

## Escape and Recapture

[Narrator] The moment for the escape finally arrived on the night of March 24, 1944. Roger Bushell had selected 250 to go through the tunnel. He put those men who spoke fluent German at the head of the line since they had the best chance. The three who managed to successfully escape were fluently bilingual. The escape was discovered after 76 had gotten through the tunnel. Even so, it had an electric effect. What followed, however, was shocking.

[LtGen Clark] "After this escape, Hitler said 'That's it. Shoot'em. You've got to stop this nonsense.' By the time the order was down to the implementation stage, it became 'Shoot more than half.' And that's how the magic number of fifty showed up."

[John Cordwell] "Only three people got back, as you know, from the great escape: one Dutchman Vanderstok and the two Norwegians. They all looked like Germans. They spoke German fluently and they knew Europe like the palm of their hands. It was like being in their own back yard. They spoke German so fluently that they were the only people that really had a dog's chance of escaping, really. The fifty people that escaped, they brought them back to the Gestapo jail. The ones who were captured, all but the three, were brought back to Gorlitz, to the Gestapo jail. They were all in prison there. And then having decided to kill fifty of them, they all were taken back to where they caught them originally. But they took them all right back there and 'Get up, go to the bathroom, and stretch your legs' then shot them in the back of the head and that was end of it. They cremated them right on the spot. They were all cremated in different villages, different places, different funeral parlors, and they all had different urns. They brought the fifty urns back to us and they said 'This is your problem now, now you take care of them.' So we designed a mausoleum for the fifty urns and put them there."

[Narrator] When the news of the fifty murders reached Stalag Luft III, it had a numbing effect. This poster accompanied the news. [photo of poster]

[LtGen Clark] "Well, of course, it was a great shock. We had no reason to believe that the Germans would react that way, although we were all aware of the fact that a 'massen flug' a mass escape, was a very serious thing in wartime Germany and that it would result in various serious countermeasures: more guards put on every bridge, more paper checks in all the trains, border guards were being alerted, many things of that sort which detracted from the war effort. The Luftwaffe was not involved in this. They were as shocked as we were. And they, I think, had to take a pretty stiff drink before they had to come into our camp and tell us what had happened. They looked shook. And naturally we were quite shaken by the whole thing as well. The Air Ministry was very bloody-minded and was determined to track these guys down and deal with them. And they did a marvelous job. I think they found most of the principals. And I can't see any reason why they shouldn't have executed them. It was cold blood."

[Ira Weinstein] "As you know, I was shot down on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March of '44 and the great escape took place on March 24, March 25<sup>th</sup>. When I got there, the camp was in a

state of euphoria because of the great escape. They were so happy – 76 men had broken out. But within a few days we learned that the Germans had murdered 50 -- 26 others were put in the cooler – solitary. ”

[John Cordwell] “The SS told us, on that day after the escape, they said ‘Well, gentlemen, you have nothing more to worry about now. We are going to win the war and you are going to spend the rest of your lives here rebuilding the cities that you have destroyed.’ And I think they meant that. Then they said ‘And if by some mischance, you should win the war, you are not going home anyway.’ So we knew from that point we were under the sentence of death until the end of the war.