

AU historian sets the record straight on “The Great Escape”

by Dr. Silvano A. Wueschner/ LtCol, CAP

Historian, Air University, Maxwell AFB

Director Aerospace Education, Alabama Wing Civil Air Patrol

On July 1, 2017, Dr. Silvano Wueschner, one of two historians for Air University, will attend a ceremony near Ramstein Air Base, Germany where Ramstein and local community officials will dedicate a memorial plaque to Royal Air Force (RAF) Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, Free French Lieutenant Bernard Scheidhauer who had escaped from Luft Stalag III at Sagan, Germany (now Poland) before dawn, March 24, 1944 but executed by the Nazi secret police, the Gestapo, on five days later. The Gestapo also executed an additional 48 of the recaptured POWs and returned 23 recaptured POWs to the camp. Only three of 76 escaped prisoners made it to freedom.

“Interestingly, the Gestapo executed Bushell and his escape partner Lieutenant Scheidhauer in a small stand of trees near present-day Ramstein where I had served as the historian for the 86th Airlift Wing, the host wing for Ramstein, from June 2011 until June 2016,” Dr. Wueschner commented. “That’s how I became involved in straightening out the record on the specific location where the Gestapo executed Bushell and Scheidhauer and, then later, the conception for a plaque to their memory.”

In 1950, Paul Brickhill, himself a former POW of Stalag III, wrote *The Great Escape*, and the Mirisch Company produced the movie of the same name in 1963 which recounted the planning, escape, and fates of the 76 Allied POWs who had escaped from Luft Stalag III, the largest escape of Allied POWs during World War II. In the movie well known British actor Richard Attenborough played Squadron Leader Roger Bartlett, the movie’s character modelled on Roger Bushell.

“I became involved in this fascinating story when a German professor, Gerhard Moroff, in Manheim, Germany, sent me a copy of the February 1995 issue of the British military history magazine *After The Battle*, written by its editor Winston G. Ramsey,” Dr. Wueschner recalled. “Ramsey had detailed the story of Bushell’s escape, capture, journey from Saarbrücken, and execution near Ramstein fifty years before, including the fact that the Gestapo had executed the 50 recaptured in pairs or singly as they were recaptured, not as a group as depicted in the movie.”

The article contained two photographs, a 1944 aerial view which showed the location of Bushell’s and Scheidhauer’s execution spot and a photograph which Ramsey took of the supposed execution spot in 1994. “I mentally compared the copy of the 1944 aerial view with Ramsey’s 1994 photograph of the presumed execution spot, just short of the Einsiedlerhof Bridge on Autobahn A6 west of Kaiserslautern.” Dr. Wueschner stated. “I realized that, although the 1944 aerial photo did indeed capture the location, the 1994 photo was of a new section of the A6 autobahn (highway) near Ramstein Air Base, a section which did not exist in 1944. The original A6 ran further north through an area that later became Ramstein.”

“Other authors over the years have produced conflicting accounts of the exact execution spot of Bushell and Scheidhauer,” Dr Wueschner added. “Some placed the execution near

Landstuhl, Saarbrücken, Homburg, and Kaiserslautern.” Dr. Wueschner continued, “As a result, I decided to bring clarity to the discussion about the actual location of the execution spot.”

“After a careful examination of the postwar British interrogation records of Gestapo agent Schultz and the driver who accompanied the two POWs to their execution, I determined their exact execution spot shortly before a bridge, located where Kindsbacher Road crossed the A6 highway,” stated Dr. Wueschner. “There are still remnants of that bridge near the spot where the execution took place, and old time residents of Ramstein recall the bridge crossing A6 on Kindsbacher Road.”

“With this information, I contacted Kai Philipp of the 86 Civil Engineering Squadron (CES) at Ramstein who conducted physical measurements of the area, using the squadron’s Geospatial software, to settle the matter.” Dr. Wueschner provided the editor of *After The Battle* with this new updated information, and he, in turn, amended the original article and published an expanded revision in the November 2015 issue of the magazine.

“At the same time, I also presented this material to Ramstein Mayor Klaus Layes and Wing Commander Alan Jones, RAF, attached to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization air staff at Ramstein,” Dr. Wueschner noted, “and suggested that a suitable memorial to Bushell and Scheidhauer be placed at the execution site.” After a good deal of discussion and collaboration with the appropriate local German authorities and American officials at Ramstein Air Base, that memorial plaque, which Winston Ramsey donated, will become a reality on July 1, 2017.





