

Great Escape hero dies

By **Richard Palmer**

Bomber pilot carved his name in history

A WAR hero who was one of the few to survive the real-life Great Escape has died aged 86.

RAF bomber pilot Desmond Plunkett was chief forger in the escape of 76 men from Stalag Luft III in March 1944 - providing some of the inspiration for the character played by Donald Pleasence in the 1963 film that immortalised their deeds.

Mr Plunkett, a Flight Lieutenant who had been shot down over Holland in 1942, was the 13th man to crawl through the 360ft tunnel out of the camp at Sagan, 80 miles south-east of Berlin.

All but three of the original 76 were recaptured and 50 were executed on Hitler's orders.

After being captured in Czechoslovakia Mr Plunkett spent nine months in Gestapo custody, facing regular beatings.

It was his job to lead a

team of 14 men who produced 2,500 maps, forged passes, permits and other documents to aid the effort.

Prior to the mass breakout he had made several other attempts to escape.

However, many of those involved later resented Hollywood's inclusion of American characters,

played by Steve McQueen and James Garner, in the film as there had been no US servicemen involved.

After the war, Mr Plunkett remained in the RAF for two years before a long career flying as a survey pilot in India and then Africa, living in Zimbabwe for many years.

He returned to England

in the late 1990s, spending the last four years of his life at a Royal Air Force Association home at Storrington, West Sussex, where he helped to raise funds for other ex-servicemen.

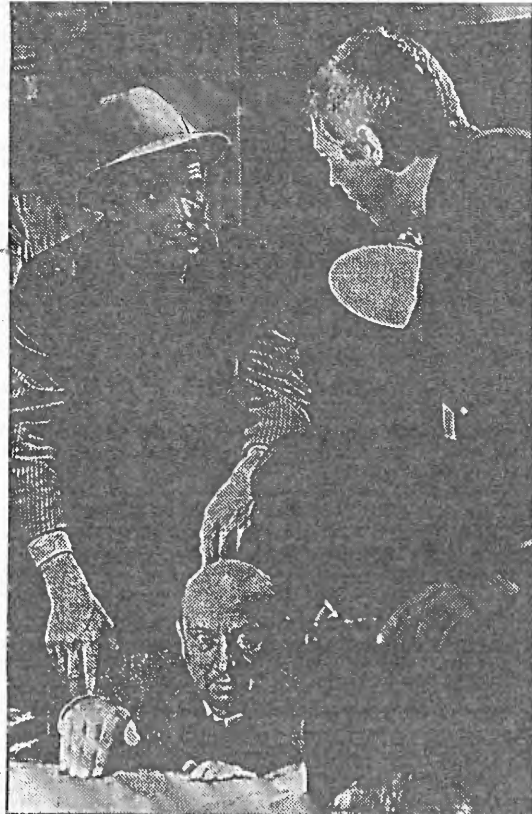
His funeral was held on Friday.

Mike Sedman, fund-raising director for RAFA, said Mr Plunkett was a charismatic figure.

"His wartime experiences left a deep impression on him and inspired him to work in support of those less fortunate than himself," he said.



PILOT: Desmond Plunkett



LEGEND: Donald Pleasence heads for the tunnel aided by McQueen and Garner in the hit movie

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