

Breaking the Dams

The Story of Dambuster David Maltby and His Crew

*

Charles Foster

Extract from Introduction

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In memory of

David Maltby DSO DFC
John Fort DFC
William Hatton
Victor Hill
Vivian Nicholson DFM
Harold Simmonds
Antony Stone

of the 1,394 people who died on the night of 16–17 May 1942

*of the 55,000 other members of RAF Bomber Command
who died between 1939 and 1945*

*and of my mother Jean Maltby,
her sister, Audrey,
and their parents, Ettrick and Aileen*

R I P

Note: The 1955 film and the Paul Brickhill book on which it is based, published in 1951, are both called *The Dam Busters*. However, the term Dambuster is more commonly seen these days, and I have chosen to use that in this text (except in specific references to the film or book title).

Chapter 1



Introduction

It's a piece of music that's as familiar as Rule Britannia or Over the Rainbow (and like them now downloadable as a ringtone for your mobile phone) but to us, growing up in the Home Counties in the late 1950s, it was indisputably – and slightly embarrassingly – our tune. If you sing that famous descending melody – ‘daah-da-da-da-da’ out loud in company, someone is bound to complete it... ‘da, da-dee-da-da-da-da’. It instantly evokes an image: clean-shaven, bright-eyed young men putting one across the Jerries in a daring night-time raid. Or, perhaps, football fans in too-tight England jerseys urging their country on in another doomed penalty shoot-out. It is, of course, Eric Coates's music ‘The Dam Busters March’ first used in the 1955 film of the same name.

I can't remember when I first heard it – we had a scratchy 78 rpm record at home, played by the RAF Band, and it was often on the radio in the late 1950s. I know, however, that I didn't see the film itself until about 1961, when I was 11. During one school holiday my brother George and I were staying with my Aunt Audrey and Uncle Johnnie near Oxford. Together with our cousin, David, Audrey had driven us to some obscure cinema miles away (was it Abingdon? Aylesbury? Banbury?) because she had noticed that the film was showing. This time, instead of leaving us to sit through the screening on our own and collecting us afterwards, which was her usual practice when she took us to the pictures, Audrey came in with us. She paid sharp attention. ‘Here it is,’ she whispered to us as the scene began where Wg Cdr Guy Gibson, played by Richard Todd, and Gp Capt Charles Whitworth, played by Derek Farr, are shown leafing through an album full of photographs of aircrew, looking for pilots for the special mission. ‘Oh yes, David Maltby,’ says Whitworth and they pass on to the next page.

The film tells the rest of the story: a new RAF squadron is formed, 617 Squadron, led by Gibson. Their Lancaster bombers are specially adapted to carry a secret new weapon, the so-called 'bouncing bomb', designed to attack several large dams in the Ruhr valley, the heart of Germany's industrial region. But when they attack the first dam things don't go exactly to plan. Four aircraft attack, one crashes in flames, but the dam is still in place. David Maltby is piloting the next plane. 'Hello J-Johnny are you ready?' asks Gibson. 'OK Leader,' says the actor George Baker, playing David. Then there is silence as his aircraft approaches, two others flying ahead of him to draw the flak. The bomb is dropped, bounces four, five, six times – then a pause, followed by an explosion at the base of the dam. Still the soundtrack remains silent, but, just as the next aircraft is lining up, someone shouts out, 'It's gone, look, my God!' A rush of water through the dam – and a blast of music.

In the cinema that day a prickle of recognition ran down the back of my neck, a feeling that I have had countless times since. Even at 11, I knew well what connected my family to this story because I had read, and reread, Paul Brickhill's book which shares the name of the film. The pilot who dropped the bomb which broke the dam, David Maltby, was my uncle – the only brother of my Aunt Audrey and my mother, Jean.

* * *

Working on this book, however, has made me realise that there is a lot I simply don't know. I remember many of the stories that my mother told us about the war, but she has been dead for 20 years. Her tendency to over-embroider any narrative got worse towards the end of her life, and now I wonder whether she made some of it up completely. She once told my brother Andrew that she had been taken by the police to identify David's body. But I never heard this from her myself, as either a child or an adult.

So I began the work by trying to put together a better picture of the rest of the crew of AJ-J. Their names were familiar to me from the air-crew lists in my mother's copy of Guy Gibson's *Enemy Coast Ahead*, but it takes a bit more research to find out more than just their ranks and surnames. The crew that flew with David on the Dams Raid – or to give it its official name, Operation Chastise – were:

Flight Engineer:	Sgt William Hatton
Navigator:	Sgt Vivian Nicholson
Wireless Operator:	Sgt Antony Stone
Bomb Aimer:	Plt Off John Fort
Front Gunner:	Sgt Victor Hill
Rear Gunner:	Sgt Harold Simmonds.

There is one invaluable guide to anyone trying to find out more about Operation Chastise. John Sweetman's 1982 book, revised in 2002 as *The Dambusters Raid*, is the most authoritative account of all, and, as I am later to discover, much more reliable than those accounts which purport to be 'definitive'. As regards the crews, he quickly debunks the myth that they were all veterans and hand-picked by Gibson:

... the majority were not decorated (including six of the pilots); and far from having finished two operational tours some had not done one. Many who would fly to the German dams in May 1943 had completed fewer than ten operations against enemy targets.⁹

In fact, David Maltby's crew was probably the most inexperienced of the lot. Three of them, Nicholson, Stone and Simmonds, had never flown on an operation at all. John Fort and William Hatton had only flown a handful. David, by contrast, had done a full operational tour of

9 John Sweetman, *The Dambusters Raid*, Cassell, 2002, p.98

28 flights in 106 and 97 Squadrons between June 1941 and June 1942. After a few months on the usual between-tours break, in his case commanding a target and gunnery flight, training bomb aimers and gunners, he had gone back for a second tour. It was on his return to 97 Squadron in March 1943 that he met the five who were to be his crew: all waiting to start work. They crewed-up together but were then transferred the few miles from Coningsby to Scampton, to the new 617 Squadron to begin the special training. Another front gunner originally came with them, but he was replaced by Victor Hill only 10 days before the actual raid. He brought some real operational experience to the crew, having flown on more than 20 sorties in 9 Squadron.

During the training for the Dams Raid the crew of AJ-J obviously came in for some ribbing from the rest for being so inexperienced. The Squadron's Adjutant, Harry Humphries, says that David himself used to call them 'sprogs' and 'rookies'.¹⁰ However, they acquitted themselves admirably when put to the test. So well, in fact, that navigator Vivian Nicholson and bomb aimer John Fort were decorated on their first and second missions respectively.

This same crew flew together on just three more sorties over the next four months until on 15 September 1943, turning back when recalled from a low-level operation to bomb the Dortmund Ems canal, some sort of accident occurred and the aircraft plunged into the North Sea. Only David's body was ever found – the rest must still be trapped in the broken fuselage hundreds of feet below the surface.

It seems to have been a happy crew, but they had no illusions about how difficult their jobs were and the risks involved. In the letter left for his family, which they received after the fatal crash, wireless operator Sgt Antony Stone wrote: 'I will have ended happily, so have no fears of how I ended as I have the finest crowd of fellows with me, and if the skipper goes I will be glad to go with him. He has so much to lose, far more responsibilities than I.'¹¹

* * *

¹⁰ Harry Humphries, *Living with Heroes*, Erskine Press, 2003, p.34

¹¹ Stone family correspondence

Immediately the war started David left his job in mining, travelled down from Yorkshire and tried to sign up for the RAF. Ettrick recorded in his diary on 8 September 1939 that David ‘went to Brighton to enlist but wasn’t wanted!’. He eventually managed to join the RAFVR (the RAF Volunteer Reserve) in March 1940, but wasn’t actually called up until 20 June. The sheer logistics of getting more than a quarter of a million new recruits into the service must have almost overwhelmed it, and David obviously just had to wait his turn.

It’s worth recalling just what a state the country was in at the time that he finally got his call-up papers. Churchill had been Prime Minister for little more than a month. He had almost broken down in the car on the way back to Admiralty House after being appointed by the King at Buckingham Palace. When his bodyguard, Inspector Thompson, congratulated him saying that he knew he had an enormous task, he replied, with tears in his eyes, ‘God alone knows how great it is. I hope it is not too late. I am very much afraid it is. We can only do our best.’ As John Lukacs has noted, Hitler’s advance not only seemed irresistible: in many places and many ways it was.¹⁵

Churchill made two of his greatest speeches in that month. On Tuesday 4 June he told a silent House of Commons about the fall of France, Belgium and the retreat from Dunkirk. He spoke of how it might be necessary to fight to defend ‘our island home’, ending with his famous peroration: ‘we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...’. Oratory on a grand scale, designed to rouse the nation. He had to wind up his gift for inspirational language again, just a fortnight later when his words were broadcast once more. This time he warned the listening world that the Battle of Britain was about to begin: ‘Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “This was their finest hour.”’

It’s curious how oratory has the power to influence a national mood. Just a few days after I had looked up these words and typed them out, a CD of great speeches popped out of my copy of *The Guardian* one Saturday. Included in it was the earlier, post-Dunkirk speech. Even now you can hear the determination in Churchill’s voice, the whole massive backing of power and resolve behind his words like a fortress: they are

¹⁵ John Lukacs, *Five Days in London*, Yale 2001, p.6

¹⁶ Simon Schama, *Great Speeches of the 20th Century No.1, The Guardian* pamphlet, 2007

never words for words' sake. As Simon Schama wrote in an accompanying essay, referring to a contemporary article by Vita Sackville-West: 'They were words for everyone's sake. They were the lifeboat and the blood transfusion. They turned the tide.'¹⁶

The day after Churchill's deep growl resonated from a million wireless sets, David set off from Okehampton railway station for a reception centre at RAF Uxbridge. New aircrew were badly needed: even though the Battle of Britain had not yet started, bomber pilots in inadequate aircraft were already falling like flies. (Max Hastings tells the story of one called 'Ten Minute' Jenkins who was shot down on his first operation before he had even unpacked his kitbag.¹⁷)

By September 1940 Churchill had already identified the expansion of Bomber Command as the key to victory. He wrote in a memorandum to Lord Beaverbrook:

The Navy can lose us the war, but only the Air Force can win it. Therefore our supreme effort must be to gain overwhelming mastery in the air. The Fighters are our salvation, but the Bombers alone provide the means of victory.¹⁸

When Churchill wrote those words it was by no means clear that Britain, then standing alone although bolstered by its forces from the Commonwealth, would emerge victorious. In the end, of course, it did – but at the price of the lives of more than 55,000 Bomber Command aircrew. These would include the seven young men in Grace Blackburn's picture, a casual snap taken in the unaccustomed heat and dust of North Africa. Two months after the picture was taken, and four months after taking part in the most famous single bombing operation of the war, they were all dead.

¹⁶ Simon Schama, *Great Speeches of the 20th Century No.1*, The Guardian pamphlet, 2007

¹⁷ Max Hastings, *Bomber Command*, Michael Joseph, 1979, p.69

¹⁸ John Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1985, p.260