

Brigadier Jock Hamilton-Baillie AAS Beachley - Chief Instructor - 1959 to 1962

PoW who took part in some of the classic prison-camp breakouts before being accorded the accolade of incarceration in Colditz

At the end of the German offensive through the Low Countries and northern France in 1940 Jock Hamilton-Baillie was wounded and taken prisoner when the 51st Highland Division had to surrender at St Valery-en-Caux on June 12. He spent the rest of the war striving to escape, establishing a formidable reputation as a specialist in the art.

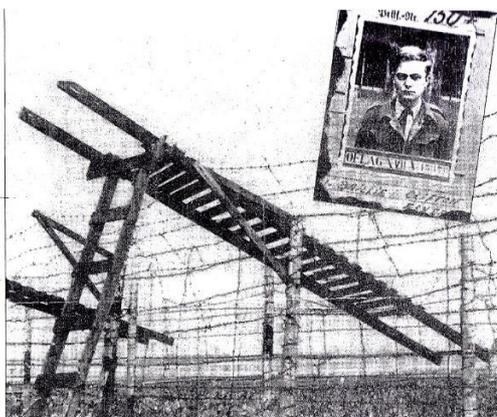
He got beyond the perimeter of five different camps but only once remained at liberty for longer than three days. Finally, he was sent to Oflag IVC, Colditz Castle, where he refused to give up, but his lasting memorial in the annals of escaping - and ingenious triumph - was the "Warburg Wire Job" of August 1942.

Only 21 at the time of his capture; "HB" - as he was generally known was a subaltern in the Royal Engineers. After recovering from his wound in a French hospital in Rouen, he was sent to a prison camp at Péronne, east of Amiens. There, he and another officer scaled the wire and were free for three days before recapture.

His next escape attempt was from Stalag VIIC at Laufen, close to the old Austrian border. With a small coterie of fellow escape enthusiasts, he dug a short tunnel under the outer wall from a basement to a pigsty across the external road, but the tunnel entrance was discovered before the exit could be widened sufficiently to permit the tunnellers to escape.

This resulted in his being moved to Oflag VIID at Tittmoning, a medieval castle standing on the Salzach river which, before the Anschluss, marked the Austro-German border. He decided to make his next attempt alone and, having found a way through the wire, followed the course of the River Inn on foot to the Swiss frontier, a distance of almost 200 miles. He slept rough in the woods avoiding all human contact until the tenth day, when he crossed over to what his rough map indicated was the Swiss side of the river. But the map was wrong and he was recaptured by a border guard just yards from freedom.

On his return to Tittmoning the German commandant congratulated him on his enterprise, then sent him to Oflag VIB at Warburg, a hutted camp east of the Ruhr. Specially constructed to hold prisoners of war, the camp stood on an isolated plateau three miles from Warburg railway station. Several tunnels were being dug secretly and HB was prompt in putting his experience at the disposal of one of the teams.



The ingenious arrangements for the "Warburg Wire Job", and Hamilton-Baillie's PoW identity card

At the same time he helped to design and build three hinged ladders, made from duckboards and roof beams, for crossing over the perimeter wire. One leg of each ladder reached the top of the wire and the second spanned its three-metre width to allow a stream of men to cross and swing down using a trapeze bar at the end.

The plan was for a mass escape of about 40 prisoners, at night, in three minutes, while 50 others created a diversion to distract the sentries. The perimeter lights were short-circuited by using a string through a hole in the window of a locked workshop to pull a spanner across an open switch. As soon as the lights went out, the 50 diversionists staged a decoy escape on the opposite side of the camp. Forty-one prisoners escaped and three of them made a home run.

Hamilton- Baillie and his group of tunnellers had planned to escape in the general confusion, but a tragedy led to their tunnel being discovered. While working in the tunnel, one member of the team - John Du Pré, of the Seaforth Highlanders was knocked out by a roof fall and a shock from the tunnel's electricity supply. The guards had to be called to help to dig him out from above, but he was dead by the time they reached him.

Sobered by this incident but not deterred from further escape attempts, HB and other British officers were transferred to Oflag VIIB at Eichstätt in Bavaria. There, a well-organised escape committee was being aided by MI9, the War Office branch in secret communication with a number of prison camps. He joined a tunnelling team and helped to design a long route under the wire to a building beyond it. A mass break out of 65 prisoners, including HB, was made on June 3, 1943, but the Germans reacted by deploying a 50,000-strong force of police, troops, Home Guard and Hitler Youth to search for them. All were recaptured within two weeks, HB within two days, and sent to Colditz, the prison camp for persistent escapers.

After his arrival at Colditz in June 1943, Hamilton-Baillie made a detailed survey of all parts of the castle to which he could gain access to update the plan secretly provided by MI9. This led him to try, as had others, to find a way from the prisoners' courtyard through the line of buildings separating it from the outer courtyard used by the German guards. Entering via the roof cavity he found a way into a clothing store containing German uniforms, invaluable for would-be escapers. He made a return visit intending to collect some of the uniform, but an unlucky chance return of the German storeman led to his discovery, but not the route by which he had come

Ever restless to find a way out HB remained a prisoner until Colditz was liberated by the 69th (United States) Division on April 16th 1945. He was awarded the Military Cross in December 1941 in recognition of his resolute escape attempts and efforts on behalf of other prisoners in the camps where, he was held before being sent to Colditz.

John Robert Edward Hamilton-Baillie was educated at Clifton College and the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, where he won the Pollock Medal for the most distinguished cadet of his intake. He was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in January 1939 and went to France with 26 Field Company RE, initially serving with the 1st Division of the British Expeditionary Force and later with the 51st (Highland) Division.

After release from Colditz, he joined the staff of the School of Military Engineering, Roorkee, in India but re-turned to England to take a First in the Mechanical Sciences Tripos at Cambridge and then attend the Staff College, Camberley.

A conventional career of alternating regimental and staff appointments followed until he became chief instructor of the Army Apprentices School, Chepstow, in 1959. Senior administrative planning appointments in the Middle East and Germany followed until, in 1970, he became head of a new branch of the Royal Engineers' staff which was to take over responsibility for airfield construction when this task was switched to the Army from the RAF.

His final appointment as a serving officer was as Brigadier Engineer Plans in the Ministry of Defence. He was an ADC to the Queen, 1972-74.

He left the Army in 1974 to teach soil mechanics at the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham, and to devote more of his time to the history of fortifications. He was for several years the chairman of United Kingdom Fortress Study Group and wrote a number of papers on the subject.

He married Lettice Pumphrey in 1947. She predeceased him; he is survived by two sons and two daughters.

Brigadier J. R. E. Hamilton-Baillie, MC, persistent prison camp escaper, was born on March 1, 1919. He died on April 16, 2003, aged 84.