

War and Remembrance

Pamela Wade visits Stalag Luft III in Poland – scene of the Great Escape – and closes the circle on her father's extraordinary war story.



Above: Photos sent home from the prison camp were seen as good propaganda for the Germans (Frank Reece is on the right). Opposite page: Frank, 21, at the controls of the Blenheim, MY-U.

I'm standing in a forest in eastern Poland. At my feet is a big lump of concrete surrounded by a drift of pine needles. In my hand is a smaller lump, of broken brick, a crumbling corner piece furry with moss. And in my throat is another lump that, no matter how much I swallow, isn't going away.

"It's all I can give you," says Marek apologetically; but he knows that what I'm holding is much more than just a rough chunk of masonry, and he covers my silence with, "It's a privilege to be able to show you around. It's a special day."

It really is. We're on the site of Stalag Luft III, the Luftwaffe-run prison camp for Allied air force officers that was the location of 1944's Great Escape, the biggest outbreak of prisoners during the entire war and, to Hitler's fury, a major disruption to the German war effort. The camp is on the outskirts of Zagan, a small town near the border with Germany, 160km south-east of Berlin. For me, it's been a long trek here from New Zealand, but that's fine: quests aren't meant to be easy.

I've come because this is where my father, Frank Reece, spent more than three long years behind the wire, from 1942 until the end of World War II. He saw them as lost years and a shameful failure and, like so many returned servicemen, he shut the door on them when he resumed his ordinary life.

Later, as a teenager immersed in the novels of Nevil Shute and Alistair MacLean, I was fascinated by the war and wanted to know my father's story but he would never tell it. When the movie *The Great Escape* came out in 1963 and we went to see it as a family, he scoffed at Steve McQueen's famous leap over the wire on a motorbike. "American ballyhoo," he called it, but even then he wouldn't be drawn on the reality he knew so well from personal experience.

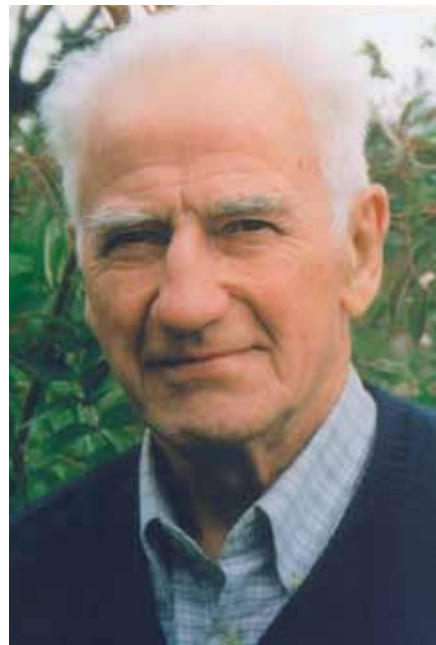
Long afterwards, in his retirement, he joined the Brevet Club in Christchurch and enjoyed reminiscing with other former airmen, some

PAMELA WADE IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER.





Above: Marching through Dunedin in 1940, like all young men going off to war, Frank was looking forward to his great adventure. He is in the second row of the column, on the right. Below: Frank in later life.



of them also ex-POWs. He was more forthcoming than about his war but by that time I was living in England. Fortunately, my nephew Scott Espie had the initiative and foresight to record an interview with him and after his death, we found a number of handwritten accounts among his papers, which have helped fill in the details. We knew he had wanted to return to Zagan, though he never did: my being here now feels like completing a circle.

My journey has involved planes, cars, boats, trains and even a dislocated shoulder, but Frank's journey to this place was much longer, and infinitely more eventful. In one sense, it began in 1933 when Charles Kingsford Smith was touring New Zealand in his little plane *Southern Cross*, in which five years earlier he'd made the first flight across the Tasman. For ten shillings apiece, excited joyriders could take to the air for a brief circuit, and thanks to a lucky draw at Mosgiel District High my father, in the school's blazer and striped tie, was one of them.

That short flight changed his life forever.

Besotted with flying, he'd run outside on the rare occasions when a Tiger Moth flew overhead and by the age of 19 he had logged seven hours' flying time even before he was accepted for training by the RNZAF in 1940.

Leaving Dunedin, he sailed from Lyttelton to Canada and thence to England where he joined Coastal Command as pilot of a Blenheim bomber: heady stuff for a young cow-cockie from the far end of the world.

His *Boy's Own* adventure straightaway became very grown-up, when he started flying operations over the Channel into France; and one moonless night in September 1941 the story turned deadly serious. Heading back to base after bombing the U-boat pens at St Nazaire in the Bay of Biscay, his route took him over a German-defended airfield in Brittany, setting off a flurry of flak that disabled his port engine. Knowing it would be suicidal to try to reach England on one engine he circled and, only just able to distinguish land from sea, brought the plane down in a wide bay near the rural seaside village of Saint-Efflam.



It was a real achievement to ditch in complete darkness without injury to any of the crew, and fortunately the sea was so shallow that the aircraft ended up sitting in a metre of water. After he and his two flight sergeants had disabled the instruments and waded ashore, they found a hut nearby to hide in. Finally he had time to reflect, and my father's main emotion was blank disappointment. "This is the end," he thought.

In fact, it was just the beginning, but of a different story from the one he'd envisaged. When morning brought the locals to the beach to marvel at the aeroplane marooned in their bay, Frank used his schoolboy French to ask for help from a young girl passing close to their hideout with her little dog.

She was the first in a long series of



Top: Frank's POW personal file from Stalag Luft III. Above: Frank's plane, photographed by the Germans. The morning after the ditching, the German soldiers were unaware that three Allied airmen were hiding a short distance away.

courageous French people, mostly women, who defied the occupying forces by hiding and feeding the three airmen and then helping them to go south, towards neutral Spain. They were risking their lives: for men, the penalty for helping Allied fugitives was death, while the women would be sent to concentration camps, which often amounted to the same thing. They shrugged off the danger, however, enjoying the thrill, as well as the chance to score against the hated Germans.

For 10 days while the Resistance made arrangements and procured false passports for them, Frank, his Irish gunner Paddy Smyth and Canadian navigator Doug Appleyard holed up first in a hut, then a chateau, a cave and a farm, enduring long periods of inactivity and boredom interspersed with episodes of fear when they had to be moved hurriedly through the woods to evade the Germans, who had towed the aeroplane out of the water and were searching for them.

Finally an escort, Georges, came to take them by train first to Rennes and then on to Nantes, a journey that involved several too-close-for-comfort brushes with German officers. One even apologised to Frank for bumping into him at the railway station: "I felt I had 'Englander' written all over me," he wrote later, conscious at the time of his ill-fitting borrowed civilian clothes.

Nearly four long weeks of hiding followed, kicking their heels in a third-floor flat in Nantes waiting for their passage to Spain to be sorted out. Then came more bad luck. The town was locked down after the assassination of a German colonel — by a disaffected German soldier, it eventually turned out — and a large-scale search was made for the culprit. Early one morning, soldiers suddenly appeared at the door of the flat and Paddy dashed for the stairs, one going up, the other down. The Canadian was soon captured, but Frank hid all day and into the night, watching and trying to keep track of the comings and goings from the building.

It was now November, and cold. Dressed only in light clothes and with no shoes, Frank needed to get to his things before he could strike out on his own. Convinced the Germans had all gone, and with the door to the flat locked, he shinned up a drainpipe to climb through his bedroom window. He was shocked to realise someone was asleep in the bed but, committed now, he crept to the wardrobe for his greatcoat.

Yet more bad luck: ransacking the place earlier, the Germans had flung things every-



Top: The camp theatre. Frank is fifth from right, with a guitar on his knees. He performed in regular concerts. Left: Frank second from left at rear, in swimming togs. Above: Lagergeld, or “camp money”. These vouchers were issued to the men by the Germans in token substitution for their Armed Forces wages, to buy goods or extra rations, when available.



Above: The tunnel, nicknamed “Harry”, stretched for 110m under the wire and towards the surrounding forest. Above right: This model of the camp was made by local school students. Right: The names of the shot escapers are recorded on these stones, and the altar originally contained their urns.

where, and in the dark Frank trod on a cup which broke with a loud snap. Before he could reach the window, the light clicked on and there stood a startled young soldier, Mauser pistol in his hand, “shaking like a leaf, more scared than I was”.

The game really was up now, and when Frank was driven to Angers and bundled into a dirty prison cell, he had his first deep sleep since leaving England nearly six weeks earlier. “What I had feared had happened. I was caught, and the strain was relaxed.”

It was a brief respite, however. At his interrogation, he complained about the primitive conditions, insisting that as a British officer and a prisoner of war, he was entitled to better treatment under the Geneva Convention. The German major shrugged: “You are in civilian clothes. You had false papers. As far as we are concerned, you are a spy.” This was ominous, as spies were not protected by the convention; and there was worse to follow.

Taken outside to a line of buses filled with prisoners, among whom he spotted several of the women from Brittany who gaily blew him kisses, he was driven to Fresnes prison

at Versailles to begin the most terrible three months of his life. Run by the Gestapo, conditions were grim: kept in solitary confinement in a small cell with one high window, Frank spent his days pacing — five steps from door to window, five back again — and hanging out for the one meal of cabbage soup with a square of coarse bread.

At night he listened to the chorus of dogs baying and other prisoners screaming as they were tortured. Twice he thought the Gestapo were coming for him, but it was the poor souls in the cells either side who were taken away. This was officially the coldest winter of the war, and the water that ran down the walls turned to ice as Frank shivered in his thin clothes.

There was no contact with any other person, except the hand that shoved his food at him, until one day the regular observation check through the eyehole caught him trying to mend the wire base of his bed. “That is forbidden,” the guards told him and pulled it apart again — but Frank took the chance to plead his case with the civilian accompanying them, again demanding to be treated as a British officer. Just like that,

one week later the nightmare was over: he was taken to join his two sergeants. Shaggy and emaciated, they looked like a trio of Robinson Crusoes. The men were given extra blankets and some food parcels, and several days afterwards Frank was on his way, via a transit camp, to Stalag Luft III at what was then called Sagan.

Today it’s Zagan, part of Poland again, and just outside the town is a small museum built on the edge of the pine forest that was cleared for the prison camp. In front of the building is a memorial with a horrifying statue of a skeletal figure huddled on the ground, in stark contrast to the bouquets of fresh flowers placed around it. It’s a shocking introduction to what I had understood was a civilised camp where the prisoners were as well treated as conditions allowed. Inside the museum, director Marek Lazarz explained: “It’s in memory of the 49,000 prisoners, Russians, French and Poles, who were sent here as forced labourers, and died in their thousands at Stalag VIIIIC.”

That was the neighbouring, Wehrmacht-run, concentration camp that my father, and the rest of the 10,000 Allied airmen who

paced the five compounds of the Luftwaffe’s Stalag Luft III, had no idea existed. For them the world ended at the high barbed-wire fence, punctuated every 100m by wooden watchtowers continuously manned by guards with spotlights and machine guns. It was a bunk bed in a wooden hut with a smoky stove in the corner, it was tediously long roll-calls twice a day, it was sweltering heat and sticky flies in the summer and long hard winters of snow and 20-below temperatures. It was dreaming about roast beef and eking out starvation rations, supplemented with literally life-saving Red Cross food parcels — and laying the foundations for a horror of waste that meant for the rest of Frank’s life a fridge full of scrappy leftovers, plus one small daughter made to stay at the dining table in front of an unfinished plateful of food.

It was also, surprisingly, productions of Shakespeare and West End shows with hired costumes on the stage of a purpose-built theatre; orchestral concerts and choirs; lectures on art and history; and a yachting club, of model boats on the fire pool. Under the convention, officers were not required

to work, and the camp commandant, the well-respected Colonel von Lindeiner, was pleased to see the prisoners able to access cultural and sporting activities to fill their empty days.

It wasn’t enough. Combine intelligence and resourcefulness with boredom and opportunity, and the last thing these young men were going to do was meekly stay put. As soon as they were arrested, they were trying to escape: at first so chaotically that tunnels intersected and men dropping opportunistically into open cartage trucks fell on top of each other; but later, order prevailed.

One of the most successful projects was during Frank’s time in the east compound of Stalag Luft III in 1943, when he was on the team that carried a vaulting horse out every day to the precise spot where a concealed tunnel was being dug by the man hidden inside.

The Wooden Horse was the title of the book later written by one of the three successful escapers, a copy of which Frank put into my hand when I was devouring everything war-related, but he didn’t say a word about his involvement with the tunnel back

in that long autumn. Made of battens and Red Cross box plywood, the vaulting horse was, he later wrote, “very hard to carry and look as though it weighed nothing, especially on the return trip with all the excavated sand plus the digger.”

Ingenious and audacious as that escape was, it was totally eclipsed by the scale of what followed the next year after Frank was transferred to the north compound. The Great Escape was the climax of an operation of staggering complexity involving more than 600 men under the overall command of RAF Squadron Leader Roger Bushell. His code name was “Big X” and the focus of the team he assembled was not just one tunnel, but three: Tom, Dick and Harry. The subject of many books as well as a movie (which is generally faithful to the truth despite Steve McQueen’s antics), the story remains irresistibly fascinating.

After showing the displays of artefacts and models upstairs in his museum, Marek takes me into a hut like the one Frank lived in. It’s a reconstruction, as today nothing is left of the barracks other than the concrete bases of the chimneys and the shower drains

that were put to such inspired use as tunnel entrances. Here we look at a copy of the clever bellows air-pump cobbled together from milk powder tins, kit bags, hockey sticks and bedboards. Too tall and broad-shouldered to be a digger, Frank took his turn sitting at the bottom of the 10m shaft of Harry, heaving like a rower to push air down the pipe to the man at the end scraping at the sand with a spoon. “That damned pump – it was very hard work, half an hour and that’s it, you’ve had it.”

He also did stints as a “penguin”, shuffling around the camp leaking the giveaway yellow sand from the tunnel out of bags concealed in his trousers, scuffing it into the grey surface dirt to disguise it, but mostly he worked in Australian Al Hake’s compass-making factory. Hours were spent stroking a magnet along a razor blade, to magnetise the metal which would be cut into slivers for the needles and set in a case made of moulded gramophone records, the bases stamped “Made in Stalag Luft III – Patent pending”.

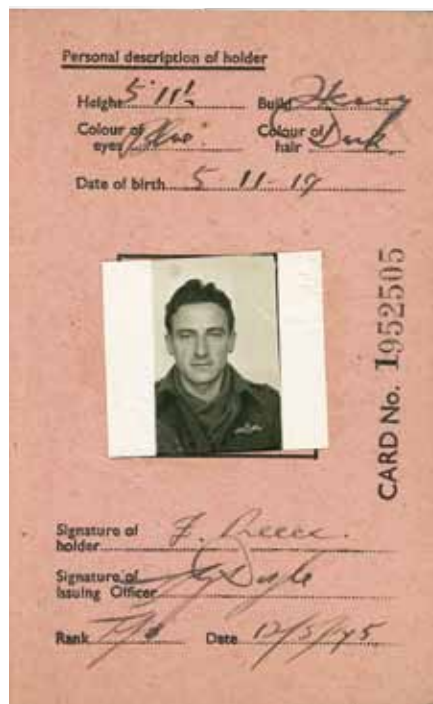
Outside, pine, oak and birch trees have reclaimed the camp. It’s unnerving to see a tank trundling among the trunks and then to hear cannons boom, but alongside is the training ground of Poland’s biggest tank division. Around the far side of the compound, we drive along a narrow dirt road – “This is the real road from World War II, just as it was,” Marek says – and stop near a granite boulder. Beneath an inscription in impenetrable Polish is another stone with just one word: Harry.

This is the exit of the tunnel, only metres away from the concrete plinths of the base of a watchtower and fatally short of the trees. Here Leonard Trent, from Nelson, gave himself up when the tunnel was discovered by chance shortly before dawn on March 25, 1944, as the 76th man emerged. That was his mate Mick Shand of Wellington, the last of four New Zealanders to exit the tunnel – Frank’s number in the draw of 200 was a hopeless 129 – and their names are recorded, two blue, two black, on the stones that mark the line of the tunnel.

Straight as a die, it leads 110m to where Hut 104 once stood with its marvellously engineered tunnel entrance hidden under the working stove. Nothing remains of it now, but my focus is on what lies nearby. Hut 103 is where my father lived in Room 2, one of a dozen men including Johnny Pohe from Taihape, the first Maori pilot to go to war. There’s a crumbling concrete chimney base set with a few loose bricks, and new wooden



Flight Sergeant Michael Reece, who has been reported killed on active service. He was 21 years of age, and was the fourth and youngest son of Mrs M. H. Reece, of Concord. He was educated at the Maungatua and Concord Schools before going to the King Edward Technical College. He joined the A.T.C. in 1941, and entered the R.N.Z.A.F. in June, 1942. After completing his preliminary flying training at the Taieri, he was sent to Canada in June, 1943, receiving his “wings” in the following November. He then went to England, and was posted to Bomber Command of the R.A.F.



Above: In his Armed Forces ID card photo, taken when he was repatriated to England in 1945, Frank’s gaunt face shows the effects of three years in prison, and his shock at having recently heard the news of the death of his youngest brother, Michael (top).

posts mark the corners of the long building, but there’s little else to see, just a lumpy piece of ground thick with soft green moss that wild pigs have rooted through. A cuckoo is calling nearby but otherwise it’s peaceful. It’s hard to imagine this place bare and brown, swarming with young men in darned and mismatched uniforms, all with broken dreams.

Marek picks the piece of brick out of the moss and gives it to me: it’s a link to my father, who lost three years of his life here – bored, frustrated, bitter. But then we leave the camp and follow the road a short distance towards Zagan where, in a clearing surrounded by tall oaks with fresh spring foliage, I’m reminded others lost far more than that.

On a simple stone altar are three engraved slabs, with poppy wreaths and bouquets at their base. “In memory of the officers who gave their lives. Sagan March 1944” is inscribed across the front, and on the slabs are the names of 50 of the recaptured escapers, who were summarily shot on Hitler’s personal orders. Johnny Pohe’s name is there, and so is that of Hastings man Arnold Christensen. Roger Bushell and Al Hake were murdered too – only 23 of the escapers were allowed to live, in the hope of making the atrocity less obvious. Just three men got safely home.

I think about luck: a draw for a joy flight, a low tide, a dropped cup, a random cell check, the number 129 which turned out to be a blessing. I recall the story told by Owen Foster from Hawarden at my father’s funeral, after his untimely death in 2001 from a post-surgery infection: “One day Frank couldn’t come with me on our daily 22 circuits around the perimeter, so someone else took his place. We were walking along, I heard a shot and looked around, and Wally was dead at my feet. A guard in the pillbox had just heard his family had been wiped out in a Berlin air-raid.”

I remember how, after six weeks on the run, three months in solitary in Fresnes prison, three years at Stalag Luft III, nearly a month trudging through the snow ahead of the liberating Russian troops, another two months in a prison camp in northern Germany, and yet another route march, Frank was finally freed by the Americans and returned to England. Here, billeted in the Grand Hotel in Brighton, he fell with delight on an old copy of the *Auckland Weekly News* – only to read that his youngest brother Michael, also a pilot, had been killed in a training crash four months earlier.

I know how lucky I am, in every sense, that Frank Reece was my father. +