



Press Release

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DARING ESCAPE FROM A WW1 PRISONER OF WAR CAMP IS COMMEMORATED AT STOW MARIES GREAT WAR AERODROME

Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome has launched a new exhibition which recreates a dramatic escape from the dreaded Holzminden Prisoner-of-War camp in Germany during World War One.

The First Great Escape exhibition was formally opened by guest Sarah Paterson, Curator (World War One) at the Imperial War Museum, on Friday 24 July – 108 years to the day that 29 prisoners escaped through a narrow tunnel, dug using sharpened spoons. While many were recaptured following the escape, 10 made it safely back to England after travelling on foot for 150 miles to reach safety in neutral Holland. Supporting Ms Paterson was Dr Henry Raffal, Head of Collections and Research at the RAF Museum, especially relevant as all the escapees were aviators of the fledgling Royal Air Force.

The exhibition at Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, set in one of its original WW1 buildings, explores different aspects of this amazing feat, including a fascinating recreation of the entrance to the escape tunnel. The original was concealed in a tiny space beneath a staircase, with a cunningly designed pump made from a leather jacket and bed boards helping to keep some air flow into the narrow, rat-infested tunnel. Visitors to the exhibition can now get a taste of the cramped and difficult conditions in which the escape was planned and executed.

Watching over the exhibition is a life-sized standee of Commandant Karl 'Milwaukee Bill' Niemeyer, who ruled over the camp with a rod of iron and was feared by prisoners and his own staff alike. Known for his rages and harsh punishments, Niemeyer was in charge of the camp, near Hanover, which housed 600 officers and men, many of whom were deemed troublesome after previous escape attempts. Niemeyer claimed that Holzminden was impossible to escape, but the ingenuity of the prisoners-of-war, who dug the tunnel over a nine-month period, proved him wrong. In fact, many of those who successfully escaped went on to form MI9, the Military Intelligence unit that advised the Armed Forces during World War Two, passing on the skills that would be put to use in future Great Escapes, such as the one immortalised by Steve McQueen.

Ian Flint, Chief Executive Officer of Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, comments: *"We are incredibly privileged to be custodians of so many original photographs, documents and objects relating to this incredible story of courage and perseverance. Wartime escapes didn't start with the Hollywood blockbuster, but with brave officers equipped with little more than a spoon and who were determined to make it back home."*

Sarah Paterson added: *"It's a huge privilege to be here. The 1918 escape from Holzminden is a very exciting and uplifting success story that should be better known, and this wonderful aerodrome is playing an important part in making this happen."*

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2/... The opening ceremony was led by Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome Trustee John Aldridge. Guests included local historian Stephen Nunn, who spoke about the varying circumstances of both Essex servicemen who found themselves prisoners of war in Germany, and Germans who were taken prisoner in Essex.

Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome was also delighted to welcome Ian Pearson and his father Peter Pearson. Peter is the nephew of one of the Great Escapers Lieutenant Leonard Pearson. After being shot down over Germany, the RFC/RAF pilot was sent to Holzminden after a previous failed escape attempt. He was 30th in line to escape through the tunnel, but it collapsed on top of him, leaving him buried for several hours, and he remained in custody until the end of the war.

The team of volunteers who came up with the idea, built scale models and then created the carefully detailed life-sized replica of the hidden tunnel were also invited to the grand opening. Neil Robertson jokingly told the assembled guests: "We used CAD – cardboard assisted design!"

The First Great Escape, which was funded by Essex Heritage Trust and Fowler Smith Jones Trust, is open Friday to Sunday, 10am to 4pm. Museum admission on standard opening days costs £12 for adults, £9 for concessions and children 0-10 free. Please note that admission prices vary on event days. For more information visit www.stowmaries.org.uk.

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Notes for editors:

- All proceeds from opening to the public and all events directly funds the ongoing work to preserve and protect Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome and support its battle for survival.
- The museum, situated between Chelmsford and Maldon in the Essex countryside, features the largest collection of Royal Flying Corps buildings in the world. It was the base of 37 (Home Defence) Squadron Royal Flying Corps, which was tasked to protect London from raids by German Zeppelin airships and Gotha heavy bombers.
- Essex County and Maldon District Councils led the acquisition of the site for the nation in 2013, following a generous grant from the Heritage Memorial Fund. It was placed in the care of Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, a registered charity.
- Today the museum, still an operational airfield, is supported and maintained by over 100 volunteers. It is open each Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 10am until 4pm.