

Obituaries

Desmond Plunkett

Captured bomber pilot who oversaw the making of 2,500 maps for 'The Great Escape' from Stalag Luft III

DESMOND PLUNKETT, who has died aged 86, was one of the Allied airmen who took part in what became known as "The Great Escape"; as the mapmaker for the escape committee at Stalag Luft III, he was one of several models for the character played by Donald Pleasence in the film made in 1963.

Of the 76 men who got away, 73 were recaptured – and 50 were executed on Hitler's orders. Plunkett – the 13th man to crawl through the tunnel – was among those retaken; but he was fortunate that he managed to remain on the run until the Germans had shot their quota of officers. Instead of being executed, he endured seven months at the Gestapo's headquarters at Prague; much of the time he was in solitary confinement, and subjected to frequent beatings.

Plunkett had served only eight days with No 218, his first operational squadron, when the four-engine Stirling heavy bomber he was co-piloting was shot down by an Me 109 over enemy-occupied Holland in June 1942. He bailed out, and landed in the midst of a herd of cattle. He was later arrested in a nearby village.

He was taken to Stalag Luft III at Sagan in Lower Silesia, 80 miles south-east of Berlin, where his fellow-prisoners included Douglas Bader. The prison camp of prefabricated huts surrounded by high barbed wire fences was in a clearing in a thick pine forest.

Remembered by one fellow PoW as "a niggety little man with a fierce moustache", Plunkett was charged by the men's escape leader, Roger Bushell, with leading the team of some 14 men who were employed in mapmaking. The aim was to produce local maps indicating the quietest routes leading away from the camp, as well as more extensive maps showing escape routes through Czechoslovakia to Switzerland and France, and through the Baltic to Sweden.

By bribing a guard, Plunkett obtained a large and detailed map of Europe which formed the basis of an eventual supply of some 2,500 maps in five colours. He abandoned tracing as being too time-consuming; instead, he conjured up an ingenious mimeograph using gelatine created from the crystal jelly sent in Red Cross parcels. The gelatine was poured into shallow trays made from old food tins bonded together by resin extracted from the ubiquitous fir trees. The ink was derived



Desmond Plunkett (left), his wife Patricia (far right), his brother Gillian with wife Jean, at Calcutta after the war

from the crushed leaf of indelible pencils.

Plunkett and his team were able to run off not only maps, but also forged passes, permits and other "official" documents devised by Tim Walenn, the escape committee's master forger whose "department" was known as Dean & Dawson, after the travel business.

Between them Plunkett and Walenn came up with the essential kit for "The Great Escape", which took place on March 23 1944 after the tunnel diggers had made the most of Sagan's light sandy soil and forced an exit beyond the wire. The tunnel, which had been a year in the making, was 360 ft long and some 30 ft beneath the surface.

At his own request (no one else would volunteer for the unlucky number), Plunkett was the 13th man to crawl to freedom; and he had

reached the safety of the wood before the Germans discovered the existence of "Harry" – the name the PoWs had given to their tunnel ("Tom" and "Dick" had been their less successful predecessors). With his companion, a Czech airman called Bedrich Dvorak, he went to the local railway station and boarded a train for Breslau.

The two men succeeded in getting into Czechoslovakia where, after several days in the relative luxury of a hotel, they hid in a barn. The eventually got as far as the Austria border before being arrested. While Plunkett enjoyed the hospitality of the Gestapo (boiled blood was on the prisoners' menu every Tuesday on Thursdays), Dvorak was sent to Colditz.

Plunkett was finally released by the Gestapo into the custody of British soldiers in Prague. Later, in Janu-

ary 1945, he was sent to Stalag Luft I on the Baltic Sea, from where he was repatriated after VE Day. He returned home 50 lb below his normal body weight.

Desmond Launcelot Plunkett was born on February 21 1915 at Guntur in the Madras Presidency of India, where his father was a civil engineer. After the family had returned to England, Desmond was educated at King's College, Wimbledon. Years later, after he had been posted missing, the school inscribed his name on its roll of honour ("Desmond Plunkett, killed in action, 1942") where it remained for many years.

His first job was with the Hawker aircraft company at Kingston upon Thames, Surrey. In 1936 he found work with a company that designed and built gliders, and in the same year he had his first experience of flying, in a Gipsy 1 Moth at Redhill

Flying Club. He then joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve, graduating as a flying instructor in 1939. Despite many requests for active service, he was retained as an instructor for the first two years of the war.

Finally, in 1941, Plunkett was posted for training as a bomber pilot with the rank of flight lieutenant, the notification coming only a few days before his wedding to Patricia Wildblood in November 1941. He was posted to RAF Marham in Norfolk, and his first bombing missions were in the raids on Cologne and Essen.

Before the escape from Stalag Luft III, Plunkett had been involved in earlier attempts to get away. His first plan had been to conceal himself in a cart which was removing ash from the camp. He and another airman duly climbed into the cart, and buried themselves in the ash; but because the coals lying underneath were still red hot, their trousers caught fire.

A second attempt, to escape via a tunnel, had been foiled by the German guard dogs. A third, to scale the perimeter fence by ladder, was also unsuccessful. And a further effort to dig a tunnel was abandoned after the excavators found themselves delving into the local sewage works. It was after this that Roger Bushell instructed Plunkett to concentrate on mapmaking.

After the war, Plunkett remained in the RAF for two years. He was posted to India with 10 Squadron, where he turned down the chance to become Lord Mountbatten's personal pilot. Instead, he left the RAF to join the Hindustan Aircraft Company at Calcutta as sales manager. In 1949 he began a new career in India as a survey pilot, later moving to Africa. In 1965 he and his family settled in Rhodesia, where he continued to carry out air surveys.

In 1971 he was lucky to escape with his life when the de Havilland Dove aircraft in which he was instructing a young Canadian crashed at the airport at Salisbury (now Harare). He retired from flying in 1975, and decided to take up beekeeping.

He returned to England in the late 1990s, going to live at the Royal Air Forces Association home at Storrington, West Sussex.

In 2000 he co-wrote a book about his experiences, *The Man Who Would not Die*.

Desmond Plunkett is survived by his wife and by their son and two daughters.