

Ewen McDonald

One of the last surviving inmates of Stalag Luft III, setting of *The Great Escape*

Appreciation

■ Ewen McDonald, headmaster, RAF pilot and Stalag Luft III survivor. Born: 30 June, 1920, in Glasgow. Died: 6 May, 2015, in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, aged 94.

E WEN McDonald lived in quiet retirement in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, where he had been the local headmaster and a pillar of the community. But behind the outward appearance of an ageing, frail old man was one of the last living inmates of Stalag Luft III, setting of the classic war film *The Great Escape*, and a remarkable story of wartime survival.

When war broke out he was a student at Glasgow University, seemingly destined for the ministry. But he was determined to sign up. He joined the RAF, was given command of a Wellington bomber and was shot down over Heraklion Harbour.

He had a crew of four, three of whom were killed. He was badly wounded, but eventually fished out of the Mediterranean by a German rescue boat.

As a prisoner of war he was involved in escape plans, though considered too tall to attempt an escape through the tunnels that featured in *The Great Escape* – a film he always dismissed as Hollywood nonsense.

But one thing the film got right was the mass execution of recaptured prisoners, news of which had a devastating effect on those left behind.

As the war entered its final weeks the Soviets were closing on one side, the Americans on the other and the Germans were determined to hold onto British officers as “bargaining counters”, marching them west ahead of the Soviet advance.

Battles continued all around. Eventually freed by Soviet tanks, he made his own way back across Europe, witnessing many horrors and occasional acts of kindness.

He received no counselling and just got on with life, although forever haunted by his memories.

He visited the families of dead crew. One mother shut the door in his face – because there was no body she refused to believe that her son was dead.

He became a teacher and latterly rector of the Gordon Schools in Huntly. He was a justice of the peace, chairman of the children’s panel in Aberdeenshire and Huntly’s Citizen of the Year.

In those later years he spent a lot of time reading about the war and watching documentaries.

He did not go to reunions where he might meet the dwindling band of fellow servicemen. Eventually he talked about it, little by little, to close family and me. Ewen was my father-in-law.

The son of a senior police officer, he was born in Glasgow in 1920,



attended Allan Glen’s School and Glasgow University, which was intended to lead to training as a Church of Scotland minister.

When the Second World War broke out he immediately tried to enlist in the army, only to be told he should finish his degree and that ministers were a reserved occupation.

Despite pressure from his parents to stay on at university, he managed to enlist in the RAF, where he proved to be such a capable pilot that they refused to send him into action and instead put him to work training others.

They wanted to send him to Canada to train pilots there, but he pushed for active service.

He flew 15 operations, attacking enemy shipping in the Mediterranean. “On the evening of the 16th February, 1943 we were briefed to attack a fairly large ship which was expected to dock at Heraklion at dawn on the 17th,” he later wrote in a personal account.

“Tactics were up to the individual crew and I decided to go round the small island that stood north-west of Heraklion and then from height come gliding in close to the harbour mole, drop our mine and speed off at low height.”

He did not remember much about his plane being hit, just swearing when the co-pilot collapsed on top of him, not realising the man was dead, an

engine on fire, going down into the sea and climbing onto the fuselage. He was lucky to survive, with serious head wounds and numerous other injuries.

He and his surviving crewman were flown to Athens. “We were nursed by two German auxiliary Red Cross nurses,” he wrote. “They brought us oranges from the Athens street markets... They wrote down their names and addresses for me before I left, but on the way to Germany I tore them up.”

“I didn’t think it would be a good idea for them to be handing out such information to enemy prisoners.”

He wondered about trying to track them down after the war, but never did.

He ended up in Stalag Luft III, the prison camp for captured airmen. “The big excitement of the first year was the Wooden Horse escape,” he wrote in his personal papers. This involved men using the exercise apparatus as cover for a tunnel. Ewen took his turn running up to it, but did not actually jump it. He was still badly injured and feared knocking it over, exposing the dig.

He was part of one escape scheme that ended when a roof collapsed under the weight of earth that had been dug out of a tunnel over six months – an episode shown in the film *The Wooden Horse*.

He maintained that most POW films

are accurate in their depiction of conditions, though he was dismissive of *The Great Escape* and Steve McQueen leaping over the boundary fence on a motorbike.

He did not write about the actual *Great Escape* – it was too painful. Seventy-six men escaped, 73 were recaptured and 50 summarily executed, a war crime committed on Hitler’s personal orders.

Ewen returned to Glasgow University after the war, not to study Divinity, but Arts. He taught English in Blairgowrie, Aberdeen and Oban, was co-author of the text book *Work in English* and in 1961 became rector of the Gordon Schools.

After retiring in 1982, he returned to the site of Stalag Luft III, now in Poland. By chance he met a visiting school group and was persuaded to talk to them about his experiences. The children were in awe, adopting their own real-life war hero.

Ewen is survived by his wife Mary, who he had met before the war and who was also a teacher, three children, five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

BRIAN PENDREIGH