

# “GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR STEAL RAF PLANE IN WW2”

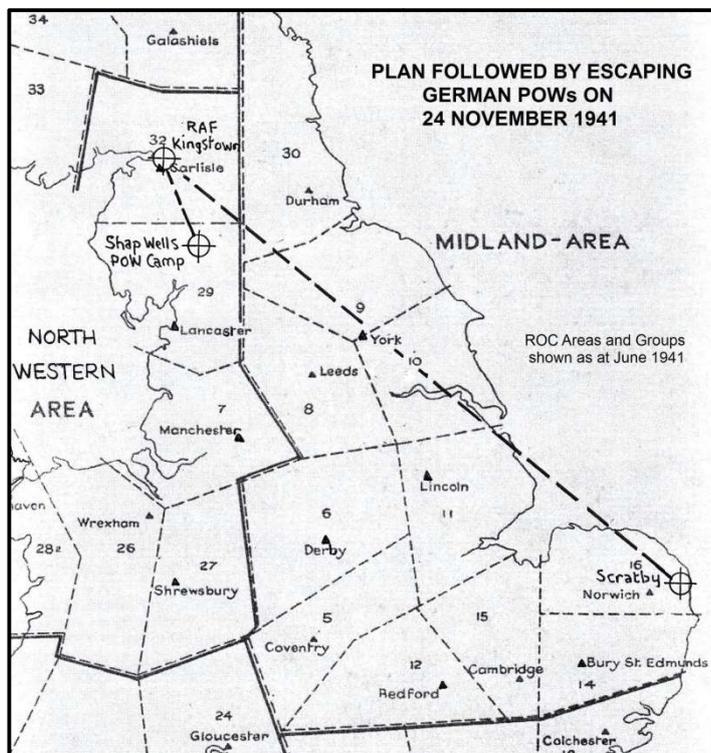
(Heinz Schnabel and Harry Wappler escape attempt)

By Lawrence Holmes

Heinz Schnabel and Harry Wappler were two WW2 German prisoners of war who escaped from a British prison camp and attempted to fly to the continent in a stolen aircraft on 24 November 1941.

## 1. Overview

*Leutnant* Schnabel and *Oberleutnant* Wappler were German Luftwaffe airmen who had been shot down during the Battle of Britain. Schnabel's aircraft was damaged by British fighters. He crash landed in Kent on 5 September 1940. Wappler's bomber had hit a barrage balloon over Newport one week later and crashed. The two were taken as prisoners of war (POWs) to Shap Wells, Cumbria, where they were held for a year. On 23 November 1941, the aviators, equipped with fake Dutch uniforms and forged identity documents, escaped from the prison camp and made their way to the British air base at RAF Kingstown (RAF Carlisle, Cumbria). The next day they stole a trainer aircraft (Miles Magister), with the intention of flying to the German occupied Netherlands. However, this flight would have stretched their machine's fuel range to its maximum, and unknown to the German escapees, the plane's fuel tanks were only half full. The pair decided to land in eastern England when they realised that they would run out of fuel over the North Sea if they continued. They were caught on the ground, and returned to prisoner of war camps.



## 2. Heinz Schnabel

Heinz Schnabel was a member of the 1st Squadron (*Staffel*) of Jagdgeschwader 3 and was an ace with six enemy aircraft confirmed destroyed at the time. He had taken off on the morning on 5 September at 0840hrs to escort Dornier 17 bombers for a raid on Croydon. His Messerschmitt Bf 109 was intercepted by RAF Spitfire and Hurricane fighters on the return to France and its engine was disabled. Schnabel crash-landed in a field at Handen Farm near Aldington, Kent, shortly after 1000hrs in the morning. After capture, Schnabel was sent to hospital due to injuries to his spine and a pre-existing chest wound he had sustained during the Battle of France. After he recuperated he was sent to the No. 1 POW Camp (Officers) Grizedale Hall and then later to the POW camp from which his escape attempt was to be made at Shap Wells in Cumbria.



## 3. Harry Wappler

Oberleutnant Harry Wappler was the pilot of a four man Heinkel He111P2 bomber of Kampfgeschwader 27 (8 *Staffel* (squadron)) which had left an airfield in northern France on the evening of 12 September 1940 on a bombing sortie to Ellesmere Port in Cheshire, England. After they had bombed their intended target they headed for home. Their return route took the aircraft over Newport in South Wales, a secondary target.

Wappler's aircraft still had two bombs aboard and to ensure accuracy he flew low to avoid cloud cover and the bomber flew into cables strung from barrage balloons of No 966 Balloon Squadron AAF in the early morning of 13 September. Close to Tredegar Park and at approximately 6,500 ft, the bomber hit the first cable of several mobile Fordson barrage balloon winches scattered around the park. The bomber's starboard wing sliced into the cable and stalled the aircraft. The severely damaged aircraft flew on with its left engine on fire and ran into a second cable. Wappler was thrown out of the doomed bomber which crashed at 0315hrs onto a house in Stow Park Avenue, Newport, killing the remaining three crew members as well as two occupants in the house.



Wappler's aircraft was the first confirmed loss in Britain of an aircraft to a barrage balloon during the Second World War. After interrogation, Wappler was sent to the Shap Wells hotel, requisitioned for use as POW camp No 13, located between Kendal and Penrith in Cumbria.

#### **4. Shap Wells Prison Camp**

The Shap Wells Hotel was opened in 1833, and was known for its water and as having the 'finest air of Britain'. It was requisitioned in 1939 during WW2 to serve as a prisoner-of-war camp for officers, non-commissioned officers and petty officers, most of them from the German Navy or the Luftwaffe. Known then as 'Camp 13', the hotel was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, and was equipped with searchlights. The guards lived in Nissen huts. At the time when Schnabel and Wappler arrived, the camp held approximately 250 POWs.



Shap Wells Hotel POW Camp.

#### **5. Escape Attempt**

Prior to their escape, the German pilots had secretly put together Dutch pilots' uniforms by altering Luftwaffe uniforms.

They managed to create plaster of Paris tunic buttons covered in foil to resemble those of the Dutch air force. They also created within the camp false Dutch identification documents. Schnabel carried papers in the name of Pilot Officer George Harry David and Wappler as Flight Lieutenant Harry Graven.

On Sunday 23 November 1941, Schnabel and Wappler hid within a log pile that camp prisoners had constructed. It was to serve as fuel for the camp during the coming winter but a space had been left inside so that the two Germans could hide there. After dark they carefully made their way to the camp fence which they managed to prise apart using wooden tools made for the occasion. They headed towards the nearby railway line where they climbed aboard a Carlisle-bound freight train which had been slowed by ascending the steep Shap Bank.

The pair left the train after it pulled into a yard and then the two escapees spent a few hours in a Carlisle cinema. After the end of the film, they mingled with the rest of the audience which included airmen from the local airfield at RAF Kingstown (later to become RAF Carlisle No 15 Elementary Flying Training School).

This station was 3 miles north west of Carlisle city centre just west of the modern M6 motorway. After entering the camp using their false papers they spent the night hidden behind a hangar. On the morning of Monday 24 November 1941, the Germans bluffed an airfield mechanic to start up a Miles Magister trainer aircraft. The escapees initially thought of heading towards neutral Ireland but the weather over the Irish Sea looked poor for an open cockpit aircraft and instead the Germans headed south east, with hopes of reaching the German-occupied Netherlands.

The trainer had only a half tank of fuel when the pair took off. When they flew out over the coast they realised they would have to land and refuel. They could not risk ditching in the North Sea as they had no survival gear. They landed the trainer in a meadow near Scratby, five miles north of Great Yarmouth in Norfolk at around 1500hrs.



Miles Magister basic trainer 1940.

They again showed their false Dutch papers to a local policeman, Sergeant Clifford Fisk. Wappler asked if they could call the local airfield and request fuel be sent to them, so Fisk took Wappler to Caister Police Station. Another policeman remained with the other 'Dutchman' and the aircraft.

Due to the late hour, a car was sent to pick up the airmen and transport them to the RAF Bomber Command base at RAF Horsham St Faith (now Norwich International Airport). Initially, both men continued to convince everyone they were Dutch airmen and were put in unoccupied Officers' quarters. However, news of their escape in the Miles Magister had been broadcast across the country, and both were arrested in their quarters, allegedly one was having a bath at the time.

For their escape attempt, both pilots were sentenced to 28 days of solitary confinement. They were later transferred to a POW camp in Canada where they spent the remainder of their internment.

## 6. The Escape and the Royal Observer Corps

The escape was duly reported in the South London Observer dated Friday 23 January 1942. No locations were mentioned at that time but in the general warning that was sent to all RAF Stations it was stated that the Magister was tracked by the Royal Observer Corps.

The POW Camp at Shap Wells was in 29 Group Lancaster area and observer posts may have been asked to keep a look out for 'escaping POWs'. RAF Kingstown is in 32 Group Carlisle and local posts would undoubtedly have plotted the many training aircraft using RAF Kingstown. J2 Rockcliffe Post, later to become Kingstown then, 33 Post Carlisle, was located very near RAF Kingstown and one wonders if they in particular plotted the Magister? Another unit was 37 post Brampton some 8 miles to the east?

Another point of interest is the ROC Club. By 1940/41 branches of the club had been set up at Carlisle (No 82), Solway (No 59), and Brampton (No 89). In 1942 the Carlisle branch alone had 122 members including some from the ROC Centre in Carlisle. The ROC Club taught aircraft recognition and held proficiency tests so the local observers would be able to recognise most aircraft types. Ironically in August 1942, the Carlisle Branch, President Col F R W Graham, showed a film called 'Know Your Enemy'.

It is not known if any ROC Group was asked to keep a lookout for the Miles Magister but the aircraft, being open cockpit, would have probably flown at quite a low height and would have been easily spotted and plotted by eagle eyed members of the ROC. The south easterly route of the Magister took it over 32 Group then into York Groups 9 and 10. The whole flight would have taken about 2.5 hours. It is very possible that the aircraft was plotted from Group to Group since the hand over of tracks was very efficient by that stage in the war.

The Magister probably passed over the sea in the latter part of the flight then made land fall again in 16 Group Norwich. When the pilots saw the vast expanse of the North Sea ahead of them they decided to land in a meadow at Scratby, adjoining Caister on Sea, north west of Great Yarmouth. (Caister was the scene of a tip and run raid by 18 FW190s on 11 May 1943 when 26 people were killed. In this instance the whole raid was plotted and reported by the local ROC posts). Again the two Germans tried to bluff their way but were taken RAF Horsham St Faith where they were arrested. Their bid for freedom was over.

There is no record or any details to be found about this flight in the books 'Forewarned is Forearmed' or 'Attack Warning Red'. Good history books have been written for the York, Lincoln and Norwich ROC Groups and these historic sources have yet to be searched. Another ROC connection is RAF Horsham St Faith where the pair were finally arrested. The ROC camp was held at RAF Horsham St Faith in 1962. Lawrence Holmes attended this camp without ever knowing of the German escape !

This flight is interesting, almost exciting and thanks go to Jim Mackie for his original news archive research which made further aviation research possible.

*(Details taken from accounts on Wikipedia and other web sites and from the books 'Attack Warning Red' and 'Forewarned is Forearmed').*

Appendix 1 – Original Newspaper article

#### **“PRISONERS OF WAR WHO STOLE RAF PLANE”**

*Ald. Ammon's question in the House of Commons*

In the House of Commons on Tuesday, Ald. C. G. Ammon, M.P. for N. Camberwell, asked the Secretary for Air whether he was now in a position to say how it was possible for two German airmen, who escaped from a North of England prison camp. to obtain possession of an R.A.F. aeroplane as a means of escape from this country.

Capt. Balfour, in a written reply. stated the incident occurred on 24th November last. An R.A.F. court of inquiry was ordered the next day.

The report of the proceedings reached the Air Ministry on 26th December, and revealed these facts: The two prisoners of war gained access to an aerodrome operated on behalf of the R.A.F. by a civilian concern, where Allied personnel were under training.

The court could not establish exactly how and where entry was effected, but the two men succeeded in evading the R.A.F. guard and the defence patrol on duty at the time. They then got into a training aircraft and were allowed to take off under the eyes of a civilian mechanic, who mistook them for Allied personnel. His suspicions were aroused when he realised that neither was carrying a parachute, but by this time the aircraft had already taxied away and was taking off. He reported at once to the station commander.

A general warning was thereupon issued to all R.A.F. stations, and the aircraft was tracked by the Royal Observer Corps. When. later it landed. through lack of fuel. the prisoners were apprehended.

The court of inquiry found that, while there was no evidence of individual negligence, the patrol system for guarding the aerodrome was inadequate, and the procedure for authorising flights was not satisfactory. Measures had been taken to prevent recurrence of a similar incident at this or any other civil operated aerodrome. A suggestion that the fugitives were given flying suits was unfounded.

*(Extract from the South London Observer dated 23rd January 1942. Part of the research being carried out by Jim Mackie on the National newspaper Database Archive).*