

Captain Richard  
Phillip Carr  
MBE, MC



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



In the 1963 film, *The Great Escape*, Steve McQueen plays Captain Virgil Hilts, who is repeatedly returned to solitary confinement after numerous attempted breakouts as a POW. In real life, Captain Richard Carr was equally vigorous in his escape bids, making no fewer than four determined attempts to gain his freedom and re-join the war effort. Indeed, Carr has been likened to the charismatic character of 'the Cooler King' played by McQueen.

I feel hugely privileged to be the custodian of this wonderful man's medals, letters and other memorabilia. For Carr was a soldier who displayed 'cold', or premeditated, courage time and time again. Moreover, Carr was modest about his escape attempts, describing them as "four real breaks and a few minor ones".

Born in 1920, Richard Phillip Carr was the son of a businessman who ran a large biscuit-making company. Little is known about his younger years but by 1940 he was serving with the Royal Artillery in France, where he proved to be a regular and quite splendid letter-writer.

If ever there was a man relatively unfazed by the horrors of war, it was the cool, calm and collected Carr, as his informative letter to his father, dated May 22, 1940, testifies: "I am dreadfully sorry that I have not written before, but we have been terrifically busy. It's extraordinary how used you become to being shot at, bombed, machine gunned and shelled at by those bloody Germans, but the more they do it, the less it worries. I can't describe the things I've seen, because it's all so absolutely amazing, but I am well and feeling in cracking form and I must say we laugh a lot.

"For instance, the other day, 42 German aircraft attacked the building I was in, making the most frightful din but not hurting anyone! Where I am now is like a city of the dead, not a soul about; you just go into any house you want to and take what you want; stray dogs are wandering about; everything half in ruins; it's all so grotesque. But it's such a rest from the last few days that it feels marvellous.

"A Spitfire is, at this moment, in the process of bringing down one of those bloody Germans. Ah, yes! I can see the smoke going up where he crashed – just one more out of his many hundreds. Don't worry about this war, since I am sure that, at the moment, it's not as bad as that of 1914. I felt sorry for the German tanks that come under my gunfire, since it will put them straight out! The weather is superb, and I am sitting out in the open at 4am writing this. The war has certainly made me see the dawn!

"It would be terrific if you could send me some bourbon and chocolate biscuits as

soon as possible, since one never seems to have enough food on these occasions. I simply must stop now, since I must go on my rounds and see what's going on this morning."

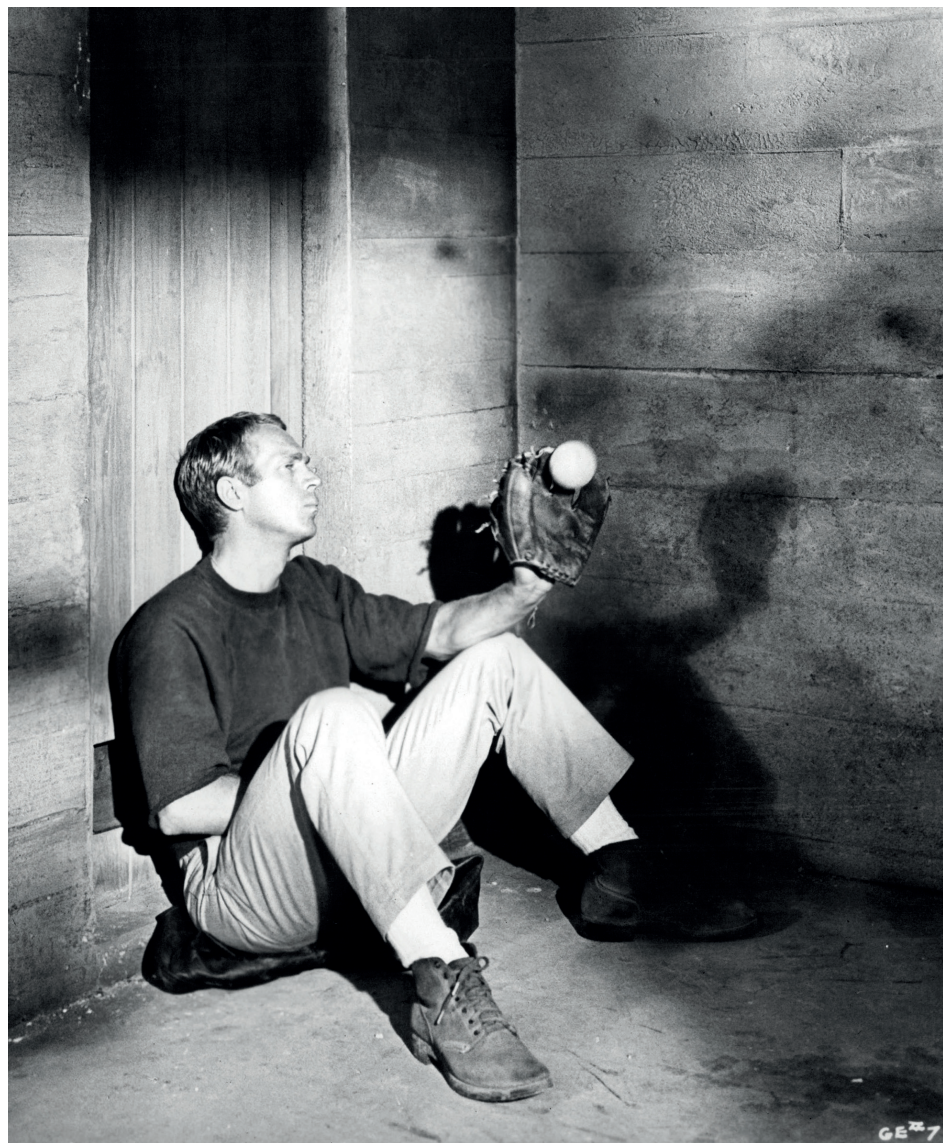
### Coolness and contempt

Incredibly, just six days after writing this boyish and enthusiastic letter, Carr, still only 20, and a second lieutenant, was involved in the action for which he would receive the Military Cross. It was for his outstanding bravery during the retreat to Dunkirk that he was awarded this decoration, announced on August 27, 1940. The recommendation stated: "Second Lieutenant Carr was left in command of his battery on [May 28], 1940, when his battery commander and battery captain became casualties, and he showed great qualities of leadership

and initiative during that day and during the subsequent withdrawal from Ypres Comines Canal. Carr has displayed great powers of leadership and by his coolness under fire and contempt of danger has set a high example to all ranks."

Following a period at the 42nd General Hospital, as the result of an apparent small wound or illness, Carr volunteered for the Commandos. He joined 11 Commando on August 28, 1940, serving with No.1 Troop. After Carr was sent to the Middle East, it is believed he took part in the famous Litani River Raid of June 9-10, 1941. It was during this raid that his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Pedder, was killed. In a letter to a friend – dated July 3, 1941 and giving his address as 'C' Battalion, Layforce, Middle East Forces – Carr says Pedder is "a great loss to us, life is very different without him."

*"Carr has been likened to the charismatic character of 'the Cooler King' played by Steve McQueen"*



ABOVE THE ACTIONS OF THE FICTIONAL 'THE COOLER KING' BARE RESEMBLANCE TO THE EXPLOITS TO RICHARD CARR MOVIEPIX/GETTY



## HERO OF THE MONTH

He wrote: "I have travelled thousands of miles by air, sea, land," but added "I am beginning to dislike the Middle East intensely."

Carr appears to have served in Layforce, the Commando formation led by Colonel (later Major-General) Robert Laycock, during September 1941 and then transferred to the Long Range Desert Group, where he was appointed as adjutant. In January 1942, Rommel's Afrika Korps made a surprise attack, gaining ground quickly, resulting in a rapid withdrawal of the British forces. Carr was given command of a seven-vehicle patrol ordered to Msus, Libya, to collect valuable stores and to carry out reconnaissance. However, the German advance was so swift that it had captured Msus and Carr's patrol drove straight into them.

Captured, Carr was taken to Italy, and he wasted no time in trying to escape, making his four determined, but eventually unsuccessful, breakouts in just over two years. In a letter home, dated January 17, 1944, he indicated how hard it was for him as he tried to keep up his spirits: "I must say that letters from me have, after two years, become rather pointless, except to tell you that I am safe and well. After a few days in hospital with a touch of 'flu, I am both 'safe and well'!

"...There are a few lines left and I find it very hard to know what to say. My



ABOVE THROUGH THE WIRE: A COVERTLY TAKEN PHOTOGRAPH OF THE POW COMPOUND AT STALAG VII-A, SHOWING CAPTURED BRITISH SOLDIERS BREWING TEA IN THE YARD OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

experiences would fill a book, so many worlds have crashed about my head during the last six months that sometimes I lose faith and hope in everything; but of course, that is ridiculous."

### Considerate son

Even as a POW, he remained a regular letter-writer and a considerate son. On November 1, 1944, he wrote to his father: "Many congratulations on completing 40 years in the business. How I wish I had lunched with you on that day. We'll

have just as good a celebration on my return, won't we?"

In the same letter, Carr tried to be optimistic about his life after the war ends: "But here's to the future; the past is dead. I've all my life ahead. A wonderful job, independence, security; surely, with those ingredients, I can make happiness? It is that thought which makes the next few days, weeks, months, whichever it may be, bearable, because, viewed dispassionately, what are a few weeks out of a lifetime?"

FOUND TO THE NORTH OF GENOA, THE FORTE DI GAVI OR CAMPO 5 (KNOWN VARIOUSLY AS 'CAMP HELL' AND AS THE 'PUNISHMENT FORTRESS') BECAME A COLDITZ-LIKE PENITENTIARY FOR NOTORIOUS POW ESCAPERS  
DAVIDE PAPALINI







ABOVE CAPTAIN RICHARD CARR'S MBE AND MC MEDAL GROUP COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

*“Carr and another officer had prepared a small hideout and were sealed in before the camp was due to move. After a hunt lasting all day and most of the night, during which the guards threw grenades indiscriminately, Carr and his companion were dragged out and beaten up”*

Carr was eventually freed as the Germans retreated in the face of the Allied onslaught in April 1945.

His MBE (Military Division) was announced on January 1, 1946, when his citation stated: “Captain Carr was captured at Msus on 26 January 1942. At Camp 35 Padula on 13 September, he and 13 others escaped through a tunnel, which had taken them 1½ months to construct. Outside the camp, the party split up and Captain Carr, with one other, started out in the direction of Switzerland. They were recaptured by Carabinieri seven days later, when forced to seek shelter at a farmhouse in the hills near Titopotenza. As a result of his escape, Carr was sent to Camp 5 Gavi and did one month's cells as punishment. His second attempt was made after the Germans took over Camp 5.

“In September 1943, he and another officer had prepared a small hideout beneath the stairs and were sealed in an hour before the camp was due to move. About 58 others had also hidden themselves and at the last moment their absence was noticed. After a hunt lasting all day and most of the night, during which the German guards threw grenades indiscriminately, Captain Carr and his companion were dragged out of their cramped and airless quarters at

3am and beaten up before being taken to Mantua and thence with others by train to Stalag VII-A Moosburg.”

### Interview with the Gestapo

Carr's next escape was even bolder than his Italian sit-in. The citation continues: “On [October 5], 1943, Captain Carr and an American officer walked out of the camp dressed as French workers and walked to Munich, where they parted and Captain Carr, with the assistance of French workers, boarded a goods train bound for Strasbourg. He had been given the address of a helper at Vendhelm but was unable to get in touch with him and while trying to find him in one of the barges on the canal at Detweilie, he was arrested by a German policeman.”

Taken to Oflag V-A, Carr was involved in the digging of a tunnel, but before it could be used, Carr, together with 119 other officers, were moved to Stalag VIII-F by train. Again, his citation logged yet another bid for freedom: “On the second day of the journey [January 6, 1944] while the train was going fairly fast, Captain Carr and another officer escaped through the netted window of their truck and jumped from the train. Carr broke a finger and was completely winded, but his companion's face was so badly cut that he had to give himself up at Neurode next day. Captain Carr, who

was wearing his battledress, was arrested at Oppeln and after an unpleasant interview with a Gestapo agent in Neurode and time in the cells at Görlitz, he was returned to Stalag VIII-F, given five days hospital treatment and a week in the cells.”

Carr's final escape attempt was among the simplest, but arguably his most audacious yet – though he was perhaps the victim of hubris: “In May 1944, all the prisoners were loaded onto trucks, handcuffed together and taken to Stalag 79 at Brunswick. Almost immediately, Captain Carr walked out of the camp through a partially finished sewer but was then caught when he returned to fetch his kit. He remained in this camp until his eventual liberation in April 1945.”

Carr left the army at the end of the war and went on to join the family business – Carr's Biscuits. He also became a keen sailor and a member of the Royal Yacht Club. He died, aged 58, on December 24, 1977, following a brief illness.

An unidentified friend wrote a short obituary that was published in at least one national newspaper early in 1978. It began: “The death of Mr Richard Carr, MBE, MC, on Christmas Eve at the age of 58, came as a great shock to his friends. He faced his short illness with the same courage that he faced life, and those who took part with him in his many escapes as a prisoner of war marvelled at his physical courage in the face of danger.”

### SPECIAL OPS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Special Ops Heroes*, was first published in 2014 and is available

in hardback and paperback. For more information, visit [www.specialopsheroes.com](http://www.specialopsheroes.com).

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information, visit [www.iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes). Details about his VC collection may be found at [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com). Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft

