Escape Is No Longer A Sport

Colonel Drake’s Escape Committee approved a plan to dig an escape tunnel in late summer 1943. The two largest obstacles were what to do with the dirt and how to hide the entrance. Because they knew the Germans had underground microphones sensitive to 30 feet in depth, the engineer officers in the camp decided to dig down 40 feet. They estimated the tunnel would result in tons of dirt yellow in color and therefore could not be spread around the camp unnoticed. According to Kriegy Van Vliet, “Something over 56 tons of dirt was precariously stored in Red Cross boxes on platforms in the shallow attics” of the barracks. The entrance to the tunnel was camouflaged in the bathroom of one of the barracks. Kriegies were warned to avoid a certain toilet.

The Germans suspected a tunnel was being dug but were unable to find it so they brought in a post-hole digger and sank ten-foot deep holes at 100 foot intervals around the camp’s barbed wire fence. In the holes they placed explosive charges and randomly detonated them. This caused some of the tunnel to cave in, cracked windows in nearby barracks and triggered cracks in the ceilings under which the tons of dirt were stored. The barracks were old and not too steady so naturally the Kriegies were concerned the dirt might come through the ceiling and crush them. As Kriegy Howard Holder described one such incident, "It was really funny to see the exodus of Kriegies from Barracks 3 when the guards set off a nearby charge. They even jumped out the windows, and I can’t say I blamed them.” Other problems arose such as ventilation issues in the tunnel, etc. but the tunnel progressed nicely until it was called off in late summer 1944. In March 1944 an identical tunnel had been dug at Stalag Luft 3 through which some 87 POWs escaped known to moviegoers later as the “Great Escape”. Most were recaptured. Hitler was furious over the escape and ordered 50 of the escapees murdered. Notices were placed in all POW camps by the Germans announcing that “Escaping is No Longer a Sport” and escapees were to be shot on sight. As a result Colonel Drake called off all escape plans judging the risk too great to permit any attempts that late in the war.

The Germans never found the tunnel but it did serve as a hiding place for some POWs to avoid being evacuated to Germany in January 1945.