



Spring 2024

# VIMM Newsletter

Vancouver Island Military Museum

## John Colwell: The Tin Man of *The Great Escape*

By Greg Devenish

On April 12, 1943, F/O John Colwell, a young RCAF navigator, disembarked from the railway station in Sagan, Germany. He was escorted down the road to Stalag Luft III, a German POW Camp. It was a new camp, surrounded by a pine forest which made the camp feel closed in, with no view to the outside world. He looked over the compound and noticed the two high fences, topped with barbed wire, and armed guard towers. Inside the fences was a low warning wire and any prisoner caught beyond the wire could be shot. The young navigator was sent to the North Compound which had sixteen single story huts, each holding 144 prisoners. He was assigned to HUT 120 and to Room 14. It was a sparse room with bunks, straw mattresses, and little heat - this would be home for the foreseeable future.

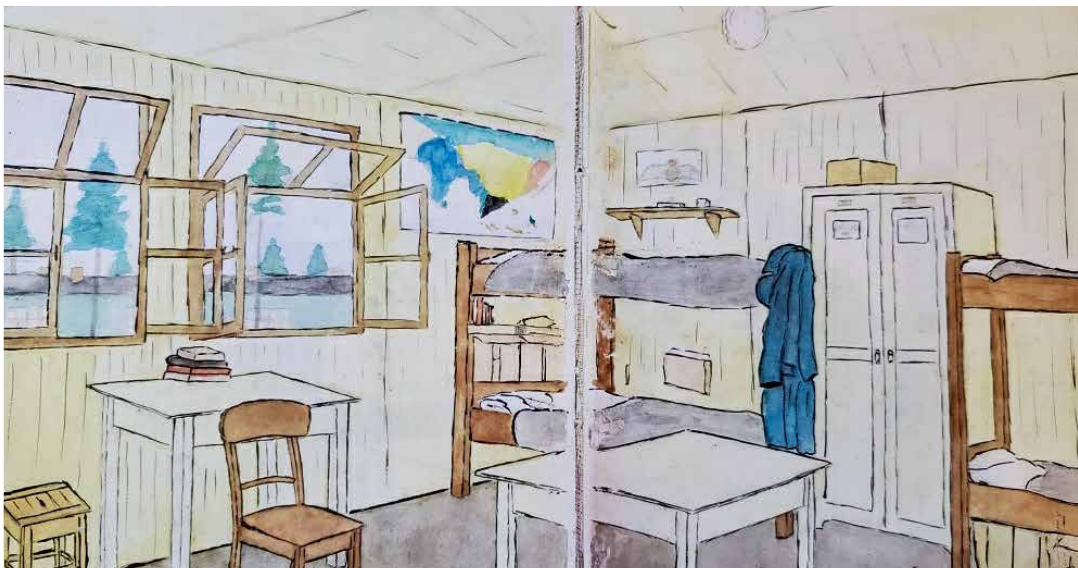
John Colwell was born in India in 1916. His father was a missionary and had served in WWI as a doctor. In 1933, his father moved the family to Nanaimo and took up farming. John attended school in Nanaimo and, after completing high school, worked on the farm.

John joined the RCAF, and, given his strong background in mathematics, was assigned to be trained as an air observer. He took his first flight in 1941 and completed gunnery and bombing in Moosejaw, Sask. Sergeant Colwell arrived in England in May 1942 and completed more training in navigation. He reported to 404 RCAF Squadron in Yorkshire. The squadron was involved in bomber raids on Stuttgart, Essen, and the U-Boat pens in St. Nazaire.

On 3 April 1943, John's Halifax bomber was shot down by a German night fighter. He bailed out and landed near Rotterdam. (The parachute saved his life, and he would later become a member of the Caterpillar Club). He was captured and was sent to Stag Luft III.

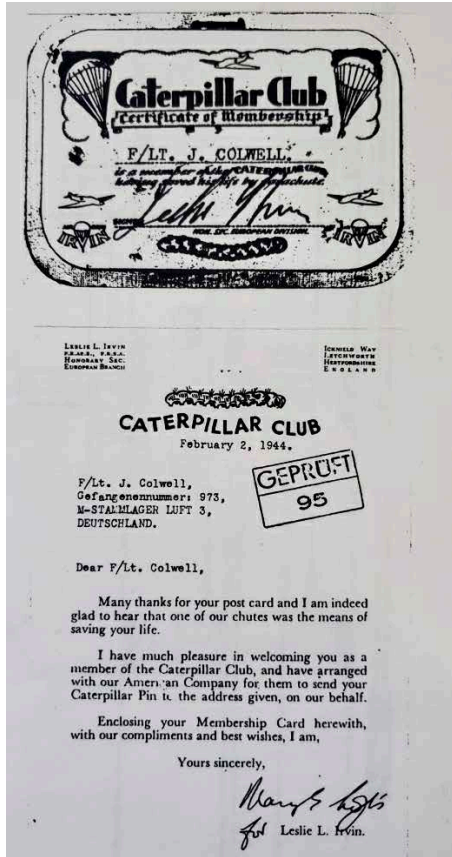


*P/O John Colwell.  
Note the observers  
badge "O."*



*A drawing by John Colwell of his room at Stalag Luft III. Many of the items in the room were constructed by John.*

Continued from page 1



Colwell received his membership card in the Caterpillar Club while a POW.

John learned very quickly that, to get home, self-preservation was important. Two things were clear, getting along with his roommates, and food. He decided to keep a secret diary of life in Stalag Luft III. This has become an important historical document complete with daily entries, illustrations

of camp living, lists of Red Cross parcels, menus, diagrams of the "Great Escape Tunnel" and even theatre performances. (The original diary is on display in the Comox Air Museum). In June he wrote, *Two Americans got under the south fence along the new road ... 33 walked out the main gate disguised as a delousing party and escaped ...but were caught.*

John quickly got involved in the Great Escape, the largest escape from a German POW camp in WWII. Roger Bushell, nicknamed "Big X", hatched a sophisticated plan to dig three tunnels, named Tom, Dick and Harry, to break out over 200 Commonwealth prisoners, complete with forged documents, civilian clothing, rations, maps, and compasses. The "X" organization put together a team of tunnel men, forgers, scroungers, tailors, and penguins. John noticed one day that two prisoners, ... *came along and sort of scuffed along in the middle of our game. I remember thinking it wasn't very considerate of them....and then I saw the sand trickling out of their pant legs and realized what was going on.* John joined the penguins. Their role was to distribute sand, dug from the tunnels, around the compound or hide it in buildings. Penguins moved around the

compound with two bags made from undergarments under their pants. Using discarded cans, John made various items such as pots, compasses, sandbags, kettles and even a working clock. His talents earned the nick name **The Tin Man**. A fellow Canadian RCAF officer and roommate, Art Hartwin, commented on John, *He could make anything out of anything. There were twelve of us moved into a bigger room. There wasn't anything in the room when we got there. Seven o'clock the next morning he rounded up all the tin cans he could, and we had every utensil we needed within a week. He was a master tinker.*

John's contribution meant that he was chosen to take part in the Great Escape. On 24 March, he wrote, *Jamie and I spent the night in Block 104 in preparation to go out the tunnel. Our turns were 146 and 147. The tunnel was broken at 10pm. Unfortunately, after the 76th man's escape, the tunnel was discovered. Colwell wrote, I awoke about 5:15 am to learn the tunnel had been found. Two Goons were in the hut with their dogs. I burned all my papers ... and threw all my chocolates and food out the window... At 6:30 we were taken outside, counted, strip-searched individually ...*

In the end, the discovery of the tunnel may have saved his life. Of the 76 who escaped 3 got away and 50 were executed by the Germans. The remainder were returned to the camp.

With the Russian Army advancing in January 1945, the German guards forced the prisoners to go on a winter march with little food and clothing. Then on May 2nd Colwell wrote, *Goons deserting, tanks arrived at noon – FREE!!*

After the war John returned to Vancouver Island and he married Fern Rodge. He settled in Lantzville and took up dairy farming. He became active in the Scout movement and became an active rockhound. In 1974, John and Fern donated land and scrounged the materials to build a clubhouse for hobby lovers. The non-profit group which operated the program named it *Jonanco Hobby Workshop* (John and Company). It is a place where crafters can access tools, workspace, storage, and expertise to build everything from furniture to jewelry. His legacy is still active today and a real tribute to John. John passed away in 2007.



# President's Report

Happy new year to all and welcome to 2024. Last year was a successful year, with visitors from all over. In 2022, we had 3333 visitors and in 2023 we had 3736 (an increase of 403). We are finding a slow improvement in visitations since the COVID years. We had a good showing for Remembrance Day and solid financial donations as well.

Our Christmas luncheon at the Grand Hotel last November was well attended and fun for all. Our volunteer base is steady with a few new volunteers in the wings ready to sign up. We are in good finances this year thanks again to a grant from the BC Gaming Commission and sales of surplus militaria items. We are finally finished with Telus fibre optic upgrades and our credit card machine changes. We have been replacing some of our security cameras with newer versions since the older cameras are near their life expectancy date. We have a new NATO display, which was long overdue, and a possible Chinese Canadians in WW1 display to come, if we can find space.

We are continuing meetings with the City of Nanaimo Parks, Recreation, and Culture Department. We meet with them every two months to determine the museum's future, using the co-management template.

The City Bylaw patrols seem to have positive effects on conditions around the park and museum building; let's hope this will continue. I thank all our directing staff and volunteers for their effort in making the museum the place to visit in Nanaimo. Let's keep up the good work.

*Roger Bird*

## Medal Mounting

The VIMM will gladly mount your medals in court mounting or in a frame. Contact us for further information and prices.



## Links you may find interesting

SCAN THE QR CODES TO ACCESS THE PAGES



The  
Great War  
Aviation  
Society



*The bag of Lieutenant Emily Davies, Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service.*



# Women at War - First Aid Nursing Yeomanry

## Joan Bamford Fletcher, MBE

By Heather Neil, VIMM Volunteer



Joan Bamford Fletcher

Joan Bamford Fletcher was born in Regina, Saskatchewan in April of 1909, the daughter of successful British immigrants. After boarding school in England, she studied at Les Tourelles in Brussels, Belgium, and in France.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Fletcher trained as a driver in the transport section of the *Canadian Red Cross* and studied motor mechanics in the *Saskatchewan Auxiliary Territorial Service*, a women's voluntary wartime organization. In early 1941, at her own expense, she travelled

to Britain and joined the *Women's Transport Service*, specifically the *First Aid Nursing Yeomanry*. Fletcher was stationed with the other Canadian FANY's at Moncrieffe House in Scotland, where she drove cars and ambulances for the exiled Polish army.

In 1945, as the war was ending in Europe, Fletcher was assigned to Southeast Asia to help evacuate Allied prisoners of war. She arrived in Calcutta, India, in April 1945. In October she was dispatched to the Dutch East Indies – now Indonesia – to evacuate the civilian internment camp in Bangkinang, Sumatra. At that time, approximately 100,000 soldiers and civilians remained in prison camps throughout the Dutch East Indies. The camp at Bangkinang contained approximately 2000 emaciated prisoners – mostly women and children – who had to be transported to the coastal city of Padang.

The Allies had no personnel available to help in the region at the time. Further complicating the matter, while the Japanese had surrendered in mid-August (1945), the Allied Forces did not reach the Dutch East Indies until September 29. This lapse of time had given Indonesian nationalists opportunity to assume control and declare their independence on August 17th. The situation was chaotic and rebel groups, many still loyal to the Japanese, were attacking the camps.

Unfazed, Fletcher approached the recently defeated Japanese 25th Army, and persuaded them to provide her with an interpreter, 25 trucks, and an escort of 40 armed soldiers, to accomplish her assigned evacuation. In all, transporting the 2000 internees would require 21 trips over a six-week span. Each trip from camp to coast took approximately 20 hours. Each convoy was monitored by Fletcher. On the third convoy she was left with a four-inch gash in her scalp when her coat snagged on the wheel of a passing truck, and she was dragged under. A Japanese physician bandaged her wound and, within two hours, she carried on with the evacuation. Following the incident, her interpreter informed her that she had earned the respect of the Japanese soldiers – who now saluted her as she passed. On the second to last run, Fletcher and a Japanese officer were leading the convoy in a jeep. After stopping to fix a tire along the column, Fletcher returned to the front to discover two Dutch passengers in the lead car were missing, and an Indonesian rebel was attempting to steal the vehicle. She pulled alongside the car in her jeep and shouted "Out!" The rebel jumped out of the vehicle and ran off. Fletcher and her interpreter went in search of the missing evacuees and found them in a hut, held captive by three armed rebels. While the interpreter was attempting to convince the rebels that the captives were British, Fletcher reportedly shouted at them. And, while they were so taken aback, she grabbed a knife and cut the Dutch hostages loose and ushered them out the door. All escaped unharmed and the rebels did not follow.

When, finally, the evacuation was complete, the captain of the Japanese escort presented Fletcher with his katana in recognition of her courage. This 300 year old samurai sword can be seen in the collection of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.



Joan Bamford Fletcher with her ambulance, attached to Polish Forces.

Lt. Joan Bamford Fletcher was awarded the O.B.E (Civil Division) for her service in the Far East. She died in 1979 in Langley, BC.

# A Portrait of Evil - Dealt With In Summary Manner by Canadian Troops

By John Thomson, VIMM Volunteer

In November 1932, the National Socialist Party (Nazi) of Germany held the most seats in the German Reichstag following a free and fair general election. Although the Nazis were unable to form a majority parliamentary coalition, former chancellor Franz von Papen and other conservative leaders persuaded President Paul von Hindenburg to appoint Adolph Hitler as chancellor on January 30, 1933. Shortly after, the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act of 1933 and the Weimar Republic was converted into a one-party dictatorship



*Major Jamieson brought the shot-up portrait back to Canada*

based upon the totalitarian and autocratic ideology of Nazism. When Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934, Hitler became the head of state and government with the ultimate aim of establishing a New Order that was meant to counter what were perceived to be the injustices of the post-Great War laws and

reparations imposed by the victorious Allied Forces.

By September 1, 1939, Hitler and his armed forces launched World War II after invading Poland and then ultimately conquering most of continental Europe. In order to reinforce his portrayal as the ultimate leader of Germany, as well as the ruler of the countries that had been subjugated by German forces, Hitler's portrait, created by his official photographer Heinrich Hoffman, was exhibited in all government buildings and in thousands of private homes. In addition, images of the German dictator were also displayed on postage stamps, postcards, posters, and photo books, in an attempt to

manipulate his persona into a depiction of strength, power, and ruthlessness.

By the spring of 1945, much of Europe lay in ruins as Allied Armed Forces advanced toward Berlin and the eventual, unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. Tens of millions of people had died in what is considered to be the deadliest conflict in history. Understandably, emotions ran high as American, British, and Canadian troops uncovered the atrocities that had been dealt to untold numbers of innocent people throughout Europe under the direction of Adolph Hitler.

Soldiers from the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RCEME), in the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, discovered a portrait of the Nazi leader in a building during the liberation of Holland in 1944. Under the direction of Major Stewart Edgar Jamieson, commanding officer, delightful revenge was taken upon the illustration. Twenty-eight bullets were fired through the picture and its frame. Major Jamieson then carried the photo home to Canada as a souvenir of the war.

In December of 2016, the perforated picture in its original frame was donated to the Vancouver Island Military Museum (VIMM) by Major

Jamieson's son, Glen Jamieson. It is now on display with numerous other artifacts from wars that have involved Canadians throughout the world for more than two-hundred years.



*Canadian troops took target practice on the portrait of a dictator*



# The Chinese Labour Corps. (CLC)

By Brian McFadden

Early in the First World War, Britain and France recognized the need to recruit a labour force to support troops serving in France and Belgium. The scheme to recruit Chinese men to work as non-combatants was pioneered by the French Government in 1916. The advantage of such a labour force was quickly adopted by the British to solve the labour shortage of skilled and non-skilled workers for railway construction and maintenance work on the Western Front.

China was officially neutral at the time, however, their government saw an opportunity to take advantage of the war to position themselves as a new international power. The Chinese Labour Department officially sanctioned the plan as a way to link China with the Allied powers by supplying non-military personnel to alleviate the labour shortage. In total, Britain and France recruited nearly 140,000 Chinese labourers during WWI.



*Recruiting men for the Chinese labour Corps.*

region and China's political instabilities. Each volunteer

received an embarkation fee of 20 yuan followed by 10 yuan a month to be paid to their family in China.

Those recruited by the British were transported to Europe by ship across the Pacific to Victoria, British Columbia, on Canada's West Coast, then by train to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and then by ship to France. The Canadian Government kept the travel arrangements secret because at that time a head tax of \$500 was charged on every Asian person entering the country. However, this was waived for the Chinese Labour Corp. The men travelled in sealed railway cars and were prevented from leaving the train at any time during the six-day journey. In 1917, it is estimated, 80,000 labourers travelled secretly by train across the country. Many died on the journey, some from disease, others by accident, or disputes among themselves mainly due to the cramped and crowded conditions. Those who died in Canada were buried in unmarked graves in British Columbia and Ontario.

Once the men reached their destination, they were formed into companies of 500 and, depending on the level of skills, were assigned various tasks under the direction of

British Officers. The work was hard and often dangerous, and, although deemed non-combatants, these men were often close to the fighting and more than 2,000 died from shelling, landmines, or bullets. Several Chinese labourers were awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for bravery under fire, and all who served with the labour corps were issued the British War Medal. The members of the labour corps who were killed were classified as war

casualties and are buried in military war cemeteries, of which the largest is at Noyelles-sur-Mer on the Somme, in France. These graves are tended today by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. After the war, the Chinese labourers



*CLC Chinese Labour Corp. at work in France.*

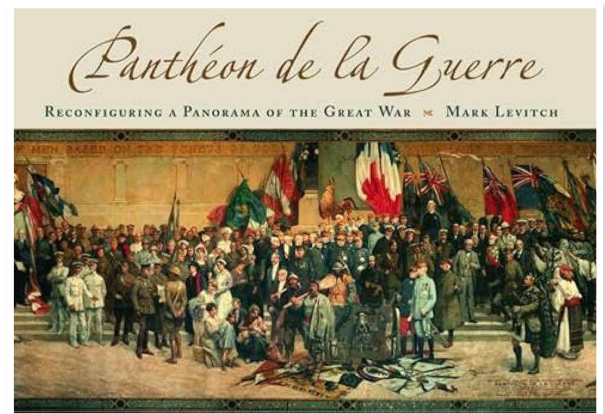
were transported back to China, but they received little

or no recognition in history books or war memorials for their contribution and sacrifices during WWI.

A giant 400 ft canvas started in 1914 was exhibited in Paris at the end of the war depicting France surrounded by its allies including the Chinese Labour Corp. Their presence was later painted over to make way for the United States who had joined the war in 1917.



*CLC Chinese Labour Corp. Workers crossing Canada (Victoria to Halifax)*



*Great War mural in Paris, completed in 1918.*

# DISPATCHES

from VIMM



## DISPATCHES

### TV Coverage and Connections

On November 10, 2023, Global TV News featured a story about our Spitfire display and its creator, Pat Murphy.



SCAN THE QR  
TO WATCH!



Connections and connections – in Kelowna, a viewer of the Global News story recognized one of the names in the display, the father of a friend in Calgary. The Calgary man, informed by his friend, was about to visit Vancouver Island, so he called a friend in Nanaimo – Doug Hogg, one of our volunteers. When Brian McConnell arrived here in Nanaimo, Doug Hogg was able to introduce him to the display, and to the model of the Spitfire flown by P/O Brian “Blackie” McConnell. The model is an exact replica, including a tiny name on the side of the fuselage - Emily - Blackie’s wife, Brian’s mother.

## REMEMBERENCE DAY

The Museum was very busy on November 11 with 280 visitors, including Nanaimo Mayor Len Krogh and Councillor Ian Thorpe.

## NEW MEMBERS

Welcome Lucas Breen, Nigel O’Neil, and Chris Buckham.



Welcome Chris Buckham.



Welcome Nigel O’Neil.

Helping greet Remembrance Day visitors were volunteers Ben Opheim (left) and Shonn Klahooz.



## THE SATURDAY CREW



Volunteer Logan Scherr



Volunteer Iain Stewart

## Museum Directors

**Roger Bird**, President

**Brian McFadden**, Vice President

**Greg Devenish**, Secretary, Treasurer, Library

**Bruce Davison**, Volunteer Coordinator

**Bill Brayshaw**, Acquisitions

**Angus Scully**, Newsletter Editor

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