

EXTRACT FROM NEWSLETTER 79 – NOV 2004

THE GREAT ESCAPE

In Newsletter N° 62 / 2000 — our friend and Life Member Bobby LAUMANS vividly described "Circus 178" — 01/06/42 , the operation during which he was shot down over the Channel to eventually "land" in Stalag Luft III at Sagan.

Bobby sends us the following most interesting testimony:

"This year being the 60th anniversary (one more) of the *Great Escape*, general ceremonies took place in U.K. and also in Poland. I took part in the British one, but did not go to Sagan in Poland. Remember, the start of the Great Escape (*Operation 200*) took place in Stalag Luft located in Sagan. What was Silesia — Germany in 1944 has now been Polish territory for many years. Most old codgers like me recall these facts, but, unfortunately, not the younger generations. So it was refreshing to receive a letter and documents from a young Dutchman: Ben Van Drogenbroeck, only 38 years old, who has started an Association publishing Newsletters about Stalag Luft.

He was prompted to do so in honour of Bob Van Der Stok — RAF-VR — a Dutchman Spitfire pilot, POW in Sagan Of the 76 who escaped, he was one of only three (the other two being Norwegians) who succeeded in reaching England after the big Break Out. Bob died only a few years ago, having left the Air Force to become a medical Doctor.

Ben also recalls in the 2 Newsletters he sent me, that 50 RAF Officers were executed after recapture and that one of them was a Belgian: Henri PICARD shot down on August 27th 1942. I personally stayed three days in my dinghy after baling out of my burning Spitfire (refer to "Circus 178 " Newsletter N° 62); but PICARD remained five days and six nights in the North Sea, being badly wounded in one leg !

The Dutch Newsletters remind us that PICARD was such a good caricaturist, drawing the picture of many of his fellow prisoners. No wonder that in the preparation of the "*Great Escape*", Henri was a member of the "Forged papers" team. That group of people was headed by F/Lt Tim Walenn and called *Dean & Dawson*, after the famous English pre-war travel agency. Bear in mind that everything had a code name: like the three tunnels coded *Tom, Dick and Harry* so that the word "tunnel" would never be spoken.

Henri PICARD escaped during the night 24/25 March 1944 but was recaptured at Scheidemithl and murdered on 29 March by Hauptmann Reinholt Bruchardt from the Danzig Gestapo. Bruchardt was traced in 1948 and sentenced to death, later commuted to 21 years imprisonment

Henri PICARD's body was cremated at Danzig and is now buried at POZNAN Old Garrison

Cemetery.

A memorial plaque for F/Lt H. PICARD was inaugurated at BEAUVECHAIN Air Base on December 1st 1951 on occasion of the 10th anniversary celebration of 350 (Belgian) Squadron

Let us have a thought for those who gave their life — *We shall remember Them.*"

Bobby LAUMANS