

Every three or four years I take out my copy of The Great Escape and read it again. The story of how 76 prisoners broke out through a tunnel named Harry and caused the most monumental disruption across the whole of the third Reich. I like to connect with the story and remind myself of it and what was at stake for them, I'll explain why in a moment.

Most people will be more familiar with the 1963 film the Great Escape, than the book.

Back in the day when we only had three channels on our Television, The Great Escape seemed to come round every Christmas, if not at other times.

With a fabulous ensemble cast, iconic music by Elmer Bernstein and the genuine tension that didn't need any Hollywood exaggeration it's not surprising it remains a film favourite.

And it's simply too good an opportunity to miss –

(And here I played the theme music!!)

I only really have one quibble with the film...and it's to do with Steve McQueen and the motorbike escape...that was all pure Hollywood.

Some years back I loaned my copy of the book to someone, I can't remember who and I never got it back, so I bought one 2nd hand off the internet and to my disgust this is the cover picture...(and it's Steve McQueen!!!) in fact if you look up the great escape pretty much every cover picture and film picture stars Steve McQueen and his fictional motorbike. Leaving that aside – why read it? Why read it every three or four years? I know the account of Prison Camp Stalag Luft Drei (III) pretty well by now.

The answer is found on one of the opening pages. The dedication reads "To the Fifty".

Against all protocol of the Geneva Convention, the German High Command – Hitler to be precise, wanted every escaped officer to be shot. They toned it down a little, and executed 50 of the 76 who escaped from the famous tunnel.

The Geneva Convention allowed that it was every officers duty to try and escape. They had standards by which they had to be treated. Such was the growing trouble caused by escaping prisoners that stage by stage the High Command stepped up their reprisals and eventually took to executing escapees.

The author, Paul Brickhill, who trained with the Australian air force and then came over and joined 96 Squadron RAF. He was shot down and taken prisoner and he was in the camp so he knew the story from first-hand experience.

He writes extremely well with journalistic thoroughness and no need to invent drama or tension, there was plenty there anyway.

Every time I read it I marvel at the ingenuity, the creativity, the bravery, the stubbornness, the determination to break out, find freedom and get back to helping win the war.

From the moment members of the RAF were being taken prisoner they were trying to escape. They learned a great deal from their mistakes, so when the Luftwaffe – who naturally enough hosted the RAF prisoners - lumped them all together in one place in this new camp they brought together all the escape expertise available.

They prisoners created the X organisation. Big X was head of the escape. Big S was in charge of security. Every hut had a little X and little S and just about everyone was involved in some way or

other. Forging documents, making clothing, digging one of three tunnels known as Tom, Dick and Harry, getting rid of sand, manufacturing the board to shore up the tunnels or being stooges – that is simply hanging around keeping an eye on the guards who they called goons.

Nearly seven decades on some British archaeologists were allowed to go back and they found the site of the camp and the tunnels. Some of the bed boards used were still in place, what they achieved was remarkable.



Many of you today will have walked the length of the tunnel. The distance from the war memorial to the gate into our driveway was how far they tunnelled.

But what hits me every time I read the story is that the escapees knew what was likely to happen. The guards, who they got to know quite well, warned them, told them that patience had run out and they would in all likelihood be shot. So why escape? What was the point? Getting two or three prisoners back to London was

hardly likely to win the war even though it would help camp morale.

In the end, it came down to a sense of duty. These were men who knew their life could be over every time they took to the sky. They knew what they were fighting for and how important it was and if the best they could do was to cause the enemy trouble by escaping...then that's what they would do, even though it might cost their lives.

After the escape over 70,000 police had to devote countless hours searching for the escapees. In the end, documents show that nearly 5 million people, police, SS, Gestapo, Luftwaffe, a sort of home guard had to be turned out to try and find these men. They caused the most monumental disruption to the enemy.

So why read this story again and again?

Because I live in what they were fighting for. I benefit, from their sacrifice and I don't want to take it for granted. I chose to remember them and I choose to live as fully and as well as I can because they deserve nothing less.

Our scriptures remind us of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who willingly gave his life for our freedom. The church doesn't shy away from talking about the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross.

In one of the songs we sing at the primary school, when we say Jesus, we point to our hands, reminding ourselves of the nail marks where he was nailed to the cross.

When we celebrate communion here, in our Eucharist prayer we name the bread as Jesus body broken for us and the wine as his blood shed for us.

Week by week we remember Jesus death and our forgiveness and freedom because of his sacrifice.

But the Apostle John takes it a step further. It's all very well appreciating Jesus death and resurrection and our freedom through Him – but what does that mean day by day?

John says we are to live our lives sacrificially. In this colloquial translation by the pastor Eugene Peterson, St John says... Christ sacrificed his life for us. we ought to live sacrificially not just for ourselves.

If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.

18-20 My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love.

When I read the Great Escape I wonder if I would have shown the same bravery, the same commitment, the same ingenuity and doggedness and strength of purpose. Because of their sacrifice, I don't have to face the suffering they did.

When I take communion I marvel at what Jesus did for me, as St Paul says, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

What we can do is choose how to live and choose how we give of ourselves, in the service of others.

I've chosen a hymn to follow this talk and perhaps the stirring words might be a prompt for your reflection and commitment on living life to the very fullest, reflecting the love of God to others, and celebrating our freedom.

I vow to Thee my country.

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 12/11/23



