

**PILOT OFFICER SCHEIDHAUER –  
THE FORCED LANDING AND  
“THE GREAT ESCAPE”**

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by Ian Le Sueur

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Bernard William Martial Scheidhauer was born in Landau on 28th August 1921. His father, Colonel Michel Scheidhauer, was in charge of a battalion of Moroccan infantry troops, sent as occupying forces to the disputed Alsace Lorraine region after the Great War.

When his father retired from the Army and moved with his family back to their home town of Brest in Brittany, Bernard continued his education. Although he was not particularly academic he excelled at sports. His aspiration was to become a pilot following his graduation, but this was postponed by the fall of France in May, 1940.

Undaunted, he made his way to Douarnenez, a fishing village just south of Brest on the Côte de Comouaille, where his family had relatives. Along with five other young Frenchmen he managed to purchase a small fishing boat called "La Petite Anna". On the night of 20th/21st October 1940 the six young men set sail for England, with rations on board for 24 hours and 180 litres of fuel. After a couple of days they ran into heavy weather. The remaining fuel was expended trying to ride out the storm, and they started to drift helplessly. After being at sea for ten days, they were rescued by a British merchant ship, the *SS Craighorn*, which landed them at Milford Haven.

On 5th November 1940 Scheidhauer enlisted in the Free French Navy, serving on board a ship called the "Volontaire", berthed in Liverpool. His ambition to be a pilot was soon answered when, on 22nd January 1941, he reported to Camberley to start his pilot training. Following training with 6 Elementary Flying Training School (E.F.T.S.), 17 E.F.T.S. and 5 E.F.T.S., and then conversion to type with 53, 58 and 52 Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.), on 24th June 1942 he joined No.242 Sqdn. RAF. The Squadron was predominately Canadian and had suffered severe losses during the Battle of France whilst flying Hurricanes. Squadron Leader Douglas Bader was one of the Squadron's first commanders on its return to England, whereupon he set about restoring morale and returning the unit to combat readiness. When Scheidhauer joined the Squadron, Bader had been a POW for nine months and the Squadron had replaced its Hurricanes with Spitfire Mk V's. Scheidhauer flew several sorties with 242, including a number over the ill-fated Dieppe raid of August, 1942. Squadron records mention that he attended a couple of navigational courses, but do not record any combat reports filed by him.

On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1942, P/O (*Sous-Lt*) Scheidhauer, P/O Henri de Bordas and P/O Stourm transferred to 131 (County of Kent) Sqdn., based in Westhampnett. 131 Sqdn. was first formed in 1918 as a training squadron, but on 30th June 1941 it reformed as a fighter squadron, equipped with Spitfires paid for by the people of Kent in tribute to the airmen who had died defending their country in the skies over Kent during the summer of 1940. Scheidhauer was soon in action, taking part in several fighter sweeps and scrambles. Then, on the 11<sup>th</sup> November, he had his second rescue from the sea.

Following a sortie to the mouth of the Somme Estuary to unsuccessfully try out new tactics, the Squadron was returning to Westhampnett when, approximately 25 miles south of Shoreham, it ran into dense cloud. One section managed to avoid it, but Blue Section in which Scheidhauer was flying as No.3, entered the cloud at its densest point. Suddenly, Scheidhauer saw the shape of the tail of another

aircraft directly in front of him; he pushed the nose of his own machine down and to port, and at the same time noticed that approximately 18 inches was missing from his propeller. His engine soon stalled, and after being forced to bail out into the sea, he was picked up by a Walrus amphibian from 277 Sqdn. The pilot of the other aircraft, Taffy Williams, was not so lucky, and his body was recovered from the Channel shortly afterwards.

Seven days later Scheidhauer was back in the air, but for the last time. At 14.10 hours on 18<sup>th</sup> November he accompanied P/O de Bordas on a raid over Normandy. They made landfall at St. Aubin-Sur-Mer, and followed the Caen-Cherbourg railway, taking care to avoid Bayeux and its defences. Nevertheless, they encountered much light flak along their route, and just before turning east at Ecausseville P/O de Bordas lost sight of Scheidhauer. He circled several times and called out repeatedly on his radio, but was forced to return to Westhampnett before his fuel ran short.

Scheidhauer had been hit and the damage affected his fuel situation, but for some reason he headed west rather than east. He crossed the short stretch of water separating Jersey from Normandy, followed the Island's north coast and then turned in over Rozel Bay and flew up the valley. At Victoria Village he circled and selected a field in which to land, but as he made his approach he realised that the field had a herd of cows in it! He pulled the nose of his aircraft up, hopped the hedgerow at the top of the field, and landed in the adjacent field, coming to rest alongside the dovecote at Dielament Manor.

He was quickly met by local inhabitants from the surrounding farms. His initial reaction was to ask if he was in the Isle of Wight, a point on which he was quickly put right! He tried to obtain fuel with which to destroy his aircraft, but his request was in vain. With the help of bystanders he attempted to destroy the cockpit and its equipment. Souvenir hunters were quick to act, his helmet, the cockpit mirror and pieces of the laminated wood propeller being secreted away.

It took the occupying forces approximately 45 minutes to find Scheidhauer and his aircraft, as the field where he landed is well out of sight of the nearby roads. He was placed in custody. A hand-written note by the Bailiff, Alexander Coutanche, dated 20th November 1942 and held by the Jersey Archives Service, confirms that Scheidhauer was visited by Dr. Shone. Unfortunately, no other official records of the event exist, the occupying forces having destroyed them before the Liberation.

Sometime later he was transferred to Germany, arriving at the infamous *Stalag Luft III* in December, 1942. His bilingual talents were soon picked upon by the camp escape committee, headed by "Big X", Squadron Leader Roger Bushell.

A South African, Bushell was a very successful barrister in civilian life. He joined 601 RAuxAF ("The Millionaires' Squadron") in the early 1930s. With the outbreak of war he was promoted to Squadron Leader and put in charge of the newly formed 92 Sqdn.

On 23rd May 1940, while patrolling near Dunkirk, his squadron was "bounced" by 4 superior force of MEI 10's. Bushell accounted for two enemy aircraft before his Spitfire was mortally hit and he had to get down in a field. Thinking he was within BEF-held territory he waited to be collected, and seeing a motorcycle heading his way he proceeded to flag it down. Unfortunately, his original assumption was wrong and he was taken prisoner by the German rider.

Bushell made several escape attempts. At one point he actually walked into neutral Switzerland and straight out again. At another he hid in Czechoslovakia for several months before finally being recaptured in the bloodthirsty reprisals following the assassination in Prague of Gestapo chief, Reinhard Heydrich.

In *Stalag Luft III* Bushell selected Scheidhauer to form part of the security side of the tunnelling operation. His main task was to keep watch on the German guards and report on their every move. Scheidhauer also spent several hours at the tunnel face - a particularly hazardous task with the constant risk of cave-ins and of being buried alive.

One of the main problems faced by the escape committee was the tunnel soil. The surface soil was grey in colour, but the tunnel soil was a sandy yellow. A Fleet Air Arm prisoner, Lt. Peter ("Hornblower") Fanshaw came up with an ingenious solution. Canvas pouches were hidden within either the trouser legs or greatcoat of the prisoner and filled with dirt. The prisoner then moved around the compound and released the soil by pulling a couple of pegs at the bottom of each pouch, connected to a length of string. Scheidhauer became heavily involved in this disposal operation.

Three tunnels were originally planned under "Operation Escape 200" ("200" because it was intended to get 200 POWs out). The first tunnel, "Tom", was discovered by the Germans in late 1943, with only 40ft. to go before it reached the forest. All efforts were then transferred to the second tunnel, "Harry", as the third tunnel, "Dick", had been closed down and was being used for soil storage.

"Harry" proceeded well and by March, 1944, had reached its objective. It was then closed down to wait for the next moonless night. Bushell had chosen to escape with the famous fighter ace, Wing Commander Bob Stanford-Tuck, but for some unexplained reason several days before the escape was to be made Stanford-Tuck was moved to Belerla, a POW camp about 5 miles away. Bushell decided to go alone, but at the last moment he changed his mind and teamed up with Scheidhauer, who was fluent in several languages including German. They were to be Nos.3 and 4 out of the tunnel, and were among the 70 or so escapees that were deemed most likely to succeed.

The next moonless period approached, and 24th/25th March was selected as the night to escape. The forgery department had been hard at work and the finishing touches were put to the various documents that each escaper was expected to need.

The first hitch occurred when they tried to open the exit to "Harry"; it was stuck solid and took an hour to free. The next hitch became apparent almost immediately - the tunnel was 20ft. too short! It had broken ground in the clearing between the camp and the trees, but not in the forest as anticipated. Bushell elected to go, but the escape

process was slowed down yet again because a signalling mechanism had to be put into practice. The intended 200 escapees was now reduced to a maximum of 100.

Following the initial hiccup, Scheidhauer and Bushell made their way to Sagan and the railway station, taking advantage of an opportune air-raid to make good progress (although the air-raid generally slowed down the escape operation for those still coming through the tunnel when it was plunged into darkness following an electricity blackout). The two men's intentions were relatively unknown to the other escapees, but they caught a train to Breslau where they were seen by another escaper, Raymond Van Wymeersch. Van Wymeersch had been Scheidhauer's closest companion in the POW camp, but at Breslau they studiously ignored each other and went on their respective ways. Van Wymeersch took a circuitous journey before returning to Breslau and buying a ticket direct to Paris. He was captured in Metz on the morning of the 26th March. His *Gestapo* captors took some glee in announcing that they had already captured two other escapees in Saarbrücken earlier that day, and by the description Van Wymeersch guessed that it was Bushell and Scheidhauer.

They had been unlucky; their papers, although forged to a high standard, did not contain a certain mark; this alerted the *Gestapo*, and when Scheidhauer made the mistake of answering a cursory remark in English, the game was up.

The two airmen were imprisoned in the local *Kriminalpolizei* (*Kripo*) prison at Saarbrücken. Several days later, on 28th March, at the Saarbrücken *Gestapo* headquarters, a secretary by the name of Gertrude Schmidt was shocked to see two handcuffed men being herded into a nearby office by *Obersturmbannführer* Dr. Leopold Spann and two other *Gestapo* agents. Spann returned shortly afterwards and placed a piece of paper in front of the fearful secretary; she was well aware of Spann's infamous reputation as a man who did not delegate. He ordered her to type two death certificates in the names on the piece of paper. She asked if the two men were already dead. "Yes", replied Dr. Spann, "one has just died of appendicitis". The names were Bushell and Scheidhauer.

Early the next day, a *Gestapo* driver called Walter Breithaupt collected Spann and an accomplice, *Kriminalsekretär* Emil Schulz, and drove to the *Kripo* prison. Both agents were fully uniformed. They collected Bushell and Scheidhauer and drove towards Mannheim. The sun was just rising when Spann ordered Breithaupt to pull over at a clearing approximately 25 miles along the Mannheim autobahn. The agents got out and walked several yards away from the car to light cigarettes. They smoked and chatted for some time, and then Spann returned to the car and asked Breithaupt to come with him. He told the driver that the prisoners were to be shot, and that he was to say nothing about the incident or he would suffer the same fate. The driver and Spann returned to the car and the two RAF officers were told to get out to relieve themselves. The two agents followed, Spann behind Scheidhauer and Schulz behind Bushell. As they walked Spann warned them that if they tried to escape they would be shot. As the two officers unbuttoned their trousers Spann and Schulz raised their pistols and fired one shot into the back of each man. Scheidhauer slumped forward, face down, but Bushell fell onto his side and proceeded to roll over, moaning. Schulz knelt down alongside him, waited for his temple to come into view, and shot him a second time.

The bodies of the two men were taken to Nene Bremm concentration camp near Saarbrücken, where they were cremated. Some time later two urns containing ashes arrived back at *Stalag Luft III*. They were simply marked "Saarbrücken" with no other identification. Bushell was 33, Scheidhauer 22.

Their deaths did not go unpunished. Dr. Spann was killed in an American air-raid on Linz on 24th March 1945. Emil Schulz was arrested at a French-controlled concentration camp eight miles from Saarbrücken on 10th August 1945. He stood trial, was sentenced to death on 3rd September 1947, and was hanged on 27th February 1948. Walter Breithaupt was arrested on 10th July 1946 in Frankfurt am Main, and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Of the 76 men who escaped through "Harry", 50 were murdered, 23 were recaptured and either returned to *Stalag Luft III* or were interned in concentration camps, and three made it to England.

And so back to the present ...

On 17th September 1999 a memorial to P/O B.W.M. Scheidhauer was established at Rue de Dielament, Trinity. This resulted from seven months of research (still on-going) into the life of this young airman. Initially, I wanted to check the accuracy of a book that I had received called "Fighter Losses of WW2, Vol.2", written by Norman Franks. In his book Franks stated that Scheidhauer had been shot down over France. In an endeavour to verify this I wrote to the *Jersey Evening Post* to ask for help. On 24th February the telephone did not stop ringing, and this continued throughout the following day - the homies' nest had been well and truly stirred. The *JEP* ran an article in early March at about the same time as I came up with the idea of a memorial. The main problem was where to site it - the present

owner of the field where Scheidhauer had come down was accommodating, but the memorial needed to be seen from the road.

With this in mind we approached the Connetable of Trinity, Roy Cabot, to ask his advice. Several sites were mentioned, but one in particular, the old gateway to Dielament Manor, seemed to be the most appropriate. Upon enquiry it transpired that the gateway and adjacent field were owned by a local trust, the monies accrued being used to finance young men wanting to take up the priesthood.

We wrote to the administrators, and subsequently gained permission to use the gateway. It was at about this time that we enlisted the help of the Jersey Branch of the Royal British Legion, and in particular, its Chairman, Gerald Bisson. Gerald had been involved with several memorials and knew the right people to talk to and the right strings to pull. He managed to accomplish in days what would have taken us months - a true human whirlwind.

We still had the problem of how to clear the site, but it was then that whirlwind No.2 came along. We had gone to the site with trimmers in hand to do some clearing, but it still was not right and we stood there wondering what we should do and how to approach it. The two chaps helping us on that Sunday morning announced in unison that we needed "a Des Hinault". As if on cue a distant hooting was heard and into sight came

a yellow three-wheeler driven by Des himself! Under Des's auspices curb stones, plastic sheeting and hoggins were duly laid. Over a six week period we progressed from a run-down gateway to a fully fledged memorial. Des worked like a trojan, even though at times he was literally doubled over by a trapped nerve in his back.

Through my research and several hundred letters, I had been put in touch with the Free French Air Force Association in Paris (FAFL), and through them, I was able to contact Bernard Scheidhauer's family. They were surprised by the interest, but were happy to hear of the proposed memorial. William Magne, one of Scheidhauer's nephews, telephoned to say that he would like to bring his family to Jersey for the unveiling. At this, I asked him if his mother, Christiane, would be prepared to perform the task. I also received a call from the FAFL to say that they wished to bring a delegation, which would include Scheidhauer's Section Leader, General Henri de Bordas, and his companion from *Stalag Luft III*, Colonel Raymond Van Wymeersch.

Following advertisements which I placed in *Flypast*, I made contact with a real character, namely, Flt. Lt. Sydney Dowse. He was the driving force behind the 50th Great Escape Remembrance service at St. Clement Danes in London, and asked if he could attend our ceremony - as if we would refuse!

The week beginning 13th September was one of the most fraught but most enjoyable weeks of our lives. The weekend before was spent putting the final touches to the site, and after the last piece of turf had been laid, and the Cross of Lorraine put in place, we were now awaiting the arrival of the memorial stones, scheduled for the morning of the 15th.

The family and FAFL delegation arrived on time on the Wednesday afternoon, and the next two days were busy; that evening they were guests of the Aero Club, and the following day they were guests of the RAFA at the Air Display. Though in their 70s and 80s these veterans have not lost their enthusiasm for anything aeronautical. On the Thursday evening General Gueguen (President of the FAFL) and Colonel Guy Hays (French Air Attaché) were given a guided tour of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Lancaster, the "City of Lincoln".

On the day of the memorial service things could not have been better; the weather held out and the timing went according to plan. Madame Magne performed the unveiling of the French plaque and cross, and the main stone was unveiled by Jurat the Hon. John Coutanche and General Gueguen. As the last notes of the reveille were drifting away, the flypast of a Spitfire and two Mirage 2000's of the French Air Force came overhead. They performed a 360° turn before passing behind again. The Spitfire then returned to perform a solo slow roll, pulling up into the heavens. To say that there was not a dry eye would be an understatement. It was a fitting tribute to a courageous young man.