

Real great escape

A copy out of the Daily Mail on Wed Jan 26th 2011 By Sarah Bruce
War hero: Sir Chandos Blair KCVO OBE MC & Bar, right, was captured in France after the Seaforth Highlanders epic stand-off with the Germans.

He died at the age of 91, the first officer to make it home from a Nazi PoW camp



It was the first great escape by a British officer in the Second World War.

In an audacious bid for freedom, Lieutenant-General Sir Chandos Blair slipped past the guards at a German POW camp and, using a homemade compass, set off for neutral Switzerland.

During the gruelling seventy five mile journey, he was hunted by Nazis, plagued by mosquitoes and forced to live on meagre rations – but he made it home and lived to fight another day.

Now, however, the man who later became the senior Army commander in Scotland has died at the age of ninety one.

History will remember the father of two for his determination to break out of the hell of the camps, via Switzerland and Spain.

In June 1940, Sir Chandos was a young Second Lieutenant in the 2nd Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, fighting in France.

Most of the British Expeditionary Force had been evacuated from Dunkirk and he was one of the thousands involved in fierce fighting at St Valery-en-Caux, Normandy. Eventually surrounded by the Germans and out of ammunition and supplies, the 51st Highland Division surrendered to Rommel's 7th Panzer Division on June 12th. The division's Commander, Major-General Victor Fortune, was one of the most senior officers taken prisoner during the war – and an estimated 10,000 men were captured with him.

Sir Chandos later spoke of the sense of shock and disgrace he felt at being forced to surrender. For fourteen gruelling days, sleeping outdoors and with virtually no food and water, Sir Chandos and his fellow Highlanders were marched to Hulst in Holland. From there, he was put on a boat to Germany and then endured 60-hour rail journey in a packed cattle truck to Oflag VB in Biberach. His written report on returning to safety tells how he paid incredible attention to detail as he attached his escape plan. Armed only with his painstakingly assembled "escape kit" which included a pocket knife a homemade compass, matches, chocolate and a tin of Horlicks tablets, he made it "outside the wire" with the help of a fellow prisoner.

Years later, Sir Chandos recalled the feeling of slipping out from the camp: "for the first mile or so my feet never touched the ground." The escapee hid in the woods and was plagued by mosquitoes during his marathon seventy five mile trek to neutral Switzerland. He later recalled "thoroughly enjoyed being a hunted wild animal with the barking roe and foxes, grunting badgers, squealing wild boars, screeching owls, skirling buzzards, as well as the friendly little birds and animals part of my life to for a week." On the eighth day he crossed the frontier without knowing that he had done so. Attempting at night to find out which small town he was in, he was arrested by a guard stirred from his sleep – but luckily, the guard was Swiss.

After being given a passport and money, Sir Chandos travelled to Madrid and then on to Gibraltar, before arriving home in the U K in a Sunderland flying boat.

For his feat he was awarded the Military Cross. He was later promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General and became the senior Army commander in Scotland. During the post-war years he spent some time on secondment with the Kings African Rifles in East Africa. In 1975 he played a key role in negotiations in Uganda to save the British teacher Dennis Hills, who had been sentenced to death by President Idi Amin for treason. The following year, Mr Hills' death sentence was overturned.

Sir Chandos Blair KCVO OBE MC & Bar, died at his home in Gullane, East Lothian. The grandfather was predeceased by his wife Audrey, with whom he had a son and daughter.