

Canadian prisoner of war George Sweanor aided the Great Escape

Tom Hawthorn Published 14 hours ago



George Sweanor as a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II.

Courtesy of the Family

George Sweanor acted as a lookout as fellow prisoners of war surreptitiously dug tunnels out of a German camp for a

breakout remembered as the Great Escape.

Mr. Sweanor, who has died at 101, spent 800 days as a PoW, mostly in Stalag Luft III, a camp for air force officers outside Sagan, Germany (now Zagan, Poland). While others dug tunnels named Tom, Dick and Harry, Mr. Sweanor's assignment was to monitor the actions of guards and to deliver warnings when necessary.

Mr. Sweanor, a "stooge" in camp parlance, kept an eye on "ferrets," the Germans whose job it was to discover tunnels and other hints of escape. The Canadian was so diligent that two Germans were punished after a German officer seized the airman's meticulous notebook and discovered guards had left their posts prematurely.

Among other tasks, he also helped hide the yellow tunnel sand from excavations by mixing and raking it into the black dirt from the vegetable patches tended by prisoners. The sand was delivered by "penguins," so-called because of the waddling gait they used to walk with socks filled with sand hidden beneath their trousers.



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Squadron Leader George Sweanor of the Royal Canadian Air Force, serving with the North American Air Defense Command at Colorado Springs, Colo., points out that the latest satellite being tracked by the Space Defense Centre belongs to Canada, on Nov. 29, 1965.

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The guards and the kriegies (shortened from *kriegsgefangenen*, prisoners) played a cat-and-mouse game over several months of escape preparation. The airmen's nemesis was a tall non-commissioned officer named Karl Griese, whom they called Rubberneck.

One wintry day, as recounted in Mr. Sweanor's 1967 memoir, *It's All Pensionable Time*, the prisoner was on the

roll-call grounds with a file and a map when the Germans ordered a quick search. He ditched his tools in the snow for later retrieval and waited as the guards tore apart a hut. They uncovered a secret wall panel, inside which they found only a piece of paper. On it was written a single sentence: "Sorry, Rubberneck, you are too late."

The escape committee selected 60 prisoners with German proficiency or previous escape experience, while another 160 spots were selected by lot. Thinking repatriation was unlikely from a camp so deep in enemy territory, Mr. Sweanor was relieved to have drawn a high number.

On March 24, 1944, the first prisoners, dressed in work clothes and armed with counterfeit cash and documents, slipped into the tunnel named Harry to crawl underground toward the adjacent woods. As it turned out, the tunnellers had come up short and the exit was in an open space. The sounding of an air raid siren also forced the camp into darkness, slowing progress. By the time the escape was discovered at dawn, only 76 men had managed to flee.

In the end, all but three were recaptured. Fifty of the escapees, including six Canadians, were murdered on Hitler's orders, an infamous war crime.

George Joseph Sweanor was born on Nov. 7, 1919, in Sudbury, Ont. He was the oldest of three children born to

the former Alice Mary McGirr and George Edward Sweanor, a manager with Bell Telephone whose job took the family to Newmarket, Owen Sound, Oshawa and Toronto before settling in Port Hope, a lakeside town about 110 kilometres east of Toronto.

After graduating from high school in 1937, Mr. Sweanor was hired as an accountant by the Royal Bank in Napanee, Ont. Three years later, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

After training as a gunner, navigator and observer, Mr. Sweanor, a flying officer by rank, was shipped overseas and posted to the No. 419 (Moose) Squadron. Soon after, he attended a dance in a town hall and immediately spotted an auburn-haired beauty named Joan Saunders, the daughter of a wounded Great War veteran who made deliveries by horse and cart in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. Miss Saunders had her own close call during the war, when her office was strafed by a German bomber shortly before she arrived for work one morning. The couple married on Jan. 6, 1943.

Mr. Sweanor's crew flew Halifax bombers, "flying iceboxes," in his words, as they bombed industrial sites in Duisberg, the submarine base at St. Nazaire in occupied France, and dropped mines in the North Sea shipping lanes off the Frisian Islands.

The crew's 17th mission, on the night of March 27-28, 1943, was to take part in a bombing raid over Berlin, a particularly risky assignment. They lost the starboard outer engine on the way and, fearing being too slow to accompany the rest of the raid, chose to drop the payload on the secondary target of Magdeburg. As the bombs were released, Mr. Sweanor silently offered "my usual, useless prayer" that only military targets would be hit.

Forty-five minutes later, on the return home, the plane was sprayed by bullet and cannon fire from an unspotted night fighter. The pilot, Charles Edward (Pat) Porter, a gold miner's son from Manson Creek, B.C., was wounded, as was Mr. Sweanor, who took shrapnel in his lower left leg. The bomber was afire. With only two operating engines, the pilot put the bomber into a dive to try to extinguish the fire in a port engine.

"Let's get out of here before we explode," the pilot finally yelled. "Abandon aircraft! Abandon aircraft!"

Mr. Sweanor tried unsuccessfully to open the front escape hatch. He then gave the pilot a parachute and opened the top hatch above their head before making his way to the rear of the plane, where he came upon another desperate scene. The handle of the rear hatch had been shot off. The rear gunner, Sergeant A.H. (Scotty) Taylor, had been a lumberjack before the war, so he attacked the hatch with an

axe.

The men did not know whether they were to parachute over land (enemy territory) or sea (the frigid North Sea in March).

"Finally, the door gave and Bish [flight engineer Murray Bishop] slid out into the unknown," Mr. Sweanor recalled in his memoir. Wireless air gunner G.J. Lanteigne was next in line. "Gerry looked at the gaping hole and hesitated. Bud and Scotty pushed him out."

Navigator Alan Budinger, mid-upper gunner Danny London and Scotty Taylor all jumped, followed by Mr. Sweanor, who as the ranking officer, was the last to leap. He immediately pulled his parachute cord and suddenly found himself quickly snagged in a large tree as the bomber crashed in the next field. He had jumped at about 600 feet, perilously close to the ground. They would later learn the pilot had been killed. Pat Porter had celebrated his 23rd birthday just 10 days earlier.

Grateful to have parachuted over land, Mr. Sweanor was distressed to realize he had landed in a settled area. Civilians closed in and troops would obviously be searching the area of the downed bomber's flight path. He eluded immediate capture by hobbling along crouched over in a drainage ditch. He was later spotted by a young woman in a public park at dusk as he awaited nightfall.

As an officer, he was placed in Stalag Luft III, into which he smuggled much of his escape kit, including a compass, a hunting knife, foreign currency (though, curiously, no Reichsmarks), a German-English dictionary and a cloth map of Europe. These he turned over to X Organization, which handled escape planning.

In January, 1945, the camp was abandoned as the Soviets approached. As prisoners were marched out, Mr. Sweanor remained in the hospital after taking sick. He, too, would soon be on an arduous journey by foot and cattle car, including a stop in Dresden only hours before an Allied air raid obliterated the city, ended in Moosburg, where he was soon liberated by tanks with the U.S. Third Army. Two weeks later, he was reunited with his wife and a daughter he had yet to meet.

He re-enlisted in the peacetime RCAF, serving as a navigator and instructor with postings in Edmonton, Summerside, PEI, and St. Hubert, Que. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was a military commander of a sector of the Distant Early Warning Line based at Cape Parry, NWT. He later served at the headquarters of the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., where he remained after retiring from the military in 1967.

After completing a university degree, he taught high-school history and geography for 12 years before retiring a second

time.

Mr. Sweanor, who became an American citizen in 1984, spent 12 years compiling a history of military veterans from Port Hope. He also maintained a blog that included more than 200 postings, the last placed online just three months ago.



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George Sweanor, a retired 98-year-old Royal Canadian Air Force Squadron Leader and World War II veteran living in Colorado Springs, received a surprise visit from members of 419 Tactical Fighter (Training) Squadron following the unit's training mission in El Centro, California, on Feb. 23, 2018.

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His memoir is cited by many of the mountain of books

written about the breakout at Stalag Luft III, including Ted Barris's 2013 book *The Great Escape*. The popular 1963 movie of that title helped make it one of the more famous episodes of the war.

While in the prison camp, Mr. Sweanor wrote a letter to his wife, which was shared with newspapers, in support of an ultimately unsuccessful campaign for his pilot to receive a posthumous Victoria Cross for bravery for keeping the bomber aloft long enough for the crew to bail. The couple named one of their daughters Patricia in honour of Pat Porter, who had served as best man at their wedding.

Mr. Sweanor died at his home on Jan. 3. He leaves five daughters – Barbara Jagoda, Valerie Bruington, Patricia (Trish) Sweanor and Linda Sweanor, all of Colorado, and Diane Edwards of Toronto. He also leaves five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. He was predeceased by his wife of 72 years, who died in 2015 one week after her 96th birthday. He was also predeceased by brother Trevor Sweanor, a wartime RCAF pilot and owner of a Port Hope appliance store, who died in 2019 at 98, and sister Ruth Filiatrault, and a grandson, Braden Bruington, who died in 2016 at 33.

Mr. Sweanor's wartime adventures were the result of bureaucratic legerdemain on his part. He was serving as a clerk accountant during a temporary posting to an army

base in Quebec when an order came for RCAF recruits to be sent for aircrew training. Mr. Sweanor volunteered to type up the transfers. While doing so, he took his own 3x5 card, "changed the CA for Clerk Accountant to PO for Pilot or Observer. My name was soon on the official posting list to Victoriaville," he wrote in his memoir. "I like to think that the RCAF is still looking for a missing clerk accountant."