

Sharp-sighted airman picked for place in history

Tony Smith reveals the dramatic story behind World War Two legend



THE part played by a county war hero in the famous Dambusters raid is remembered today when seven of his medals are auctioned by Spinks in London.

Sixty years ago Kettering-born Len Sumpter was one of the legendary airmen who carried out the spectacular attack on the Moehne, Eder and Sorpe dams in the heart of Germany's industrial area.

The so-called 'bouncing bombs' - the untried weapons designed by Barnes Wallis - destroyed the dams, sending millions of tons of water surging down the Ruhr Valley and damaging much of the enemy's wartime coal and steel production.

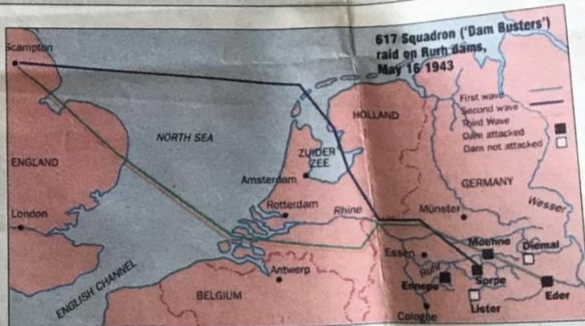
The success of the mission earned Mr Sumpter the Distinguished Flying Medal and he was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. But when quizzed about the daring operation after the war, modest Len said: "I have been on worse raids."

Born in 1911 Leonard Joseph Sumpter lived with his parents in Edgell Street, Kettering and attended Stamford Road School. He served in the Grenadier Guards from 1928 to 1931 and again when war broke out before transferring to the RAF. In between he worked at Stewarts and Lloyds at Corby, where he also played rugby.

As a bomb aimer on Lancaster bombers and then navigator on Mosquitoes, he completed 78 missions over enemy territory, clocking up 998 flying hours. He first flew 13 missions with 57 Squadron, but was wounded by enemy shells on his first sortie over Wissmar.

As a flight sergeant he joined the famous 617 Squadron, led by the legendary Wing Commander Guy Gibson, and became bomb aimer to the crew of Squadron Leader Dave Shannon, the Australian ace pilot.

The bomb designed by Wallis skipped over the water like a stone and part of the low-flying training for the Ruhr raid took place at Eyebrook Reservoir, near Corby. Codenamed "Upkeep," the weapon was, in essence, a gigantic depth charge designed to hit



Heroes of war in the air



Part 1 of a Memory Lane special marks the 60th anniversary of the Dambusters Raid

the dam wall and then sink to about 60ft below the surface before exploding.

Sumpter, on his 14th mission, was one of the men hand-picked by Gibson for the raids on May 17, 1943. He was in the first wave of Lancasters which attacked the Eder dam, which was shrouded in mist.

On Shannon's first two runs Sumpter wasn't happy with the height, distance and speed. But on the third, timed at 2.06am, he released the

'On Shannon's first two runs Sumpter wasn't happy with the height speed and distance'

bomb, which bounced twice and sank into the wall. Within a minute a huge jet of water spouted 1,000ft high and a gap of nine feet was seen on the east side of the dam.

Sadly only eight of Gibson's 19 Lancasters returned, two of them on the return leg of the raid, and 56 men failed to return. The mission was so secret that Len's parents didn't know of his involvement until May 28 when they received a letter from their son telling of his DFM, presented to him by the Duke of Gloucester. He wrote: "Now I can tell you why I was so busy a few weeks ago."

At that time Len was married to a Canadian girl called Hilda, a WAAF member he met during training, and they had a baby daughter, Jacqueline. He remained with the squadron, winning the DFC for his part in

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THE DAM BUSTERS

“This is London. The Air Ministry have just issued the following communiqué. In the early hours of this morning, a force of Lancasters of Bomber Command, led by Wing Commander GP Gibson, DSO DFC, attacked with mines the dams of the Moehne and Sorpe reservoirs”



Words by John Sweetman

In spring 1942, Barnes Wallis began experiments on the terrace of his house using a catapult to fire marbles on to the surface of a water-filled tub. He was seeking a method of guaranteeing consistent performance of a weapon that would bounce across the reservoir. Wallis decided on backspin so that the weapon did not drift offline

On Monday 17 May, 1943, the BBC announced the successful completion of the Dambusters raid. Next day, newspapers ran banner headlines – “Devastation by water”; “Smash-up”; “Titanic blow to Germany” – and printed RAF reconnaissance photos showing great spouts of water gushing through gaps blown in the massive concrete structures.

But this sensational success had come only after years of frustration. Destruction of the Moehne and Sorpe had long been sought, as they provided hydro-electric power to Germany’s industrial heartland.

Pre-war, the Air Ministry declared all dams and their reservoirs “the Achilles’ heel” of Germany’s industry, targets of “urgent importance”. Officially, an “exhaustive” study took place and a variety of schemes were examined: high-explosive bombs with delayed-action fuses, a seaplane floated down the reservoir packed with explosive set to detonate on impact, sabotage by paratroopers with charges strapped to their backs, rockets fired at the dry (air) side of the wall, a remote-controlled



drone carrying explosives, or 16 Wellingtons, each with two new self-propelled weapons slung under their wings. The Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, also backed a squadron of Hampden torpedo bombers to attack “this most vital target” (the Moehne Dam). None of these proposals was actually tried, and no workable way of destroying the dams appeared – until Barnes Wallis,

a civilian aeronautical engineer at Vickers-Armstrong in Weybridge, Surrey, came on to the scene.

In 1940, he proposed that a 10-ton bomb (including seven tons of explosive) be released to burrow beneath a target, explode underground and cause it to collapse. This weapon would strike at Germany’s natural sources of power: coal mines, oil storage tanks and dams.

Sponsored by the Ministry for Aircraft Production (MAP), the Road Research Laboratory made 1:50 models of the dam, and a scientific officer, Dick Collins, took charge of tests with scaled-down charges to determine whether Wallis’s idea would work. Another more carefully constructed model with three million individual bricks was built and similar tests were carried out. By the end of 1941, this “earthquake” bomb had lost support but Wallis refused to give up. The small Nant-y-Gro dam near Rhyader in Wales, one-fifth the size of the Moehne, had been earmarked for further tests and 1:10 models of it were fashioned at Harmondsworth in Middlesex. Early in 1942, Collins detonated a charge in contact with one of these models, with spectacular results; it disintegrated. Solely

due to this demonstration, Wallis focused on getting a weapon to explode against a dam wall, not merely close to it.

In spring 1942, he began experiments on the terrace of his house at Effingham, Surrey, using a catapult to fire marbles on to the surface of a water-filled tub. He was seeking to develop a weapon that would bounce across the reservoir. Wallis believed that backspin would prevent the weapon from drifting offline or bouncing back from the dam after hitting it. Instead it would crawl down the face.

With the aid of Sir Henry Tizard, scientific adviser to the Air Ministry, Wallis used a large testing tank at the National Physics Laboratory at Teddington. He made such progress that permission was given to use a modified Wellington bomber to test a larger, 4ft 6in-diameter sphere. A month later, Collins punched a large hole in the Nant-y-Gro dam by exploding a 500lb anti-submarine mine with 279lb of explosive against it. Wallis knew for certain that a contact charge would destroy Moehne.

On 30 September, Tizard coined the term “Bouncing Bomb”, and development gathered pace. In October 1942, the



Barnes Wallis, the civilian engineer who solved the problem that had foxed the Air Ministry for years, and one of his bouncing bombs under test



6in weapon was spun in the air over the Queen Mary reservoir near Staines, and two months later the Wellington began dropping it at Chesil Beach in Dorset.

After modifications, one sphere leapt 55ft in the air, another bounced 20 to 22 times and a third travelled 1,315 yards.

Armed with films of these trials, Wallis set out to convince doubters. His reception was not always positive. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, described Wallis's weapon as "tripe of the wildest description." On 23 February, Sir Charles Craven, chairman of Vickers-Armstrong, directed Wallis to "stop this silly nonsense" and Wallis offered to resign. Unknown to Craven and Harris, Sir Charles Portal, the Chief of Air Staff was more sympathetic. Three years earlier, he had supported sending the Hampden Squadron against the Moehne Dam. So, on 26 February, the green light was given for Operation Chastise, the Dams raid - with 26 May as the latest date for the operation.

So far, no full-size (7ft 6in diameter) weapon had been tested, and none even existed on the drawing board. The day after the decisive meeting, on 27 February, Wallis started the final design, and soon ran into a major problem.

Sufficient steel was not available, so he settled for a central cylinder for the explosive charge, with packing round it and "great staves of wood" outside held in place by metal bands. The ends of the sphere were flattened to allow a belt mechanism to spin the bomb. It resembled a large beer barrel. More aerial trials were needed to analyse the performance of Upkeep (the code name for Wallis's weapon).

Then, from 13 April, the Wellington and two Lancasters, piloted by two Vickers-Armstrong test pilots, Captains Joseph Summers and Bob Handasyde, Captain Sam Brown (from AV Roes and Co) and a seconded RAF officer, Flight Lieutenant "Shorty" Longbottom, began to drop the scaled-down practice bombs.

The wooden exteriors broke on hitting

the water. Some of the inner cylinders continued to bounce, though, and, on 18 April, Wallis decided to remove the outer casing and rely on just the cylinder.

Further trials took place off Reculver, Kent. On 7 May, Wallis wrote: "Shorty did two good drops, direct hits."

While Wallis had been labouring to perfect Upkeep, 617 Squadron was training to deliver it. Wing Commander Gibson worked the squadron hard, requiring pilots to fly down canals, carry out endless bombing exercises, dive from 1-2,000ft before levelling out, and to "attack" dams such as the Eyebrook near Uppingham and Abberton at Colchester - unknown to the crews representing the Moehne and Eder dams.

Until the eve of the operation, only Gibson knew the real targets. On 11 May, 617 Squadron pilots began practising at Reculver - the first time many of them had glimpsed the strange object which they would carry to the dams in under a week. On the night, Upkeep would have to be released at precisely 220mph ground speed, from a height of 60ft, and spun at 500 revolutions per minute. Not until Wednesday 13 May did Longbottom drop a live-filled Upkeep (9,250lb including 6,600 lb of explosive) off Broadstairs.

It bounced and exploded beneath the sea exactly as planned. Another live drop two days later banished remaining fears and the Dambusters raid was set for the very next day. Nineteen Lancasters, with 133 British, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and American aircrew, began taking off from RAF Scampton just before 9.30pm on Sunday 16 May. The last would return

60th anniversary

at 6.15am the following morning. By then, two of the six target dams had been breached; two others were attacked with less success. Eight Lancasters were shot down, with only three of the 56 downed crew surviving to become prisoners of war.

Air Vice-Marshal Cochrane, Commander of 5 Bomber Group, of which 617 Squadron was part, wrote to Wallis on 17 May: "How much I admire the perseverance that brought you this outstanding success."

Wallis had solved a problem which had foxed the Air Ministry since 1937, and from boarding school his elder daughter, who took part in those first marble experiments, wired: "Hooray, wonderful Daddy."

Sixty years on, her enthusiasm remains fully justified. ■

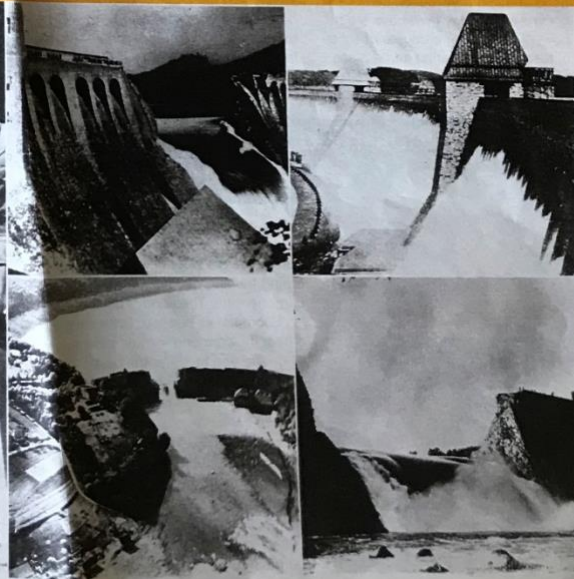
John Sweetman is the author of *The Dambusters*, published by Time-Warner (price £18.99).

To commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Dambusters raid, Express Newspapers are offering readers the chance to buy an exclusive first-day cover signed by Richard Todd, who portrayed Wing Commander Guy Gibson in the classic film *The Dam Busters*. This limited-edition cover costs £22.95 and is available only to Express readers. To reserve yours, call 0870 333 3525, or send a cheque, made payable to Express Newspapers, to Dambusters Offer, Buckingham Covers, Church House, 136 Sandgate Road, Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BY. Your order will be available for despatch shortly after postmarking (16 May 2003).

The Dambusters and their target: Aircrew began taking off just before 9.30pm on Sunday 16 May. The last would return at 6.15 the following morning. By then, two of the six target dams had been breached; two others were less successfully attacked. Eight Lancasters were shot down, only three of the 56 men surviving to become prisoners of war



S2 27 APRIL 2003



Written by Judy Hodgetts – January 2021