

A TUNNEL TOO SHORT, A BRIDGE TOO FAR

Obsessed with *The Great Escape* and *A Bridge Too Far*, **Rishad Saam Mehta** travelled to Poland and the Netherlands to discover the locations of the two classic war movies and found himself fascinated all over again



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



A memorial to the 101st Airborne unit called the 'Screaming Eagles' that liberated Eindhoven in Operation Market Garden. It was the focus of the film *A Bridge Too Far*

the camp. There is also a replica of the tunnel that visitors can crawl through to get a sense of what it must have felt like.

A short drive away, in the woods behind the village, is where Stalag Luft III once stood. The Germans destroyed the camp when they abandoned it in the face of the Russian advance. In the 65 years since, it has been overgrown by the forest but the concrete foundations remain. A cobblestoned path marks the route of the tunnel nicknamed 'Harry' on the ground. I walked around the camp and saw where the 'Cooler' stood. It was here that Steve McQueen was often put in solitary confinement.

The reason the escape failed was because the exit of tunnel 'Harry' that the prisoners had painstakingly dug over a year fell short of the tree line of the woods by a few metres. Today, you can stand there and see how little they fell short by. How agonisingly, heartbreakingly little. This was the reason why only 76 prisoners managed to get out instead of the 250 planned. Of these, 73 were recaptured and 50 were executed by the Gestapo. Three escaped and 23 were sent back to the camp. Close by, there is a memorial to the 50 who were shot dead. Even today, 66 years later, there were fresh flowers on it.

It took many years coming but I had a date with another teenage love recently when I visited the lively and peaceful Dutch towns of Nijmegen and Arnhem, central to the plot of *A Bridge Too Far*. Nijmegen has a large student population, thanks to its university, and both cities have regular festivals. Walking around Arnhem or exploring the environs of Nijmegen on bicycle, you come across many a plaque, memorial and cemetery. Some of them are flamboyant and eye-catching while others are a simple tile-in-the-wall of a country house in the middle of nowhere. They commemorate different units like the American 101 and 82nd Airborne or the British 1st Airborne. Some plaques talk about heroic battles and paratrooper or glider landings. But they all have one thing in common – September 1944 and Operation Market-Garden. This was Field Marshal Montgomery's bold plan to airdrop 35,000 men 60 miles behind enemy lines and capture the bridgeheads over the Rhine, particularly at Nijmegen and Arnhem in Holland. Then, the idea was to turn east into the heart of industrial Nazi Germany, capture the arms and ammunition factories and hence, end the war by Christmas 1944. Op-

HOW TO GET THERE

Poland

The best way to get to Stalag Luft III in Zagan, Poland, is to drive from Prague. Fly to a hub like Brussels, Frankfurt or Zurich and there are convenient connections to Prague. A return ticket from Delhi to Brussels costs approximately ₹ 42,000 (non-stop). A Schengen Visa is valid for entry into Poland.

Visit

Don't miss the Museum of Allied Prisoners of War Martyrdom at Rynek-Ratusz 36, 68-100 Zagan. Watch the short 20 minute film which will put things in perspective when you visit Stalag Luft III, a short walk away. There is also a replica of the Tunnel Harry outside the museum. Tickets cost around €9 a head. The memorial to the 50 escapees who were executed is a short distance away.

For more info:

www.muzeum.eline2.serwery.pl

The Netherlands

The major hub near Nijmegen, Arnhem and Eindhoven is Amsterdam. A Delhi – Amsterdam return ticket costs approximately ₹ 47,000 (non-stop). Another option is to fly to Brussels. There are plenty of connecting flights to Amsterdam.

Info: www.rememberseptember44.com & www.rememberseptember44.com/rs44.htm. Download an audio walk in MP3 format from www.liberationroute.com

eration Market-Garden was a failure because the Allies misjudged the strength of the SS Panzer Units in the area and the air-dropped units couldn't hold the bridges long enough for the arrival of the ground forces. It was Arnhem Bridge that proved to be 'a bridge too far'.

The Arnhem Bridge that Jon Frost (Anthony Hopkins) fought so gallantly to hold on to is called the Jon Frost Bridge today and has traffic jams. Hotel Hartenstien that General Roy Urquhart (Sean Connery) made his temporary headquarters in Oosterbeek near Arnhem houses a museum today and a monument to the 1st British Airborne stands in front of it. A lovely cycle ride from the centre of Nijmegen across the bridge brings you to the Waal Crossing monument where the 504th Regiment of General Gavin's (Ryan O'Neal) 82nd Airborne crossed the river to encircle the Germans and capture Nijmegen Bridge. The battalion was led by Major Julian Cook (Robert Redford).

Museums and tales of battles do lend a sense of adventure to war, but nothing reminds you of the ravaging grief more poignantly than a cemetery. The Oosterbeek cemetery houses the tombs of soldiers, between the ages of 19 and 22, most of whom are unnamed. Heartbreaking but compelling.

[Rishad Saam Mehta is a travel writer and photographer]

A cobblestone path marks the route of tunnel 'Harry', the site of an audacious escape attempt in WWII. 'The Great Escape' is based on this

location of the old prison camp.

The Germans chose Zagan as a location for a POW camp because it was so deep in the heart of enemy territory. The Baltic Sea was far away and if airmen escaped, they would have to travel through hundreds of miles of enemy territory before reaching neutral countries like Switzerland or Sweden. Besides that, the soft sand was not conducive for tunnelling.

This little museum is run by locals and makes for an interesting visit with its display of the ingenious tools the prisoners fashioned, reel footage and a small layout of

This July, I walked the same ground Sean Connery and Steve McQueen had walked on. It was in my teenage years that I fell in love with *The Great Escape* and *A Bridge Too Far*. So much that I read and reread the books by Flt Lt Paul Brickhill (*The Great Escape*) and Cornelius Ryan (*A Bridge Too Far*) that inspired the eponymous movies. So much that I couldn't get Poland and Netherlands, where the events immortalised by these classic Hollywood movies took place, out of my mind. It was that kind of love. A torrid, teenage love.

Anybody who's seen *The Great Escape* will know that it was one of the most audacious escape attempts of the war. Allied airmen dug a 360 foot tunnel in a bid to escape from Stalag Luft III, a prisoner of war camp for Allied airmen in Poland, deep inside Nazi Europe

I was in Mlada Boleslav in the Czech Republic for two days. A quick Net search revealed that Sagan (now called Zagan) was just 187 km away. Country roads, motorways, and narrow village streets took me to Poland and led me from Mlada Boleslav right up to the doorstep of the little museum in Zagan that stands a kilometre from the

THE MOVIES



A Bridge Too Far (1977)

Starring: Sean Connery, Michael Caine, Anthony Hopkins, James Caan, Gene Hackman, Laurence Olivier, and Robert Redford.

Director: Richard Attenborough



The Great Escape (1963)

Starring: Steven McQueen, James Garner, James Coburn and Richard Attenborough

Director: John Sturges

Both movies are now available on DVD



The Nijmegen Bridge that the American 82nd Airborne unit captured intact in World War II. This was an important outpost in Operation Market-Garden and the film based on it, *A Bridge Too Far*. Dutch resistance workers had cut the lines to the explosives the Germans had set under the bridge.