



Funeral of Thomas Henry Cullen MBE MRCS LRCP Medical Officer, 30 Squadron RAF, Maleme, Crete

Tom Cullen, probably the last known RAF survivor from the Battle of Maleme in May 1941, died on 24 March 2019 aged 102. While listed officially as 30 Squadron's Medical Officer, Tom worked closely with 33 Squadron in Crete; in his book Edward Howell, 33 Squadron's Commanding Officer in Crete, credited Tom for saving his life after being badly wounded and left for dead for two days. For his bravery and dedication to the wounded at Maleme in May 1941 Tom was awarded an MBE. The citation, published in the 29 December 1942 edition of the London Gazette, read as follows:

Flight Lieutenant Thomas Henry Cullen, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. (81303), RAFVR.

A few days before the German invasion of Crete, this medical officer fell sick with dysentery at Maleme. When the heavy air attack on Maleme began, although too weak to walk properly, he immediately attended to the wounded and continued to do so under fire until his post was captured. Flight Lieutenant Cullen then established a first-aid post in a nearby village and worked alone and without sleep for the next three days, when he was joined by two doctors of the New Zealand forces. Over 1,000 wounded were passed through this medical post before it was finally taken over by an Australian Field Ambulance. Flight Lieutenant Cullen displayed devotion to duty and courage of the highest order.

Tom attended several Crete Day reunions at Odiham and memorial services over in Crete. Those of us who met him never knew that as a PoW he had escaped from Stalag Luft XX A in Poland and made his way back to Britain via Sweden. An interview Tom gave to the Daily Mirror on the occasion his 100th birthday is reproduced overleaf, giving more details of the escape.

Tom's family have extended an invitation to members of 33 Squadron and the 33 Squadron Association to attend Tom's memorial service at 1430 hrs on Thursday 25 April at St Mary The Virgin Church, Church Street, Kelvedon, Essex CO5 9AL. The undertaker is janetcdavies@hunnaball.co.uk ; as the family are asking for no flowers, Janet is opening a fund towards pancreatic cancer, the RSPCA and the Alzheimer's Society if you wish to donate. Please let one of the Committee know if you are going to attend.

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Daring escape from Prisoner of War horror camp finally revealed as hero celebrates 100th birthday

Tom Cullen fled the Nazi's in World War Two by crossing a frozen lake, climbing a barbed wire fence and then racing across Poland

By Louie Smith

Knowing he could be shot dead by the Nazis at any moment, RAF doctor Tom Cullen's heart pounded as he clambered over the 8ft-high barbed wire fence at the prisoner of war camp where he was being held. The guards had been distracted by the mock riot his fellow PoWs staged to help the escape bid in Nazi-occupied Poland as the Second World War raged in 1944.



Thomas Henry Cullen RAFVR

(Image: Eastnews Press Agency)

After getting over the fence, Tom and another brave British serviceman made their way through Poland, and sneaked between safe houses before stowing away on a ship to neutral Sweden then finally being flown home to Britain. It has taken until now – after just celebrating his 100th birthday – for Tom to reveal his incredible journey to freedom.

The great-grandad, one of Britain's last surviving Nazi PoW escapees, says: "It became known that if people could get out of the camp there would be Poles that would help them get out of the country. "I don't know if you feel nervous – we were a bit excited. There was just nothing we could do about it once we were out. It was likely the Germans would shoot us on sight."

Luckily, they lived to tell the tale – but Tom then decided to keep his story secret for more than 70 years.

The squadron leader had been captured by German paratroopers during fierce fighting in Maleme, Crete, in 1941. He was immediately told to attempt to care for more than 1,000 wounded men. He only had minimal medical supplies. Tom received the MBE military honour for his efforts treating the soldiers. The citation praised his bravery and “devotion to duty and courage of the highest order”.

Tom, who served with 33 Squadron, says: “We all knew the invasion was coming, we didn’t know what it would be like. We all thought we’d probably get killed. The whole campaign in Crete was a complete mess up. When the Germans came and I had to put my hands up (you have to if they are pointing guns at you), I was taken to a barn and I had to try and do what I could for the wounded. I didn’t have any equipment though. I had to get on with it, there was no way out. Even if you hadn’t done the operations before, you just had to deal with the wounds as best you could.”

Tom and other PoWs were then taken across Europe to Stalag XXA near Torun in northern Poland. Despite his fading memory, the war veteran vividly recalls the terrible conditions in the camp, which he described as his very own Colditz. Tom adds: “It looked like an old fort surrounded by a moat. It was partly underground.” With typical British stiff upper lip, he says: “The Germans just had us locked up and provided us some food as best they could and that was that. Time went slowly, though – it was boring. There was nothing to do but play bridge.”

While under lock and key, Tom wrote home once a week to his parents in Kelvedon, Essex. His letters asked for updates about the pet dogs, family vegetable patch and local gossip. Following the Battle of Stalingrad, which ended in 1943, Tom and Army officer John Greig hatched an escape plan with Red Cross workers. The centenarian says he felt it was his duty to get back to Britain.

He adds: “Put it like this, no one knew when the war would end so you always thought if they could get home they would. There were two things about this – if you escaped from your camp that’s one thing, having got outside the camp how did you get to your country? My view was if you didn’t know how to get out of the country, why would you escape?”

Tom had spent two-and-a-half years in the Nazi camp before the escape during the night of February 29, when he was aged 27. After weeks of planning, the pair put on the Polish clothes other prisoners had stitched for them so they could blend in once outside. The Polish resistance was also enlisted to help the men escape. After the pretend riot kicked off, Tom and John walked across the frozen moat, carrying a ladder so they could scale the barbed wire fence.

Tom says: “The moat was frozen over and we took this ladder with us, it had rope on and they were able to pull it back. It made a crash but thankfully the guards were distracted. I just remember we got over it, then we had to go past the guardroom into a field and we hid in a hedge and waited for a truck to come up the road. We were just waiting to see what would happen next.”

The lorry arrived at the arranged point and the resistance fighters took the Brits more than 100 miles to the port town of Gdynia, near Gdansk, where they spent several days hopping between safe houses. Tom says: “We stayed on a farm and we waited for a suitable ship and they took us to the city. A chap went with us and we had to get a bus into the city and we sat near the back and tried not to talk to anybody. We followed 50 yards behind him on the docks. He gave us a shovel and said ‘We are going to shift coal on the ship’.”

The men hid in the hold for 36 hours in pitch darkness with no toilets, then they made themselves known to the crew. Tom says: “When we knocked on the hatch they gave us food and clothes and

said 'we won't tell the captain as he'll be upset.'" After three days the boat arrived in Malmö in neutral Sweden, where Tom and John were handed to the police then passed to the British ambassador. Nineteen days after the escape from the camp, they were flown to Scotland, then returned to their respective families. Tom did not meet John again, saying "we never had much in common apart from we escaped together".

Tom spent the rest of the war serving at RAF Halton in Bucks where he met Catherine Mary Lockerbie. They married, had four children, 11 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren. After the war Tom forged a career as a surgeon before settling down in Colchester, Essex, where he still lives. His wife, known as Mollie, died in 2006.

Modest Tom only opened up to his family in later years about that remarkable escape of more than 1,000 miles. His son Richard says: "We only found out in the last 20 years." Richard adds: "You ask him about it and it is like he is talking about a long boring weekend in Poland rather than escaping from a PoW camp."



Tom Cullen opened up about his daring escapes as he celebrated his 100th birthday

(Image: Eastnews Press Agency)