

*The Tunnel King: the true story of  
Wally Floody and the Great Escape*

by Barbara Hehner



**BOOK SUMMARY:**

The Great Escape was the most daring and carefully planned prisoner-of-war breakout of the Second World War. Yet not many Canadians know the heroic story of Wally Floody, a Canadian airman imprisoned in Germany, who was a key figure in digging a set of sophisticated escape tunnels. Now writer Barbara Hehner has written a gripping action- adventure that tells Floody's incredible story, and how he eventually became the consultant for the movie, The Great Escape.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY:**

Born in Montreal, Quebec, Barbara Hehner spent much of her childhood as an "army brat" in the far north: Goose Bay, Labrador and Churchill. She feels lucky to have lived in the far north while the Inuit still maintained a more traditional way of life, using sled dogs instead of snowmobiles and fur parkas instead of the nylon ones of today. After her family settled in Ottawa, Barbara completed high school. She then earned an Honours B.A. in English Literature at Carleton University and a Master's Degree at the University of Toronto. In 1991, she also completed an MFA degree in Film and Video at York University.

Barbara began her career as a junior editor in a Toronto publishing house. She began writing books in the early 1980s in partnership with David Suzuki. Together, they wrote a series of six children's science and activity books. Barbara lives with her husband Eric Zweig, a sportswriter and novelist, and daughter Amanda in midtown Toronto. They share their home with a demanding rabbit. Once or twice a summer, they foster orphan baby squirrels for the Toronto Humane Society.

### **Pre-Reading Questions**

1. Look at the cover of this book. What kind of story is *The Tunnel King*? What are some of the clues you used to decide?
2. Wally Floody trained as a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force. Do you know anyone who served in the military in World War II? Have you spoken to them about their experiences? What do you remember most about the stories they told you?
3. Take a look at the map at the beginning of the book. It shows central Europe and the locations of the camps where Wally Floody was held as a prisoner of war. How has this map changed as a result of World War II?
4. Read the Historical Note that begins on page 135. It gives background information on prisoners during the Second World War.
5. Refer to the Glossary, or word list, on page 139. It gives definitions for unfamiliar words used in the book.

### **Chapter Summaries**

It is not always necessary to read every chapter of a non-fiction book to understand the story. When working with a group or learners at LBS levels 1 & 2, you might find the following chapter summaries helpful.

#### **Chapter 1 – Looking for adventure**

The first chapter describes Wally Floody's childhood. He was not a very good student but enjoyed sports. Wally uses his athletic ability to join a mining company baseball team and get a job as a miner. He meets a young lady named Betty and even though they talk about marriage Wally is not ready to settle down. In 1939, Wally and his friend Chas go 'riding the rails' looking for some adventure.

#### **Chapter 2 – Signing up**

The Second World War starts and Wally wants to become a pilot. He and Betty get married, move to Kirkland Lake, and wait for his call to attend training school for the Royal Canadian Air Force. Several men get sent to train while Wally waits for his chance. Wally finally gets the call to go to Brandon, Manitoba to begin his pilot training.

#### **Chapter 3 – Getting wings**

We follow Wally through the many stages of his training to become a fighter pilot. Wally graduates as a pilot officer on May 17, 1941. After a very busy few days, Wally leaves Halifax on a ship for England on May 26, 1941. Betty will not see her husband again for four years.

#### **Chapter 4 – 401 Squadron**

After a dangerous convoy journey across the Atlantic, Wally arrived in England in June 1941. Sent for advanced pilot training in Scotland, he learned about 'circuses', 'rodeos' and 'rhubarbs' all different types of raids flown over France. Wally was also instructed on his duty to escape if he should be captured and sent to a prisoner of war camp. Wally had some bad luck on his second raid and was shot down and captured.

#### **Chapter 5 – Captured**

We follow Wally's journey to Germany and his arrival at Stalag Luft I, a prisoner of war camp. Wally is angry with himself for having been captured. He starts to think about his duty to escape.

Betty is notified by the RCAF that Wally is missing in action. She then gets more information from a man listening to German broadcasts on his short-wave radio that Wally has been captured, not killed.

### **Chapter 6 – The ‘escape-proof’ camp**

In March 1942, Wally is moved to Stalag Luft III a large prisoner camp built to house captured airmen. The Germans had built this camp to be escape proof. Several men tried various methods to escape but none of them worked. The efforts to escape Stalag Luft III were eventually organized by RAF Squadron leader Roger Bushell who wanted to make use of Wally’s mining experience and construct an escape tunnel.

### **Chapter 7 – The X organization**

In this chapter, we get a good description of how the X organization, the group of prisoners working on an escape, prepared to begin digging their tunnels. Wally led the tunneling group. George Harsh, an American, was in charge of security. Other men were in charge of things like getting wood, forging documents and bribing the guards.

### **Chapter 8 – Tom, Dick and Harry**

The prisoners knew they would have to prepare documents, clothes, maps and compasses for the men who were going to escape. They used very ingenious things to make the supplies they needed. Wally and the other tunnellers worked in very hard conditions to dig out the three tunnels they planned. One tunnel, “Tom”, was discovered by the Germans and blown up. The tunnel called “Dick” had been used to hide sand and dirt and had been filled in. All the American prisoners, many who had helped work on the escape plan, were moved to a new compound. It got too dangerous to work on the last tunnel, “Harry”, so tunnel digging was stopped.

### **Chapter 9 – One day at a time**

The routine of prisoner life was filled with roll calls, listening to hidden radios built in the camp, taking classes taught by other prisoners, writing letters home, making household objects or working in the camp theater. For Wally and his fellow prisoners, food became very important. Prisoners were fed but their food was not tasty and the portions were small. Red Cross food packages gave some variety but these parcels did not arrive regularly.

### **Chapter 10 – Starting again**

In January 1944, Wally and his crew re-opened the tunnel named Harry. It looked like this tunnel would allow the men to escape. The X organization chose the 200 names of prisoners who would attempt the escape. Although they could not find it, the Germans knew some prisoners were working on a tunnel.

### **Chapter 11 – The darkest hour**

With only a few weeks to go before the planned escape, Wally and twenty other prisoners are sent to another prisoner camp called Belaria. He had missed his chance to join the escape. On March 24, 1944 the escape went ahead but there were problems. The next day Wally learned that 76 men had managed to use the tunnel to escape. The escape caused a panic all over Germany. Twenty-three prisoners were recaptured and returned to Stalag Luft III. Two Norwegian men made it to Sweden. A Dutch prisoner returned to Holland and then made his way to Spain. The shocking information was that the remaining 50 prisoners had been shot.

### **Chapter 12 – The long march**

In January 1945 the Germans marched Wally and his fellow prisoners from Belaria. Wally walked in the winter conditions with very little food for a week. The prisoners were put on trains and taken to the prisoner of war camp at Luckenwald. Conditions at the camp were very bad and Wally believed he was in danger of starving to death. The Russian army arrived at Luckenwald in April. The prisoners were caught in the tension between the Russian and American armies. They had to wait several weeks for their release into American hands.

### **Chapter 13 – Coming home**

Wally got back home to Canada on July 1, 1945. He and Betty started a family. Wally learned he had been awarded the Order of the British Empire by King George VI for his brave work at Stalag Luft III working on escape tunnels. In 1951 Paul Brickhill, an Australian, wrote the bestselling book *The Great Escape* about the prisoner escape from Stalag Luft III. It talks about Wally’s work on the tunnels.

### **Chapter 14 – Back to Germany**

John Sturges, the director for the film version of *The Great Escape* invites Wally to be a technical advisor for the movie. The movie, a fictionalized account of the escape, had actor Charles Bronson playing the part of ‘Danny’ a Polish airman who is the “tunnel king”.

**Chapter 15 – The great escape on the big screen**

With the release of the film *The Great Escape*, Wally became something of a celebrity. The film was very successful and Wally was pleased he was able to provide technical details that helped the movie be factually accurate.

**Chapter 16 – Living history**

There were many tributes to Wally when he died in 1989. He had suffered from chronic lung disease that his family thought started when he dug in sand and grit while making escape tunnels. “Wally was living Canadian history. He always kept on fighting and other men took inspiration from that.”

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Prologue**

1. In this biography of Wally Floody, the author sets the stage in the Prologue. Flight Lieutenant Wally Floody was instrumental in digging escape tunnels in German prisoner of war camps during World War II. What do we learn about Wally Floody and his determination to escape?
2. Heroes are often portrayed as glamorous risk takers. What type of person do you think of when you think of a hero? Who do you think of as a hero and why?

**Chapter 1**

3. What work prepared Wally for what was to come?
4. Who did Wally meet at the 1938 Grey Cup game?
5. Wally and Ches left on their journey around North America in the spring of 1939. Why did they decide to take this trip at this time? What risks did they take by riding the rails?

**Chapter 2**

6. When did Canada declare war on Germany? What were the allied countries?
7. How did Canada’s declaration of war on Germany affect Wally’s life? Why did Wally feel that the Air Force was the right choice for him?

**Chapter 3**

8. What is a Link trainer and how did Wally do?
9. What goal had Wally set for himself?
10. The picture of Wally and Betty on page 27 shows a happy couple. What do you imagine Wally’s wife Betty may have felt when her husband left for England? How long would it be before Betty saw her husband again?

**Chapter 4**

11. The instructors gave lectures on how to bail out of their planes if pilots were hit. Not much was said about being taken prisoner, since it was far more likely that either pilots would make it back to the base, or they would be killed. What were all the air force officers expected to do if they were taken prisoner by the Germans?
12. What characteristics do you need to be a successful escaper? What characteristics did Wally feel he possessed?
13. What happened on the morning of October 27, 1941?

**Chapter 5**

14. What was the German policy for prisoners of war? In the early years of the war, how did pilots regard one another?
15. How did Wally feel about being captured?
16. How did Betty find out that Wally was still alive?
17. The photograph on page 41 shows Wally in Stalag Luft I. What does the picture tell you about life as a prisoner of war?

**Chapter 6**

18. How had the Germans designed Stalag Luft III to be escape proof?
19. What kept Wally from getting depressed?
20. One of the prisoners to arrive at the camp was a wounded American named George Harsh who had been a bomber-gunner in the RCAF. What does Wally do for George and what happens as a result?

**Chapter 7**

21. Who is the “Tunnel King” and what is his responsibility? What are the challenges for the “Tunnel King”?
22. How did the prisoners solve the problem of finding wood? How did the prisoners get rid of the sand Wally and his crew dug out of the tunnels? How was air supplied to the tunnels?
23. What words would you use to describe the prisoners who worked on the escape plan?

**Chapter 8**

24. What were some of the ways the prisoners prepared for the escape?
25. Why did Wally make the men who did the digging in the tunnels wear long johns?

**Chapter 9**

26. How did prisoners keep informed about the war?

How did they fill their days when they weren't working on the tunnel?

27. What news from home did Wally receive while he was a prisoner? Wally kept a journal. What did he write about?

**Chapter 10**

28. The diggers enlarged the tunnel for a halfway house that they called Piccadilly Circus, after a busy intersection in London. How did this feature make digging easier for the tunnelers and the escapers?
29. How did Betty know that Wally was working on a way to escape from the prisoner of war camp?
30. How did the X organization choose the men who would try to escape using Harry? Did Wally think he could escape and get all the way back to England?

**Chapter 11**

31. With less than 100 feet to go, what happened to dash all of Wally's hopes for escape? How did you feel when you read this passage?
32. How many men managed to escape using the tunnel Wally had dug?
33. How did the Germans react to the 'great escape'?

**Chapter 12**

34. What hardships did Wally suffer on the move from Belaria to Luckenwald?
35. As prisoners traveled in a sealed boxcar, Wally comforted a young pilot who was suffering from pneumonia. What does this act of kindness tell you about Wally?
36. Why were the prisoners at Luckenwald not released to the American army right away?

**Chapter 13**

37. Wally did not travel to London to receive his award from King George VI, as he did not think of himself as a hero. Do you think Wally was a hero?

**Chapter 14**

38. What kind of details did Wally advise the filmmakers about?
39. How did Wally know the film was true to life?

**Chapter 15**

40. What unexpected challenges did John Sturges, an experienced director of action films, have to face when filming *The Great Escape*?
41. How did Wally use the premiere of the film as a fundraiser? Who did he raise money for?

42. How did the former prisoners of war who attended the Toronto screening of *The Great Escape* react to the film?

**Chapter 16**

43. How did Wally's life change after the release of *The Great Escape*?
44. How do you think Wally might have felt about meeting Herman Glemnitz again?
45. Wally and Betty cared for George Harsh in their home after he had a stroke. What does this tell you about the friendships Wally made during the war and the way he felt about these friends?
46. How does Wally Floody meet or not meet your expectations of what you think of as a hero?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

1. Watch the movie *The Great Escape*. This book has given you lots of background information about the escape from Stalag Luft III and the people involved. There is also a sequel *The Great Escape II: the untold story* starring Christopher Reeve, Judd Hirsch and Donald Pleasance. In *The Great Escape* the characters were rewarded for their hard work and escaped. In your opinion, which one, the book or the movie, tells the better story?
2. Read more accounts of the 'great escape'. Other books have been written about the escape from different viewpoints.

Paul Brickhill *The Great Escape* (available as an audio book) Blackstone Audio Books, 1997.

Anthony Burgess *The longest tunnel : the true story of World War II's great escape tunnel*. New York : Grove Weidenfeld , 1990.

Anton Gill *The great escape: the full dramatic story with contributions from survivors and their families*. London : Review, 2002.

Jonathan Vance *A gallant company : the men of the great escape*. New York : Ibooks, 2003.

3. There were 35,000 German prisoners of war who were brought to POW camps throughout Canada during World War II. *The Enemy Within*, is a National Film Board of Canada film made by Eva Colmers whose father had been held in Canada as a prisoner of war. (Try your local public library.)