

Profile – Squadron Leader Roger Bushell – 601 Squadron.

(From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

30 August 1910 – 29 March 1944 (aged 33)



Left - Bushell in RAF uniform just before his capture. Right – Bushell having a laugh (permission to use pic kindly given by 601 Sqn web site)

Place of Birth; Springs, Transvaal, South Africa

Place of Death; Saarbrücken, Germany

Years of Service; 1932-1944

Rank; Squadron Leader

Commands held; No. 92 Squadron RAF (1939-1940)

Squadron Leader Roger Joyce Bushell RAF (30 August 1910 – 29 March 1944) was a South Africa born British Auxiliary Air Force pilot who organised and led the famous escape from the Nazi prisoner of war camp, Stalag Luft III. He was a victim of the Stalag Luft III murders. The escape was used as the basis for the film *The Great Escape*. The character played by Richard Attenborough, Roger Bartlett, is modelled on Roger Bushell.

Birth and early life

Bushell was born in Springs, Transvaal, South Africa on 30 August 1910 to English parents Benjamin Daniel and Dorothy Wingate Bushell (nee White). His father, a mining engineer, had emigrated to the country from England and he used his wealth to ensure that Roger received a first class education. He was first schooled in Johannesburg, then aged 14 went to Wellington College in Berkshire, England. In 1929, Bushell matriculated to Pembroke College, Cambridge to read law.

Bushell was keen to pursue non-academic interests from an early age. Roger Bushell excelled in athletics and represented Cambridge in skiing.

Skiing

One of Bushell's passions and talents was skiing: in the early 1930s he was declared the fastest Briton in the male downhill category. He even had a black run named after him in Switzerland. This naming was in recognition of the fact that he had set the fastest time to complete the run.

At an event in Canada, Bushell had an accident in which one of his skis narrowly missed his left eye, leaving him with a gash in the corner of it. Although Bushell recovered from this accident he still had a dark drooping in his left eye as a result of scarring from his stitches.

Bushell became fluent in French and German, with good accents, which became extremely useful during his time as a prisoner of war.

Career



Squadron Leader Roger Bushell (right) with Wing Commander Robert Stanford Tuck.

RAF Auxiliary and legal career

Despite his sporting prospects, one of Bushell's primary wishes was to fly, and in 1932 he joined 601 Squadron Auxiliary Air Force, which was often referred to as "The Millionaires' Mob" because of the number of wealthy young men who paid their way solely to learn how to fly during training days (often at weekends).

Although Bushell was pursuing a career with the RAF he wasn't hampered in his attempts to become a barrister-at-Law, of Lincolns Inn, London. From the outset of his legal career many commented on his ability as a lawyer, particularly in criminal defence. After a while, Bushell was appointed to military cases in prosecuting RAF personnel charged with various offences. These often involved pilots charged with dangerous flying. In October 1939, acting as assistant to Sir Patrick Hastings, he successfully defended two RAF pilots, John Freeborn and Paddy Byrne, court martialled after the friendly fire incident known as the Battle of Barking Creek. Byrne would later be incarcerated with Bushell at Stalag Luft III.



From left: Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, Leutnant Eberhardt (German Security) and Paddy Byrne (fellow POW)

Regular military career

Bushell was given command of 92 Squadron in October 1939, and his promotion to Squadron Leader was confirmed on 1 January 1940.

During the squadron's first engagement with enemy aircraft on 23 May 1940, whilst on a patrol near Calais, Bushell was credited with damaging two Messerschmitt Bf 110 fighter aircraft of ZG 26 before being shot down himself, probably by future ace Oberleutnant Günther Specht. He crash landed his Spitfire on German occupied ground and was captured before he had a chance to hide.

He became a POW and was sent to the Dulag luft transit camp near Frankfurt with all other captured aircrew.

Prisoner of war

On arrival at Dulag luft he was made part of the permanent British staff, under the Senior British Officer Wing Commander Harry Day. The permanent staff's duty was to help newly captured Allied aircrew to adjust to life as a POW.

Escape, which was regarded as a duty of all prisoners of war of officer rank, was never far from his mind, and, fortunately, he was in good company with Day and Fleet Air Arm pilot Jimmy Buckley RN. Day placed Buckley in charge of escape operations, with Bushell as his deputy. The three of them formed the escape committee responsible for all escape attempts.

First escape

The permanent staff of the camp started several escape tunnels, one of which was completed in May 1941. Bushell was given a place in the tunnel, but elected to escape on the same day as the tunnel break, by cutting through the wire surrounding a small park in the camp grounds. His decision for not using the tunnel was to allow him an earlier get away, thus enabling him to catch a particular train.

The exact date of the escape is not known, but is believed to have occurred in June 1941. Bushell hid in a goat's shed in the camp grounds, and soon as it was dark enough, he crawled to the wire and made good his escape.

He was recaptured on the Swiss border, only a few hundred yards from freedom, by a German border guard. He was treated well and returned to Dulag luft, before being transferred to Stalag Luft I with all the 17 others who had escaped in the tunnel (including Day and Buckley).

He was at Stalag Luft I for only a short period before being transferred to Oflag X-C at Lübeck. At this camp he participated in the construction of another tunnel, but this was abandoned unfinished when the camp was evacuated.

Second escape

All British and Commonwealth Officer POWs were removed from the camp on the 8 October 1941 and were entrained for transfer to Oflag VI-B at Warburg.

During the night of 8/9 October, 1941, the train stopped briefly in Hannover, where Bushell and a Czech officer Pilot Officer Jaroslav Zafouk jumped from the train and escaped unnoticed at the time by the German guards. Earlier in the journey six other officers had escaped by jumping off the train whilst it was moving slowly, one was immediately recaptured, and one officer was killed when he fell under the wheels.

Bushell and Zafouk made their way to Prague in occupied Czechoslovakia, and using Zafouk's contacts made contact with the Czech underground movement. They stayed in 'safe houses' whilst arrangements for their onward journey was being made. However, luck was not with them, and

following the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in May 1942, the Germans launched a massive manhunt for the assassins, and during the round-up Bushell and Zafouk were arrested.

Both were interrogated by the Gestapo and were very roughly treated. Bushell was eventually sent to Stalag Luft III at Sagan, arriving there in October 1942. Zafouk was sent to Oflag IV-C at Colditz.

He took over control of the escape organisation from Jimmy Buckley who was being transferred to another camp. He became known as "Big X" of the camp escape committee and was the mastermind behind the mass escapes that occurred from the camp.

During his stay with the Gestapo, he had witnessed the terror and suffering of many at the hands of the Nazis and developed an intense hatred for them.

His plan was to strike back at the Germans as best he could - by organising mass break outs from the POW camps he was in. One of them became known as The Great Escape, which was planned to allow 200 men to escape on a single night.

The Great Escape

In the spring of 1943, Bushell masterminded a plot for a major escape from the camp. Being held in the North Compound where British airmen were housed, Bushell as commander of the Escape Committee channelled the escape effort into probing for weaknesses and looking for opportunities. Falling back on his legal background to represent his scheme, Bushell called a meeting of the Escape Committee in the camp and not only shocked those present with its scope, but injected into every man a passionate determination to put their every energy into the escape. He declared,

"Everyone here in this room is living on borrowed time. By rights we should all be dead! The only reason that God allowed us this extra ration of life is so we can make life hell for the Hun... In North Compound we are concentrating our efforts on completing and escaping through one master tunnel. No private-enterprise tunnels allowed. Three bloody deep, bloody long tunnels will be dug - Tom, Dick and Harry. One will succeed!"

The simultaneous digging of these tunnels would become an advantage if any one of them were discovered by the Germans, because the guards would scarcely imagine that another two could be well underway. The most radical aspect of the plan was not merely the scale of the construction, but the sheer number of men that Bushell intended to pass through these tunnels. Previous attempts had involved the escape of anything up to a dozen or twenty men, but Bushell was proposing to get in excess of 200 out, all of whom would be wearing civilian clothes and possessing a complete range of forged papers and escape equipment. It was an unprecedented undertaking and would require unparalleled organisation. As the mastermind of the Great Escape, Bushell inherited the codename of "Big X". The tunnel "Tom" began in a darkened corner of a hall in one of the buildings. "Dick's" entrance was carefully hidden in a drain sump in one of the washrooms. The entrance to "Harry" was hidden under a stove.^[9] More than 600 prisoners were involved in their construction.



End of "Harry" tunnel showing how close the exit was to the camp fence

Tom was discovered in August 1943 when nearing completion. Bushell also organised another mass break out, which occurred on 12 June 1943. This became known as the Delousing Break when 26 officers escaped by leaving the camp under escort with two fake guards (POWs disguised as guards) supposedly to go the showers for delousing in the neighbouring compound. All but two were later

recaptured and returned to the camp, with the remaining two officers being sent to Oflag IV-C at Colditz for attempting to steal an aircraft.

Tunnel Harry had been completed on the evening of 24 March 1944, 200 officers prepared to escape, but things did not go according to plan, and only 76 officers managed to get clear of the camp. Among those left behind was 21-year-old RAF Flight Lieutenant Alan Bryett, who refers to Bushell as; "the bravest man I ever knew".

Roger and his partner Bernard Scheidhauer were among the first few to leave the tunnel, and successfully boarded a train at Sagan railway station. They were caught the next day at Saarbrücken railway station awaiting a train to Alsace in France.

Bushell and Scheidhauer were murdered three days later by Emil Schulz of the Gestapo, helped by others. This was a breach of the Geneva Convention and so constituted a war crime. The perpetrators were later tried and executed by the Allies. Fifty of the 76 escapees were killed in the Stalag Luft III murders.

Roger Bushell is buried at the Poznan Old Garrison Cemetery (Coll. grave 9. A.) in Poznań, Poland.



Grave of R.J.Bushell in Poznań, Poland

He was posthumously Mentioned in Despatches for his services as a POW. This award was recorded in the *London Gazette* dated 13 June, 1946.