

Memories of the Dambusters

My wife and I with two friends joined a group of fifteen others on a coach tour which was described as a four day "*Themed Break*" dedicated to the remarkable achievements of the 617 Dambusters Squadron in 1943. We were to visit Lincolnshire, home to the Royal Air Force and famous for its World War II airfields, and also to visit the area where the 617 Squadron practiced before embarking on their perilous attacks on the German dams.

On the first day of the tour we journeyed north to Tankersley which is situated between Sheffield and Barnsley and our base was the Tankersley Manor, a 17th century manor house which had been converted into an hotel with a leisure complex and a restaurant that is noted for its fine cuisine. On this first evening we were served dinner in a room separate from the main restaurant because we were joined at dinner by Paul Holland who had been chosen as the official 50th Anniversary Artist to the Dambusters Squadron. He was chosen from 200 applicants as his painting called "*Salute to a Legend*", which he submitted in the competition for this title, was chosen by the judges as the winner. The painting was of a Lancaster bomber coming in to land on a moonlit runway and amongst the clouds in the background could be seen the ghostly face of Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC., the leader of the 617 Squadron who had been killed on another mission. Paul Holland brought along a display of his paintings and we were able to buy prints and to talk to him about his work which also included wood turning and carving.

The next day we went to RAF Scampton that has a history dating back to 1917 and which is still in use by the RAF today. It was in August/September 1943 that the base achieved a double award of the Victoria Cross when Flight Lieutenant Learoyd and Sergeant John Hannah won the award for their bravery during an attack on the Dortmund Ems canal. But it was in May 1943 that the base was brought to the very forefront of Bomber Command with the attack against the Mohne, Eder and Sorpe dams. The raid was led by Wing Commander Guy Gibson and earned the station its third Victoria Cross. It was on this airfield that the Dambusters were based and in later years the Dambusters film starring Richard Todd was filmed here. When we arrived at the base we were met by the curator who took us to the small museum that is dedicated to the 617 Squadron and contains some 700 exhibits. These included photographs of many members of the Squadron, uniforms and medals awarded to them and poignant letters written to and from the widows and mothers of the men who lost their lives on the various missions. We were told that at one time the lives of these fliers could be measured in weeks from the date when they joined the Squadron. There were boards on the walls listing the very many names of those who had died. There were models and parts of the aircraft that operated from Scampton and personal memorabilia of the crews.

We were then taken on a tour of the airfield, passing the hangars where the Lancaster bombers were housed, then to the building where the crews were briefed, although we could not go inside, and on to the administration block where Guy Gibson had his office. Finally we were shown the grave of Guy Gibson's Labrador dog "*Nigger*" who was tragically killed in a road accident on the day of the raid on the German dams. A plaque commemorates this event and his grave is carefully tended to this day.

We then moved on to The Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre at East Kirby which is owned and operated by Fred and Harold Panton and was conceived as a memorial to their elder brother, Pilot Officer Christopher Panton, and all others of the 55,000 aircrew of Bomber

Command who lost their lives during World War II. The centre is the home of a Lancaster bomber Mk2 NX611 named "*Just Jane*" and is one of the 7,000 built during the war with 5,000 being lost on operations. "*Just Jane*" is housed in a large hangar together with a two seat Spitfire and many other items of interest including artefacts recovered from aircraft crash sites by the volunteers of The Lincolnshire Aircraft Recovery Group. Every summer this Lancaster makes several taxi runs under its own power along the runway and the Spitfire often gives aerobatic displays over this airfield. On boards around the hangar are potted histories of all the RAF bomber squadrons that operated out of Lincolnshire airfields during World War II. Also displayed are the crew names of all Lancaster's lost by the two squadrons nos. 57 and 630 operating from this airfield during the war together with a selection of original letters sent to the widows and mothers informing them of the tragic news concerning their loved ones. A notice states that these letters are deliberately shown so that the many young visitors to the Centre are made aware of the price that was paid, and often has to be paid in the pursuit of liberty and peace.

There are many original buildings still standing on the airfield, including the control tower which is set up as a working model with various figures in uniform and you can listen to the conversations between the operators and the pilots on a mock raid on Berlin. The NAAFI still stands and we were able to buy refreshments and cooked meals here. There was also a large section devoted to souvenirs, books and videos.

I continued to walk across the airfield despite the drizzle and a cold wind and came to a small chapel. This was a particularly peaceful place for a rest and reflection, especially as I was the only one there and I sat for a while listening to the recorded organ music which was being played very softly over hidden speakers. Again, on the Roll of Honour on the walls of the chapel were the names of 848 aircrew who gave their lives whilst serving with 57 and 630 Squadrons which flew from this airfield between August 1943 and VE Day, the 8th May 1945.

From there I moved to another building which is known as the "*Escape Museum*" and which houses an interesting collection of items and details of aircrew members who had managed to evade capture or who had escaped from Germany and other parts of occupied Europe during the war. There were forged passes and papers together with a selection of genuine German passes and documents, and accurate copies of German uniforms and civilian clothing that had been made from various pieces of cloth which somehow the prisoners had scrounged or had surreptitiously obtained. The ingenuity employed was incredible. There was also some clothing of a Jewish lady who had escaped from a concentration camp and walked half way across Europe to freedom.

After the visit to the Aviation centre we returned to our hotel, where, after dinner that evening we were joined by an historian who had specialised in the history of the Dambusters but I regret that I cannot remember his name. He gave a presentation that lasted about 75 minutes in which he covered the preparation work that was done in creating the bomb which was to be used in the attack on the dams and then, went on to give details of the raid itself.

As you will know, a Dr. Barnes Wallis conceived the idea of destroying the Mohne, Eder and Sorpe dams with the consequent flooding of the vast German industrial centre in the Ruhr valley and the infliction of serious damage to the enemy's war effort. In 1943 the bombs used by the RAF were not powerful enough to destroy the dams and it was not possible to

use torpedoes because the Germans had placed metal barriers under the water behind the dams to protect them from an attack. Therefore Dr. Barnes Wallis had calculated that it was necessary to produce a bomb that would avoid these barriers and then sink to a precisely calculated depth where it would explode and the force of the explosion and the weight of the increased water pressure caused by that explosion would breach the dam. We were shown a video that contained old newsreels which were taken at the time when the bomb was being developed and these included shots of the Lancaster bomber dropping the bomb from various heights with varying results. Eventually it was calculated that the aircraft would have to fly at a height of 60 feet in order to get the bomb to bounce along the surface of the water. This bomb was not streamlined but was in the shape of a barrel and contained 5 tons of TNT. Apparatus on the aircraft spun the bomb rapidly in a vertical plane and in an anti-clockwise direction so that when it hit the dam it would then sink but the spinning motion would keep it in contact with the dam until a pressure switch detonated it at a pre-determined depth.

The historian then went on to explain the details of the raid itself which required great skill and courage on the part of the pilots and crews who undertook this mission. Wing Commander Guy Gibson led the raid and he was responsible for choosing the team of fliers who would accompany him. Nineteen Lancaster bombers were involved and their crews had been practising for weeks, flying at 60 feet above the waters of the Upper Derwent Valley and the Derwent and Ladybower dams in The Peak District National Park. The Derwent dam with its twin towers was very similar in appearance to the Mohne dam and enabled the RAF to construct a simple but effective bombsight which would ensure that the bouncing bomb was released at precisely the right moment because great accuracy was required. The high moorland on the sides of The Upper Derwent Valley was similar to the terrain surrounding the German dams. The altimeters on the Lancaster's were ineffective at 60 feet therefore two spotlights that shone downwards at an angle, were fitted to the aircraft and when the beams converged on the waters below, the pilot knew that he was at the correct height,

On the night of the raid the bombers flew in three waves all the way at 200 feet in order to avoid the enemy radar. When they arrived at the target they were met with heavy anti-aircraft fire but with sheer determination and courage the crews succeeded in hitting their targets with several bombs and the Mohne and Eder dams were breached but the Sorpe dam survived the attack. After dropping his bombs, Guy Gibson had switched on all the lights on his plane and had made a further run over the target to draw the gunfire away from the next waves of bombers which were coming in behind him. It was for this action that he was awarded the Victoria Cross. However, during this raid, seven of the nineteen Lancaster's and their crews were lost.

The video then showed aerial photographs that were taken by a reconnaissance aircraft the next day and one could see the damage which had been caused and a vast area that had been flooded as a result. Then followed interviews with German civilians and workers who had witnessed the assault. Inevitably there had been loss of life when the wall of water rushed along the valley and swept away the first village in its path and many of the factories in the area were flooded and put out of action for a while, but the workers claimed that they were soon operational again.

Finally the video showed Guy Gibson addressing a large group of scouts at a rally and to these boys and teenagers he stressed the values of self respect, respect for others and

discipline in their lives. The Historian then referred to the second Dambusters film that is being made and especially to the controversy which arose over the name of Guy Gibson's dog. Some felt that the name "*Nigger*" would now cause offence and wanted it changed, but eventually when it was pointed out that it was factually correct and that you can't change history, it was agreed that the proper name would be used in the film.

On the third day of the tour we were taken to the Upper Derwent Valley, a beautiful area with its large reservoirs, quiet forests and high moorland. The area attracts two million visitors per year. Our destination of course was the Derwent dam which played such an important part in the Dambusters training and in particular, the western tower that houses a memorial and the Dambusters museum. Here we were able to view the largest collection of memorabilia dedicated to the famous dams' raid as well as material relating to the original Dambusters film starring Richard Todd. An example of the "*bouncing bomb*" forms the centre piece of the display and our visit was made even more interesting because the curator made our group very welcome and gave us a talk on the many exhibits in this museum. He played us a video which gave us further information on the work and lives of the Dambusters. There was also a display of photographs and information relating to the construction of the Derwent and Howden dams which were built nearly 100 years ago by over a thousand people who were housed in a temporary "*tin town*" that was specially erected for them at Birchinlee. Further down the valley is the Ladybower dam that was completed in 1945 to help supply an ever increasing demand for water by the cities of Sheffield, Nottingham, Derby and Leicester. This resulted in flooding of the villages of Derwent and Ashopton and apparently when the waters of the reservoirs are low, you may get a glimpse of the village remains.

When we stood on the top of the Derwent dam and looked at the surrounding hills and the winding valley we realised how very dangerous it was to fly at 60 feet above the water at high speed with no room for error on the part of the pilots. Add to that, the fact that the raid was made at night and the aircraft were subjected to heavy anti-aircraft fire, the bravery and the flying skills of the crews were remarkable.

Finally, on the fourth day it was time for us to return home from a tour which was always interesting and at times emotional. Our group consisted mainly of elderly people like me who had lived through those turbulent wartime years and we had enjoyed each others company throughout our visit to the museums and airfields. We each returned with our own memories of the people we had met and the places that we had visited, and above all, memories of the men who were known as "*The Dambusters*".

Peter Appleby

