

John McCallum, war veteran

Born June 20 1917, died October 15, 2011

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John McCallum, who has died aged 94, was a Glasgow-born war hero who organised one of the most daring escapes of the Second World War. His extraordinary story remained untold for decades, but was finally published in 2005 in his book *The Long Way Home* (Birlinn). In his foreword, George Robertson, former Secretary of State for Defence and NATO chief, said "I could not stop turning the pages".

Born in Milton, John McCallum was one of five children of Malcolm McCallum and Annie McDonald Bruce. He attended St George's Road, Maryhill and left school at the age of 14 to join the Post Office.

He was 19 when he followed family tradition by signing up as a reservist in the Signal Corps. Before the outbreak of World War II he was stationed in France, and when the conflict began he was given the task of setting up vital communication lines.

In 1940 he was manning a road block at La Capelle, near Boulogne. He had become a good shot while serving in the Territorial Army and had volunteered to work the Bren gun. After shooting at a monoplane and a tank, the tank's machine gun returned fire that shattered his left ankle – an injury that left him with a lifelong limp.

Captured by German soldiers, he was taken first to a German field hospital, then to the German-controlled British 21st Field Hospital in Camiers. Thanks to the skilful surgery he received there, he regained the ability to walk and later was passed as A1 fit by an army medical.

Release from hospital led to an appalling train journey of 3 days and 3 nights in a closed freight wagon to the notorious camp Stalag VIII B in Lamsdorf, Upper Silesia where he remained as a prisoner of war for nearly four years.

There he was reunited with his older brother Jimmy and friend Joe Harkin who had believed the official verdict of "missing, believed killed in action". The three Glasgow engineers moved around on various work parties outside the camp, for example hard labour on railway construction near the Polish border.

After some very hard work parties, the three privates realised that what they really needed was rank, so they organised their relatives to send them postcards using invented ranks – thus becoming a sergeant and two corporals. Being accepted as NCOs conferred privileges, and in 1942 they successfully applied to return to Stalag VIII B.

They then volunteered for a working party in Bad Karlsbrunn, a mountain spa village in the Sudetenland. It was while on day release from this camp that John McCallum had an intense romance with a local girl, Edeltraud, in a classic case of love at first sight.

The relationship helped him to learn some German phrases and much more besides. He took to breaking out of camp after lights out through a tunnel to court her, returning the same way before roll call in the morning to escape detection. After two years, this relatively happier interlude in the mountains ended in 1944 when the regime abruptly tightened up and all prisoners were returned to Lamsdorf.

Now set upon escape, John accepted Edeltraud's help with their plans. She even took the enormous risk of hiding him in her hotel room while he forged the travel documents. Her role was crucial, but both of them knew that their goodbye would be final.

Because local villages had a night-time curfew, the three POWs had decided that their only hope of escape was to travel in daylight hours, and to use the railway from Wurbenthal via Zagan to try to cover the 400 km to the port of Stettin. In March 1944, they cut through a barbed wire perimeter fence and ran for their lives.

Their journey took them through Zagan station – by bizarre coincidence on the very day of the famous 'Great Escape' after which 50 airmen were shot dead and 23 recaptured. Despite the number of Gestapo on the station they held their nerve and stuck to their plans. John then had the terrifying task of using his recently-learned German to buy train tickets.

The rest of their train journey involved many other narrow escapes and they relied on finding French resistance workers for safe overnights *en route*. After a hair-raising embarkation at Stettin, they stowed away in the coal hole of a Swedish ship. Eventually they made it all the way home to RAF Leuchars via Malmö and Stockholm.

After the war, Mr McCallum retrained and served as an Intelligence officer in Hamburg, reaching the rank of major. He had been unable to contact Edeltraud, his first love, for fear of endangering her life. Then he heard that she had met and married a Czech officer.

Later, during a posting to Lübeck he met and courted another German woman called Franziska, and in 1949 they were married. After 1950 he returned to work for the Post Office and lived in various places in the West of Scotland. He took early retirement and he and Franziska returned to Germany and lived there for two years.

On return to Scotland in 1973, he worked as a security officer and then retired fully when they moved to Lochearnhead in 1984. In 2001 they moved into sheltered housing first in Blairgowrie, then in Comrie, where his wife Franziska died in 2006 and where he stayed on afterwards.

John McCallum was awarded the Military Medal for bravery on the field and the Imperial Service Medal for long service in a civilian profession

He is survived by two sons, John and Kenneth, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild.