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Dick Churchill, Last Survivor of 'The Great Escape,' Dies at 99

Dick Churchill in an undated photograph. He was the last living member of the group of Allied soldiers who took part in the breakout from a Nazi P.O.W. camp that inspired the 1963 movie "The Great Escape."

By [Daniel E. Slotnik](#)

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Dick Churchill, the last living participant in a daring breakout from a German prisoner-of-war camp that inspired the 1963 movie "[The Great Escape](#)," died on Feb. 12 at his home near Crediton, Devon, England. He was 99.

His son Roger confirmed the death by email.

Paul Royle, the second-to-last surviving prisoner to escape from Stalag Luft III in 1944, [died in 2015](#) at 101. Many British news media outlets and other sources called Mr. Churchill the last surviving prisoner who had taken part in the escape.

The Germans captured Mr. Churchill, a squadron leader at the time, after they shot down the bomber he was flying over the Netherlands in 1940. He was transferred to Stalag III, about 100 miles southeast of Berlin, in 1942, and soon a few hundred prisoners began excavating tunnels to escape.

Mr. Churchill later recalled that the inmates had felt that they had to do something, even though it would have probably been safer to try to wait out the war.

"Were you going to sit and enjoy the very few delights of a barbed-wire prison camp until you were rescued by your comrades, if you were rescued, or were you going to try and get out of the place and rejoin, and drop something on them?" Mr. Churchill asked in a [BBC interview](#) in 2018.

Mr. Churchill helped dig the three main tunnels, which the prisoners called Tom, Dick and Harry. It was arduous, nerve-racking work, done with improvised tools and the constant risk of discovery or a cave-in.

"You didn't have any air," Mr. Churchill said, "and you had a little fat lump lamp, which was Reich margarine, which spluttered, with a bit of pajama cord or something similar, which sucked up the oil and gave you a little bit of a light. And you hacked away at your sand, pushed it behind you, where another fool took it further back."

The tunnels were cleverly concealed, but Tom was discovered by the Germans in 1943 and Dick proved unusable. On a frigid night in March 1944, Mr. Churchill was one of 76 prisoners to make their way through the tunnel called Harry and out of Stalag III.

The escape was delayed for more than an hour, and the tunnel mistakenly ended yards from the forest that the escapees had hoped would conceal them, forcing them to scramble for cover over open ground.

Richard Attenborough, front, and Steve McQueen in a scene from “The Great Escape.”
United Artists

Once free of the camp, Mr. Churchill, in improvised clothing, had hoped to pass as a Romanian woodcutter; he had spent months studying Romanian. But after fleeing with Flight Lt. Bob Nelson and spending two days hiding in the woods as the Germans searched the area, they were discovered hiding in a hayloft.

[Paul Brickhill](#), an Australian P.O.W. who took part in the prison break, wrote the book, “The Great Escape” (1950), that was the basis for the movie, which starred Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, Richard Attenborough and James Garner. The film added embellishments, most memorably when Mr. McQueen’s character vaulted a barbed-wire fence [on a motorcycle](#).

Most of the escapees were recaptured in days — only three made it to freedom — and 50 were executed. On why he was spared, Mr. Churchill speculated that his captors might have believed that he was related to Prime Minister Winston Churchill and could therefore be a bargaining chip. (He said they were not related as far as he knew.)

Mr. Churchill told The Telegraph in 2014 that he thought that the escape had been “a worthwhile venture” despite its terrible cost.

“If nothing else, you are doing something towards the target of getting out and getting back to what you were doing before, whether it’s flying fighters or dropping bombs” instead of giving in to despair, he said.

Richard Sydney Albion Churchill was born on Jan 21, 1920, in East Molesey, Surrey, England, to Sidney and Elsie (Taylor) Churchill. His father was a civil servant. He graduated from the Tiffin School in Kingston-Upon-Thames and in 1938 joined the Royal Air Force and trained as a pilot.

Nazi fighters shot down Mr. Churchill’s bomber on Sept. 2, 1940, during a nighttime raid on Ludwigshafen, Germany. The explosion damaged one of his eardrums before he could bail out, and his hearing in that ear never recovered.

Mr. Churchill left Stalag Luft III for good in January 1945, when the Nazis evacuated the camp before the Soviet Army could reach it. The prisoners were forced to march west through deep snow and punishing cold and were liberated by British forces that spring.

After the war Mr. Churchill worked with the R.A.F. for a time, but his damaged eardrum kept him from flying again. His son said he had worked mainly in export sales and marketing.

In 1950 he married Patricia Lane, who died in 2013. In addition to his son Roger, he is survived by another son, David, and five grandchildren.

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