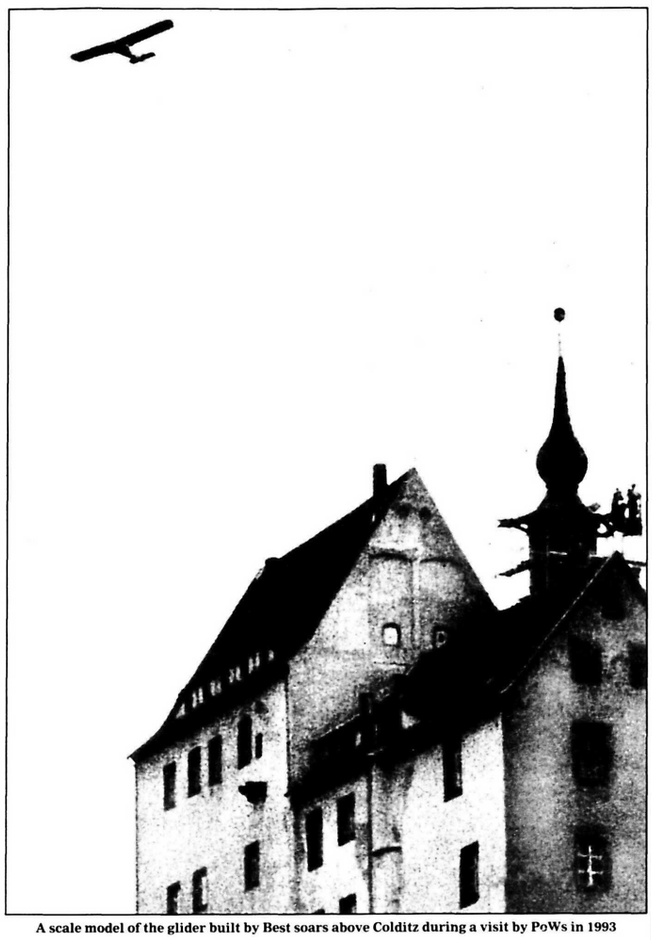
OBITUARIES

Jack Best

Prisoner in Colditz who in an attempt to escape from the castle built a glider hidden in an attic above the chapel

Best and Goldfinch hail the flight of a replica glider this year



A scale model of the glider built by Best soars above Colditz during a visit by PoWs in 1993

JACK BEST, who has died aged 87, took part in one of the most audacious escape attempts of the Second World War, the plan to build and fly a glider out of Colditz.

The idea was dreamt up by Tony Rolt, a naval officer, who had noticed that the roof of the castle's chapel was hidden from sight of the guards below. He convinced Bill Goldfinch, a Sunderland flying boat pilot, to draw up a design for, a glider which could be flown from the roof, and with Best erected a false wall in an attic of the chapel to form a workshop.

In this, the glider was painstakingly constructed over nine months using tools improvised from bedsteads, iron window bars and gramophone springs, which were turned into makeshift saws.

Best made the wingspars from floorboards and parts of the fuselage from bed slats, while the control wires were electric cable torn from unused parts of the castle. The aircraft's skin was made from cotton sleeping bags stiffened with the prisoners' ration of boiled millet.

On the day of the flight, a hole was to have been made in the wall of the attic and the glider hauled out on to the roof of the chapel. The wings, measuring 32 ft across, would then have been attached to the body, and the glider launched by a catapult system, the counterweight of which was an earth-filled bathtub dropping five storeys from the roof to the ground below.

The schematics were reviewed by Lorne Welch, a glider pilot, and Best and the others believed that the glider would have flown for about a mile across the River Mulde, enabling its two-man crew to get a head start on any pursuit.

Best, himself a bomber pilot, later played down suggestions that he would have been in the glider's cockpit. He had been recaptured after a previous escape in which he had shinned down a rope from a window of the castle, and he felt that it would have been right for someone else to have had the chance to make a bid for freedom.

In the event, however, the war ended too soon for them to discover whether the plan would have worked, and the glider is thought to have been broken up for firewood during the bitter winter of 1946 by occupying Russian troops.

But almost 50 years later, Best and his fellow PoWs did get the chance to see if their ingenuity would have been rewarded. In 1993, they returned to Colditz and successfully flew a one-third scale model from the chapel roof.

Then, in February of this year, Best was at RAF Odiham in Hampshire to see a full-size replica of the original glider — built for a Channel 4 series about Colditz — take to the skies.

Its maiden flight was almost half a century late, but there no longer could be any doubt that it would have made possible yet another break-out from the supposedly escape-proof fortress.

John William Best, known as Jack, was born on August 6 1912 at Vivod, near Llangollen in North Wales, and grew up on the family estate.

He was educated at Stowe, took part in a public schools' tour to Kenya, and in 1931 became an apprentice farmer there.

When war came in 1939, he was training for a civilian pilot's licence and accordingly joined the RAF, gaining his wings at No 4 Flying Training School, at Habbaniyah in Iraq. He then became a ferry pilot, flying aircraft from Takoradi in Ghana across Africa to Egypt.

He transferred to No 69, a Maryland bomber reconnaissance squadron, and on a flight in 1941 ran out of fuel over the Mediterranean. He was forced to land in the sea off southern Greece, where he was captured by the Germans.

He was sent to a camp at Biberach and in the winter of 1941-42 on to Stalag Luft I at Barth. Best was later moved to Stalag Luft III, at Sagan, near the Polish border.

Here he made several attempts to escape and in June 1942 he, Goldfinch and Henry Lamond tunnelled 80 ft out under the wire. They had pilot's notes for a Ju 52 transport and so headed for an airfield with the intention of stealing such an aircraft.

There they watched German air cadets undergoing glider training, but as they could not find a suitable aeroplane they walked instead by night to the banks of the Oder, staving off hunger with some potatoes which they had dug up.

There Best and the two other escapers found a skiff and so set off for the Baltic, intending to stow away on a ship bound for Sweden. But they made the mistake of failing to obey the rule of the sea and rowed up the wrong bank, against the river traffic. They were sleeping under the upturned boat when they were rumbled by the police, who gave them bread and cheese and beer before returning them to Sagan. From there they were dispatched to Colditz.

Best was liberated in May 1945 and demobbed as a flight lieutenant. He later farmed in Kenya and served with the reserve police during the Mau Mau troubles. Eventually he returned to Britain and farmed in Herefordshire.

He was awarded a military MBE in 1945.

Jack Best married first, in 1938 (dissolved 1959), Constance Otter. They had a son and a daughter. He married secondly, in 1959, Elisabeth Bunting.

Mobed Rostam Shahzadi

Spiritual leader of Iran's Zoroastrians throughout the revolution

MOBED ROSTAM SHAHZADI, who has died in Teheran aged 88, was the leader of Zoroastrian believers in Iran.

Zoroastrianism was the state religion of Persia from the third to seventh centuries AD, when it was displaced by Islam. Its principles were articulated by the prophet Zoroaster — more correctly Zarathushtra — who lived from 628-551BC.

Divine revelation from Ahura Mazdah (the Wise Lord) led Zoroaster to create a religion which was among the first to be monotheistic. He also placed the distinction between truth and error — right and wrong — at the forefront of his beliefs, and held that man was free to choose between good and evil.

The religion developed greatly after the prophet's death, and its concepts of evil, of the immortality of the soul and of a resurrection of the body are thought by some to have exerted influence on Judaism when the Hebrews were exiled in Babylon in the sixth century BC.

Perhaps the best known Zoroastrian belief is that their dead should not be buried or cremated, lest that pollute the purity of the earth or the air. Traditionally, the dead were left for birds atop "towers of silence", although in practice most Zoroastrians are now buried in concrete-lined graves.

Zoroastrianism has at present no more than 125,000 adherents, among them the Parsi community in India. The late Freddie Mercury was born a Zoroastrian. It is still recognised — along with Christianity and Judaism — as one of Iran's three official minority religions. The community is represented in the Majlis, the Iranian parliament, by its own MP.

Otherwise Iranian Zoroastrians have often been persecuted. Mobed Shahzadi waged a quiet and persistent campaign throughout his life to defend their rights, culture and religious freedom.

Rostam Dinyar Shahzadi was born in 1912 in the desert oasis of Yazd, central Iran, the country's traditional Zoroastrian stronghold, where there are today perhaps 30,000 believers. After primary education in Yazd, he taught traditional songs in a girls' school.

In 1925, when Shahzadi was a teenager, the Qajar monarchy was overthrown and Reza Khan assumed the rulership of Iran and the title of Shah. Petty discrimination that had restricted Zoroastrian life was eased, although Zoroastrians were still forbidden to handle food that would be eaten by Muslims, to ride horses, or to trade in the bazaar.

Reza Shah saw Zoroastrianism as a link with the splendours of Iran's imperial past. He adopted the Zoroastrian names for the months (which are still in use), and the first Zoroastrian deputy was elected.

In this more liberal climate, Shahzadi continued his education in Teheran at a Zoroastrian school, and later at the American College.

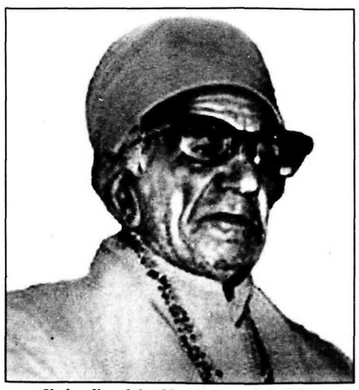
Zoroastrian priesthood is hereditary, and vested in the line of which Shahzadi was a member. At 16, later than the usual age, Shahzadi was sent to be trained in Bombay, at an institution maintained by Parsis. At 19, he was ordained at a ceremony at a fire temple or *ateshkadé* in Bombay.

After ordination, Shahzadi returned to Teheran, where he trained and practised as a lawyer, while at the same time teaching religion in Zoroastrian schools and officiating as a priest at a fire temple in Teheran. Because of his superior education and adroitness in representing Zoroastrian interests, he was nominated *mobed-e mobedan*, "priest of priests", the pre-eminent Zoroastrian divine in Iran.

He wrote several books on Iran's Zoroastrian heritage, including an analysis of the fall of the Zoroastrian Sassanid empire to Arab Muslim forces in 642 AD.

When Iran became an Islamic Republic in 1979, Shahzadi cultivated good relations with the Islamic theocrats who now governed the country, and was invited to represent the Zoroastrians in a constitutional convention.

He and his wife Daulat Lohrasb had a son, who was killed in the Iran-Iraq war, and a daughter.



Shahzadi: ordained in a fire temple in 1931

The Right Reverend Thomas Lobsinger

Bishop of the Yukon who loved the wild and felt at home in canoes

THE RIGHT REVEREND THOMAS LOBSINGER, who has died aged 73, was the Roman Catholic Bishop of the vast and often frozen Yukon Territory of Canada.

His diocese covered 183,000 square miles but numbered only 12,000 Catholic parishioners, 40 per cent of the population of the territory, many of whom live in remote settlements. Such a ministry was ideal for a man used to the demands of life in the wild and one who loved nothing better than fishing from the pontoon of the small flying boat in which he travelled the Yukon.

When he was consecrated a bishop at Whitehorse in 1987, Lobsinger held up his crozier and joked: "This doesn't really suit me. It ought to be a fishing rod."

The arduous and sometimes dangerous journeys he was compelled to undertake had made him highly self-sufficient. During a 300-mile trip by canoe from Johnson Crossing to Dawson City, Lobsinger and his paddling partner came across a frontiersman whose motorised canoe had developed a fault after falling in the water. The bishop took the engine apart on the spot and repaired it.

Lobsinger was also an experienced pilot and mechanic and during earlier work as a missionary had criss-crossed British Columbia in light aircraft.

He was killed, however, when his aeroplane crashed into a frozen lake while he and a colleague, Brother Hubert Spruyt, were flying from Whitehorse to Dawson City where the bishop was due to have said Mass.

Thomas Joseph Lobsinger was born on November 15 1927, at Ayton, Ontario, about 90 miles from Brantford, where his family moved when he was a child. A bright boy, he won a scholarship to St Michael's College in Toronto. From there he went on to Arnprior, to the novitiate of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the religious congregation that he had resolved to join.

He was ordained a priest in 1954 and undertook his first missionary work at Kyuquot, a small Canadian Indian fishing village on Vancouver Island. He spent most of his career as a priest on native reserves before becoming head of the Oblates, and later a bishop.

Perhaps the most difficult issue with which he was confronted during his bishopric was a scandal involving 12 men who as boys had been abused at a school run by the Oblates in British Columbia. Lobsinger agreed that the church should offer financial compensation to the victims, and apologised on behalf of the congregation to the native population.

Lobsinger was a congenial man who preferred pastoral work to that involving committees.

He particularly enjoyed the coming of summer, which once more allowed him to travel more freely across his frequently ice-bound diocese.

Lobsinger at the controls of his plane

Neal Matthews Jnr. At Brentwood, Tennessee, aged 70. Singer who backed Elvis Presley. Member of the singing quartet The Jordanaires. Their gospel-influenced harmony was an integral part of such Presley hits as *Hound Dog* and *Don't Be Cruel*. The group also recorded with Ricky Nelson, Marie Osmond, Jimmy Dean and Tom Jones. On stage, they backed Marty Robbins, Kitty Wells, Jim Reeves, Tennessee Ernie Ford and Don Gibson. Matthews wrote a book *Elvis: A Golden Tribute* (1985).

George Moore. At Sotogrande, Spain, aged 95. American banker who expanded Citibank's overseas operations. After retiring in 1967 became president of Metropolitan Opera Association, New York, guiding it out of troubled financial times. Later helped promote the port of Algeciras.

Conrad Grau. At Bad Freienwalde, Brandenburg, aged 67, after setting himself on fire. Historian of science. Member of the Berlin Academy of Science.

Oliver Pritchett

ANOTHER VIEW

It's good to talk... and talk... and talk

MOST of us seem to have mastered the latest changeover to the new telephone numbers without too much trouble. The next step may be a little more tricky. Preparations are now being made to prepare the public for June 17 and "Talk Longer Day". After that date, all telephone conversations have to go on for at least a minute more than they did before.

The reason for this is a bit technical, but I will try to explain it as simply as I can. Now that many of us have extra digits in our phone numbers, and now that there are so many mobile phones with extra long numbers, at any given moment, the system has to cope with a vastly increased volume of actual numbers being dialled. This is what the boffins call "digital impulse traffic overload".

To avoid this, subscribers are being asked to dial less frequently, and the best way they can achieve this is by making every telephone conversation last longer. As the slogan for Talk Longer Day puts it "While You're Chatting, You're Not Dialling".

Some people may have difficulty in thinking of extra things to say on the telephone, so, in the next few weeks BT will be sending booklets to every household in the country giving them their designated topics of conversation. For example, for phones in Inner London it will be "The difficulties I had in getting to work today" while people in Leicester will have "It's nothing I can put my finger on, but I just don't feel right".

Of course, having a lot more extended phone calls will put a tremendous extra burden on the engaged signal. In this country we have had the same engaged signal for more than 50 years and experts are not sure that it can hold out much longer. On the other hand, it would be a huge undertaking to replace it with, for example, a new streamlined three-tone engaged signal. There would have to be a massive advertising campaign to get the public to accept it.

For this reason, all new telephone handsets issued after May 9 will have an enhanced facility for keeping callers on *hold* — or an EFKCOHold, as it is known. This will incorporate some personalised message such as "Thank you for calling the Wilkinsons. The family is busy on the phone at the moment and you are being held in a queue until one of the Wilkinsons can deal with you." There might be some additional refinement, such as a message to say: "If you just rang the Wilkinsons for a chat, press two now."

Obviously this message will be accompanied by some pacifying music. The problem here is that the existing system does not have the capacity to hold any more Vivaldi. In future, subscribers in Manchester will have the *Four Seasons* excluding *Spring* which is ear-marked for Norwich. Cardiff gets Albinoni and Purcell has been allocated to Birmingham. Subscribers west of Exeter will have Joe Loss and his Orchestra, and most of Liverpool will get "The Best of Andy Williams".

Oftel, the telephone watchdog is hoping that people will get used to the extended conversations before Talk Longer Day. Subscribers are already being encouraged to make use of the Long Goodbye which, if applied properly, can take up three or four minutes. "Well, I'd better get on, it's been lovely talking to you. Take care. Yes, I'll ring soon. Thanks for calling. Right. Yes ... Lovely. Anyway. I'll ring on Thursday. Or you ring me on Tuesday. Lovely. Take care. Anyway. If I don't hear from you on Tuesday, I'll ring on Thursday. Bye. Yes. Or Wednesday. Lovely. Right. Speak Tuesday. Right. Or Thursday. Anyway."

Newcastle is the one exception in the new Talk Longer arrangement. Because of the need to re-route more calls through Newcastle and to boost the engaged signal, BT is launching a "Terse Tyneside" campaign, to keep phone calls in this area brisk and to the point. If anybody in Wales wishes to ring Newcastle they are being asked to phone somebody in Strathclyde and get them to pass on a message.

In the early stages of the new system there are bound to be a few crossed lines until people get used to the conversation topics that have been assigned to them. The easiest way to remember is that those whose numbers begin 021 should not mention the weather, unless talking to somebody in an 015 area. If your number begins 014 you should not discuss religion with anybody with a double zero in their number unless you have a "star" symbol on your keypad. And if anybody in Sheffield calls the Speaking Clock the whole system will come crashing down.

Leslie Bear

Hansard reporter from Baldwin to Heath

LESLIE BEAR, the former editor of *Hansard* who has died aged 88, reported the speeches of every Prime Minister from Baldwin to Heath.

Bear was appointed editor of the *Official Report of Debates*, commonly known as *Hansard*, in 1954, and he held the post for the next 17 years.

Hansard was created as an official House of Commons publication in 1909, to provide a record of all Parliamentary debates. Bear was its eighth editor.

Leslie William Bear was born on June 16 1911 at Falkenham, Suffolk, the son of a gardener. After leaving school he persuaded his father to let him undertake a commercial course at the Gregg shorthand school in Ipswich.

He found he had a flair for Gregg shorthand, attaining a writing speed of more than 200 words a minute; he went on to become the national champion.

Bear's first appointment after leaving the Gregg school was as an official reporter to the League of Nations, which he joined in 1930 at the age of 19, moving to Geneva.

His shorthand ability was, by any standards, remarkable, but he excelled himself at the League when he produced a perfect report of a speech delivered in French, translating as he went and writing the English version in shorthand, which he then duly transcribed.

In 1936 he joined the staff of the House of Commons Official Report. As a Hansard reporter, he witnessed historic moments in the House through the tumultuous times of the pre-war years. He recalled reporting, in his first year, Stanley Baldwin's speech on the abdication, and, many years later, witnessing the noisy scenes over Suez.

He recalled the problems facing all reporters in the Press Gallery before the installation of the amplification system that today makes Members' words more audible. In the days of Baldwin and Chamberlain it was often a case of supplementing an incomplete report of a speech barely heard in the Press Gallery with intelligent guess work and creative writing confirmed by asking the Member concerned.

Bear: 200 words a minute

During the war, Bear served in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve from April 1943 as an air traffic controller. In March 1945 he was released from his service to return to the Commons.

He was appointed CBE in 1972.

Leslie Bear married first, in 1932, Betsy Sobels. She died in 1935. He married secondly, in 1936, Annelise Gross, who died in 1979; they had two sons.

"Mobed Rostam Shahzadi." Daily Telegraph, 25 Apr. 2000, p. 25. The Telegraph Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0700695614/TGRH?u=tou&sid=bookmark-TGRH. Accessed 8 July 2024.