

Lieutenant AM Sinclair DSO

“The Greatest Escaper of All”

By
Gavin JF Worrell

AT JUST BEFORE three o'clock on an autumnal afternoon in 1944 a shot from an aging German sentry on guard in the exercise park at Oflag IV C, better known as Colditz the escape proof prisoner of war camp for allied officers, tragically brought to an end not just another audacious escape but also the life of the man the Germans respectfully called 'The Red Fox'.

He was known by all, Allies and Germans alike, as the 'Greatest Escaper of All', his name was 'Mike' Sinclair of the 60th, the King's Royal Rifle Corps, he was just 26 years old.



“The Red Fox”

Few servicemen become legends in their own lifetime. One such was fellow Colditz inmate, Douglas Bader, the legless air ace whose triumph over personal adversity was well publicised in the media of the day and the nation clung to his exploits during and after the Battle of Britain. Mike Sinclair was different he had become a legend not

through the media but by personal reputation which spread throughout the ranks of those taken prisoner during the Second World War. His exploits as a determined, dedicated, highly professional escaper really could have been taken from the pages of a Boys Own annual. The business of escape for Mike, however, was not child's play, it was deadly serious.

At three o'clock in the afternoon of Thursday 25th September 2008 I and several of my band of fellow Colditz enthusiasts, who I affectionately call 'The Old Contemptibles', found ourselves standing at the exact spot where Mike Sinclair's final escape met its end. Today access to many parts of Colditz Castle is restricted yet I had managed to gain special permission from the Saxon State Government, who own the Castle, to go down into the exercise park to pay our respects to 'The Red Fox'. This moment marked the start of a trip dedicated by us to celebrate the exploits of the man. There were to be several moving moments over the next few days as we retraced the scenes of Sinclair's various escapes from Colditz, some successful, others not, as well as the scene of his death, his funeral service, his initial grave and also his memorial service back up at the castle. Mike Sinclair's tale is a little told one yet on this trip we wanted to do the man justice and celebrate what he and his escapes stood for - an unrelenting fight against Nazism which raged on despite being incarcerated following being taken prisoner at Calais in May 1940, the scene of such desperate and bitter fighting by the 2KRRC as part of 30th Infantry Brigade.

The exercise park at Colditz was located beside the castle and consists of an uneven grass area in a small valley. Making our way down into the park we retraced the route Sinclair took when he climbed the barbed wire exercise enclosure in broad daylight and ran from his pursuers. Some may say this was a suicidal attempt and that his mind may have been unbalanced given the recent news he received about the death of one of his brothers in Italy. However, those who really knew Sinclair (including Grismond Davies Scourfield a fellow officer in the 60th Rifles) would say that he would have planned the escape in minute detail and calculated the risk involved. Highly risky though it may have been he would have deduced that the risk would have been worth it. He would also have known that Le Brun, a French Cavalry

Officer, had vaulted the wire and climbed the boundary stone three years previously, all in daylight and while being pursued by the German guards. We found the spot Sinclair reached before being shot dead by a guard. Warnings to stop had been shouted by guards and fellow prisoners alike and most would agree that the bullet which ricocheted off his elbow and through his heart, killing him instantly, was fired at a prisoner failing to stop when properly called upon to do so. This incident being in stark contrast to the shooting just over twelve months previous during the famous 'Franz Josef' escape attempt which saw Sinclair dress up and impersonate one of the Guard Company Sergeant Major's who was noted for bearing a strong resemblance to the old leader of the Austro-Hungarian empire. On that occasion when the plan had failed and Sinclair had surrendered he had been shot whilst having his hands raised, an incident that later led to a War Crimes Investigation.



Colditz Casle (Oflag IV C) at the end of WWII.

On returning from the park we went up into what was the former Kommandantur which housed the Kommandant's office, the administration offices and also some of the German Garrison. This building has now been turned into a high quality youth hostel. Some of our party were staying in the youth hostel and others were staying in a traditional Pension just off the quaint town square. I had obtained permission from the Castle authorities to have a lecture room up in the Kommandantur building and I gave a talk on the exploits of Mike Sinclair. A brief summary of which now follows.

Mike Sinclair was born Albert Michael Sinclair, Mike to his friends, in 1918. He was the younger son of Colonel and Mrs TC Sinclair. Mike went to school at Winchester College and then went up to Trinity College, Cambridge where he obtained Honours in Modern Languages and History, something which stood him in great stead during his captivity. He joined the 2nd Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps in July 1939 and served with the British Expeditionary Force in France and was taken prisoner on May 26th 1940 after fighting a rearguard action in the defence of Calais designed to hold up the German advance and allow troop evacuation from Dunkirk. There then following a gruelling ten day march across France for Sinclair and his fellow prisoners. From a small station northwest of Luxembourg they were sent by train to Trier, then to Mainz where they stayed three days and finally arrived at Laufen mid June 1940. Oflag VII C Laufen, in Bavaria, was originally the principle camp for all the British Army officers captured in France. Major General Victor Fortune (the highest ranking Allied POW in German hands) knew Mike at Laufen and put in for a posthumous DSO, an unheard of action. Fortune and all the officers from the 51st Highland Division captured at St Valery on the Somme were also initially sent to this camp. Early in March 1941 Sinclair was included in a party of 400 officers sent to Fort 8, Stalag XXI D at Posen.

He arrived at Posen in mid March 1941. His first escape was on 28th May 1941. He escaped with Grismond Davies-Scourfield & Ronnie Littledale both of the KRRC. Sinclair hid in a rubbish pit about 50 yards outside the Fort entrance. He was concealed in a wooden hand cart

and dumped in a pit by the orderlies. He later made his way to a Polish helper's house. The group were then split up and hidden. On 20 June 1941 they set out in 3 separate parties to reach Russia. On 23rd June they were informed that Germany had invaded Russia and their plans therefore had to dramatically change. By then the Germans had learnt of their hiding place so they set out for Warsaw. On 26th August they travelled by train to Krakow, and on 29th August they entered Slovakia by guide and 31st by train to Budapest, Hungary. On 9th November they moved by train and ferry to Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Sadly they were caught by Bulgarian customs officials on the Bulgarian/Yugoslav border while they posed as Poles and were subsequently held in prison in Sofia. On 2nd December they were moved by train to Belgrade and then to a military prison in Vienna where they remained until 17 January 1942.

Sinclair's second escape took place on 17 January 1942 and the prisoners were told they were being taken to a camp near Dresden. Sinclair tried to escape on the way by train jumping. He climbed out of the lavatory window and as the train slowed he jumped but was seen and the train stopped. He hit his head and was dazed and was soon re-caught and eventually taken to Oflag IV C Colditz.

He arrived at Colditz on 17th January 1942 and it was not long before this experienced escaper was up to his old tricks. His first escape from Colditz, his third overall escape, took place on 2nd June 1942. While attending a hospital in nearby Leipzig to undergo treatment for chronic sinusitis he escaped. Unfortunately he was recaptured in Cologne just a few days later on 6th June in a round up following an allied air raid.

During the traditional punishment stint in solitary confinement Sinclair had ample time to consider his next attempt to escape. This second escape from Colditz has become known as the 'Light Well Escape'. It took place on 25th November 1942 and the participants were Mike Sinclair and the Frenchman Cpt. Charles Klein. The location was to be via a light well in Theatre Block or Saalhaus. Stooging graphs over a month period revealed a two minute blind spot around 2pm every day - coinciding with the change of guard. At the bottom of the light well there were no Germans for this time only. At the bottom of well doors led off to German kitchens, sculleries, store rooms bakeries and

canteens. A corridor led to a staircase, down one flight then out onto the German courtyard. In preparation the bars were cut in a window overlooking the light well and subsequently a descent was to be made by a fifty foot rope made from bed sheets and tied to a wooden horse. The escape took place after the 2pm Appel (or roll call whereby the prisoners were counted which, only at Colditz, sometimes consisted of four a day). The pair walked out dressed in German fatigues and down to the exercise park and over the high stone wall which surrounded the park. Travelling alone Sinclair was sadly recaptured near the Swiss border at Immendingen near the Schaffhausen frontier on November 30th 1942.

Next followed one of the most famous escape attempts not just from Colditz but from any prisoner of war camp, ever before. This escape has been labelled the 'Franz Josef Escape' and took place on September 2nd 1943. The participants were Mike Sinclair dressed as Guard Platoon Commander RSM Rothenberger, known as 'Franz Josef' due to his large moustache, plus Lance Pope and John Hyde Thompson dressed as 2 sentries - all fluent German speakers. The plan involved leaving the Sick Bay window on the north face of the castle and walking round from the north to east side to the wire gate. The plan was to relieve and replace sentries so as to release a group of POWs ready in British Quarters on the east side of the castle. After initial success where Sinclair managed to relieve a guard from his post a second became suspicious when the colour of the elaborately forged pass was not of the correct colour and, as bad luck would have it, the sentry was from the same town as Rothenberger and knew the initial of his first name whereas the prisoners had merely guessed. Sinclair reached the gate sentry who handed over his keys but refused to leave his post. As he did so the second, suspicious, sentry called out for the alarm to be raised. A heated argument ensued. When Sinclair could not give the password of the day the 'riot squad' was called for from the Guard House and effectively the escape was over. Sinclair could have gone through the gate himself but in true team spirit he put the others before himself. He finally surrendered and while his hands were raised he was shot at point blank range by an over excited N.C.O. nick-named 'Big Bum' by the prisoners. Sinclair, in a witness statement that I have in my possession, states he was treated badly and not allowed any assistance for some time and only

Nichtdeutscher

Dienstausweis Nr. 25617.

Domgut
(Zuname)

Janina
(Vorname)

Handwerker
(Stand)

geb. 29.9.13.

Litke, Kalyan
(Wohnort)

Rau an L'Gelpa 15
(Straße)

Inhaber hat die Erlaubnis
folgende reichs-(wehr-) fisca-
lische Grundstücke zu betreten

Zeitstempel

19 42	19 43	
19 44	19	
19	19	



Lt. AM Sinclair's forged passport.

being taken to hospital for an x-ray after first being placed in the arrest cells. Whatever his treatment he had a lucky escape. He was shot at point blank range with the bullet missing his lung by only half an inch - yet he survived!

For many the outcome of the 'Franz Josef Escape' would have put an end to their escaping career, not so the relentless Sinclair. His next escape attempt was to take place from the West side of the castle as by now the British had been housed for some time on the west side, where, although offering much escape potential little had been successfully achieved to cash in on the situation. This was to change for the British on the night of January 19th 1944. Mike Sinclair along with his companion 'Jack' Best, a Flight Lieutenant of the RAF Volunteer Reserve who is perhaps best known for his involvement in the design and construction of the Colditz Glider, successfully escaped over the West Terrace. The escape was an audacious one as it involved split second timing and being lowered on bed sheet ropes through a window in the British quarters, across the west terrace, down another 40 foot drop, cutting through barbed wire and down another precipice through the back of some gardens and away. The split second timing involved making a quick exit between the changing of guards and the evening floodlights being turned on. The pair succeeded in getting away despite a near miss with a curious sentry who came out of the Guardhouse and Best had accidentally triggered the Guard House alarm bell (which Best discovered years later when he read a book written by a German Officer, Eggers, who gave an account of the escape from the German viewpoint). Sadly the pair were arrested near the Dutch border after a policeman thought Best did not look 'German' as he had claimed to be. He was tall and very gaunt and wore a black suit, quite un-German. One should note Best had been hiding in the castle for nearly a year as one of the two 'Ghosts' who could stand in at roll calls to help cover the absence for real escapers.

March 1944 saw the tragic murder of fifty Allied airmen following the great 'Harry' tunnel escape from Stalag Luft III, Sagan, Poland. This combined with the administration of POW camps being transferred from the Wehrmacht, and other armed forces, to Himmler and the SS following the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life on 20th July 1944,

changed the rules of escaping forever. All prisoners were informed that escaping was no longer to be considered 'a sport'. Recapture almost certainly meant death if they fell into the hands of the SS - and the distinct possibility of reprisals against those that remained. The Senior British Officer passed information to this effect on to prisoners and for all intents and purposes the duty to escape had been curtailed. At Colditz this was not the case for all. On the afternoon of September 25th 1944 Mike Sinclair carried out a solo escape down in the exercise park. He climbed the barbed wire enclosure and ran, bent over, toward the far northern end of the park. He ignored calls for him to stop and was shot dead by a sentry, the bullet glancing off his elbow and going through his heart and killing him instantly. Despite not confiding in his closest friends Mike had gone equipped for an escape with his personal kit plus maps and money drawn from Kenneth Lockwood who held central supplies. Lockwood would not have instantaneously issued these precious supplies had Mike's reputation as an excellent escaper been so strong. Still, whether the chances of such an escape being carried off successfully were, the result was that the Red Fox was dead.

Mike Sinclair was buried on the morning of Thursday 28th September 1944. Ten POWs were allowed to attend including Padre 'Dickie' Heard, (QVR) the SBO Lt. Col. Tod, and the five officers and three other ranks of the Regiment attended. The officers were Martin Gilliat, Phil Pardoe, Grismond Davies-Scourfield, Jack Courtney (QVR) and Peter Parker. The 'Other Ranks' were Ralf Cowen, Cpl. Nugent and one other. A moving service was given in the town cemetery chapel. The coffin was covered in a Union Jack and Mike's dress service cap placed on top by Padre Heard. Padre Heard read the first part of the service and Captain Martin Gilliat read the lessons. The first was "The death of Mr Valiant-for-Truth" from Pilgrim's Progress, the second St John ch. xiv. vv 1 to 6. After the service the party followed bare headed from Chapel to the grave immediately behind the coffin. The coffin was carried by 6 black coated undertakers and at the graveside the Padre read the rest of the service. After the coffin was lowered the Senior British Officer laid a fine wreath, provided by the Germans, at the head of the grave and all the POWs saluted and moved away. The German party was one officer (Captain Pupke) and ten other ranks - it was photographed but no copy is thought to exist. The Germans fired



Lt. Mike Sinclair
60th Rifles

a three volley salute over the grave.

In the afternoon a memorial service was held in the Castle Chapel so as to allow all of Mike Sinclair's contemporaries to attend and celebrate his life. The Chapel was absolutely packed and all nations represented and the service was conducted by Padre Heard who had been living in the same room as Mike for a year. Phil Pardoe, in a letter to Mike's mother dated 29/9/44 wrote "there was an atmosphere and reverence such as I have seldom experienced before". They started with the hymn 'Abide with me' requested by Phil Pardoe and they then went on to sing the Psalm 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. S.B.O. Lt. Col. Tod read the lesson from the 21st Chapter of Revelations. The address was by Padre 'Dickie' Heard and was most moving. The congregation then sang the hymn 'For all the Saints' and finally a bugler up in the gallery sounded Last Post and Reveille.

Colditz was liberated by the Americans on 16th April 1945 but the town, following the Yalta Agreement, was to be in the part of Germany to be occupied by the Soviets. The Americans remained in Colditz town, on the west bank of the River Mulde, for a further 8 months after liberation. During this time they exhumed Mike's body and moved his body as his grave would have been deep behind the 'Iron Curtain' and in an area under the Soviet sphere of control. Mike Sinclair was re-buried in Charlottenburg War Cemetery, Berlin, in grave 10.1.14 and there until this day rests 'The Red Fox', the Greatest Escaper of the Second World War, a man whose story should be known by all those interested in the history of World War Two and in discovering one man's personal struggle against adversity in his fight against tyranny. The name of Lieutenant Mike Sinclair, DSO, will live on in Regimental history and military history in general.

After settling into our accommodation we rounded the day off with a meal and refreshment or two at my favourite old local Inn, "The Rats", up by the castle. After dinner I gave a talk on the Great Escape Camp, Stalag Luft III, Sagan, Poland which we were visiting the next day, Friday. Indeed just a few hours later we were on our way to that great camp located on what has been described as the Upper Silesian dust bowl. We arrived back in Colditz in the early hours of Saturday morning. Little sleep on such trips seems to be the order of the day and after a hearty breakfast we set off to the town cemetery to visit the small chapel that we had been granted private access to.

To stand in the chapel and take in the atmosphere of the place where Sinclair's compatriots held his funeral service was very moving. After a period of time we made our way to the graveside in the adjoining cemetery. Sinclair's grave is not currently individually marked but instead the row, H, has a plaque dedicated to all the prisoners in Colditz who died in the Second World War. We paused by Plot Number 1, where Sinclair was buried, and held a few contemplative moments of silence to pay our respects.

We then made our way up to the Castle as I had been granted private access to the castle chapel, one of the few places in the castle left unchanged since Sinclair's time in residence. We were standing in the chapel where Dickie Heard had given Sinclair's moving memorial

service. I had managed to obtain a copy of the words spoken by the Padre and with great good fortune we had a Minister, Steve Hughes, with us who read these words before giving us a brief sermon and holding a contemplative moment of prayer. We were all deeply moved by the experience which reduced a few grown men to tears. When we left the Chapel we went out into the prisoner courtyard where we presented a representative of the Castle with a KRRC wreath, a Beret with Regimental Cap-Badge and a framed portrait of Mike Sinclair. Before the trip I had visited the KRRC Association offices in London where the KRRC Honorary Secretary, Richard Frost MBE, had kindly arranged for the beret, badge and wreath to be supplied to me. The representatives of the castle have promised to have the items displayed in the Oflag IV C POW museum in the Castle.

We then spent the last part of our trip visiting all the areas of the castle directly involved with the escapes of Mike Sinclair, the west terrace, the light well exit, the east side park gate etc. Late afternoon we made our way to Altenburg airport, the former Luftwaffe then Soviet airbase (and atomic weapons site) where we flew back home and reflected upon a trip whose memories would stay with us forever.

Finally, I think it most appropriate that this article should be rounded off with a statement by a man who the prisoners had regular contact with and who, indeed, referred to the prisoners as 'our friends, the enemy'.

"If there is indeed a Valhalla for the heroes of whatever nation, if the men who go there are men of courage and daring, if their determination springs from one true motive alone and that motive is love of their country - then in our own German tradition, Valhalla is the resting place of Lieutenant Mike Sinclair."

(Hauptmann, Reinhold Eggers, Camp Officer, and later
Security Officer, Oflag IV C.)

**Lieutenant Albert Michael Sinclair D.S.O.
(Posthumous)**

Killed in Germany whilst a Prisoner of War, September 1944.



From Major Lord Cromwell, D.S.O.

Mike Sinclair, aged 26, when he was shot and killed on September 25th while attempting a daring solo escape, was the younger son of Colonel and Mrs T C Sinclair.

Prior to being gazetted to the 2nd Battalion in July 1939, he distinguished himself at Winchester College, where he was in the

Cricket XI (Lords), and also at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he obtained Honours in Modern Languages and History.

By his death, the Regiment loses one that can ill be spared. His Commanding Officer writes:

"Mike was a magnificent Officer and his record is one of cold, sustained gallantry which can hardly be surpassed." His Company Commander writes: "Mike was a born leader; with very high ideals, and a charming companion. He had done extremely good work and I had hoped to see the day when this would have been recognised." A prisoner of war Padre writes: "It is difficult to be soldierly in our conditions, but you will hear after the war about his magnificent escapes and the inspiration he was to others. He stood out as a leader, and an unselfish one at that. We were all proud of his achievements which won't soon be forgotten." A brother Officer writes: "I am sending you Mike's watch, which he gave to me just after we were taken prisoners. It was one of many examples of his unstinted generosity ... I saw a good deal of Mike at Calais, and I can assure you what he did there would not have gone unrecognised."

A book could be written about Mike's many escapes. That he did not make it was a great disappointment to his fellow prisoners and has turned out a tragedy. Our deepest sympathy goes out to his family. Having said that, may I add, although the knowledge that someone else has got home fills one with delight, it is the preparation, planning and execution of an escape which most help to maintain the morale of a prisoner of war camp. In this respect, Mike did more than anyone else I know to keep the flag flying on each occasion. From the moment he was recaptured he set himself the task of preparing for yet another escape. You would not get him down. He was an inspiration to us all. When the war is over and others return they will be the first to give testimony that it was Mike and others like him who helped them to win through.

□

Michael Sinclair

Let us consider the fate
of the “Red Fox”
so called by the Germans
for his red hair
and for his many and cunning
attempts to escape.

The last
a foothold in the hands of a friend
which launched him freely
over the single strand fence
of the Colditz Sportzplatz,
but
not
for long
as a guard aimed his Mauser 98
and brought him down
running hundred of miles
to Freedom.

*Victor (Vic) West
For Lt. Michael Sinclair DSO, KRRC*