

“IN THE BAG”: PRISONERS OF WAR 1915 - 1945



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One of 'The Fifty'- Understanding the human cost of The Great Escape through the relics of Squadron Leader James Catanach DFC

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A lot of people know about the Great Escape and their most important source of information is this document :-



And the detail of the escape they remember most, is this one.



I really shouldn't make light of one of the Second World War's most fascinating and tragic episodes and only do so to make the point that the film was made as entertainment. Many aspects of the story were altered for commercial reasons. None of the actual escapees were American, for instance, and none of the escape attempts involved stolen motorcycles, or hijacked Messerschmitts. Most characters in the film were amalgams of many men rather than single individuals and the 'The Fifty' to who the film is dedicated were not machine-gunned in one place at the same time, as depicted in the film, but shot in small groups, in different locales, over many days.

Much of what the film does depict, however, is correct, the way sought-after items—tools, identity papers, supplies—were fabricated or otherwise obtained, as well as, the inventive technologies employed in the planning of the escape and the construction of the tunnel. The net result of this beloved film is that awareness of the escape is widespread but only in an imprecise form.

As in the film, the Great Escapees discovered, on the night of 24 March 1944, that 'Harry', the tunnel they had dug painstakingly over many months, was short—5 metres short, in fact—of the tree line that was supposed to conceal its exit. More worrying still was the presence of a German watchtower a mere 10 metres away. These misfortunes—together with a frozen hatch door which delayed the escape for some hours—meant that only 76 of the planned 200 prisoners were able to make it out of the camp, before a patrolling sentry noticed steam raising from the ground when he went to take a pee on a nearby tree at daybreak.



From left **Per Bergsland, Halldor Espelid and Jens Muller** c 1944
Stalag Luft III, Sagan Poland

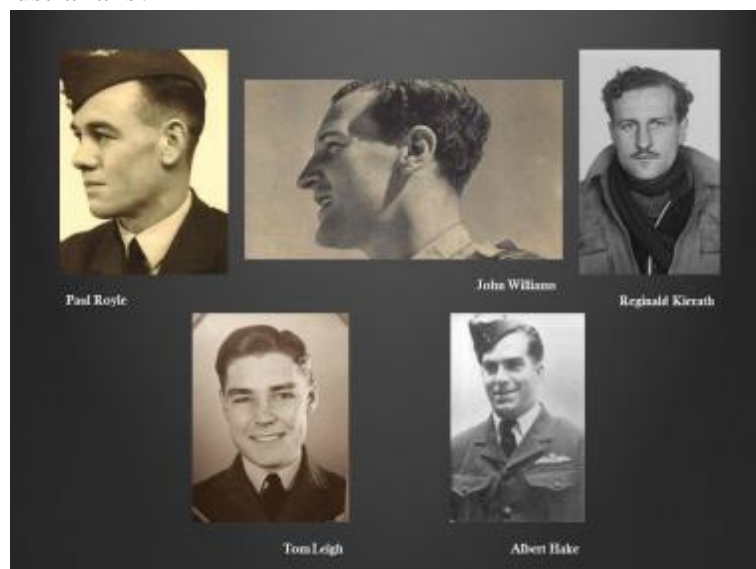
Many Australians were involved in the planning of the Great Escape and a total of six were among those who managed to get out of the camp. Sadly, none were among the only three airmen who made it to freedom. This will disappoint fans of the film who might recall that one of the successful escapees was an oddly accented Australian, played by American actor John Coburn.



Bram van der Stock c 1940
England

The men who did succeed—two Norwegian airmen, Per Bergsland and Jens Muller, and a Dutchman, Bram van der Stock—did so largely because the Reich was replete with forced labourers from Norway and Holland. The presence of these men in Germany was therefore plausible and their prospects for escape greater—a point I will return to later.

What of the six Australians?



One, Flight Lieutenant Paul Royle was recaptured very soon after escaping. He survived because he was picked up not by the Gestapo—the Nazi political police service—but by Luftwaffe (German Air Force) guards who took him and a small group safely back to camp. The other five men—Squadron Leaders James Catanach and John Williams, Flight Lieutenants Reginald Kierath and Thomas Leigh and Pilot Officer Albert Hake—were all ‘shot whilst trying to escape’. A phrase as cynically ambiguous as it was shamelessly expedient.

All six men, and many hundreds more, had worked for months to achieve the Great Escape. They had dug three very long tunnels and concealed evidence of them.

They had fabricated—from the limited material available to them—ingenious ‘escape kits’, bartering, bribing, blackmailing and stealing from the Germans, anything they could not make or forge for themselves.

One of the aforementioned Australians Albert Hake, upon whom the James Coburn character was largely based, had provided each of his fellow escapees with compasses painstakingly crafted from shellac records, slivers of magnetized razor blades, glass from broken windows and solder gleaned from tins. All had been stamped ‘Made in Stalag Luft III. Patent pending’ so the carrier could not be accused of being a spy, supplied with field equipment from the British government. Tragically for most of these men such ingenuity would secure neither their freedom, nor their lives.

What do we know of Stalag Luft III, the camp from which these airmen were so desperate to escape?



North Compound c 1944
Stalag Luft III, Sagan Poland

It was a purpose-built Luftwaffe-run prisoner-of-war camp for captured Allied airmen. It lay in a clearing in a pine forest in the German province of Lower Silesia near the town of Sagan (now Żagań in Poland), 160 kilometres southeast of Berlin. The site was selected because it was deep inside the Reich and the local sandy soil made tunneling difficult.

The camp comprised 5 compounds and covered 24 hectares, housing 11,000 inmates. Guarding these prisoners were about 800 Luftwaffe personnel—men too old for combat, or young men convalescing from wounds. Each compound consisted of fifteen single story huts raised from the ground on stilts. When the prisoners did begin digging they were forced to burrow through the concrete foundations of washrooms or stoves – the only structures beneath the huts that would conceal their tunnel entrances. Only one compound, at Stalag Luft III, North Compound, containing Royal Air Force Officers, from the nations of the Commonwealth and occupied European countries—Poland, the Baltic states, Holland, France and Norway and numbering around 2,500 inmates, need concern us here.



Bunk house c 1943
Stalag Luft III, Sagan Poland

Stalag Luft III was, by the standards of a bitterly fought war, an excellently administered camp and the Luftwaffe accorded far better treatment to their charges than any other German service. Every compound had athletic fields and volleyball courts. A 6 x 7 metre pool, used to store water for firefighting, was on occasion available for swimming. The prisoners fenced and boxed and played football and table tennis. The men had access to a library and correspondence courses—supplied by the Red Cross—in languages, engineering and law.

The prisoners in North Compound built a theatre and put on bi-weekly performances of West End shows. The camp intercom was used to broadcast news and music and two newspapers *The Circuit* and *The Kriegie Times* were published four times a week. In short, the prisoners had everything they needed to see out the war in peace.

But in spite of the enemy's best efforts to mollify the prisoners many would not go easily into captivity. In the spring of 1943 Escape Committee leader, Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, RAF, codenamed Big X, conceived a plan for a mass escape from the camp.

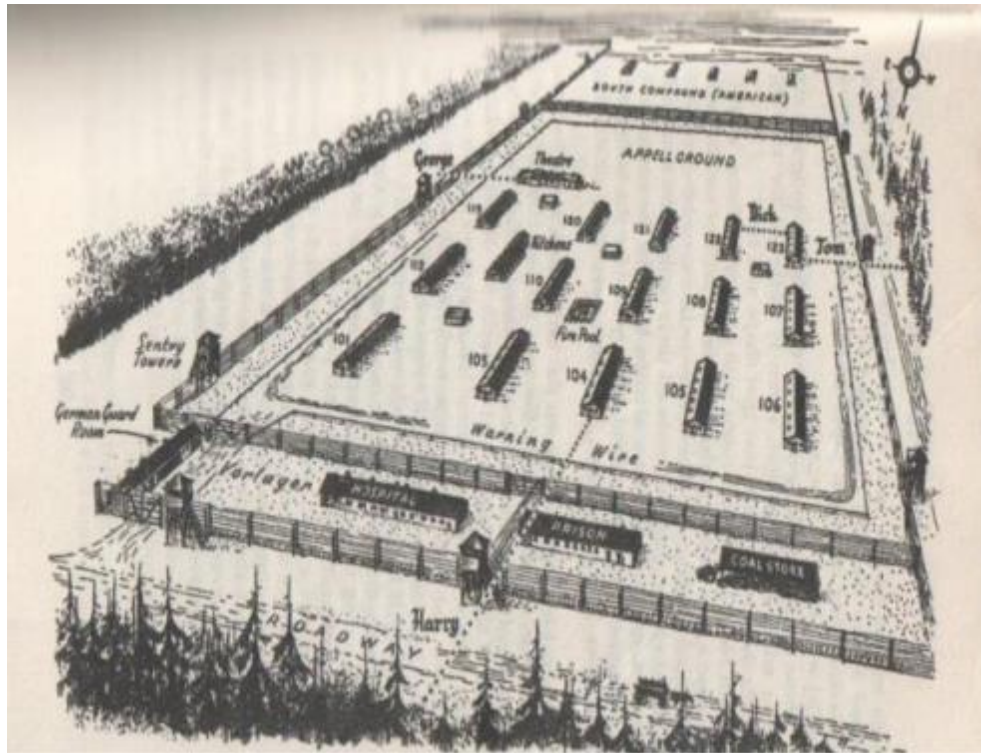


... Everyone here in this room is living on borrowed time. By rights we should all be dead!

The only reason that God allowed us this extra ration of life is so we can make life hell for the Hun...

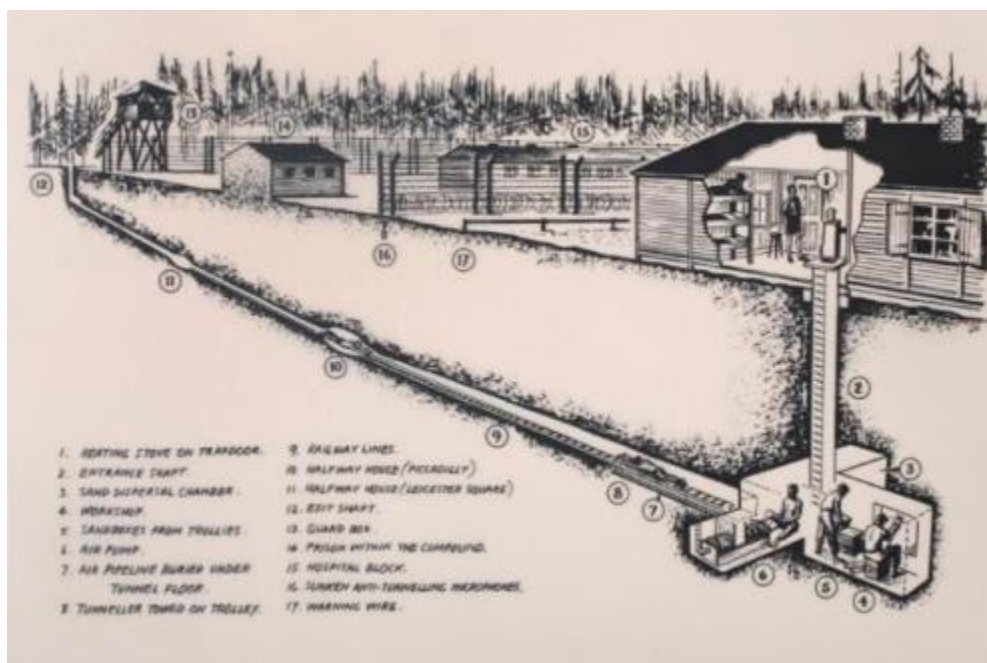
Roger Bushell – 'Big X'

Bushell appealed to his comrade's patriotism and found a receptive audience among many of his comrades. To survive psychologically as a POW life needed purpose. Idle in Stalag Luft III were some of the keenest minds and bravest men in the RAF. Many believed that honour demanded that they try their best to escape.



'Tom', 'Dick', 'Harry' (and 'George')
North Compound, Stalag Luft III, Sagan Poland

Bushell's plan, as any aficionado of the film will know, had called for the construction of three tunnels—Tom, Dick and Harry. 'Tom's' entrance began in a darkened corner next to a stove chimney in Hut 123. 'Dick's' entrance was hidden in a drain sump in the washroom of 122. The entrance to 'Harry' was hidden under a stove in Hut 104. Bushell believed that the existence of three tunnels guaranteed that at least one would succeed.



'Harry'
Stalag Luft III, Sagan Poland

The tunnels were very deep—about 9 m below the surface, two evade microphones buried by the Germans—and included workshops, air pumps and staging posts.

Dick was never completed but instead used as a hiding place for stores and soil from the other two tunnels. Tom was discovered in September 1943 on the eve of its completion. Work on 'Harry' ceased for a time but resumed in January 1944 and was completed in March. A series of paintings by an Australian prisoner, Flight Lieutenant Albert Comber, painted in 1945 illustrate aspects of the tunnels.



Extending the tunnel at the working face, Stalag Luft III 1945
by Albert Comber (1916 - 2014) AWM ART34781.016



Another tunnel: Stalag Luft III: coming up after the day's work in 'Dick' 1945
by Albert Comber (1916 - 2014) AWM ART34781.017



A demonstration of the effort that went into the construction of these tunnels became apparent when the Germans undertook an inventory of the camp after the escape. The guards found that 4,000 bed boards had gone missing—90 double bunks had disappeared entirely. Missing, along with a host of other items were 2,500 pieces of cutlery, 30 shovels, 180 m of rope, 1,700 blankets and 1,400 cans of condensed milk—used to make air pipes for the tunnels. The theft of 300 m of electric wire led to the execution, by the Gestapo, of the hapless German workers who had left it unattended and who did not report it missing.

In all some six hundred men were involved in the scheme. I could speak to you all day about the tremendous industry and ingenuity of the prisoners but I think that this aspect of the story is generally well understood. Instead I'd like to talk to you about how the events of the Great Escape affected one individual and his family.

In 2014 The Shrine of Remembrance was honored to become the custodian of the James Catanach collection, until that time held in loving care by his niece and nephew, Julia Burgess and Blair Catanach, and their families. I first encountered James, or Jimmy, Catanach in early 2013 when I was assembling a Shrine temporary exhibition about RAF Bomber Command. James' squadron, No. 455 RAAF, had been the first Australian squadron to participate in the strategic bombing offensive, before it and its complement of Hampden torpedo bombers, far better suited to maritime patrol, were transferred to Coastal Command.



**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT026**



... I've never seen such a wealth of superfluous energy in any individual over the age of twelve as Jimmy constantly had at his disposal. He didn't drink or smoke; he talked at an incredible speed; he couldn't stand still for a second, but he hopped about all the time you were talking to him till you were nearly giddy. He was a most excellent Flight Commander, and was probably the most generally liked man in the whole squadron.

Wing Commander Grant Lindeman
No. 455 Squadron, RAAF

**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT016**

My research threw up the remarkable Catanach, the squadron's first ever Distinguished Flying Cross winner and, at age 20, the RAAF's youngest Squadron Leader. When I learnt that James was also a prisoner at Stalag Luft III and a Great Escapee, a subject of my favorite war film, I almost fell over. I couldn't have been more impressed if told this same man *had* tried to jump a motorcycle from Germany into Switzerland.

Enquiries led me to Catanach's, jewelry shop on Toorak Road Armidale, a family business where James himself had once worked. I met with his grandniece Amanda Catanach and through her, her aunt, James' niece, Julia Burgess. The Catanach Collection items that I borrowed from these ladies proved a highlight of the exhibition during its run from October 2013 to May 2014. I asked Julia and Amanda if they would consider re-loaning the items for inclusion in the Shrine's permanent Second World War Gallery, to open that November and on which I was then working. It was soon after this that the offer of donation came.





Comprising Catanach's flying log book, his Distinguished Service Cross and service medals, two watches, a clock, two scrapbooks, and a host of photographs, newspaper clippings, letters, certificates and citations the collection is one of the Shrine's jewels.

A collection of such depth, pertaining to any serviceman or woman, would be special—the fact it belongs to one of the famous Great Escapers elevates it into a higher plane entirely. The items, however, are not mere relics, prized only because of the reflected glow of their association with one of the war's most famous episodes. Every object in the Catanach collection tells a unique story—about an escapee, a war hero, an airmen, a beloved son and brother, a loyal friend, a murder victim. I'm a curator, not an historian, and so am perhaps biased in believing that memorabilia—the physical, tangible objects and evidence of people and events past—can act as a portal to the past and have an immediacy that historical accounts and even contemporary photographs can struggle to match.

The items in the Catanach collection were collated by a number of different people, over several generations. Some items appear to have been sent to Jimmy's brother Bill, others to Bill's wife Corona and their children Julia and Blair. The bulk of the official and personal correspondence was addressed to William Catanach, Jimmy's father, or his stepmother, Sybil, following William's death in 1947.

James Catanach enlisted in the RAAF on 18 August 1940 and after training in Australia and Canada was posted to No. 455 Squadron, RAAF, in Britain.



**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT014**



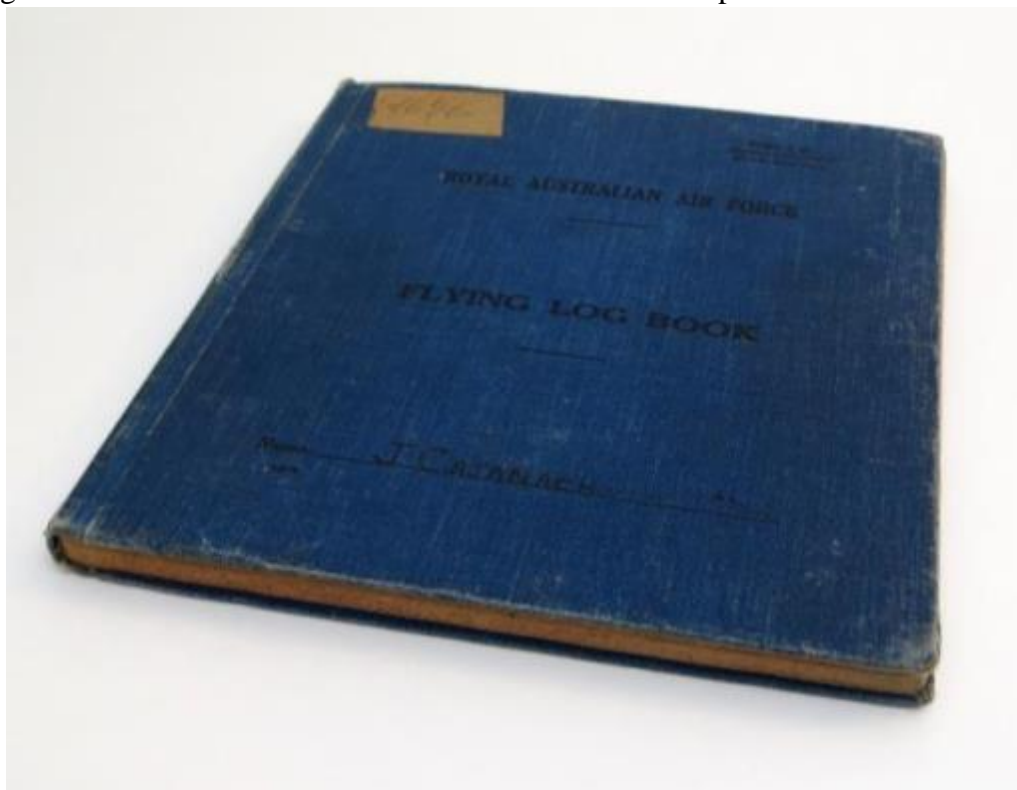
**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT015**

He proved an accomplished pilot and natural leader, and as previously mentioned, flew strategic bombing raids with Bomber Command and, from April 1942, anti-shipping missions with Coastal Command.



**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT015**

His log book serves as testament to these actions before his capture.



**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT031**

On 26 June 1942 James Catanach became the first pilot in No. 455 Squadron, RAAF to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross.



[Catanach] ... *previously completed nine operational sorties ... On three occasions despite severe damage aircraft returned home safely. Has made successful attacks Hamburg Essen Cologne L'orient Lubeck*
Squadron Leader James Catanach's
DFC Citation 26 June 1942

**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT001**



Shrine Accession No. 2013.CAT006

And, as can be seen in this newspaper clipping from *The Sun* from 7 October 1942,



**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT046**

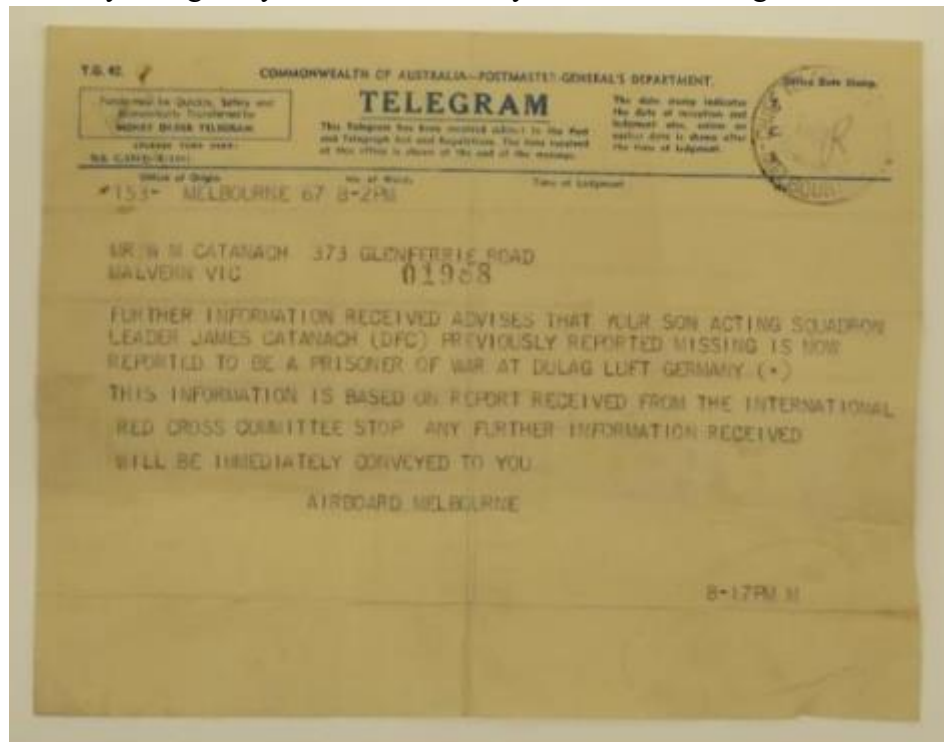
the young Squadron Leader became something of a celebrity—appearing on the BBC radio program 'The Anzac Hour' on 24 July 1942. By the time this article was published, however, James was already an inmate at Stalag Luft III.

James had been forced to land his aircraft Hampden AT109 at Kirkenes in Nazi occupied Norway on the night of 4/5 September 1942 after its fuel tanks had been holed by ground fire. He had been trying to reach Vaenga in the Soviet Union where No. 455 Squadron, RAAF was to provide air cover for British convoys bound for Murmansk. For some weeks it was unclear what had become of Catanach and his crew as this folder of correspondence sent to the Catanach family attests.



**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT045**

Catanach's family was greatly relieved when they received this telegram,



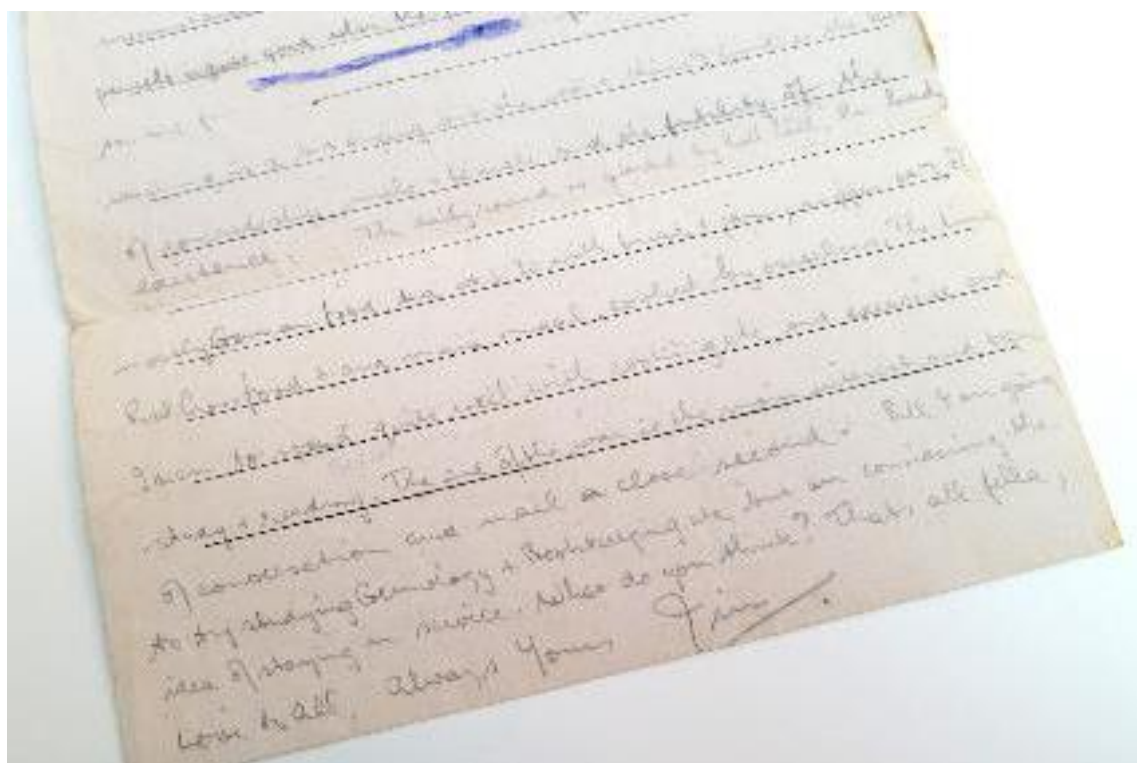
**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT003**

wrongly assuming he would be safely interned for the war's duration. The collection contains many photographs, such as this one, taken of James and his fellow inmates at Stalag Luft III, that give us insight into conditions.

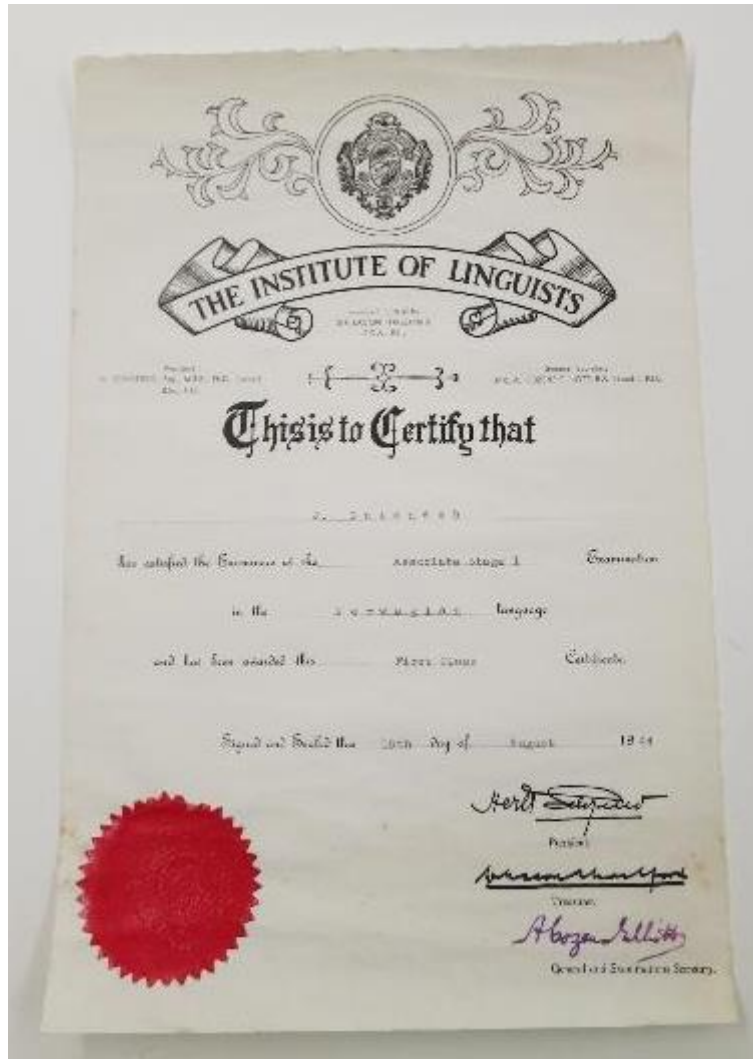


**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT005**

Further information is provided by items like this lettergram to his father William.



Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT050



**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT039**

One of the most interesting items in the collection is this certificate from the Institute of Linguists certifying that James Catanach had passed Associate Stage 1 in Norwegian by correspondence whilst an inmate. Now I don't want to disparage Norway or Norwegians but I think that many of you would agree with me that Norwegian is a peculiar language choice. Someone with a cultured or academic predisposition, like James, may have been expected to learn French, German, Italian, Latin or Ancient Greek. Ordinarily a loyal son of empire, as he was, could have expected to gain more from learning Hindi, Swahili, Cantonese, or Pidgin than Norwegian.

James was already, in fact, a fluent German speaker. It seems very likely that he was learning Norwegian with one goal in mind—to pass himself off as Norwegian when he escaped from Stalag Luft III. To this end James fostered friendships with Norwegian airmen in the camp, and when he did escape, travelled with Norwegians Hallada Espelid (who we meet earlier) and Nils Fuglesang and a New Zealander with Scandinavian parents—Arnold Christiansen.

Catanach travelled by train, with his escape companions, to Berlin, then Hamburg and on to the naval town of Flensburg on the Danish border—their destination neutral Sweden. At the border suspicious policemen insisted on carefully examining their papers. A briefcase check revealed newspapers, train timetables, rations and nothing else. Closer inspection of their clothing uncovered altered greatcoats. The gig was up, and the men found themselves in the Flensburg prison.



**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT011**

When I first met James' Catanach niece, Julia Burgess, we found this photograph among her uncle's things. It was clearly not printed in the 1940s but more recently—most likely the 1980s. Julia believed it had been sent to her father by a well-wisher but did not recognize its context. I was sorry to tell her that I did. James is not looking his usual exuberant self for a very good reason.

This is the last photograph ever taken of him.



It is a Gestapo mugshot.

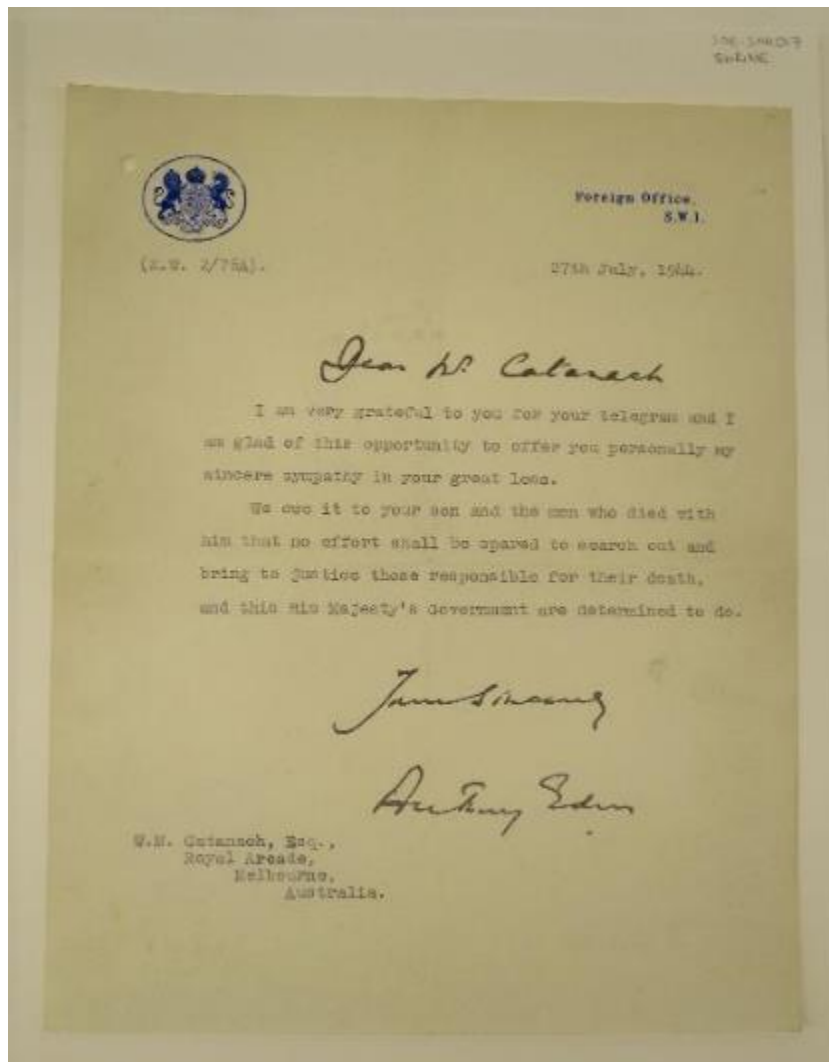
On 29 March 1944, after a brief intense but non-violent interrogation, James and his three companions were handcuffed and loaded into three cars by five Gestapo officers from the nearby city of Kiel—Walter Jacobs, Hans Kaehler, Johannes Post, Franz Schmidt and Oskar Schmidt (no relation). Catanach went with their leader Post in the first car. Out in the countryside, where the road curved sharply to the right, the Mercedes came to a halt. Catanach was told to get out and cross the road, where a gate opened into a meadow. As James walked ahead Post drew a Luger pistol from his pocket and shot him between the shoulder blades. Post later said that James' last word was 'Why?' As Post pocketed his weapon, the other cars arrived and the other three other men were escorted into the field. When one of them saw a dark object lying in the grass, the realisation that it was James caused a commotion that was quickly snuffed out with pistol shots.



'The Fifty

Across the Reich similar scenes were repeated. Here are the faces of the men killed. Among them 20 Britons, six Poles, six Canadians, five Australians, four South Africans, two New Zealanders, two Norwegians, a Belgian, a Czechoslovakian, a Frenchman, a Greek and a Lithuanian.

The British government learned of the deaths from Swiss authorities in May.



*We owe it to your son and
the men who died with him
that no effort shall be
spared to search out and
bring to justice those
responsible
Anthony Eden*

**Shrine Accession No.
2013.CAT011**

On 23 June the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden promised the House of Commons that, at the end of the war, those responsible would be 'brought to exemplary justice' - a promise extended personally to the Catanach family in this letter dated 27 July 1944. When the post-war hunt for the killers ended in May 1947 the RAF Special Investigation Branch had tracked down 329 suspects, 23 of whom were directly complicit in the Sagan murders. The defendants argued that at the time orders issued by Hitler were law; disobeying them was illegal. Allied authorities disagreed and on 3 September 1947, 12 were sentenced to hang.

Elly Koester, the sister of one of the Kiel Gestapo agents, Hans Kaehler, wrote a letter to the Catanachs asking for them to intercede on her brother's behalf during his war crimes trial. The letter went unanswered. Kaehler was executed with Post, Jacobs and Oskar Schmidt on 26 February 1948. Franz Schmidt had already committed suicide on 27 October 1946.



Johannes Post 3 September 1947
Nuremburg, Germany



Roy Nielsen c 1950

An interesting postscript to the development of the James Catanach display in the Second World War Gallery at the Shrine occurred only two months before it was due to be opened to the public. In the lead-up to the Great Escape James Catanach had not wanted to carry any item that would reveal his identity while on the lam and so entrusted this Catanach jewelry shop branded Cyma' to a Norwegian friend, Roy Nielsen. In September 2014, without any prompting, the Nielsen family contacted James' family through their jewellery business and returned the watch that had been in their safekeeping for 70 years.



Further Reading

Brickhill, Paul *The Great Escape* 1950

Burgess, Alan *The Longest Tunnel: The True Story of World War II's Great Escape* 1990

Gill, Anton *The Great Escape: The Full Dramatic Story with Contributions from Survivors and Their Families* 2002