

Pilot who dug tunnel in the 'Great Escape' to have train named in his honour by GWR

May 7, 2021



A Second World War pilot who played a vital part in the 'Great Escape' from a German prisoner-of-war camp will today have a train named in his honour by Great Western Railway.

Wing Commander Ken Rees, from Wales, was imprisoned in Stalag Luft III and helped to dig the tunnel from which a daring escape was made in March 1944.

Among those present at a train-naming ceremony at Swansea station will be RAF Air Officer for Wales, Air Commodore Dai Williams, the RAF Queen's Colour Squadron, and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales, David TC Davies.

GWR set out to mark last year's 75th anniversary of the end of World War Two by naming seven of its Intercity Express Trains after remarkable people involved in the conflict.

Highly-decorated spy Odette Hallowes, D-Day veteran Harry Billinge MBE and 'Cockleshell Hero' Cpl George Sheard were added to its list of #greatwesterners but the Covid-19 pandemic prevented any further ceremonies from taking place.

Now the train operator is fulfilling its pledge to honour four more war heroes and Wing Commander Rees' name will feature on Intercity Express Train 800310, forming the 1122 service from Swansea to London Paddington following the ceremony.

A pilot with Bomber Command, Ken was shot down over Norway in October 1942 just two weeks after getting married. He was taken to Stalag Luft III, a prisoner camp designed for captured airmen and the scene of the 'Great Escape'.

Ken was a digger on the Tunnel 'Harry', the longest of all the tunnels and the one used in the escape. In the 1963 film of the famous feat, Steve McQueen's character is said to be based on Ken due to his antagonistic attitude towards his captors, a result of his brother-in-law, Sqn Ldr Harold Starr, being shot under his parachute during the Battle of Britain.

Ken, who died in 2014 aged 93, always maintained he had nothing to do with the story that McQueen's character was loosely based on him.

"He is taller than I am, I'm heavier than he is, he's American and I'm a Welshman – the only things we've got in common is that we both annoyed the Germans and ended up doing stretches in the cooler.

"I didn't get out and if I did, I wouldn't have been able to ride a motorbike anyway."

RAF Air Officer for Wales, Air Commodore Dai Williams, said: "I welcome the opportunity to join GWR to commemorate Wing Commander Ken Rees of Wrexham, RAF Pilot of World War II and part of the 'Great Escape'. It will be a privilege to acknowledge the service of this remarkable RAF Officer."

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales, David TC Davies MP, said: "It's only fitting that Wing Commander Ken Rees' memory is being honoured in this way by Great Western Railway. He was a proud Welshman whose exceptional bravery and painstaking efforts helped 76 men escape from captivity. His heroics have rightly gone down in the annals of history and his significant wartime contribution continues to be remembered."

GWR Engineering Director, Simon Green, said: "We are honoured to be naming one of our Intercity Express Trains after Wing Commander Ken Rees, who played such a critical role as a member of the digging team in the 'Great Escape'.

"We at Great Western Railway have a long history of naming trains after Great Westerners, the past and present heroes from across our network.

"It is right that we honour some of those heroes of the war effort, remembering the sacrifice, bravery and tenacity that later generations owe so much to."

As more people return to rail after the easing of lockdown restrictions, GWR has been working hard to welcome people back on to its services.

This includes:

- A 24 per cent increase in cleaning hours every week since March 2020
- Sanitising (fogging) of 1,120 vehicles every 4 weeks
- Carrying out 2,150 on board surface tests (ATP) every four weeks, to ensure the effectiveness of our cleaning
- 272 train cleaning processes reviewed, and many adapted
- Hand sanitising facilities at key stations across its network.

The train operator has also provided extra staff at key stations to offer help and guidance; and processes are in place to help customers maintain a safe distance where possible.

GWR is encouraging customers to continue to travel safely. People are reminded to:

- Wear a face covering
- Travel at quieter times where possible
- Wash your hands more regularly
- Buy tickets online, on a smart card or by using the GWR app

Photo credit: Great Western Railway