a business out of photographing failed escapees after their capture or while reenacting the attempt and the camp commandant maintained a museum of escape paraphernalia. Here are a few of the more interesting successes and failures.

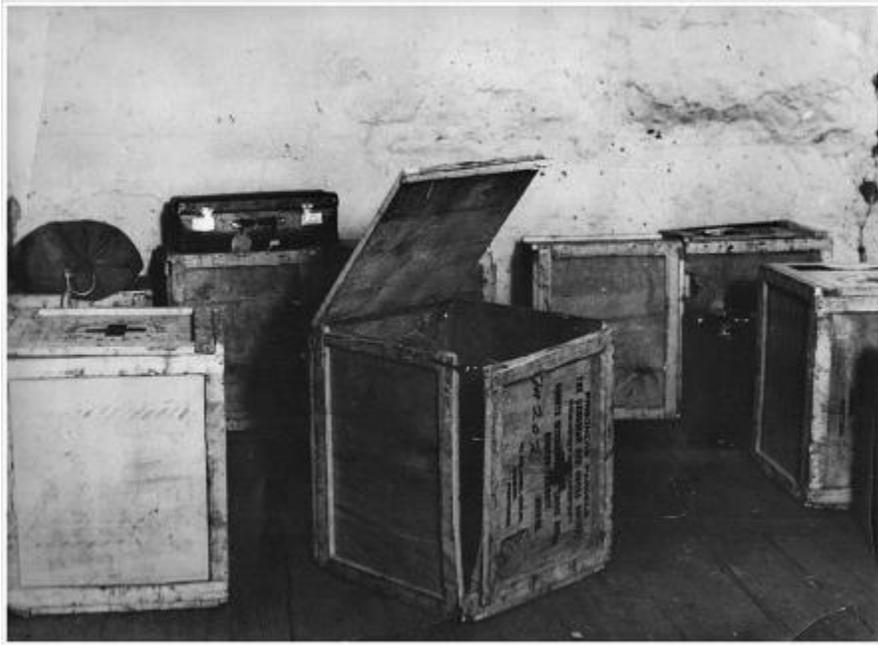
Escapes from Castle Colditz



Aerial view of the castle: the courtyard on the right side of the picture hosted the garrison; the one on the left, next to the clock tower, was for the prisoners

French Lieutenant Pierre Mairesse-Lebrun made a brazenly simple run for it while being escorted back to the castle from walk in a nearby park. He simply headed for the wire fence and vaulted over it with a boost from a comrade while the guards were too stunned to react. This was his second attempt and he made it to Switzerland in 8 days.

Escapes from Castle Colditz



The tea chest Flight Lieutenant Bruce hid in during escape

British Flight Lieutenant Dominic Bruce, nicknamed “Medium Sized Man” for his short stature, got a silk map hidden in a brass button from MI9, the British Military Intelligence department responsible for aiding POWs. In the fall of 1942, a new commandant ordered prisoners to place their excess personal belongings in storage. Bruce had himself placed in a 3-by-3 feet tea chest and taken to the storage room, climbing out of the window on a rope made of bed sheets during the night. He was recaptured in Poland while trying to stow away on a Swedish ship. He tried to use the fake identity of an enlisted man to be sent back to another camp but his *Gestapo* interrogator happened to recognize him from a previous attempt.



The rope Bruce climbed down on, visible in the dark window on the left side of the picture

French Lieutenant Bouley acquired very convincing female clothes and tried to escape after a visit to the park. To his misfortune, British POWs nearby saw him drop a watch by accident and helpfully called out. He walked on without reacting but this behavior drew the attention of the guards.

Escapes from Castle Colditz



Lieutenant Bouley photographed in the clothes he used during his escape attempt

Dutch officer Hans Larive was very helpful by providing many escapees with a save route to Switzerland. An earlier failed attempt from another camp earned him a talk with an arrogant *Gestapo* officer who was so sure of German victory; he even told Larive the unguarded route he should have taken. Once at Colditz, Larive shared the information with his comrades. For his part, he escaped by hiding under a manhole cover during a rugby match, with friends diverting attention by pretending another escape happened, using a fake glass bolt to make it look intact and waiting for nighttime.



Hans Larive, photographed at another camp

British officer Airey Neave's first attempt involved a grey Polish army tunic, whose color and shape was similar to German army coats, but the paint he used on his fake cap appeared bright under the searchlights. His second, successful, attempt occurred during one of the many theatrical plays the POWs were allowed to host, with a

Escapes from Castle Colditz

gentleman's agreement that tools borrowed for building sets should not be used for attempts, getting away through a trapdoor under the stage.



Colditz POWs representing various nations. From left to right: French, Yugoslavian, Belgian, Polish, Yugoslavian, & British.

A group of French officers used the old clock tower of the castle. The doors of the tower were bricked up after an earlier attempt but it was possible to get up into the attics, enter the tower from there and descend from the top down to the cellars via the shaft that used to hold the ropes and counterweights of the bell. Over the next eight months, the French officers dug a tunnel running 144ft horizontally, turning to avoid rock, and even installing electric lights. The attempt failed because the guards were alerted by the digging noises echoing through the castle at night.

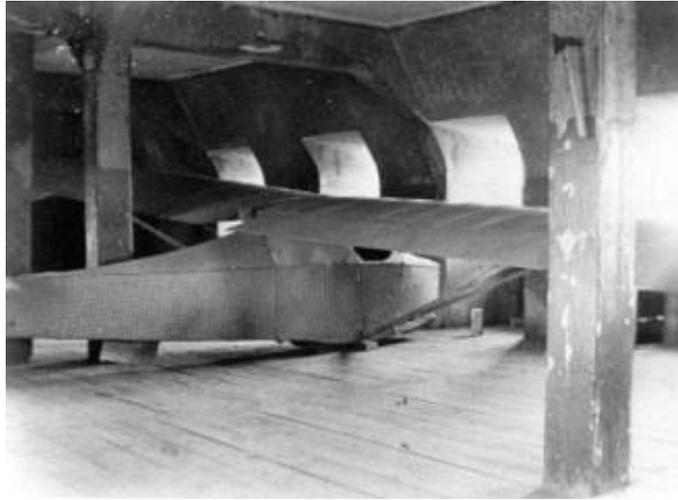


The prisoners' courtyard, with the clock tower in the corner

The most flamboyant attempt was by British pilots Jack Best and Bill Goldfinch, who went so far as to build the

Escapes from Castle Colditz

“Colditz Cock:” glider plane in the attic above the chapel, hidden behind a false wall. Designed by a glider expert POW, the plane was built of bed slats, floorboards, electrical wiring and sleeping bags whose pores were sealed by a lacquer boiled from millet rations. The rooftop runway was to be built out of tables, and the device was to be launched by a pulley system powered by dropping a bathtub filled with concrete. Colditz was liberated by Allied forces before the attempt could be made but two recent recreations proved that it could have worked.



Only known photograph of the “Colditz Cock,” the fully built but unused escape glider

Some of the unsung heroes of all these escape attempts were the “ghosts.” A ghost was a prisoner who pretended to escape, leading the guards to believe he was no longer present, and then hid in the numerous unused and obscure parts of the castle for months at a time. Ghosts would come out into the public when a “real” escapee was either digging a tunnel, otherwise preparing or had already made a getaway, so that the guards wouldn’t notice the missing men during headcount.



Modern photo of a wireless set assembled by POWs. One such set was found by the guards, another remained hidden until 1965, when a former prisoner stole away from a tour of the castle and removed it from its undisturbed hiding place.

Of the over 150 attempts, only one ended with the confirmed death of the escapee. British Lieutenant Michael Sinclair, called the “Red Fox” by the guards for his hair and elusiveness, made numerous attempts. On one occasion, he convincingly mimicked a certain guard, including uniform, fake moustache and mannerisms, but the

Escapes from Castle Colditz

plan failed when a stubborn soldier refused to follow his orders. During the confusion that broke out when the real guard appeared, Sinclair was shot and left unattended for 10 minutes while other escapees were hunted down. He recovered but wasn't so lucky at a later attempt: while trying to climb the barb wire fence, he was fatally shot. Sinclair received a burial with military honors, a 21-gun salute and his coffin draped in a Union Jack sewn by his German guards.



The entrance to Castle Colditz

This note of HISTORY is from The Band of Brothers Tours

