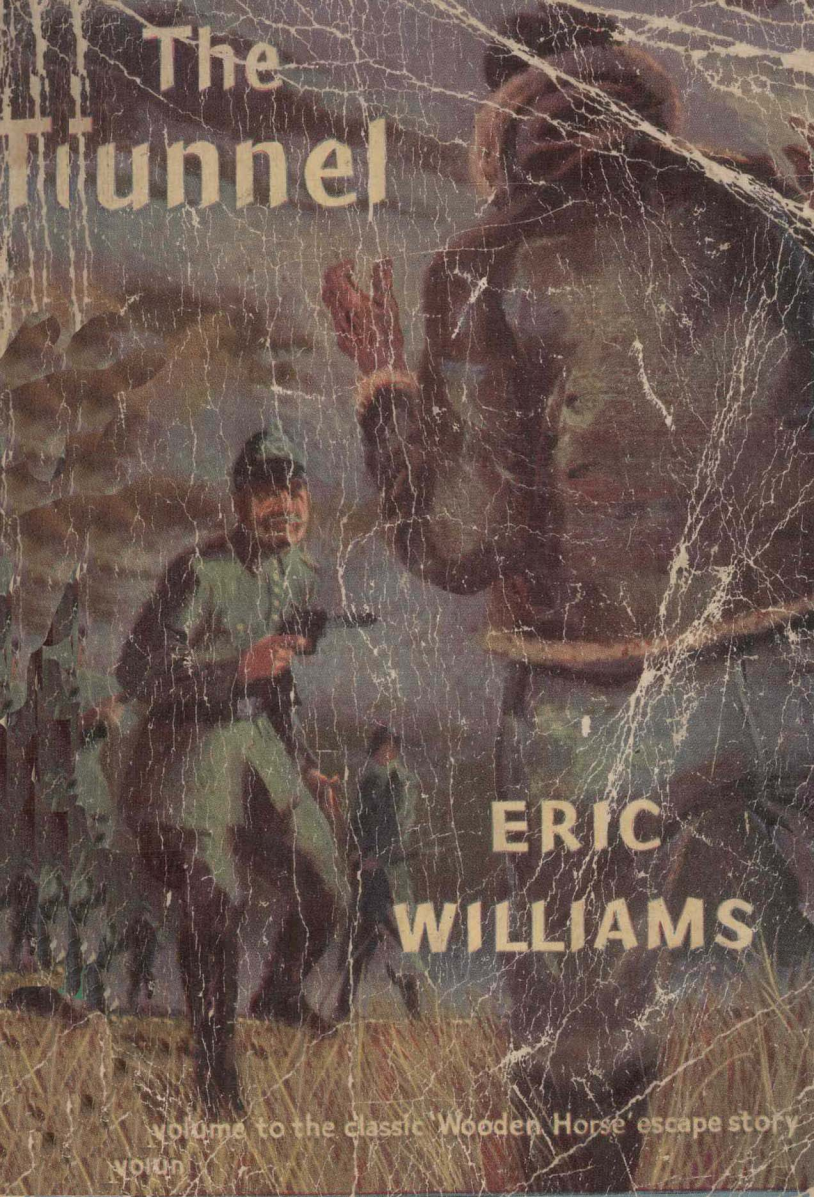
The Tunnel



ERIC WILLIAMS

volume to the classic 'Wooden Horse' escape story

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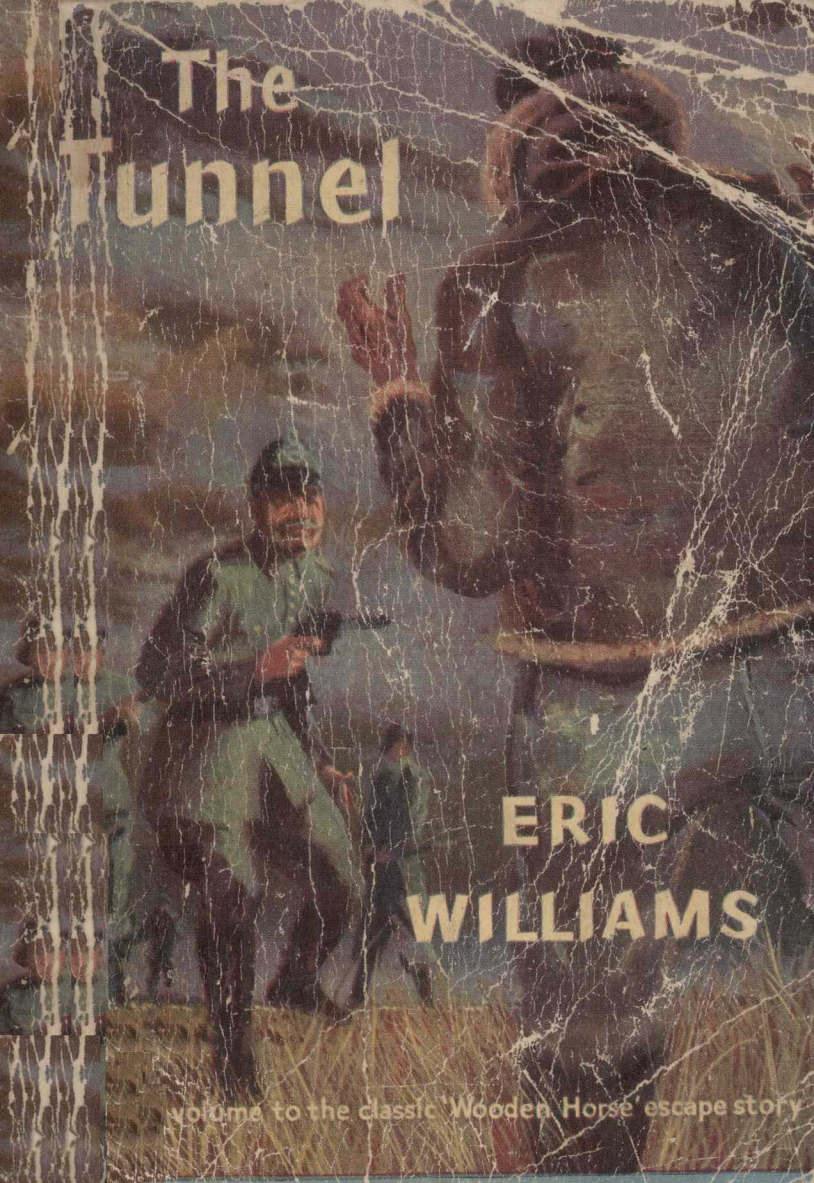

ERIC WILLIAMS

volume to the classic 'Wooden Horse' escape story

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About this book

ERIC WILLIAM'S account of his escape from a German prisoner-of-war camp by means of a wooden horse will surely become as immortal as the device on which it was modelled. In *The Wooden Horse* he confined himself to the story of that successful escape; he omitted his earlier adventures and the abortive attempts. Now in *The Tunnel*, still calling himself Peter Howard, he tells how he was shot down while on a bombing mission over Germany; how he managed to get within a stone's throw of the Dutch frontier but was caught by a search party of foresters; how he escaped from his captors and this time succeeded in reaching Holland only to be captured again.

Readers of *The Tunnel* will feel the shock of prison camp life with its perpetual hunger, lack of privacy, and isolation from normal existence; will watch the reaction of different temperaments to the inactivity and monotony; will be excited by the brief moments of drama, and warmed by the growing spirit of comradeship and determination which paved the way for later success.

About the author

ERIC WILLIAMS was born in London in 1911. On the outbreak of war he joined the R.A.F. and served in Bomber Command. In 1942 he was shot down over Germany and was eventually imprisoned in Stalag-Luft III from which he made his successful escape. He was awarded the M.C. After the war he wrote *The Wooden Horse*, the story of this adventure, which has now reached the fabulous sale of over a million and a quarter copies. More recently in *The Escapers*, he has published a selection of the best firsthand stories of escape from the 16th century to the present day. He lives in the stone-and-wood house he has built on the cliffs of Start Bay in Devon, and here he is writing the third book of *The Wooden Horse* trilogy.

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The Tunnel

ERIC WILLIAMS

COLLINS

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To My Wife

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PREFACE

IN A previous book I told how Peter Howard and John Clinton escaped from *Stalag-Luft III* by means of a wooden vaulting horse. *Stalag-Luft III* was in fact the third prison camp in which these men had been held by the Germans; and in *The Tunnel* I shall tell of the two earlier camps and of other escape attempts which were not so lucky, but which paved the way for the success of the wooden horse scheme.

A prisoner's first few days of solitary confinement immediately after capture were usually spent lying on his bed making plans to escape. By the time he reached his first camp he was thinking and talking of nothing but escape. He bored the older prisoners with his constant speculation. He sought those who had already been outside, listened to their stories and discussed their methods. He learned that some of the escapers had cut their way through the wire, some had bluffed the guards and walked out of the camp as Germans, others had managed to get away during the journeys from one camp to another; but for the majority a tunnel was the only satisfactory way. So the new prisoner began to make plans for his own tunnel only to find, every time, that it had been done before; that repeated attempts had already exhausted the few possible starting places.

In the end the newcomer drifted into a state of lethargy. He still wanted to escape, but where was the opportunity in a compound containing a thousand men, most of whom, at one time or another, had tried to get away? He turned to study, literature, art; and waited for the inspiration that, for the majority, never came.

There were some who could not wait. Because they were naturally restless, or too fond of their freedom, they could not settle down. The thought that the war was going on

without them was more than they could bear. These men either made their escape, were shot by the guards or spent their years of imprisonment in a bitter struggle against the surrounding wire.

In writing *The Tunnel* I pay homage to all those prisoners who tried and failed and tried again, and went on trying until the end of the war. Above all I pay homage to those who, in attempting to escape, were murdered by the men who led the German people at that time.

The successful escaper knows only too well how much he owes to chance; he knows also that those who tried and failed are fully entitled to lay the blame for their failure in the lap of that same blind goddess. No matter how ingenious the plan nor how careful the preparation they could not budget for the odd stroke of ill-fortune that, in an instant, wrecked many months of careful planning; a horse and cart driven over the tunnel, the chance discovery of a small quantity of excavated earth, or the sudden demand for identity papers in a dockside café.

To try is always the important thing, and in this book I have tried to recreate something of the atmosphere of those anxious, furtive, often highly amusing days in which our whole lives were filled with two diverse aims; to get out of the place, and at the same time make imprisonment as bearable as possible. The prison became a crucible in which all the traits of a man's character were hardened; a glasshouse in which his personality was forced, made to grow beyond his years. From this crucible, this glasshouse, the prisoner emerged; not changed, but hardened in the cast in which he would, inevitably, later have developed.

The prison camps described are *Dulag-Luft* near Frankfurt-on-Main, and *Oflag XXIB* near Schubin in Poland. The year is 1942-43.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

PETER HOWARD lay quietly in the thick undergrowth of the German forest and listened to the aircraft engines droning away into the darkness overhead. Still slightly dazed by his fall, he was conscious only of the silence, the resinous smell of pine trees, and that he was somehow safe from the flame and noise that had filled the last twenty minutes.

At length, with great effort, he raised his head. Everything on the ground was silent, but he realised that before long the woods would echo with the shouts of German soldiers searching for the airmen, whose parachutes they must have seen descending from the blazing aircraft. Searchlights had held him until the last minute, isolating the white swinging parachute, blinding him and indicating his path of descent.

Rising unsteadily to his feet he pressed the quick-release fastener of the parachute harness, which fell clear of his legs. He tore open the front of his inflated Mae West and struggled free. Looking round him in the wood for somewhere to hide the parachute he saw a thick clump of undergrowth and, gathering the billowing silk in his arms, he quickly stuffed it beneath the brambles. On top of the white silk he put his Mae West and the heavy padded harness, covering them with the loose moss that grew like a carpet on the forest floor. He worked fast, stopping only to listen for the sound of movement in the wood. Drops of sweat gathered in his hair and ran down his nose as he worked, although it was December and the night was cold. His limbs were trembling, and he panted with the urgency of his movements. The Germans would soon be here, and he must get away.

He looked up at the sky. Checking himself by Polaris, as he had done so often in the air, he started off at a steady

walk through the forest, keeping the North Star on his right hand and walking as silently as his heavy flying boots would allow. Soon he came to a narrow path and, turning south, he continued down this until he reached a wide grass fire-lane which ran straight as a ruled line through the quiet woods.

He stopped at the junction, afraid to take to the open but aware that he would walk more easily on the soft grass of the ride. The silence was unnerving. It reminded him of when, as a boy, he had climbed into the local park to poach pheasant. Then it had been the silence that had frightened him—the silence that had been so essential to his purpose and yet had been so much his enemy. Silence that could so easily be broken by a careless foot and which, when so broken, would fly to pieces at the angry shout and trampling footsteps of the gamekeeper. Now, in Germany, it seemed to him that the whole forest was waiting for him to move, listening for the noise made by his feet in their clumsy flying boots.

At first, remembering only the fire and the need to hide his parachute and get away, he had acted without deliberation; but now he began to plan ahead, to wonder where he would go from here. He knew that somewhere round him in the forest the rest of his crew would be hiding their parachutes and making their plans to evade capture. He thought for a moment of trying to find them but, still impelled by the urgent desire to get away, he came out into the open and started to jogtrot down the ride. Apart from a few bruises he was unhurt and he felt certain that given a fair chance he could reach Holland. He had obtained a "fix" just before they were attacked and he knew that he had landed somewhere north of Osnabruck—say, forty or fifty miles from the Dutch border. Once in Holland he might get food and clothes and perhaps money from a friendly farmer. The fire-lane would lead him in the right direction and would get him quickly away from the spot where he had fallen.

As he jogged along he felt, inside him, a slight loosening of the tightness, the stiffness that had seized his limbs when first the cannon shells had torn through the fuselage and the red tongues of fire had filled the blacked-out cabin with their hungry glow. He began to curse, first wildly, then comprehensively, remembering the petrol saved for Christmas, and that this was to have been the last trip over Germany before his leave. It was an easy target, a "piece of cake"—and they had to go and get shot down by a night-fighter. And yet behind his cursing he could not help feeling glad that he was out of it, out of the swaying aircraft and the sick fear of the searchlights and the flak.

It had been his twenty-fifth operational trip. At first flying had been an adventure. Men died, he knew, but it was always the other chap. It could never happen to him. His crew had managed to get through several trips without being hit, and after that he began to view the flak below with a certain familiar interest, admiring its beauty as he, invulnerable, flew among its coloured bursting lights. But as his operational tour grew longer and one by one he lost his closest friends, the thing came nearer home. Then—after a night when the aircraft had been hit, and he had smelled the cordite and heard the white-hot fragments tearing through the fabric of the fuselage—he began to dream. And that was the end of his invulnerability. He felt the metal fragments tearing into his guts. He felt the sear and scorch of the flame as he watched a fellow aircraft twist and turn towards the ground. From then on it could happen to him. From then on it was fun no longer.

To-night, he felt, they'd had back luck from the start.

On the way out over the North Sea they'd had trouble with one of the engines. The oil pressure had been reading low and the engineer, nervous, had advised them to turn back. Then the oil had regained its normal pressure and they had carried on. They had been hit by flak over the French coast on the way in; not badly, but enough to frighten them and make the inferno above the target look

angrier than it usually did. That was the worst part of any bombing trip, he thought, the waiting for the target to grow near. That last half-hour, with the target in full view all the time, the cones of searchlights and the wicked, beautiful display of flak winking and flashing and changing colour, with the tracer floating up slowly like sparks from a garden fire.

They had flown into it this time, right into it. And they had flown out of it again with one engine on fire, skimming the tops of the houses as they came, nearly out of control, but clear; clear and miraculously unwounded. Once away from the bump and growl of flak and the probing beams of searchlights the pilot had extinguished the burning engine, decided to make for base at a thousand feet; and they had settled down for the long cold trip home. They had been congratulating themselves on getting out safely when the night-fighter came in to attack.

Peter did not remember much of what had happened after the rear-gunner had given the warning. The pilot, handicapped by the dead engine, had done all he knew to lose the fighter. Peter could hear his heavy breathing over the intercomm as he threw the sluggish bomber about the sky. He heard the rear-gunner giving directions to the pilot, who was doing everything he could to avoid the fighter and yet maintain his height. Several times they thought they had given him the slip, only to hear the rear-gunner say, "He's coming in again, skipper, he's coming in from the port quarter! Turn to port . . . Now . . . *Dive!*" And they heard the sudden clatter of his guns as he fired a long burst at the fighter breaking away.

For the navigator, the engineer and the wireless operator, the whole fight had been in the heavy breathing of the pilot, the voice of the rear-gunner and the clatter of his guns; in the sudden lurching of the aircraft. Sitting in the blacked-out cabin they could see nothing. The rear-gunner in his turret could see the red-hot exhaust cowling of the attacking fighter, while the pilot and the front-gunner could see

the long, graceful trajectory of his tracer bullets as they sped past and over their heads. But for the three men sitting in the half-light of their cabin, the fight had come mainly through their earphones. Whenever they heard the excited voice of the rear-gunner and the clatter of his guns the wireless operator raised his fist, thumb extended upwards, and thrust out his lower lip in a gesture of supreme confidence. "Good old Mac," he seemed to be saying, "we're O.K. now—that's fixed the blighter." And Peter, huddled over his chart-table, grinned back and nodded his head.

The fighter had made several attacks and at last driven them, jinking wildly, to within a few hundred feet of the ground. A burst of machine-gun bullets, raking them from nose to tail, had set them on fire and torn great holes in the perspex cockpit cover. Inside the aircraft it had been light as day, and reeking of cordite from their own machine-guns. Everything was light and noise and the sickening smell of burnt cordite.

The pilot, realising that it was impossible to save the aircraft, had given the order to bale out.

Peter remembered taking the pilot's parachute from its rack and placing it on the seat beside him, knowing as he did it the futility of his action. The pilot, acknowledging it, had raised a hand in salute and returned to his task of holding the aircraft steady while the rest of the crew baled out.

When Peter reached the escape hatch it was open, the wind tearing and howling and blowing away the smoke from the burning wing. He found his own parachute and clipped it on to the harness at his chest. With the fuselage burning fiercely behind him and the earth a few hundred feet below, he thrust his legs through the escape hatch and was dragged out by the force of the slipstream. He must have pulled the ripcord, he did not remember doing so, because the parachute opened with a stinging crack. Something hit him on the side of the head, something kicked him

between the legs, and he found himself hanging uncomfortably, swinging sickeningly from side to side.

Gradually the pendulum movement had lessened, and he was able to look around him. Away in the distance he could see several more white parachutes floating slowly down. He had tried to count them, hoping that all the crew were there, but he could not concentrate. He was turning now, twisting at the end of his shroud lines, and the discomfort of the harness between his legs was becoming a pain.

Now, on foot in the forest, he tried to shut the memory of those last few minutes from his mind. To forget the flames, the noise and the fear. To lose the vision of his pilot quietly holding the aircraft in the air while the rest of the crew leaped to safety. Wally was now probably lying dead in the charred wreckage of his aircraft. The others, if they had landed safely, were somewhere round him in the forest. He regretted that he had not tried to make contact with them, but consoled himself with the thought that, alone, he would stand a better chance of hiding up.

After running and walking for several miles he came to a place where the earth road which he was now following crossed a narrow winding stream. Ahead and to his left, reflecting the moonlight, he could see a pond encircled by tall rushes and beyond this the vague outlines of a farm.

He climbed down beside the simple wooden bridge and drank from the stream, feeling the earth bank damp beneath his knees. The water, black as ink in the darkness, was soft and tasted brackish, and Peter remembered the water-purifying tablets in the escape tin in his battledress pocket. The tin box was difficult to open and he swore softly as he wrestled with the lid. He had taken a similar tin over Germany for so long that he had almost forgotten its purpose, and had collected it automatically with his navigation chart and radio instructions. He thought of Pop Dawson, the Intelligence Officer, and his vague lectures on evasion. He would have liked Pop to be with him now. He

had been very good on what to do if you came down in France or Belgium, but Peter could not remember him saying very much about coming down in Germany. He himself had never thought about being shot down and getting out unhurt. Death was the ever-present possibility but the other, the half-way house of being at large or in a prison camp in Germany, he had never really considered.

At last he got the escape kit open and examined its contents: a water-bottle of thin rubber, shaped like an old-fashioned purse; a bar of chocolate, stale and already covered with whitish powder; a small brass compass; a book of matches; Horlicks tablets and some cakes of concentrated food. Incongruously among this workmanlike assortment was a packet of chewing-gum. He unwrapped the water-bottle, filled it from the stream and added two of the purifying tablets. He tied the string tightly round the neck of the bottle, fastened it to his belt and climbed back on to the earthen road.

The farm when he passed it was quiet; not even a dog barked, and Peter imagined the farmer and his family sleeping again after the bombers had gone. He walked carefully past the outbuildings, round several fields of ploughed sandy soil, and once more into the forest which stretched ahead.

He was almost enjoying himself now, his first panic resolving into a firm determination to avoid capture—to get back, somehow, to England. It was good to walk alone in the forest, alone with a single clearly defined objective. A quiet, slow, lonely campaign after the noise, urgency and clamour of the last few months. He began to walk more slowly, savouring the silence of the woods.

Another wave of bombers droned their way towards England, thousands of feet above his head. He looked up, but they were too high for him to see. His young brother Roy had been flying to-night. How strange if it should be he who flew, like a homing pigeon, so far above. He imagined the crew immobile at their stations. Soon they would be crossing the Dutch coast. They would lose height

over the North Sea and, as they drank the last of their coffee, would make the jokes that are always made as a bomber nears its base. Family jokes, no longer funny, but made because they expressed the solidarity of the family. His own crew had acquired that solidarity flying for hours through the darkness of the sky. Seven men enclosed in a shell of battering roaring noise, invisible to each other but joined into intimacy by the microphones of the intercomm.

He imagined the front-gunner slowly rotating his turret as he quarters the sky for enemy aircraft. Alone in the clouds, alone with his guns and the stars and the queer thoughts that enter a man's head thousands of feet above the earth. It is cold in the turret. The gunner is unable to see the bulk of the aircraft behind him. Only when he listens for it is he conscious of the sound of the engines. Suddenly there is a click in his earphones, and softly and casually, as though the man's hand were resting on his shoulder, he hears the voice of the rear-gunner talking to the navigator. Above the roar and batter of sound in the lonely turret he hears the voice as though it were his own inner self speaking, more intimate even than his own voice which, if he were to speak outside the microphone, would vanish with the whistle of the wind. The voice, disembodied, speaks softly in his ear. It says, "Where are we, Joe—astronomically speaking I mean?" and the crew laugh. And then the pilot's voice, "Shut up, rear-gunner, we're not clear yet. Get back to your job." And the rear-gunner's reply, "O.K., skipper—just waking up the navigator." And the earphones click again, and all is silent.

The crew in the aircraft overhead would be thinking of the flarepath and the boundary lights of their own aerodrome, and all the well-worn routine of the homing bomber. The final circuit before landing. The friendly W.A.A.F. driver on the dispersal truck. The sleepy ground staff waiting to bed the aircraft down for the rest of the night. Then the interrogation, and eggs and bacon in the mess.