

WOULD THE SECOND WORLD WAR'S MOST AUDACIOUS ESCAPE PLAN HAVE SUCCEEDED?

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A view of Colditz Castle, the former Oflag IV-C, today.

Colditz Castle was the only high-security prison of its kind in Germany. It was where the Germans placed the prisoners who had caused them the most problems – serial escapers. In theory putting all the bad eggs in one basket should have made it easier for the Germans to control, but in practice all they had done was create an escape university.

The castle was built on an outcrop of rock, with a sheer drop of 250 yards down to the River Mulde, and was 400 miles from any frontier not under German control, but this did not deter the prisoners. They began escape planning from almost the day they arrived – and continued to do so throughout the months and years that followed, becoming ever more daring and ingenious.

The men had tried everything they could think of to escape; from leaping over the fence in the exercise ground, burrowing under the stage, to disguising themselves as women, German officers and guards. It was whilst Flight Lieutenant L.J.E. 'Bill' Goldfinch was looking out of a window that the most bizarre idea of them all was conceived. It was the winter of 1943-1944 and it was snowing. As he stared out of the window he watched the snowflakes swirling upwards and over the roof of the castle – and it made him think.

Of course the very idea of building a glider in the highest-security prison in Germany was preposterous. Yet nothing, it seemed, was beyond their capabilities.

Every single item for the construction of the glider had to be stolen or made from whatever objects were in the castle – and all this had to be done under the noses of the highly-vigilant German guards. Altogether, 6,000 pieces of wood, each of a specific length and width, were

manufactured, using hand-made tools or items 'liberated' from the canteen. There was also a complex lookout system which had forty men watching every movement made by the guards. The glider was completed but, with the end of the war, it never flew from the top of the castle. Thus it was, that a TV company decided to recreate the Colditz glider using the prisoners' original drawing and then release it from the top of the castle.

Flight from Colditz tells the story of how the original glider was built by the prisoners and of the audacious attempt to fly the replica from Colditz. This is an absorbing book packed with photographs and loaded with tension.

ATTEMPT TO FLY THE REPLICA FROM COLDITZ



The runway construction team take a moment to confer with Dr Hugh Hunt high up on the roof of Colditz Castle. The gap in the runway on the right nearest the bottom right of the picture was the access hatch up on to the structure. (Ian Duncan)



The runway provided the ideal spot from which to take in the scenery surrounding the castle. The author, Tony Hoskins, is standing on the left. (Ben Watkins)



The finished glider sits proudly on its runway awaiting its moment to take to the air for the first time. (Ben Watkins)



Seen from some distance away, in fact from some ruins to the north of the castle, the glider is pictures waiting on the runway prior to the big launch. At this point, the take-off was imminent and the tension and excitement was certainly mounting. (Mike Coles)



Airborne! After all the planning and effort of the previous months, the new Colditz Cock is launched from the roof of Colditz Castle and heads out over the roofs of the town below. (Windfall Films)



This snapshot from the film footage taken from the castle roof shows how far the glider dropped over leaving the runway – it can be seen to the left of the runway having got as far as the river. (Windfall Films)



This onboard camera shows the view as the glider crossed the River Mulde and closed in on the landing ground. (Windfall Films)



The glider gracefully continues its descent from the runway to undertake a banking turn to continue its final run in to the landing ground. (Windfall Films)



The last few seconds of flight for the latest version of the Colditz Cock. (Windfall Films)



The camera mounted on the nose of the glider captures the moment of impact on the landing site beside the River Mulde. (Windfall Films)



Seen from a different angle, here the glider is banking prior to touching down. (Windfall Films)



Though the glider is battered and damaged, it has nevertheless successfully completed the flight down from the castle. (Ben Watkins)

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The only picture known to exist of the real 'Colditz Cock'. It is seen here in the lower attic in Colditz Castle having been photographed by a US serviceman on the day that the castle was liberated. (NARA)



A view of the upper attic about the Chapel at Colditz Castle. The white line on the floor denotes where the partition was located. It is beyond the white line, therefore, that the prisoners had their secret workshop for constructing the glider. (Keith Rodgerson)

"...daring and ingenious."



Bill Goldfinch, one of the design and construction team, in uniform. (Courtesy of Pam Smith) In a conversation with Tony Rolt at Colditz, Bill recalled how he ended up serving in the RAF: "I got mad keen on flying and aircraft design. That sent me into the RAFVR when I was twenty-one. It must have been about 1938 ... I got called up when the war started."

Before the war Bill had been a civil engineer in the Colonial Service and worked on the Gold Coast (now Ghana), before gaining employment with Salisbury City Council in Wiltshire. It was from the latter that he joined up

Colditz Castle was one of the most famous Prisoner of War camps of the Second World War. It was there that the Germans interred their most troublesome or important prisoners. Hundreds of ingenious escape attempts were made but the most ambitious of all was to build a glider and fly to freedom.