

LESLIE "BILL" JAMES EDWARD GOLDFINCH (26-32)

He was born on 12 July 1916 at Whitstable in Kent. Shortly after leaving the College he became a 2nd Lt in the Royal Engineers (TA) from 1935 to 1939.

After enlisting in the RAF he began training at Martlesham Heath, Suffolk, before being sent to Rhodesia and then completing his operational training in Alexandria, Egypt. He was then posted to 228 Squadron, flying Sunderlands and took part in two epic sorties during the evacuation of Greece.



On 25 April 1941 he was one of 10 crew involved in rescuing 52 RAF men and flying them to Kalamata in Greece. There they picked up a further 20 men. The grossly overloaded Sunderland failed to get airborne on its first attempt, but after a five-mile run on its second attempt, it staggered into the air and headed for Suda Bay, Crete. He and his crew were immediately ordered to return to Kalamata. As the aircraft attempted to land in the dark it hit an object in the water and sank. He was one of only four survivors from the crew and badly injured, he was taken to a military hospital. It was here that he first met Jack Best (more on him later), who had also crashed off southern Greece.

Some days later the hospital fell into German hands and they were first sent to Stalag Luft I near the Swiss border. Here he started to dream of building a bi-plane glider which, with the aid of a rope and a strong wind, might be launched over the wire to reach nearby woods.

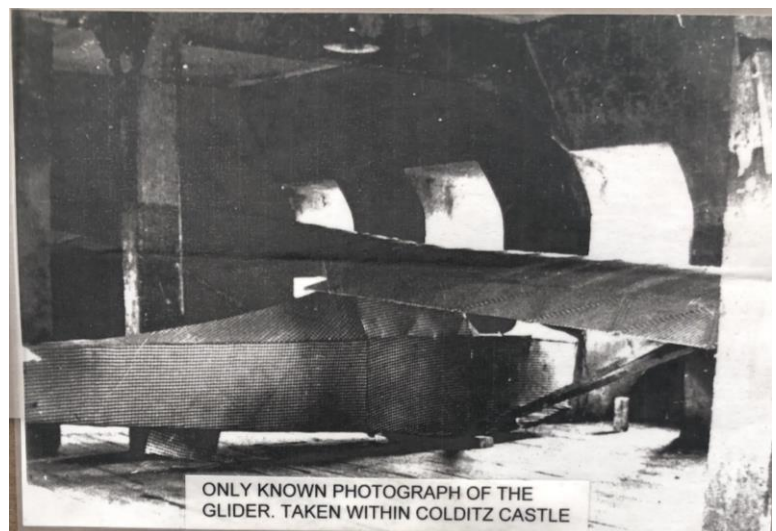
At Stalag Luft III he toyed with the idea of a giroplane, but the practical difficulties led him and Best to switch to "moling". Emerging from their tunnel outside the perimeter fence, they set off for an airfield, where they hoped to steal an aircraft. But, finding all the planes securely locked, they headed for the Oder River, where they discovered a rowing boat. They then drew attention to themselves by rowing on the wrong side of the river, and were captured as they slept on the bank. With established reputations as "bad boys", the pair were dispatched to Colditz, where they were known as "the two old crows" or "the wicked uncles".



They proved themselves the finest craftsmen in the camp, according to Pat Reid, the chairman of the escape committee; he noted that Goldfinch's equanimity made him the kind of man "who would survive in a lifeboat after weeks of exposure, long after the other occupants had gone overboard".

It was while watching the snowflakes drifting in the wind that he realised a launch from the roof would be like a dive into a swimming pool. Some prisoners simply laughed when first told of the idea, and since the execution of 50 prisoners who had taken part in the "Great Escape" from Stalag Luft III the Allied High Command had discouraged further escape attempts.

However, it was a year since the last successful break from Colditz, and the camp escape committee recognised that the proposal would provide a good opportunity to divert the younger prisoners' energies. He was aided by his discovery in the prison library of Aircraft Design, a two-volume work by CH Latimer, which explained the necessary physics and engineering and included a detailed diagram of a wing section. There was no indication as to how this invaluable textbook had arrived in the castle, or why the Germans had permitted it to remain. One theory was that building an aircraft seemed so impossible that even the most desperate Englishman would not consider it.



He duly started on his meticulous drawings for a craft with a 33ft wingspan, which, with two men aboard, could be launched into the wind at 31 mph. The plane became known as the "Colditz Cock". A secret workshop behind a false wall was devised in an attic above the chapel. Jack Best took on the practicalities of making the tools, the Canadian "Hank" Wardle helped with the construction, and Tony Rolt was the overall organiser; they were joined by 12 "apostles" and then by 40 "stooges", who acted as lookouts.

On the day of the flight a hole was to be made in the wall of the attic and the glider hauled on to the roof, where it would have its wings attached. It was then to be launched by a catapult system, with an earth and concrete-filled bathtub weighing one ton being dropped from the roof to the ground.

It was approaching completion when Colditz was relieved by the Allies on 16 April 1945. On this morning, he and Best brought down the different sections to the British quarters and assembled them for the first time, showing the craft to some astonished GIs. When they left the castle two days later he took his drawings, but the glider had to be left behind.

An attempt to retrieve it later met with no co-operation from Colditz's Russian masters. The townspeople believe that it was either burnt for firewood by the Russians or deliberately destroyed because its growing fame was irritating the new East German authorities.

After the war he settled with his wife and daughter in Poole, Dorset, where he was borough engineer. On retiring as acting city engineer of Salisbury in 1974, he devoted himself to his love of flying and making aircraft. He built a Luton Minor (see example pictured) in the 1970s, which he flew regularly from Old Sarum Flying Club on the outskirts of Salisbury, until he was in his late eighties.



Although nothing remains of the actual plane built (apart from the photo above), he had kept his drawings and this enabled a miniature version, about one-third the size of the original, to be constructed. It was eventually launched from the roof of Colditz Castle in 1993, when a party of former prisoners visited the castle. Six years later Channel 4 commissioned the glider to be built to his original specifications for the television series *Escape from Colditz*, which appeared in 2000.

The construction was undertaken in Hampshire, using modern technology, while he and Flight Lieutenant Jack Best (who died in 2000) eagerly observed and commented on its progress. When the glider was finally launched for a three-minute flight, it reached 700ft at RAF Odiham. About a dozen of the veterans who had worked on the original more than 55 years earlier proudly looked on.



There is the following detailed account of this flight in the Daily Telegraph at the time – see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/htmlContent.jhtml?html=/archive/2000/02/03/ncold03.html>

Over the last 11 years of his life he had amazingly worked for five days a week, with second-hand materials, on his version of a seaplane, which had been developed for the US Navy in the 1920s. It was to have had its second taxiing trials the day after he died. This seaplane was based on the Colditz glider but modified to a float plane and called 'Son of Colditz' – see picture below and others at <http://davidperrypictures.smugmug.com/gallery/1183626#P-1-15>

He died on 2 October 2007 at the age of 91 at his home in Poole, peacefully having worked the previous afternoon on his project.



Sadly it was only his death that revealed another remarkable wartime adventure and achievement by an Old Framlinghamian and we're indebted to fellow aviator **Bruce Micklewright (S48-51)** for bringing this to our attention. He met Bill at Old Sarum Flying Club. Bruce had spent many years as a Cathay Pacific pilot after being in the Royal Canadian Air Force and when he retired he restored a Tiger Moth and finished it in the Framlingham colours of chocolate and blue. This was spotted by Bill at the airfield and the pair became firm friends in the seven years before Bill died.

Bruce goes on to say "I spent my career in aviation and on my retirement restored a Tiger Moth and finished it with light blue wings, chocolate brown fuselage with white registration lettering. I considered registering it as G-FRAM and flying it over the school on the Millennium, however, I missed the date



to complete the restoration and I subsequently registered it as G-EMSY, my daughter's pet name.

Shortly after the completion of the rebuild, I moved the aircraft to Old Sarum near



Salisbury and one day this elderly gentleman approached me in the hangar and said "I believe you own this lovely aeroplane and I am intrigued whether you had any particular reason for choosing chocolate and light blue as a colour scheme?" When I told him they were my old school colours he replied "Not by any chance, Framlingham?" On confirming that they were, he replied "How wonderful, I also went to Framlingham".

We spent many hours reminiscing about Framlingham, our service careers, aviation and of course Colditz. His attitude to the time that he spent in Colditz was one of privileged confinement! He loved the castle and said his fellow prisoners were the most marvellous collection of intelligent and inspiring men from throughout the Commonwealth

and the USA. He was also quite fair to his captors. Bill was a charming, unassuming, delightful man. He died in his sleep, fit and well to the last."

The day after Bill died, Bruce went up to Old Sarum Flying Club and took the following pictures of "The Son of Colditz". Note the bouquet of flowers just visible on the rear fuselage which are shown below. He also tells me that Bill's Telegraph obituary (see link below) is being framed and will hang in the Old Sarum Flying Club. A proposal to suspend the aeroplane from the hangar roof is being investigated.



I'm also indebted to the obituary that appeared in the Daily Telegraph on 12 October 2007, for much of the above detail – see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/10/12/db1201.xml> Sadly this obituary does not mention that Bill went to Framlingham College.

The Salisbury Journal also carried a headline piece on Bill to mark his 90th birthday in 2006 – see http://www.oldsarumflyingclub.co.uk/documents/060803_salisbury_journal.pdf

Finally you can see a piece of video of the replica that was built in 2000 here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBjTmqbNSC0&ab_channel=BoilerRoom4

There are hundreds of articles on the Colditz Glider, but this is probably one of the most comprehensive <http://www.fiddlersgreen.net/AC/aircraft/Colditz-Glider/info/info.htm>

Bruce Micklewright (S48-51) was back in touch to say that a small ceremony was held at Old Sarum on 19 July 2008, which would have been Bill's 92nd birthday. They 'rolled out' the amphibian 'Son of Colditz'. He says that approximately 100 people attended and a close friend of Bill's read a tribute and a brief account of Bill's life. Bill's daughter, Susan Sims, unveiled the plaque that will be displayed in the clubhouse at Old Sarum. The event was filmed by Meridian TV and appeared on television that evening. They have kindly allowed us to show this piece on our website by clicking here <http://www.itvlocal.com/meridian/news/?&void=215137> After the web page comes up there is a 30 second advert before the article.

Bruce goes on to say that the aircraft is being moved to the Norfolk and Suffolk Aviation Museum at Flixton and will sit beside the replica of 'The Cock' on display. The Museum will apparently put the finishing touches to the project. He will send some photos of the day.

Bruce has now kindly sent some photos of the aircraft at Flixton, see below ;-



My thanks to **Chris Keeble (S53-59)** for spotting the obituary below to Tony Rolt, which mentions Bill Goldfinch.

Chris goes on to say "Apart from the OF interest I first heard of the Tony Rolt name in '53, my first year at Brandeston. As the article recalls, Rolt was partnered by Duncan Hamilton in the Le Mans victory that year. I purchased a Lancia Integrale Evo from his son Adrian Hamilton about 8 years ago - small world!"

Major Anthony Rolt

8.11.MMS

Resolute escape veteran who helped to build the Colditz glider and after the war won the Le Mans 24 Hours in a Jaguar

Even in his Eton schooldays it seemed likely that Tony Rolt would become famous as an amateur motor racing driver. Aged 18, he came fourth in his class in the annual 24-hour sports car race at Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium, in 1936, and a year later won the British Empire Trophy at Donnington Park in a B-type ERA. Then the Second World War intervened.

The only son of a regular soldier, he never questioned whether the Army was his correct choice of career. In the Thirties — and still when possible today — dangerous sports were encouraged, so he went to Sandhurst and was commissioned into the Rifle Brigade in 1939.

He was taken prisoner at the conclusion of the brave but hopeless defence of Calais by 30th Infantry Brigade, of which 1st Battalion The Rifle Brigade formed part, in May 1940. The small British force was landed there to secure the port, unaware that General Heinz Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps was sweeping up from the southeast. Rolt was awarded his first Military Cross for gallantry in command of his platoon in the fighting that followed.

The first stage of captivity involved a wearying trek to the railhead. He made his first escape attempt by diving into a ditch when the attention of the guards was distracted.

He and an RAF officer who had done the same, set out to find an aircraft to fly to England, but an encounter with a German patrol quashed that ambition. Rolt was sent to Stalag VB at Biberach, 60 miles from the Swiss frontier. In August 1941 he and a Sapper officer walked out of the camp disguised as German workmen. They were in sight of the border when they collided with a German border guard. Recapture was followed by 14 days in solitary confinement and transfer to Stalag XXC, an old Polish fort at Posen (Poznan).

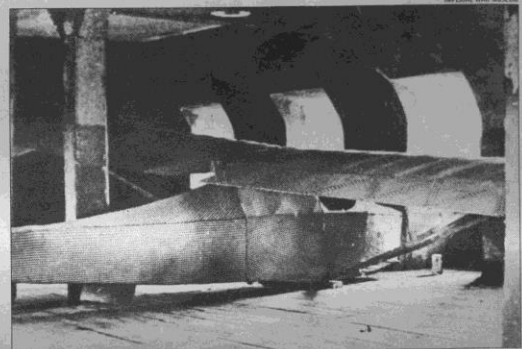
An escape attempt from there ended with more solitary confinement then transfer to Oflag VIB at Warburg. This was a purpose-built camp on a high desolate plateau west of the Weser. In a well-planned escape, Rolt and four companions walked out dressed as members of a Swiss Red Cross Commission, whose real members had entered a couple of hours earlier.

The five men were free for 48 hours before, relying too much in their "official" appearance and because two of their number spoke fluent German, they were recaptured leaving a railway station in daylight. After a stretch at Stalag VIB at Eichstätt in Bavaria, from where he also made an escape attempt, Rolt was sent to Colditz Castle, the Sonderlager for persistent escapers.

In Colditz he teamed up with two RAF officers, Flying Officer Bill Goldfinch and Flight Lieutenant Jack Best, and Lieutenant Geoffrey "Stooge" Wardle of the Royal Navy to build the glider that they planned to launch from Colditz Castle roof. By that stage of the war, spring 1944, it was apparent Germany would be defeated and it was feared that the SS might embark



Rolt: driving a D-type Jaguar, top; above right, the glider with which PoWs intended to warn the world of a possible SS slaughter of Colditz inmates



on wholesale slaughter of the Colditz prisoners as an act of reprisal. The glider was to provide the prisoners with a possibility of carrying news of any such atrocity to the outside world.

During his first winter in Colditz, Goldfinch had watched the snowflakes swirling upwards over the castle roof, conditions perfect for glider flight. From the same window, he had spotted a suitable landing ground — a meadow beyond the River Mulde 500 yards away. The Senior British Officer in Colditz, Lieutenant-Colonel "Willie" Tod, backed the project as he was concerned that the increasingly unruly behaviour of some of the prisoners and systematic baiting of the guards could lead to a more aggressive attitude being adopted by the prison staff. He reckoned that whether the glider flew or not, scavenging materials for construction, acquiring the tools and the routine positioning of lookout prisoners to give warning of sudden searches would keep a large number of men keenly motivated, occupied and out of trouble.

It was Rolt who devised the location for the glider workshop. Mud-plastered mattress covers stretched over wooden frames made a false wall at

the end of an attic, the ideal space from where the glider could be lifted on to the roof for launching.

Goldfinch found a copy of C. H. Latimer-Needham's *Aircraft Design* in the prisoners' library, providing the principles for the blueprint of a glider of 33ft wingspan capable of lifting two men of average weight. (The four core team members had decided to toss for the two places only when the glider was ready). Work began in May 1944 with a completion date scheduled for the following spring.

Rolt's role in the enterprise was the organisation of the prisoners collecting the wide range of materials required to make the 6,000 individual parts for the glider, and the complex system of lookouts to warn the workers of any approach of the guards to the area of the attic workshop. Relief of the castle by the US Army in April 1945 meant the glider never flew, although a replica constructed 40 years later by Southdown Aero Services proved it would have done so.

Anthony Peter Roylance Rolt was the son of Brigadier-General S. P. Rolt and educated at Eton and RMC Sandhurst. The persistence of his wartime

escape attempts was recognised by award of a Bar to his Military Cross in 1946. He had by then decided that the motor race track held more excitement for him than the Army in peace time, so resigned his commission to become one of the great gentlemen amateur drivers associated with Jaguar cars.

The Jaguar stable won the Le Mans 24 Hours in 1951 with their new C-type driven by Peter Walker and Peter Whitehead, while Rolt had achieved sixth place in a Nash-Healey. This led Jaguar to look on him as a potential recruit and, to his delight, he was offered the position of reserve driver for the Dundrod race in Ireland. When the works driver retired feeling ill halfway through, Rolt took over to break the lap record and raise the car's position from seventh to fourth, winning him a permanent place in the Jaguar team.

In 1953 Rolt and Duncan Hamilton in a C-type Jaguar faced competition from every leading European sports car manufacturer at Le Mans. They won the race with an average speed of more than 100 mph, Rolt having raised their game by five seconds per lap to beat the Jaguar of Stirling Moss and Peter Walker into second place,

four laps behind. He and Hamilton were jointly awarded the Malcolm Campbell Memorial Trophy. The following year, when Jaguar introduced their D-type, Rolt and Duncan Hamilton finished second at Le Mans, only oil filter pit-stops costing them first place to Ferrari.

Rolt retired from racing in 1955 to concentrate on his own motor manufacturing business, FF Developments. From modest beginnings converting ambulances and military vehicles to four-wheel drive, this company became a leading supplier of design, engineering and prototyping services of the motor industry. Rolt patented the viscous coupling differential, as co-inventor, and the company produced gearboxes for racing and rally cars, including some by McLaren.

In 1945, he married Lois Blomfield, step-daughter of Major Alexander Allan of the Rifle Brigade. She predeceased him, as did their younger daughter. He is survived by two sons and a daughter.

Major Anthony Rolt, MC and Bar, Colditz veteran and racing driver, was born on October 16, 1918. He died on February 6, 2008, aged 89

The following article appeared in the Telegraph on 9 February 2012

Colditz glider to take to the skies at last

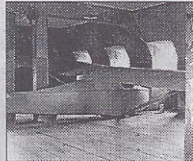
By Neil Midgley

ONE of the most audacious escape plans concocted by British prisoners of war at Colditz – a glider made of sleeping bags, gramophone springs and porridge – is to be recreated for television.

The glider, nicknamed the Colditz Cock, was still under construction in a tiny attic at the prison when the castle was liberated by American forces in April 1945. As a result, its launch, planned for later that spring, never took place.

A documentary on Channel 4 this summer will recreate the construction of the glider and launch it, though modern health and safety restrictions mean that two dummies will be its passengers.

The glider, known as the Colditz Cock, was being built behind a false wall when the castle was liberated in 1945

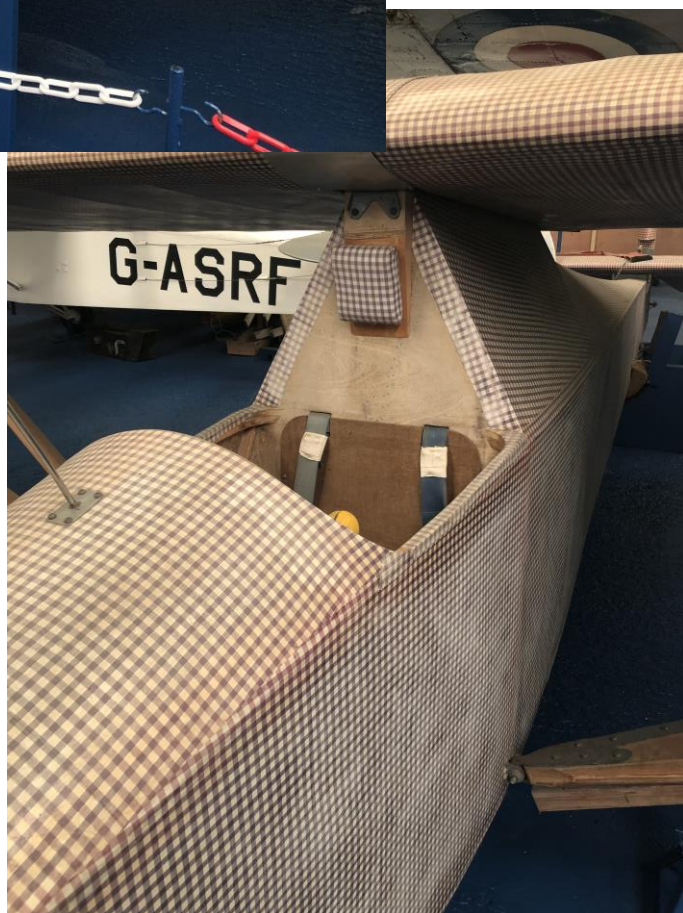


The Colditz Cock was the brainchild of Tony Rolt and Bill Goldfinch, PoWs who realised that a glider could be launched from the chapel roof to fly across the River Mulde without being seen by the Germans. It was built by a team of a dozen men led by Goldfinch and Jack Best, who built a false wall in the chapel attic to hide the construction project.

Their German captors unwittingly helped by providing in the prison library a two-volume book, *Aircraft Design* by C H Latimer-Needham, which contained the necessary engineering and even a detailed diagram of a wing section.

The story of the Colditz Cock was fictionalised, with a successful flight and escape, in a 1971 American television film, *The Birdmen*. The new documentary will be made by Windfall Films and presented by the engineer Dr Hugh Hunt, who has previously hosted programmes recreating the construction of the bouncing bomb and the digging of tunnels for the Great Escape.

In October 2023 the RAF section at the College visited the Norfolk and Suffolk Aviation Museum at Flixton to see "The Cock"



The tale of the "COLDITZ COCK"

As escapees they were sent to Colditz Castle, considered by the Germans to be escape proof. The glider escape plan was hatched by **TONY ROLT**, a pre-war motor racing driver, with **BILL GOLDFINCH** as designer, and **JACK BEST** in charge of construction.

The Colditz Cock, as it was named, was built in a concealed loft, the plan being to launch it from a rooftop wooden track with a weighted bathtub catapult arrangement.

Construction was started in early 1944 and the 32ft span machine was virtually complete when the Americans liberated the castle in 1945.

Floorboards were used as plank spars, and the remainder of the structure was built from timber scrounged from beds and plywood from cupboards. The fabric covering material came from mattress covers "doped" with a

concoction of boiled millet. The control runs were made from field telephone wiring!

Sadly the original glider was not preserved but 55 years after the end of the war, Channel 4 Television commissioned the building of a replica for its television series "Escape from Colditz".

Piloted by **JOHN LEE**, the replica Cock flew successfully at ODIHAM in February 2000, proving that the design **BILL** had penned on a single sheet of paper would have flown, and that the escape plot was indeed feasible.

Post War, **BILL** returned to his career as a civil engineer in Salisbury, retaining his interest in aviation and joining the Bustard Flying Club at Boscombe Down, and the PFA, flying well into his 80's.

BILL is survived by his wife Pauline, daughter Susan and son Michael. He will be sadly missed ... another of aviation's grand old gentlemen having passed into history.

