Voiceover: This program is sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission.
(Theme music)
Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.
(Applause)
Williams: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with author Neal Bascomb discussing his book *The Escape Artists: A Band of Daredevil Pilots and the Greatest Prison Break of the Great War.* I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. WWI was the first modern war, employing new technologies, more powerful weapons, and chemical warfare in ways that had never been seen before. Yet while some soldiers and pilots avoided the many dangers of the battlefield, others ultimately found themselves in one of the German army's many POW camps. Abominable conditions and rampant disease made these camps more deadly than the Great War's trenches. The most infamous POW camp was Holzminden. Located deep in the forest of Central Germany, Hellminden, as it was called by its prisoners, housed the most troublesome and escape-prone captives of the war. Desperate to break out and return to the fight, a group of Allied prisoners led by British ace pilot David Gray hatched an elaborate escape plan. Their plot demanded a risky feat of engineering as well as disguises, forged documents, fake walls, and steely resolve. Once beyond the watchtowers and round-the-clock patrols, Gray and almost a dozen of his half-starved fellow prisoners then made a heroic 150-mile dash through enemy-occupied territory to war-free Holland. Drawing on never before seen memoirs and personal letters, author Neal Bascomb brings this gripping narrative to life, showcasing the courage, heroism, and determination of soldiers who would risk everything to return to battle. Bascomb brings thorough research and riveting prose together to tell this little-known story of the biggest POW breakout of the Great War. Neal Bascomb is a national award winning and New York Times best-selling author of a number of books including *The Winter Fortress: The Epic Mission to Sabotage Hitler's Super Bomb*; *Hunting Eichmann: How a Band of Survivors and a Young Spy Agency Chased Down the World's Most Notorious Nazi*; and *Red Mutiny: Eleven Fateful Days on the Battleship Potemkin.* His work has been translated into over fifteen languages, featured in several documentaries, and optioned for major film and television projects. Born in Colorado and raised in St. Louis, he earned a double degree in economics and English literature at Miami University of Ohio and worked as an editor at St. Martin's Press in New York City. Please join me in welcoming Neal Bascomb back to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.
(Applause)
Bascomb: Good evening. It's an honor to be here at the Pritzker again. And this is my first event of this book tour of mine on *The Escape Artists*, and I'm generally a little bit nervous before I go on these tours, but my very smart publisher sent me to give a talk this afternoon to 500 eighth graders.
(Laughter)
Bascomb: So I think you guys are gonna be a piece of cake by comparison, which is wonderful. Now I've been thinking a lot before over the last couple of weeks about what it is or what it was that sort of motivated me to tell this story. I mean, it's a brilliant,

fascinating, very strong narrative. But what is it about escape that has sort of captivated me even back to the days of *Escape From Alcatraz*, one of my favorite movies? Clint Eastwood and the like. And just recently I took my family to San Francisco. And we went to San Francisco, and we got there. And I have two daughters, two--an eleven year old and a thirteen year old. And I said, "Well, what do you want to do while we're here? There's the Ferry Building. We can go have some great eating. We can go ride a cable car. We can go ride a bicycle over the Golden Gate Bridge." And my eleven year old turns to me and says, "I want to go see the rock. I want to go see Alcatraz." And I asked her later after we had done and taken the ferry out and seen it and seen them absolutely mesmerized by what is a brilliant exhibit. And we're riding back on the ferry, and I asked my daughter Julia, "What was it?" And she said, "It just seemed so impossible that they could do this, and they did it anyway." And that struck me about what at the very heart of this story--although I'm not equating the murders and the like at Alcatraz to the POWs I'm gonna talk about this evening, but the essence of it is the same--freedom taken away and the will to do what was considered impossible to get out of Holzminden or Alcatraz. And that's really what drew me to this story, and whenever I write a new book and I've written about a vast number of different topics that seem rather bizarre, from running to skyscrapers to Black Sea mutinies. And I ask myself two questions--one, does the story have something important to say? And I think in that respect the impossible and the will to do and get to freedom was really at the heart of what was important to me thematically about this story. And the second question I ask myself is, do I have something new to offer to this history. Now I'm fortunate in the fact that very few historians or journalists or the like have really covered this WWI story. WWII gets an immense amount of coverage, but particular WWI stories don't. And the genesis and the heart of this story has never really been told to any great extent recently. And so I reached out to the families--the great grandsons, the great granddaughters, distant cousins, some stray people I'm not quite sure why they had this information--and gathered together the memoirs, the letters, even the secret letters they wrote from the camp to their families with coded messages in them asking for various supplies and the like. And so I got a sense even from the very beginning of writing this that I could tell this story in a real personal way. And that's the story I'm gonna tell tonight to you all. Now, how I came to this to write about Holzminden was, I was looking for an escape story 'cause again I'm fascinated by it. And my publisher and some other people said, "You should do the Great Escape, you know, the WWII Stalag Luft. It's a brilliant story." And I was like, "Well, Paul Brickhill did that pretty darn well. He was there. I wasn't at Holzminden, and I'm not sure I'm gonna be able to measure up to Stalag Luft." And in a book about MI9, about the British who escape an evasion service of WWII, which was founded in WWII, is this little vignette about Holzminden. The story of this escape, and then the individuals who after the escape went on to help lecture and found MI9 in WWII. And I knew from sort of that very instant that that was the story I wanted to tell. I wanted to find out about these individuals and write about them. Now my window into that story was, and still is, initially a man named James Bennett. He was a naval sub lieutenant in the Royal Navy Air Service, RNAS, and in 1916 he was patrolling looking for submarines, U-boats. His engine went kaput. He landed on the North Sea. The submarine that he was tracking emerged out from underneath his plane that was floating on the waters, and he was captured. Now I tell a lot about James Bennett subsequently, but what's important is in WWII come 1940, every week James would, before his children would wake up he'd go into his daughter's room while she was still sleeping in her--she had a locked cupboard that he kept in there--he would open it up, he would put in his briefcase, files, various paraphernalia on escape, some slides for a presentation, and he would lock it, close it, tell his family that he was going away for a business trip.

He owned an import/export business, which seems like the perfect cover of course for an agent of MI9, and he would take the train into London, switch into a car, and then go out to various air bases across England and give lectures to the pilots, but also to sailors and various soldiers and lieutenants, on the art of escape. And you see some handwritten notes. These are actually handwritten notes that he had when he was giving his lectures on what to do if you are captured. And he would supply--MI9 would supply little button compasses, would provide maps--all stuff that was never provided to any of the RFC, Royal Flying Corps pilots, or their like in WWI. And as I'll tell you later, that made a very substantial difference into survival rates and also escape rates. Now how James started his stories, how he started his lecture about what to do when escaping, he would start with this individual named David Gray, Capitan David Gray of the Royal Flying Corps. Now David was born actually in India. His father was a doctor. His father was a bit of a drunk, he was a gambler, and David wanted to be everything that his father was not. The family moved back to England, David joined a military academy, went on to graduate from the artillery school. He then enlisted in the British India Army. He became an army sapper engineer. He served a number of years there. He served in some of the first battles in that theater during WWI. And then come about late 1915 he began to see some RFC planes flying overhead and decided that he would much rather do that than dig tunnels and trenches and engineer flotillas to ford rivers. So he left, went back to England, and began and joined the RFC. Now what I found sort of fascinating about this story--and I investigated it to some degree--was the whole history of the RFC. You're talking one of the first air forces. And I love that--I hate to put some of these generals and marshals under the stethoscope, but some of the initial ones when the idea of founding an air force, one general said that it would be an expensive fad that we would have no use of. Another said that when asked how many planes the RFC would need over the course of the war, the answer was two. Two. You will find that, from very early on in WWI, from some of the first battles, the RFC, a very fledgling service at that time, was almost instantly praised from the various officers in command back to England of how effective these planes were, first in reconnaissance, first in overseeing the trench lines and seeing enemy movements, and then transitioning of course to bombing runs, to repelling attacks by the German forces, and suddenly the British decided that they needed to move as quickly as possible of instituting a larger force, and of course they needed pilots to do that. Initially, you know, again there are some great anecdotes of the Royal Flying Corps in its nascent years. One of the first questions they would ask potential interviewees was, "Do you ride a horse?" They thought that good horsemen would make great pilots. They thought that those two things were simpatico. They would also ask, "Who do you prefer, Shelley or Tennyson?" As if your preference for one or the other would determine whether or not you'd make it well in a dogfight. It was rather a ludicrous interview process, but what they ended up doing was recruiting to a very large measure an Oxbridge educated, wealthy daredevils who liked to ride motorcycles fast in its initial years. David Gray was a bit of an enigma. You know, he was an experienced army officer. He went into training. And again it's not training as we imagine air force training. It's definitely not Top Gun training. It was a few weeks in the air with planes that were essentially wood, cloth, and piano string or piano wire. They were not terribly air worthy. The engines went kaput pretty often. The number of deaths in training were, by some estimates, twenty-five percent attrition. In fact David Gray recalls his fellow recruits before he took his first flight waving their wills up and down in the air before he took off. So it was a hard business, but David Gray wanted to do it, and off he went. Very quickly he found himself to become determined to be a very good fighter pilot. They had different squadrons for different purposes. Of course they had reconnaissance squadrons. They had of course fighter squadrons. And he was--soon joined a fighter

squadron, led it, and 1916, September he was sent over the Somme in the renewed attack, and of course he woke up that morning seeing--and again this is in letters and the like--he remembers seeing several empty spaces at the dining room table, the morning breakfast table, pilots and friends who had gone up the day before and had never come back. Again the rates of death are ballyhooed back and forth at this time, but in the real heat of things, in September of 1916--there's also a period in late 1917, the average lifespan of a pilot in the air was seventeen hours. Seventeen hours of flight time. Of course that depended on the pilot. Some pilots extended and did brilliantly throughout the war, but if they took some averages, it came out to seventeen hours. David Gray found himself on, in September of 1916, facing off against Oswald Boelcke the German flying ace, who then at that first, he had just instituted a new strategy, this flying circus, the Fokkers who were--would just overwhelm the enemy. And one of his chief lieutenants in that squadron, up on his first dog fight, was none other than the Red Baron, von Richthofen. David Gray was shot down by Boelcke. His second in command was shot down in the Red Baron's first kill in September 1916. Just briefly I'll introduce two other individuals in this story, also play a big role. Also these were lieutenants in the RFC. The first, Cecil Blain, sort of Hollywood hero looking young man. Blonde, blue eyed. Lived the very testament to this idea of an Oxbridge wealthy daredevil, and he was a very aggressive pilot and a very good one. Youngest man in his squadron, and soon by 1916 was quite experienced. The other gentleman is Caspar Kennard. He was--had a large family. He decided to move to South America, because he wasn't gonna get the inheritance, and he wanted to make his own way. He found himself on a ranch, was a cowboy, and when war broke out he decided he wanted to return to England to fight. Poor Caspar, as he wrote his family in his first letter in a POW camp, was shot down on his very first mission. He barely got up in the clouds and found himself confronted and downed behind enemy lines. Now those not killed in crashes--and David Gray for one pulled himself out of a death-defying spiral to land in a cow pasture--the first order of business of course was to burn the plane, not to run a way to eliminate the Germans from gaining any technology. So he spent his first moments actually on the ground lighting up his plane with petrol. Last thing I'd mention about the RFC before I go to camps is, there were parachutes back then. The technology was there, and the commanders of the RFC decided not to issue them for large measure because they thought that it would cut on the aggression of their pilots. They thought if they had an escape they might not fight to the very end, and so parachutes by many accounts were not issued. So now you have these individuals. They're now in Germany, and they're captured. And the history of POWs I also found utterly fascinating, just the sort of development of it. Aristotle I have quoted here said that those vanquished in war are held to belong to the victor to do as they wanted. There's a story of a Byzantine emperor who had captured 14,000 men. He blinded the lot of them and marched them back to their homes in columns led by the one in a hundred who he only took one eye from. I mean, the brutal torture of prisoners of war has a very long history. There were developments throughout the 1500s, the 1600s. Dutch theorist Grotius wrote treaties on how we should be more compassionate to prisoners of war, but that didn't stop any number of atrocities over the next 200 years. Abraham Lincoln, Great Abe, had his hand in helping prisoners of war. He got in the army field manual better treatment for prisoners. And then you have the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which were meant to civilize war. And right before WWI there's this great quote from a critic who thought that all these laws and all this stuff about how to treat prisoners of war, it will now be a halcyon time to be nursed fondly in memory, a kind of inexpensive rest cure after the worrisome time of fighting. That was to be what it was as a prisoner of war. Now of course no one--some people did, but most did not quite understand what was to

occur in WWI of course, which was to industrialize mass warfare and mass prisoners. The Germans, the Allies, no one had any conception of the fact that in six months of war there would be 1.65 million prisoners of war. By 1916 the Germans would hold 1.6 million prisoners of war themselves. There were vast camps of 30,000 to 40,000 people, enlisted ranks where typhus raged. And to a very large measure how you were treated as a POW depended on where you ended up. And David Gray and Cecil Blain and Caspar Kennard and any number of pilots ended up in the hands of General von Hanisch. He was a general on the lines. His lines were overrun by the British twice. His son was killed. He was then taken from command and sent to oversee the Tenth Army District in Germany, which to a large measure oversaw prisoner of war camps. And he hated the British. And he wanted to do anything he could to make their lives an utter misery. So you have Cecil, David, Caspar, and all these RFC pilots, and a small percentage of them wanted beyond anything to escape. They wanted to get out as soon as possible. And they tried any number of things. They were sent to camps in Schwarmstedt, Basdahl, and various other places. And the moment they got in there they applied the rules that James Bennett would only give twenty/twenty-five years later, which was escape as soon as possible. David Gray who spoke German fluently--actually David spoke six languages fluently. His nickname was Munshi, which is an Indian term for teacher, teacher of languages. And so David spoke fluently. He orchestrated a disguise as a German officer, got a pass force and walked straight out of the front gate of his POW camp at Buchenwald, to the guards and walked straight out. He ended up getting to the border and mistook a town sign for a Dutch sign versus a German one, walked right into a police station, discovered Germans there instead of the Dutch, which was you can imagine pretty heartbreaking. And David was sent back to camp in a swamp, was kept in isolation for two months, which is in total contradiction to the Hague Conventions, and went almost mad from both starvation, thirst, and inactivity. I love escape stories, and there are any number of WWI memoirs about escape. And the array of different ways that they managed to get out of places is just remarkable. Some--one of my favorites is a pair of officers dug a trench while their mates kept the guards busy, then they buried themselves in the dirt. They had thin reeds so they could breathe. Dark came, and they burst out of the underground and then climbed the fence to get away. Some Russian officers--the Russians always very clever--decided to make a balloon out of essentially Paper Mache. An inflatable balloon, which actually was not air worthy, so that did not go well for the Russians. But again and again and again, many of a small percentage of officers would attempt to run. A question I had was, why, which tethers back to what I was talking about earlier, and the best answer for that comes from this gentleman, who was probably one of my favorite people to write about over the course of this story. His name, he was Second Lieutenant Will Harvey. The Gloucester regiment. He was a scout on the Somme battlefront. An expert scout. One day he went a little bit too far to reconnoiter the German lines, actually went into a forward trench of the Germans, was captured, and Will Harvey being Will Harvey, the moment he had two bayonet blades poked up against his chest began laughing uproariously because one of the guards looked exactly like his best friend back in England. Will was very brave, and Will was a poet. Will was one of the fine WWI poets that we know today. And he wrote brilliantly about what it was to be a prisoner of war. And he talked--I'll just read a little bit from his memoir, and then I know you all love poetry. This looks like a poetry audience. I can tell. So I will give you a little snippet of poetry from Harvey so you can go back having your poetry dose for the day. But what Will wrote about this feeling that he had when in a prison camp, what it was that was so painful, he wrote about the separation from his men, and he wrote, "He cannot help them. He cannot join anymore in the dreadful and glorious fight for England and her liberty. Yes, he is futile. There is no more

terrible reflection for a man. His enemies are still unbroken. He is idle. That is the essence of his trouble. The true agony of the prisoner state." In his first month jotted lines--and fortunately the Harvey family, the daughter and granddaughter, have kept all his papers and were generous enough to give them to me over the course of writing this. And in his journal is one of his first poems. And this is a little snippet of it again to give you the mood of why it was that these individuals needed escape. Here's your poetry. Will Harvey. "Laugh. Oh, laugh loud, all yet who long ago adventure sought in gallant company. Safe in stagnation, laugh. Laugh heartily. While on this filthiest backwater of times flow, drift we and rot till something set us free. Laugh like old men with senses atrophied, heeding no present to the future dead, nodding quite foolish by the warm fireside, and seeing no flame, but only I the red and flickering embers pictures of the past. Life like a cinder fading black at last." That's Will Harvey. In 1917 the Germans were fed up. Fed up with the likes of Gray and Blain and Harvey, who on one transport flung himself out of a moving train passenger compartment window, rolled down a hillside, and ran off and was captured by the local villagers. I--well, it was a sixteen year old boy who actually nabbed him. But all these individuals kept trying to escape, escape, escape. And so the Germans, fed up, decided they needed to build their own Alcatraz of sorts. They needed to build a camp that was impregnable that couldn't--that the men could not escape from. And so they converted what were cavalry barracks at a town called Holzminden in South Hannover into a POW camp that they thought was escape-proof. And the men in the room are the grapevine was that this new camp, they were told, would be a, quote/ unquote, "prisoner's mecca." Fine brand new buildings, spacious grounds, good scenery, good air. Sounds nice, right? So they go. They arrive at Holzminden, and what they discover is in essence a prison within a prison within a prison. You have the high rectangular walls surrounding the camp, then you have high barbed wire on the interior of that, and then the dead man zone, and then another wire fence. The likes of David and Cecil, the moment they got in there they decided they would start looking for a way out. They were greeted at the gates by an individual, a colonel, Karl Niemeyer. Now Karl Niemeyer was a tyrant of the first order. His previous camp, which some of the men knew him from--often what would happen at POW camps is new arrivals would come, and the POWs would gather at the gates to see who was coming, friends and the like, and Karl decided that he didn't want that anymore, so he had the prisoners charged with bayonets and scattered. Several were stabbed in the back, wounded, and one was killed. That was the kind of man that Karl Niemeyer was. He was recruited by Hanisch to come over to Holzminden and to run it. Now, I love some of these quotes. I'll give you some quotes because while the British are good at quotes, this is their description of Karl Niemeyer. These are various depictions. He was a cad; a lowbred ruffian; the personification of hate; a bloated, pompous, crawling individual, a man of unbridled ferocity and bravado; an implausible rogue; a coward with all the attributes of one; he deceives, he is cruel, he blusters, he is dishonest, he cringes. That's not what you want on your epitaph. Karl was born in Germany, spent about seventeen years in America. Worked--if you would believe, he was constantly lying. He was a billiard maker, he was a bartender, but he spoke this sort of pigeon American, and they called him Milwaukee Bill. And he had a dog, which you'll see in this cartoon. These cartoons actually--*Comrades from Captivity* is actually the memoir that Will Harvey wrote. And he had a number of cartoons commissioned for it. And Karl had a dog. Even the dog hated Karl Niemeyer. And the prisoners of course made good humor of that by providing the dog any number of goodies that they could find so that he'd listen to them and not Karl. So Karl was straight out of Hogan's Heroes to be perfectly honest. And he would walk around the camp with a pistol in his hand, and if he saw--if he was particularly irritated one afternoon or another, he would see men in the windows, and he

would just fire his pistol at the window. That was sort of his daily enjoyment. And when individuals arrived at camp, Karl made one statement to the lot of them each time: "Welcome to Hellminden." He was very sort of cooing and had this nasally, tinny voice. And he would welcome them and be very generous, and then say, "None of you will ever escape from this camp." Now Blain and the likes and the others decide—they arrive at Holzminden, and they start looking around and they decided that the best way to escape is to break through one of the barracks walls and run off. That doesn't work. Another decided to sort of time the movement of the guards and then just brazenly jump over a series of fences, leapfrog them. That did not turn out too well. A pair concocted essentially a toboggan run out of boards that they extended out of the window one night and created almost like a chute that would run on these boards to vault over the wall. That did not work out either, surprisingly. And what ends up happening is they decided that the best way out of there is to tunnel. And they decide--they of course need a place to start the tunnel, and thanks to some very clever reconnoitering by the men they discover in one of the barracks, the stairs that go down to the basement, there are plank partitions that sort of cover the underneath of the stairwell. And these men, all of whom were escape-prone--who had escaped from a number of places, who were masters of distinguishes, who could create false walls, who could create compasses, who could do any number of escape tricks--what Holzminden became, much to the chagrin of the Germans, was in essence an escape university. So if you wanted to learn a trick of the trade of escape, you had come to the right place. And so there were expert carpenters. So if you wanted a fake wall that could hinge, and you just press it and it would pop open but there were no seams, there was a guy to do that for you. And that's exactly what they did with this partition. They created this door that they could open and close on an instant's notice. They dressed up as orderlies. Holzminden is an officer camp. The officers actually in WWI had orderlies attending to them, so to make you tea, to clean your boots. It's a very different prison camp. That does not diminish the fact that it was absolute torture for the officers for any number of reasons. But they did have orderlies, and the orderlies had uniforms, and so the officers would change into these uniforms, go into the orderly entrance, pop into this wall, and begin tunneling. They thought that by Christmas--they started in November of 1917. They thought by Christmastime they would have their fifteen-yard tunnel done to extend just beyond the wall, and that was all they would need. At the moment within days they were ready to sort of pop out of the ground like gophers, Karl Niemeyer placed exterior guards outside the walls for whatever reason. Whether he had heard rumors of a tunnel or the like, puts a serious of guards around, and one of the spots was on top of where they planned on exiting. And so the officers, David Gray being their leader--called the father of the tunnel--many just wanted to sort of give up and, that's it, we can't do it. And David Gray who was very committed at this point to tunneling, says, "We will dig seventy yards, we'll go over 200 feet at a foot a day over the next six months, and we will escape out of that tunnel." And that's what he was determined to do. And that's what he did. This sort of cartoon that you see here, where these men are sort of falling though their bunks--they needed a way to secure and support the tunnel, so they would steal bed boards. And by the time that the tunnel was almost complete, you could not land heavily in your bunk without going through it. This is a rather clever drawing of actually what the tunnel was like. It was so small and so tight that you could only enter almost flat on your belly and sort of wiggle your way forward. You could barely lift up on your elbows. You had spoons in the ends of bed stands to carve your way at a foot a day. They created bellows, because at a certain point the air began to get stale, so they created bellows out of an RFC jacket. So one man would be digging, another would be pumping the bellows, and a third would be extracting the dirt in a tin that they would hide underneath this stairwell. It was miserable

work. Caspar Kennard was an absolute claustrophobe. He went into a panic within the first minute of every time he went into the tunnel, but he did it day after day. There were rats down there. There were cave-ins. There was dirt sort of constantly falling down the nape of your neck. For an RFC pilot who loves the sort of exalt of the air, you can imagine what it was like to dig that tunnel day after day after day. So the digging was done any number of ways. In the beginning it was spoons, the end of bed stands. At a certain point they got a trowel. They basically dug any way that they could. They ran at one point into a--a buried essentially stone wall that they needed to circumvent around. So it wasn't like, as the diagram sort of points out, this sort of straight path to glory, right. It was this undulating path, and at one point they decided to see how far they had come, and they squirreled up a wire through the ground. And they thought they were there, and they were actually about twelve yards short just by the virtue of the fact that the tunnel had gone twisty and serpentine. To plum a straight line underground without the proper tools and the proper stuff is not easy to do. Over the course of the building of the tunnel or the creation of the tunnel, their entry point to--that they had through that stone partition became impossible to do because Karl Niemeyer seemed wise to the fact that there was an actual tunnel there, and so they ended up having to go up through the attic, down across the eaves, and then through the stairwell down to the bottom. So to escape David Gray wanted to build the tunnel, and he did. And he told the men, as he was in charge of them, that the most important thing is, one, to have a really good plan and to execute it well, and the second thing is to plan for the run. It's one thing to get beyond the walls. It's another thing altogether to make it 150 miles through enemy occupied territory to free Holland. He knew that well, having been captured twice near the border. So had Blain. So had Kennard and a number of others. And so they began planning as soon as they began digging. Getting supplies brought into them, compasses. These are the actual paraphernalia from the escape. Compasses were delivered in ox tongue. Love ox tongue. Fantastic. Wire cutters, and below that you see what is a map of a German town and the timetable, a train timetable because one of the officers decided that he wasn't gonna do this thing on foot. He was going to disguise himself as a businessman and do it the proper way and take a train. One of the reasons I love this story the most is because of this story of how David, Cecil and Caspar decided they would make their run to the border. Gray again who spoke German perfectly, Cecil spoke a few words, Caspar, who had a very good temper but not a very good command of languages, could not speak a word. They decided to impersonate--Caspar would be an insane asylum patient.

(Laughter)

Bascomb: This is true. This is true. Caspar would be an insane asylum patient who had escaped the asylum. The asylum was near the Dutch border. Gray would be the orderly, the senior orderly who was bringing him back, and Blain would be his assistant. They found themselves soon after getting out of the tunnel on the night of July 23, nineteen--23rd, 24th, 'cause it was at midnight. In one of the first villages they ran into, they were confronted by essentially a mob of people. Caspar went into an anaphylactic fit, foaming at the mouth, wriggling on the ground, and David in flawless German told everyone to stand back. Cecil maneuvered out a bottle of pills, which were really nothing but aspirin. Gave Caspar an aspirin, Caspar went limp, and villagers soon after ushered them out of the town.

(Laughter)

Bascomb: And time and again that was the ruse that got them towards the border. Of course, the tunnel was soon discovered after the morning these gentlemen left. Karl, no brave man, would not go into the tunnel to see where its starting point was. He ordered his guards to do it; they refused. He sent his dog in. The dog returned soon after. No one

would go in that tunnel, it was so horrific. It took three days to dig out the length of the tunnel and to find its source point, that's how well they had hidden it. Karl issued a, almost a nation-wide manhunt for these individuals to be discovered. On the night of the escape twenty-nine officers made it out before the tunnel collapsed from the sheer movement of men through it. Ten made it to freedom. This is Colonel Rathborne, who was a character in his own right. He is the one impersonating a German businessman. Buys the train ticket. Takes a series of trains. Thirty-six hours after getting, you know, wriggling out of the ground, he arrives in Holland, and probably the greatest telegram in history, I would argue, Rathborne sends the telegram to Niemeyer. I will read it here. "To Karl. Having a lovely time. Stop. If I ever find you in London. Stop. Will break your neck. Stop."
(Laughter)
Bascomb: So, go Colonel Rathborne. These men arrive back in England. It is big news. It is not only national news, it's international news. It's a sort of bright light of British daring duo in the sort of one of the darkest moments of the war. They were honored by the king. The reports written all over the place about this tunnel to freedom, as you can see from the headline, and it was a great propaganda boom for the Allies. And soon after each of the men who escaped, the ten returned to their squadrons in units to start fighting again. This is James Bennett, as I started the story. I like to bookend these things. I think it's nice. James Bennett as an observer on the left at this time and then as a family man. He was a remarkable individual, and I got to know his daughter Laurie quite well. She provided me all his papers and photographs and files and lecture notes that you saw in the first part of this lecture. What I found really remarkable is that he never told his family. His wife, his daughter, his son, even much later when the existence of MI9 was now commonly known, he never told them of his part that he played in it. He was a hero through and through and didn't want anyone to know about it. And I find great respect in that. I want to honor him in that way. The other way to honor him is the number of individuals that escaped in WWII. 33,000--I have the number exactly. I'll give it to you. 33,578 British commonwealth and Americans either shot down or found themselves behind enemy lines and made it to freedom, thanks in many measure to MI9 and the lectures like James Bennett who taught them escape and provided supplies to them. Just to contrast that, the mass amount of prisoners in WWI, the number is a diminutive 573 made it to freedom after being captured. So you can attribute that to many things. I contribute it to MI9 and the work that they did. That is the sort of inspiration, importance of this story beyond just a great story, which it is. And I thank you all for listening, and I'm welcome to take questions.
(Applause)
1: So the guys that were part of the escape but didn't make it, the whatever eighteen--
Bascomb: Nineteen.
1: How were they treated?
Bascomb: By one account, Niemeyer literally ripped the clothes from them, he was so incensed when they got back. They had watches on. He took the watches off their wrists and smashed them. He sentenced them all to solitary for moths. But they were not actually executed, although, given German military law at that time, it was a little shaky on whether or not they could execute prisoners for that. A number of prisoners are actually shot while trying to escape; none of these individuals from Holzminden suffered that fate. They all survived the war, and they were released. And subsequent to the Holzminden, it became a bit of a cabal. A bit of an organization that met every year in London and you know, shared stories and, it was a nice thing for them. So.
2: When did this, is it, M19, M9--
Bascomb: MI9.

2: When did they start that program?
Bascomb: They essentially--the genesis of it was, it began in '36 and '37. There was this thought of, perhaps we should do that, but it didn't take any great leaps until war broke out, and then it was rapidly developed. But the question from the very beginning was, who's gonna teach escape? You know, it's not a Fagan story where they get prisoners in jail and have them teach it. They went straight to the officers who--mostly officers. Although that 500-odd number who had escaped, a good share of those were enlisted ranks actually. A smaller number were officers. But they went to the officers and said, "Would you teach?" And James Bennett was one of those. Sadly Cecil Blain, Caspar Kennard, and David Gray did not survive very long. Cecil was killed in 1919 soon after rejoining his squadron. Caspar was killed in a freak accident, and David Gray who was just a remarkable individual volunteered again at a rather elevated age when war broke out in WWII and was mowed down by a truck sadly in a road accident. So Bennett and a number of others were the ones who sort of carried that flame.
3: Just a brief question. How did they get cleaned up after digging the hole so that they didn't get discovered, and how does the gentleman that disguised himself as businessman, where did he find the clothes?
Bascomb: So in digging the tunnel they would go into that secret chamber, and they had—they would strip down completely and put on—the all wore the same digging uniforms, orderly uniforms, so you can imagine how those smelled, that they dug in for over six months. And then they would dust themselves off and clean themselves off, put back on their uniforms that they wore, and then went back out into the yard. The question of where Rathborne got his outfit, what they couldn't make they smuggled in. At the time parcels were allowed into camp. You could--the Germans rather cleverly allowed the prisoners to be sent money so they could basically support themselves, and they smuggled in various uniforms and outfits.
4: Late in the war with Germany essentially surrounded, was it a burden on Germany to feed and control these prisoners, manpower and so on?
Bascomb: I mean, it was a massive burden, particularly for the millions or the hundreds of thousands of enlisted ranks who were in these mass camps. Feeding them was—they were on essentially starvation diets. Even the officers, you know, they--if you've looked at pictures of what they looked like, of David and Cecil and Caspar at the beginning of their captivity and at the end, I mean, their cheeks are sallow. Their skin is loose. They're haggard. So they had very little food. And particularly the ones late in the war and late in 1918, they were basically scavenging in the local villages. And one of the main problems with that is sometimes these officers were better supplied than the guards who were guarding them because they were being sent parcels from home, which made for very good bribing techniques. And in fact of these escapees they had three or four co-conspirators among the Germans who were supplying them information on security, provided them acid to melt the steel foundation supports that they needed to burrow through. So food was a currency, and a good one.
5: How did the family of that officer right there find out that he was MI9?
Bascomb: Laurie and Graham did not discover he was MI9 until after his death. They were going through his papers and began to find some travel receipts. Some train receipts and some car receipts that James would supply to the government to be reimbursed, and then that led to further investigation of his papers where they found that handwritten lecture notes that he supplied. And then that further went to where they found his actual letters in camp, the coded messages he sent to friends to be supplied. He was in particular need of boots, good boots, and so he sent a coded message to friends, and those were sent to him. So they discovered all of that after his death. It's amazing. Well, thank you everybody. It's been a pleasure.

(Applause)
Williams: Thank you to Neal Bascomb for an outstanding discussion and to the United States World War One Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is *The Escape Artists: A Band of Daredevil Pilots and the Greatest Prison Break of the Great War*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.
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