

The Legendary Dambusters

Sixty years ago this month a specially formed squadron of brave young airmen took part in one of the most daring exploits of the Second World War

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Above: The Lancaster bomber was a key element in the success of the mission

Right: An aerial view RAF Scampton as it was at the beginning of the Second World War showing the A15, Ermine Street, still following a straight line to the east of the base

Far right: A portrait of Guy Gibson in the RAF Scampton museum



ON SUNDAY, 16th May, 1943, the still of the Lincolnshire night was shattered by the deafening roar of seventy-six Rolls-Royce Merlin engines as nineteen huge Lancaster bombers lifted off from RAF Scampton, five miles north of Lincoln.

Their target; the great dams providing power for the heavily industrialised area of the Rhur valley, vital in feeding the insatiable demands of Hitler's war machine.

May 2003 is the sixtieth anniversary of the legendary raid carried out by the Dambusters, surely the true pioneers of low-level precision bombing.

The economic importance to Germany of the hydro-electric dams in the German heartland made an attack by

British Bomber Command a high priority. Conventional bombing, however, could never be accurate enough to destroy so small a target.

Barnes Neville Wallis, aircraft designer and scientist, was called in to find a solution. Tests began at the Elan Valley in mid-Wales where explosives were fired against a dam wall. It soon became apparent that a bomb had to explode at a precise depth right against the dam wall in order to create a breach.

Barnes Wallis carried out extensive testing at the National Physics Laboratory in Teddington on a bomb which would skip along the reservoir surface and so avoid anti-torpedo nets, hit the dam wall and sink, detonating by pressure fuse at the required depth. The

bouncing bomb was born.

RAF Scampton, a former First World War airfield, was re-activated in 1936 and chosen as the base for a bomber squadron specially formed to attack the Möhne, Sorpe and Eder dams. Originally called Squadron X, it became the famous 617 Squadron.

Guy Gibson was selected as Wing Commander and he began to hand-pick his crews. The Lancaster bomber, with its crew of seven and its 102-foot wingspan, was the only aircraft capable of delivering the 9,250-pound bomb. Designed by Roy Chadwick, built at Avro's Chadderton plant near Manchester and powered by four of the same engines that drove the Spitfire, it had a maximum speed of 287mph and a cruise-

ing speed of only 210mph.

Flying practice began in earnest at Derwent Reservoir in County Durham. Despite complaints from the locals about loss of roof tiles and drops in milk and egg yields, low-level flying continued for six weeks. Radio communication was initially poor though, and serious doubts were raised after a top-brass demonstration went farcically wrong. After the forceful intervention of Guy Gibson, state-of-the-art radios were installed in each of the aircraft and performances drastically improved. The only remaining problem was how to achieve the exact flying height of sixty feet, essential for the precise release of the bomb.

Barnes Wallis eventually came up with the simple solution of mounting spotlights on each of the wings, fixed at such an angle that their beams converged at exactly the required height. The final hurdle was overcome and the mission given the green light.

Clear skies over Germany meant good bombing conditions but also meant good hunting for Luftwaffe fighters and so, to avoid these as well as the enemy radar, the squadron crossed the North Sea sometimes as low as fifty feet. This was to prove costly, as call-sign AJ-H had to turn back after the bomb was actually torn from the underside of the aeroplane by the waves. The remaining eighteen aeroplanes flew on, eventually reaching their respective targets.

The first wave of nine aircraft attacked the Möhne dam. After four unsuccessful attempts, and with Guy Gibson flying in alongside each attacking aeroplane in order to draw anti-aircraft fire – an action which was to earn him the Victo-

ria Cross – the dam was breached by call-sign AJ-J, flown by Flight Lieutenant Maltby. The remaining three aircraft from the first wave were ordered to attack the Eder dam which was also breached.

Despite a number of direct hits, the Sorpe dam remained intact. It was later found to be of a different type of construction and so unsuitable for the bouncing bomb.

Having achieved all that they could, and after crippling losses, 617 returned to Lincolnshire. Of the nineteen aircraft which set out, only eleven returned. Fifty-three aircrew were killed and three became prisoners of war at Stalag Luft3 in Poland. It was from here in March, 1944, that a large group of prisoners escaped, only to be recaptured and executed in what became known as 'The Great Escape'.

The attacks on the dams were seen as a huge success with widespread localised flooding and disruption to industry, and large-scale relocation of human resources was necessary to repair the damage. But it was bought at a terrible cost.

It must have been a strangely subdued atmosphere back at Petwood, a mixture of triumph and grief at the loss of so many friends.

Petwood, at Woodhall Spa, the home built by Sir Blundle Maple for his daughter Grace, was already a hotel before the war and was requisitioned by the RAF to become the officers' mess for 617 Squadron.

It is a hotel once again but visiting it is like stepping back sixty years. Original oak panelling and a wooden staircase, where portraits of Guy Gibson and

the squadron are hung, lead from the four-postered bedrooms down to the snooker room. Outside, near the car park, can be found the remnants of actual bouncing bombs.

Its mission completed, 617 Squadron left its Lincolnshire home and flew out of Lossiemouth in Scotland to launch raids against the battleship Tirpitz, sister ship to the Bismark. Precision bombing was once again successful and the Tirpitz was sunk on 12th November, 1944.

Lincolnshire continued its Dambusters connection when, in 1954, RAF Scampton was used in the making of the film, starring Richard Todd as Guy Gibson, and Michael Redgrave as Barnes Wallis.

Gibson himself was tragically killed in 1944 when the Mosquito he was flying crashed at Steenberg in Holland. He is buried there along with his co-pilot, Squadron Leader J B Warwick.

To commemorate the anniversary, the RAF Swing Wing Band will be playing at the Petwood Hotel on Sunday, 18th May at 2pm. Tickets at £10 are available from 01526 352411. During this weekend 617 Squadron will be holding their reunion at the hotel.

Memorabilia from 617 Squadron is included in the RAF Scampton museum. It can be visited by appointment by telephoning Merv Hallam on 01522 879137. Visitors can also see the building in which the pre-flight briefings took place.

Thorpe Camp visitor centre, home of 617 Squadron prior to the raid, will be open to the public on Sunday, 18th May. Tel: 01526 342249. □

Nigger's last resting place

GUY GIBSON's pet black Labrador and squadron mascot, Nigger, was with his master at Scampton and accompanied him on many training flights, though never on raids. However, Nigger was killed when he ran out onto the A15 and was run over by a passing car. In the 'Dambusters' film, it is depicted as a hit-and-run accident but in reality, the motorist stopped his car, picked up Nigger's body and brought him into the guard room.

Before his burial, Nigger was laid on one of the beds in a cell at the back of the guardroom; the bed is now one of the exhibits in the RAF Scampton museum. He was buried at midnight, just as his master was flying over the Möhne dam. His grave is in a small plot, close to Guy Gibson's office, so his master could always see Nigger's last resting place.

The story of Nigger seems to have touched many hearts as people now come from all over the world to visit the grave which is carefully fenced off by railings and tended by Merv Hallam. □



Right: Nigger's grave at RAF Scampton