Out of the pages of history comes this unusual story about how the game of Monopoly was used during the Second World War. A snopes.com piece, War Games, and the 2004 Parker Brothers history, The Game Makers, both reveal that MI9, the British secret service unit responsible for escape and evasion, conspired with John Waddington, Ltd., the UK manufacturer of Monopoly, to build into the game helpful tools of escape for allied POWs in German detention camps.
Few luxuries were permitted in those camps, but organizations such as the Red Cross were allowed to distribute “games and pastimes” to prisoners.

The scheme was to use the game boards and tokens to conceal maps, money, files and compasses that would help POWs in their escapes.

The UK version of the game is played the same as our US version, but uses British landmarks, pound note “play money” and game pieces. Before the cleverly crafted games were finished, workers carefully carved out exact depressions in the game boards, filling them with low-profile compasses, files, and maps that showed escape routes from the camp where each game was to be sent. Actual pound notes were hidden among the play money.

Waddington had manufactured a unique technology that made printing on silk possible. Thinner than paper, silk isn’t water soluble, and is noiseless when handled, making it a perfect surface on which to print an escape map, which could be easily hidden in a boot or cigarette packet.
Philip Orbanes, author of several books on Monopoly, called the plot “ingenious,”

As it took a stroke of genius to hatch the scheme, it also took another stroke of genius to carry it out.

The “special” editions of Monopoly were marked with a tiny red dot placed on the “Free Parking” space on the otherwise perfectly marked game board. That little red dot, unnoticed by a guard, would be welcomed as the first step on the road to freedom.

Before leaving on their missions, RAF pilots and crew would be briefed on the special game kits that they could receive in care packages, should they be imprisoned in Nazi war camps. They were also told to completely destroy the games after they had recovered all of the escape equipment hidden within them. Because prisoners were faithful to follow all of their instructions, unfortunately, no special Monopoly sets were ever saved.
However, British historians believe that the MacGyver-like Monopoly set kits were invaluable to a number of WW II POWs. Of the nearly 35,000 British soldiers who escaped imprisonment during the Second World War, it’s estimated that some 20,000 of them used the silk maps, compasses, and assorted tools that they found in their Monopoly games!

That popular game didn’t have a “monopoly” on those used to aid prisoners of war during WW II. Bank notes, maps and other escape tools were also hidden in Chess sets and card packets.

The clandestine scheme to use games to help POWs “get out of jail free” was kept secret for over forty-five years. Recently, articles about Monopoly, Chess and playing card “escape kits” have appeared in USA Today, New York Daily News, and many European news publications.

As Paul Harvey used to say, “And now you know the rest of the story!”