

JOHNNY POHE AND THE GREAT ESCAPE

by Philip Cleaver



Early on the morning of 23 September 1943, fortune finally turned against Johnny Pohe. He'd flown many dangerous missions during the war – his luck was bound to run out. Hit by enemy fire, Johnny was forced to crash-land in the English Channel. He was captured two days later and taken to Stalag Luft III, deep in Nazi Germany. Despite being a prisoner, Johnny didn't accept that his war was over. He took part in an ambitious escape that would end tragically for himself and many others ...

Porokoru Patapu Pohe

Johnny Pohe was of Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi and Ngāti Tūwharetoa descent. His full name was Porokoru Patapu Pohe, but everyone called him Johnny. He grew up in Turangaarere, near Taihape, where his family farmed. As a teenager, Johnny went to Te Aute College, a Māori boarding school in Hawke's Bay known for producing leaders. The school's motto is "Whakatangata kia kaha" (Quit ye like men, be strong).

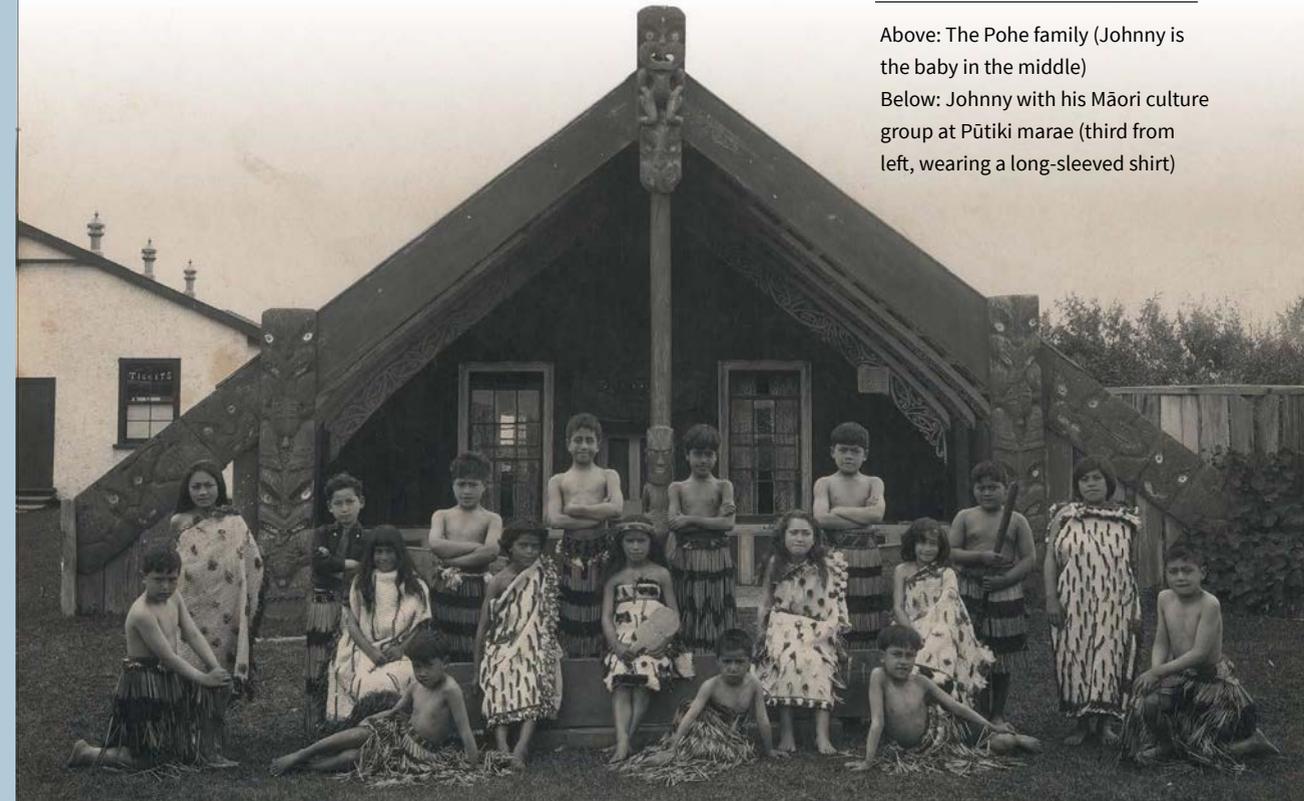
Many of Johnny's classmates would also serve in the war.

Johnny was twenty-four and working on his family's farm when the Second World War started in September 1939. A few days later, he applied to train as a pilot. This was an unusual move. Māori were expected to go into the army, just like they had in the First World War. They weren't encouraged to join the air force or navy. Johnny was about to challenge this.



Above: The Pohe family (Johnny is the baby in the middle)

Below: Johnny with his Māori culture group at Pūtiki marae (third from left, wearing a long-sleeved shirt)





The Māori Battalion in Italy during the Second World War

MĀORI AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The New Zealand government didn't make it compulsory for Māori to fight in the Second World War, but some Māori leaders, especially the politician Āpirana Ngata, encouraged their people to volunteer. Ngata saw the war as an opportunity. He believed that if Māori made a significant contribution, they would gain greater respect from Pākehā and be treated more fairly – ultimately as equals. For many young Māori, there was another motivation: adventure. They wanted to be a part of the great event that was consuming the world.

To encourage Māori to sign up – and to ensure their contribution would be visible – Ngata made sure that a separate unit was established in the army, the 28th (Māori) Battalion. Most Māori who fought during the war served within this unit – around 3,600 in total. The cost was great. Of that number, around 650 men were killed and over 1,700 were wounded. Those who escaped physical injury had to live with wartime memories. Many had trouble fitting back into their old lives.

First Māori Pilot

Johnny Pohe became a qualified pilot in January 1941. He was the first Māori to be trained by the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF). He left for England soon after and was posted to 51 Squadron, a Royal Air Force (RAF) unit based near the town of Snaith. This squadron had bomber aircraft, and in mid-July, Johnny flew his first mission, bombing enemy targets in Europe.

Being part of a bomber crew was dangerous and stressful. Planes were targeted by guns on the ground as well as attacked by enemy aircraft. At night, searchlights swept the sky. The casualty rate for airmen like Johnny was high. Almost half (44 percent) of all crew who flew in RAF bombers were killed. Many more were wounded or captured and became prisoners of war.

By April 1942, Johnny had completed twenty-two missions. This was a lot – so many, in fact, that he was no longer expected to fly. For a time, Johnny worked as a flight instructor, but he was restless to return to the action. Eventually, he was allowed to rejoin his old unit. In September the following year, Johnny left on the mission that would be his last.



THE BOMBING OF GERMANY

Both sides dropped bombs from aircraft during the Second World War, with deadly consequences. At first, Britain's Bomber Command targeted German submarine bases, railway yards, aircraft factories, and ports. Being accurate was difficult, and bombs often missed the target. From early 1942, tactics changed, and the RAF shifted its focus to German cities and their populations – a strategy known as “area bombing”. It was hoped this would destroy the morale of the German people. The result was devastation. On one night alone, in October 1943, ten thousand people died when a firestorm engulfed the city of Kassel. Over 400,000 German civilians were killed during the Allied raids of the Second World War. Millions more were left homeless.



Stuttgart, Germany, near the end of the war



Out of Luck

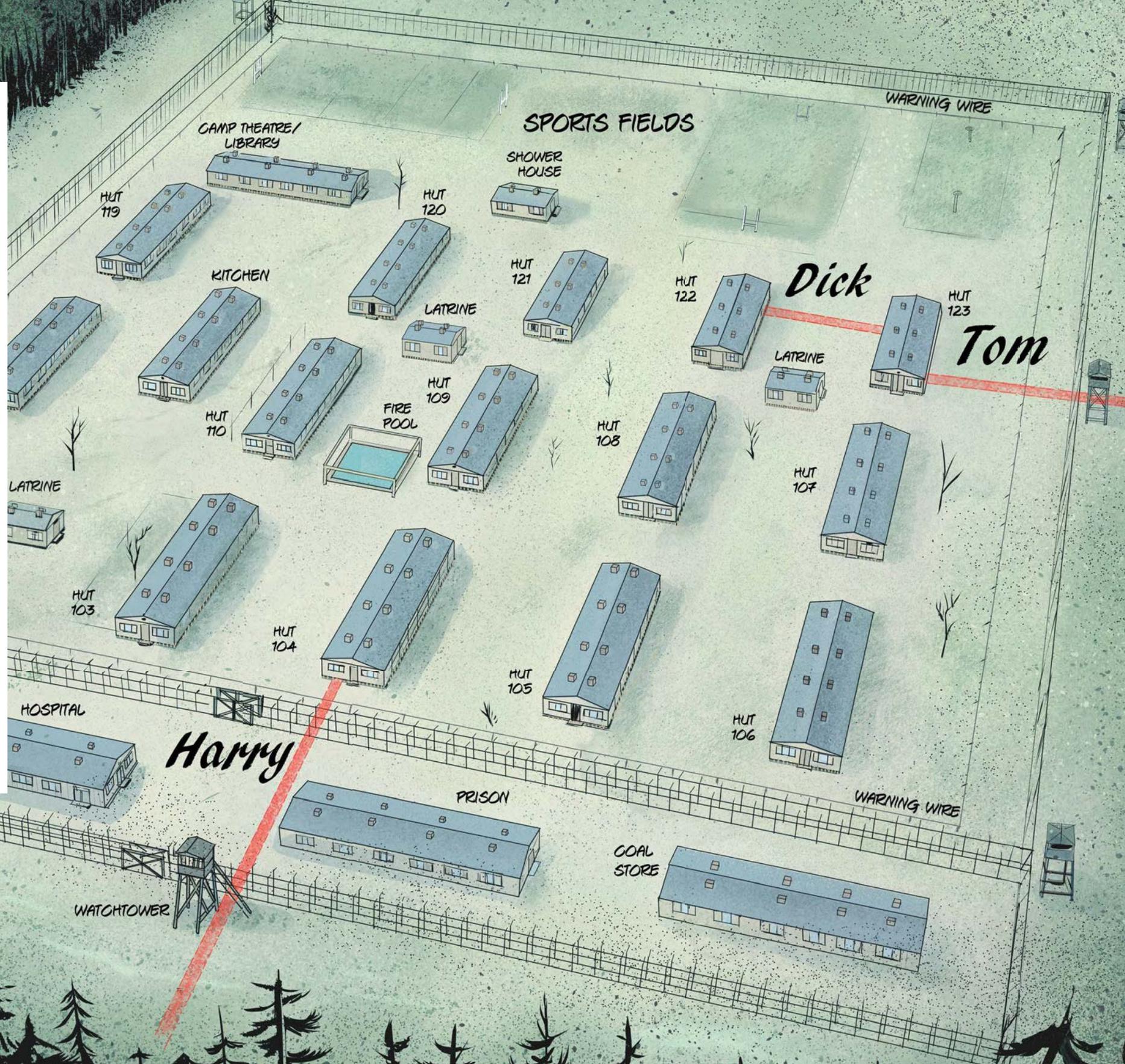
Johnny had been lucky for many months. He'd already survived a crash when the wing of his bomber caught fire. But, finally, his luck ran out. On the night of 22 September 1943, his plane was hit twice over the German city of Hanover. With an engine down, Johnny tried to fly home, but he was forced to crash-land in the English Channel. Johnny and two of his crew floated in an emergency dinghy for two days before being spotted and captured by the Luftwaffe (German air force). Because he was an officer, Johnny was sent to Stalag Luft III, a German prisoner-of-war camp for officer airmen.

Unlike the inhumane conditions experienced by many wartime prisoners, men in the camp were treated reasonably well. They were given food, shelter, and medical care, and they were allowed to write and receive letters. In one letter, Johnny reassured his family, “Do not worry unnecessarily about me as you know I always manage to get along somehow.” But life in Stalag Luft III was still difficult. The men relied on food parcels from home to supplement their rations, and the days were monotonous. Many longed to escape. The month Johnny arrived, three men made it out through a tunnel and back to England. Plans were also under way for a much more ambitious effort – a mass escape that would involve hundreds of men.

Tom, Dick, and Harry

Stalag Luft III had been carefully designed to prevent escape. The prisoners' barracks were raised off the ground so the guards could spot signs of tunnelling, and the camp was deliberately built on sandy soil that easily collapsed. The Germans also used microphones. These were placed around the camp perimeter to detect sounds of digging. Lastly, the camp's location had been chosen to make escape difficult. Allied territory – and safety – was hundreds of kilometres away. Any escapee faced a daunting task.

Men like Johnny were up for the challenge. By September 1943, hundreds were working on three tunnels: Tom, Dick, and Harry. If one tunnel was discovered, it was thought that the guards wouldn't look for another, and this proved to be right. Dick was abandoned after its planned exit point was built over during a camp extension, and Tom was found by the Germans and dynamited. In the end, Harry was the only hope. Building this tunnel would take around a year.



“Penguins” and Bribery

The escape plan was impressive. One of the first challenges was getting rid of the soil that came out of the tunnel. This work was done by “penguins” – men who scattered sand from small pouches sewn inside their trouser legs. Finding wood to brace the tunnel’s walls was also difficult, as was building pumps to provide oxygen. The prisoners were resourceful, and anything that couldn’t be found inside the camp was sourced from elsewhere. Guards were bribed for railway timetables, maps, and civilian clothing. They also provided identity papers so that new ones could be forged. For some, the bold plan was to pretend to be a local and get away by train.

Harry was finally ready in March 1944. Although six hundred men had worked on the tunnel, there was only enough time for two hundred to escape. The men were divided into two groups. The first was made up of those who spoke German or had a history of escape. It also contained men who’d done a lot of the work. This included Johnny, who was renowned for his tireless digging. The second group was chosen by ballot. These men were able to have only the most basic forged paperwork and equipment. They’d have to take their chances.



Escape

The men had to wait for a moonless night. One arrived on 24 March 1944, and the escape began. They struck trouble straight away. It was the coldest March in thirty years, and the exit trapdoor was frozen solid. Freeing it caused a ninety-minute delay. Worse was to come. It was suddenly discovered that the tunnel came up short of the nearby forest, which was needed to provide cover. The escape went ahead, and the first man emerged at 10.30 p.m. Six minutes later, he was followed by another.

These six-minute intervals were much longer than the original plan of one man per minute. A watchtower was nearby, and the extra time was needed so men could reach the woods. Word was sent back that no one with a number above a hundred would be getting away before daybreak.

At 1 a.m., there was another hitch: the tunnel collapsed. The men worked desperately to repair it, and the escape continued. Then, at 4.55 a.m., the seventy-seventh man – another New Zealander – was spotted by a guard. He surrendered. The camp was searched, but the Germans were unable to find the tunnel’s entrance, hidden under a stove in one of the huts. Eventually, a guard crawled back from the exit of the tunnel, and all was revealed.





The Other Side

For those who made it out – Johnny among them – the troubles continued. Because the escape had been delayed, many of the men missed trains and they had to wait, in daylight, for the next one. Others spread out on foot, but in places, the snow was deep, and they were forced to leave the safer woods and fields and follow roads. The cold was extreme. When Johnny was finally picked up several days later, his feet had frostbite.

The escape was a disaster. Seventy-three men were captured, including Johnny. Only three made it back to England. Along with others, Johnny was taken to a town called Gorkitz to await his fate. Hitler's order, when it came, was harsh. All those captured were to be shot. Some of Hitler's advisers were against the executions, and in the end, Hitler reduced the number to fifty. These men would be shot individually and in pairs.

We don't know if Johnny died alone. We do know that another New Zealand pilot, Arnold Christensen, was executed at the same time. Johnny was cremated, and his ashes were buried in Sagan, a town near the camp.

No Return

Back in Turangaarere, Johnny's family learnt the terrible truth. Their son and brother was not just missing – he was never coming home. The New Zealand government was "deeply shocked", and in England, politicians said the executions were a war crime. They resolved to bring the culprits to justice. By the time the hunt for those responsible had begun, Hitler and most of his highest-ranking officers were dead, although some of those involved were eventually tried and executed.

After the war, Johnny's ashes were moved to a cemetery in Poznan, Poland. He now lies a long way from home, alongside other men who escaped from the camp.

Year		AIRCRAFT		Pilot, or 1st Pilot	2nd Pilot, Pupil or Passenger	DUTY (Including Results and Remarks)
Month	Date	Type	No.			
						Totals Brought Forward
		18. HALIFAX V	DK 73	SELF	CREW	X.C.
		19. HALIFAX V	DC 399	SELF	CREW	F.A. - BOMBING.
Signature: <i>[Signature]</i>		SILE.		SUMMARY FOR COURSE: 1943.		1. HALIFAX V
OC. "C" FLIGHT:				UNIT 1665, C.O. RUFFORTH.		2.
				DATE 20.9.43.		3.
				SIGNATURE: <i>J. Pohe</i>		

34349

ROYAL N.Z. AIR FORCE

NAME: *JOHN POHE*

NZ 402894

PILOT'S FLYING LOG-BOOK

Above: The last entry in Johnny Pohe's logbook

Johnny Pohe and the Great Escape

by Philip Cleaver

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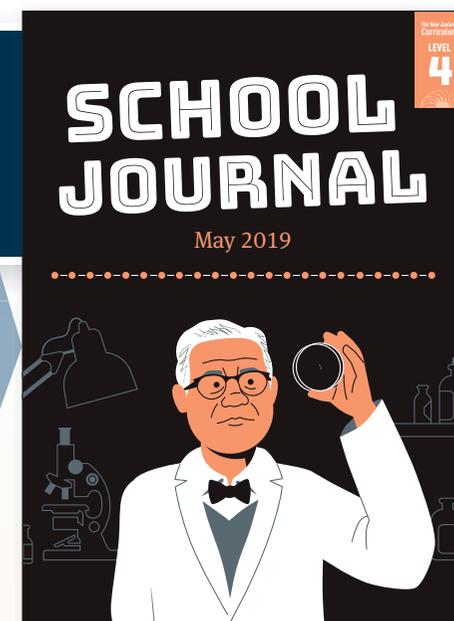
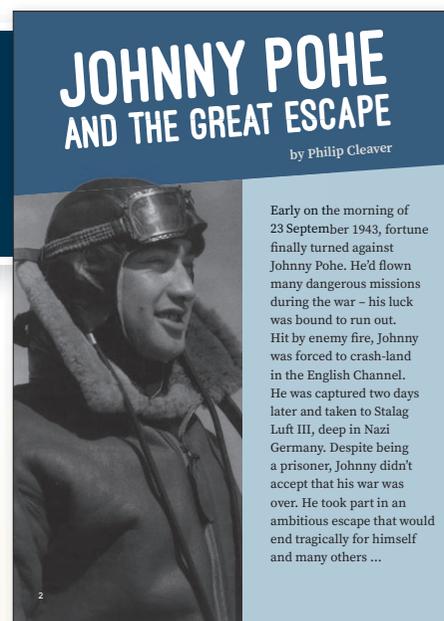
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