

# ESCAPE GLIDER

ONE of the most unusual stories of the war came to light recently in the British magazine, *Air Review* providing a thrilling reading of an attempt at escape by several British prisoners of war from the Colditz Castle camp via a glider designed and built under the very noses of German guards. The fortunes of war prevented Flt.-Lt. L. J. E. Finch, author of the story and leader of the project, and his friends reaching their objective; nevertheless the glider was actually built. The ingenuity of these men in carrying out the construction program and the daring with which it has been accomplished makes this one of the best stories of the war.

Permission to reproduce this story has been granted by Mr. A. H. Lukins, editor of *Air Review*.

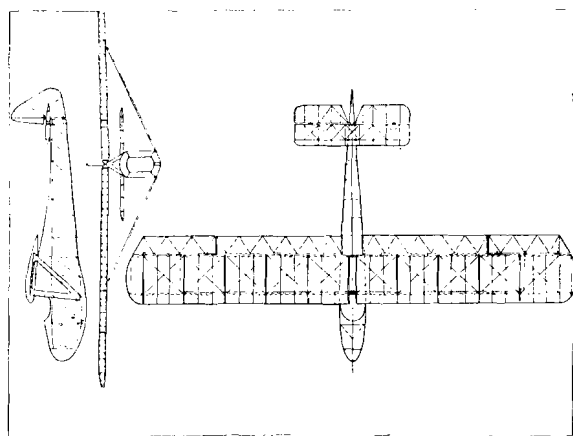
Alexis Dawydoff.

Christmas Day, 1943. Germany. Colditz Castle, scene of the internment of Allied P.O.W., mostly old lads of Dunkirk days. R.N., Army, R.A.F. and the Merchant Marine all were represented, and hands from all services were engaged on this scheme. Some had gone under the wire, through it, and some clambered over—why not glide easily off those encircling walls, wire and watching Goons (German guards)? For that object *Heavy Industries* was organized and this glider, to be known as the *Colditz Cock*, created.

The "firm" went into production on the first of January, 1944, being composed of the four sponsors, twelve assistant skilled workers and a gang of, eventually, forty stooges whose vital job was maintaining "security"—warning of the approach of Goons in time to conceal all signs of activity. The system operated for ten months at fours a day, the machine being completed without the knowledge of the Germans—though they missed a lot of floorboards.

We decided to construct a two seater, for if it were possible to complete at all then the limit to capacity was placed by wing area that could be concealed, allied to a reasonable minimum flying speed—and the more away the merrier. Launching was to be made from the castle roof, where was available a semi-concealed 60 foot run along the ridge facing into the prevailing wind. Operation was planned by moonlight. Landing was to be made in the river Mulde flowing 200 feet below the take-off point. Runway was to be of tables with legs a-straddle the ridge, a four wheel dolly on which rested the glider, with a rope passing from an automatic release hook on the dolly over a pulley at the end of the runway to a stone ballast weighing some two-tons falling vertically down the end of the castle to give an acceleration of 30 mph. A model of the assembly worked well on test and was, in fact, watched by two Goon snoops who failed to appreciate the situation.

The machine was built in a concealed workshop in the attic, 7 feet wide, 20 feet long and 16 feet to the ridge. Light was achieved at one end by removing roof tiles. The entrance was through a trap door in the floor. Materials lay all around—the castle structure yielded floorboard (some said they were spruce) modu-



lus of rupture of specimen was 9,000 lbs./sq. in., maximum length 16 feet 6 inches, which fixed the wing span and provided spars and longerons; cupboard doors were sawn down (the saw being a converted phonograph spring) for ribs; bedboards and shelves gave struts, rib-bracing and wing diagonal bracing. Plywood for nose ribs and covering was obtained from locker door panelings. Glue, casein and animal, came from the Goons in exchange for cigarettes. Covering cloth was of Goon bedsheets doped with the milk ration boiled and applied hot. Barbed wire and flexible field telephone cable used in the castle lighting system made up the *Colditz Cock's* control cables. Metal fittings, bolts, etc., came from cupboards and beds (field officers had metal beds). Samples of all materials were tested before use, though not infrequently the testing apparatus broke down first.

On completion of the machine the decision was taken not to use it for escaping because:

- (a) In October, 1944, the war seemed very nearly over.
- (b) The attitude of the Gestapo to escaped P.O.W. was distinctly unfriendly.

Not until April, 1945, the day American tanks of the First Army appeared over the horizon, was the glider unfolded from hiding and assembled for the first time, and in the attic it remains—unfortunately untested.

## Specifications

Wings—Clark YH. Rectangular with rounded tips, of two spar construction, strut braced. Ribs spaced 12 inches apart with intermediate nose ribs of three-ply, braced top and bottom with diagonal tensile wood strips. Because of space and length of timber available the wing aft of the rear spar was built up separately (for possible use of flap) with triangle rib structure as for the ailerons.

Fuselage—Jig built on floor as two side panels N girder braced, then strutted apart in plan and wing cabane built on—all rigging being done by eye. The front spar bulkhead was made open to allow the passenger to enter via the pilot's cockpit and take position under the wing facing aft.

Tail Unit—Cantilever horizontal tail surfaces fixed to the fuselage by four bolts. Vertical tail had no stabilizer.

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