

ENTOMBED

How I Discovered the Most Astonishing Story of World War II

By Tony Matthews



Entombed — *Six Men Buried Alive for Six Years*, a novel inspired by actual events. I'd like to give you a brief background to the book, how I came to write it, and what the book is actually about.

This is, without doubt, the kind of story that writers and historians wait all their lives to discover, an untold story that boggles the imagination and seems completely unbelievable but is true, nonetheless. I have literally been waiting all my adult life to find and write this one story. I knew it would capture the imagination of the world. And it has. When *Entombed* was first published here in Australia, it was also quickly sold to a major European publisher.

So what is *Entombed*, how did I find and develop this story and why is it one of the greatest untold epics of World War Two?

To answer those questions we have to go back to the mid 1990s. At that time I had been awarded a two-year commission to research and write a comprehensive history of the city of Maryborough. As part of the research into that very complex history it was necessary for me to read every newspaper that had been published in the region since the country's quite brutal colonial years. This included reading every edition of the city's most influential publication: the *Maryborough Chronicle*, which had commenced publishing in 1860 and later became a daily newspaper. As may be imagined, this in itself was a mammoth task. By the time I reached those editions published during the 1950s — more than ninety years after the paper had first appeared — I had read around 25,000 newspapers and was becoming rather punch-drunk. Then, suddenly, a small report, buried on one of the back pages of the newspaper, caught my eye. The blunt, unvarnished piece was just a few lines in length and appeared to have been almost deliberately placed where only a small number of people would read it. However, in a few sparse sentences it gave the barest account of the discovery of some men — former German army soldiers — who had accidentally been buried alive in a vast military stores bunker at the port of Gdynia, in Poland, in 1945 and had remained buried, deep underground, for well over six years.



At first I could not believe what I was reading. I thought there must have been some mistake. Perhaps the British journalist who wrote the piece had made a typo and written 'years' instead of 'weeks'. I had been researching the era of the Second World War for a very long time but had never heard of six men having been trapped underground for such a lengthy period. I copied the story on one of those old wet-paper copiers,

set the soggy page aside to dry and wondered why the report had not appeared as front-page headlines. I was intensely busy at the time, with a publishing deadline to meet, so I just filed the copy for future reference.

Within a few days, however, I discovered another similar story. It too was buried on the back pages of the newspaper, as though deliberately hidden there, and this article provided a few further points of interest. By now I knew that this was the kind of story that needed further examination because it had almost limitless potential.

I began to delve deeper. Had the story appeared around the world? If so, had it also been hidden in back pages of international newspapers. Why had no one featured it in the press or other forms of media?

What I discovered astonished me and I realised very quickly that I would have to write both a book and screenplay based on these events.

However, none of that came about immediately. I was already deeply committed to the Maryborough history and as soon as I had completed that twin-volume project, which was published under the title of: *River of Dreams*, I was literally swamped by requests to write other histories — many of which took up to two years — so my plans to write a book about the trapped German soldiers had to be shelved for more than a decade. When I eventually got around to writing *Entombed*, however, it became a lasting and intriguing passion taking me on a fascinating historical journey that, metaphorically and periodically, saw me time-travelling back to the 1940s and 1950s for the next fifteen or sixteen years.

But what is the book all about?

Entombed is the story of six German soldiers led by a *Wehrmacht* officer whom I have named Captain Hans von Roth, who were ordered to empty a massive stores bunker at Gdynia on Poland's Baltic coast. This was during the closing weeks of 1944 and the first few months of 1945. Soviet forces were rapidly approaching from the east, and the German garrison at Gdynia was desperately attempting to evacuate the port. Tens of thousands of wounded German soldiers, along with thousands of civilians, doctors, nurses, hospital orderlies and vast numbers of ancillary military personnel were attempting to flee. Many of these were being crammed on board ships at Gdynia for passage through the Baltic Sea to the port of Kiel and subsequently through the Kiel Canal to Hamburg. Included among those

ships was the huge German liner *Wilhelm Gustloff* which would later be sunk by a Soviet submarine with an estimated loss of 9000 lives — about half of whom were children. It would become the worst maritime disaster in world history.

While all this was taking place, the six German soldiers were working frantically to empty the stores facility. This bunker, in addition to containing a vast quantity of food, also contained a significant amount of munitions. Because of this, the bunker had been rigged with explosives and was to be destroyed once the vital stores had been brought to the surface. However, for some reason, now unknown, the explosives detonated accidentally and the entire bunker was buried beneath an enormous amount of rubble. The members of the German demolition team who had set the explosive charges believed that the six men who had been in the bunker at the time would all have been killed, and, as the Soviets were rapidly approaching the port, there was little or no time to investigate further. Soon afterwards the port was abandoned by the Germans, the Soviets moved into the city and no further thought was given to the six men who had been in the bunker at the time of the detonation.

Yet, in fact, all six had survived the explosion — dazed, bruised and injured — but still very much alive.

What followed were more than six terrible years as the men struggled desperately to survive what was certainly a grotesque form of living hell. They had plenty of food — principally military rations and field supplies — but not a single drop of water. Yet how could they survive without water? Fortunately the store also contained thousands of bottles of Rhine wine and schnapps. Of course, one cannot live forever on alcohol, but the soldiers were able to survive on this until it rained at the port heavily enough for water to drip through the rubble above them. They caught the muddied water in mugs and mess-tins, filtered it through flour-sacks and mixed it with the wine to make it last longer. For the entire six years they were underground this rainwater and wine mixture provided their bodies with just sufficient moisture for them to survive.

The psychological stresses of being trapped underground were also formidable. As those first weeks and months progressed, it soon became evident to the men that they had little or no hope of rescue. They did not know what was happening in the port above them, of course, but before being trapped they had known that the Germans had been evacuating and that the entire city would soon be in the hands of the enemy. Far underground they would have heard the approaching sounds of heavy Soviet artillery and rocket batteries, and eventually all had gone quiet as the port had been captured by Stalin's jubilant forces. At that moment all six Germans realised that they were desperately alone





in the darkness and would almost certainly die there. There was even the distinct possibility that if, by some miracle, the Soviets managed to rescue them, they would either be shot out of hand or sent to one of the notorious gulags in Siberia where death was also highly likely.

Fortunately the trapped men had a large store of candles; they were not left in complete darkness, and with the bountiful supply of military rations they realised that their deaths could be delayed at least for some considerable period. However, they had no knowledge of how long they could last under such appalling conditions. Eventually two of the men cracked under the psychological pressures and committed suicide. Yet this too left the remaining four soldiers with a diabolical problem. What could they do with two rotting corpses in a rat-infested bunker? There was nowhere to bury the dead, and the bodies would almost certainly heighten the probability of spreading disease to the surviving men. They eventually formulated a plan to bury the bodies in flour. Emptying two of the food barrels, the corpses were placed inside and covered with flour which had the effect of embalming them. In later years, when the bunker would be excavated, the corpses would be found in remarkably good condition.

In 1951, after almost six and a half years underground, those who had survived the terrible years of incarceration were discovered by Polish workers clearing the site for development. When the bunker was uncovered, the survivors climbed into the sunlight, confused and frightened. By now they were totally blind. Their last candle had flickered out two years previously and they had lived for that entire period in an impenetrable darkness that had induced complete blindness.

I have fictionalised this story, of course, and my interpretation of events is told within the spectrum of a novel, but this is not just a story of six men trapped underground for over six years. It's also a poignant love story involving my constructed character Erika von Roth, wife of one of the trapped men, who, with the assistance of a British Army officer named Ben Marlowe, spends those years desperately attempting to discover what had become of her husband during the war.

This is a story of immense struggle against immeasurable odds — a struggle tempered in fear, horror and death, but it is also a story of great love and anguish — the anguish of Erika von Roth who, unaware that her husband is still trapped underground in Poland, is fighting to survive in post-war Germany. Erika must find her own way through the love of her lost husband, and the growing, unexpected and self-betraying love for Ben Marlowe, a man who was once one of her sworn enemies.

I have been asked why this astonishing story has not been told before, and the answer is fairly simple. When the survivors (I'm not saying how many) were eventually discovered, the story of their ordeal coincided with the major front-page news of the defection of Soviet spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean. For weeks thereafter the story of the spies' defection dominated every form of media, and the discovery of a few former German soldiers after years trapped underground was relegated to the back pages of the newspapers. Even in Berlin, I discovered, it was reported as insignificant news. These were the days long before Internet news services or social media and the story of the soldiers was quickly — almost thankfully — forgotten. These events occurred shortly after the end of the war. All through the mid-to-late 1940s many major and minor war-crimes trials were taking place and full details of the Holocaust — the brutal murder of more than six million Jewish people — were becoming increasingly well known. Germans were internationally regarded as pariahs and monsters and that was especially the case for war criminals or anyone who had served as part of the German military. Therefore, when the fate of these six men was revealed to the world, it was a story that no one really wanted to hear. No one was interested in what had become of six men who had served in the Nazi military and had helped to maintain the power and authority of the most criminal, destructive and murderous regime in the history of humankind. It was simply easier to put the story onto the back pages of the press, or not publish it at all, and to move on as quickly and as painlessly as possible.



A few notes on the development of the story:

It was necessary for me to research the many medical and psychological aspects of what it would have been like for the men being trapped for such a lengthy period in such appalling conditions. I was fortunate to be able to discuss these elements with a medical practitioner.

During my research I also interviewed a former German Army soldier who had served on the Eastern Front as a cook during the war and he was able to tell me exactly what would have been in the bunker. It was comprised largely of tinned meat and dried rations such as rice, peas and chickpeas. The men suffered from a lack of fresh foods and greens which affected their health, but there was never any possibility of them dying of starvation.

Normally books about the war written by people who are not German, tend to portray most German soldiers as brutal — that is fairly archetypal. However, there were good Germans during the war as well as bad and I realised that this story needed to be about people who would have different personalities and ideologies. When thrown together they would make for a confronting mix of people, especially in the pressure-cooker environment of being trapped together for six years. I wanted to experiment with that and to push its boundaries. There is a deep element of goodness in many of us and I wanted to demonstrate that it would be the good within them, overcoming the evil, that assisted with the survival of those trapped underground.

I would like to think that while this story is one of great tension and anxiety, and that the ending is unexpected, it will give readers the satisfaction of knowing that these events, although fictionalised here for dramatic effect, are truly an indication that during times of war extraordinary events can occur and we as humans have to rise to the occasion and deal with whatever is thrown at us, no matter how difficult and dangerous they may be.

My book, *Entombed*, has been written as a novel, but it has been based as closely as possible on all the known events, and recounts this amazing story in all the details that have come down to us from that time.

