



# Sabretache

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF  
THE CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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June 2013



No. 617 Squadron "The Dambusters"      **Motto:** "Après moi, le deluge" ("After me, the flood").

The No. 617 Squadron was formed in March 1943, under the command of Wing Commander Guy Gibson, who had distinguished himself as an outstanding bomber and night-fighter pilot during the early war years. He was granted the unprecedented privilege of selecting crews from other squadrons of Bomber Command to fly Lancasters on a special, highly-secret operation. Gibson himself was not told for some weeks that the task was no less than the breaching of the Möhne, Eder and Sorpe dams, which stored more than 300 million tons of water vitally important to German industry.

Operation Chastise, using 19 Lancasters, each modified to carry a special mine designed expressly for the purpose by Dr. Barnes Wallis of Vickers-Armstrong. To breach the dams the mines had to be released from precisely 60 feet, at a speed of exactly 220 m.p.h. The first Lancaster took off from Scampton at 9.30 p.m. on 16th May 1943, and Wing Commander Gibson's aircraft, the first to attack the Möhne Dam, released its mine at 28 minutes past midnight. Half an hour later, just after the fifth Lancaster had attacked, Gibson radioed back to England the prearranged code-word Nigger, indicating that the dam had been breached. (Nigger was the name of Gibson's black Labrador dog, beloved of all the squadron, who was killed by a car the day before the raid and buried at Scampton.)

The remaining aircraft of the Möhne formation then flew on to the Eder Dam. The first two mines failed to breach the dam, but shortly before 2am, when the third Lancaster had attacked, Gibson signalled the code-word Dinghy, indicating success with the second part of the operation. Other aircraft attacked the Sorpe and Schwelme Dams but did not succeed in breaching them.

Of the 19 Lancasters which took off for the dams raid with their 133 men, eight did not return. Five crashed or were shot down en route to their targets. Two were destroyed while delivering their attacks and another shot down on the way home. Two more were so badly damaged that they had to abandon their missions. For his gallantry in this raid, Wing Commander Gibson received the Victoria Cross and 32 other members of the squadron were also decorated.

In one operation No. 617 Squadron-known from this time onwards as the "Dam Busters" had become famous and the decision was made to keep it in existence as a precision-bombing unit. It was re-equipped and returned to operations in July 1943, with a raid on two power stations in Northern Italy.

In September of 1943, the Dortmund-Ems canal was attacked, the 12,000 lb. HC (high-capacity) bomb being used for the first time. Like the dams raid, this operation cost the squadron very heavy casualties; out of a total force of eight Lancasters despatched, only three returned. On the following night the a viaduct on the French-Italian border was attacked. In the early part of 1944, No. 617 made a series of pinpoint attacks against factories in France which were reluctantly working

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## CMHS Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on

**Tuesday,  
June 18th  
2013**

**7:00 pm**

At the  
Petty Officers' Mess  
HCMS Tecumseh

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CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The  
CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

is a non-profit registered society  
which fosters the study of the  
military and the police, and the heritage of  
Canada, the British Empire, and the world  
as well as the preservation of military  
artifacts and records.

The CMHS meets once every calendar month  
at:

Petty Officers' Mess  
HMCS Tecumseh  
1820 - 24th Street SW  
Calgary AB T2T 0G6

All are welcome to attend

## Notice of Next Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on  
**Tuesday, June 18th, 2013**  
**19:00 (7:00 pm)**

At the Petty Officers' Mess, HMCS Tecumseh.

Members are reminded that an offering of foodstuffs for the Legion Food Bank is considered your unofficial entrance fee to our regular scheduled meetings.

The unofficial agenda of this meeting will be:

- Introduction of guests, Minutes of last meeting
- Correspondence, Membership report
- Treasurer's report, Old business / New business
- Break, Show & Tell

The President, David S would like to invite everyone to remain after the meeting for an informal time of fellowship.

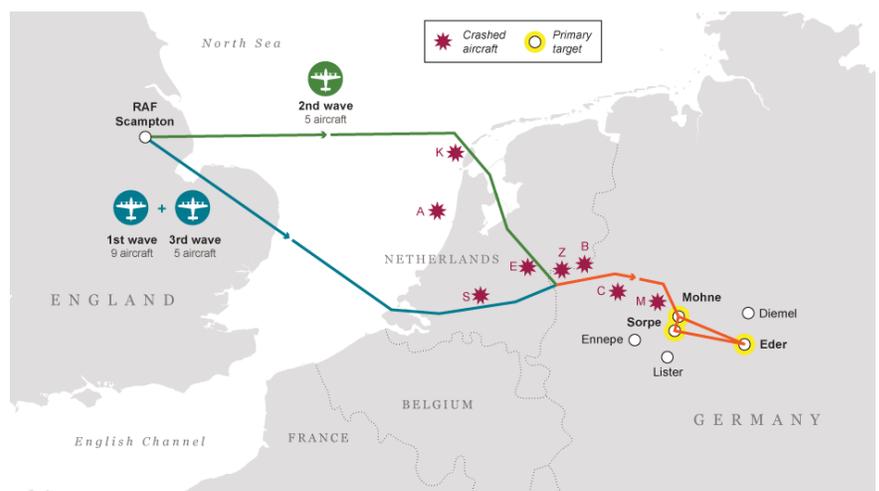
for the enemy war effort, where the object was to ensure maximum damage with the minimum loss of French lives. The CO at this time was Wing Commander GL Cheshire and it was through a low-level marking technique which he evolved that the squadron gained a high reputation for accurate bombing at night.

Another remarkable operation undertaken by the "Dam Busters" played an important part in the successful landings in Normandy on D-Day, 6th June 1944. Known as Operation Taxable it was the simulation of a large "ghost" convoy of ships crossing the narrowest part of the English Channel. Eighteen small naval vessels steamed towards France at seven knots, and to make their radar response correspond to that created by a large convoy, the Lancasters of No. 617 flew overhead in a continuous wide orbit, gradually nearing the French coast. Every four seconds throughout the three-and-a-half hours of the operation, bundles of Window (small metal strips which produced a false echo on the enemy radar screens) were thrown out of the aircraft. Meticulous timing was necessary, as an error of only four seconds would have been sufficient to make the "convoy" look suspect. As the last Lancaster turned for home its crew had the satisfaction of seeing the German guns open radar-predicted fire on the non-existent convoy. Meanwhile the real invasion force was nearing the coast many miles away.

A few days later the "Dam Busters" made another notable contribution to the success of the invasion, when the first 12,000lb Tall-boy bombs were dropped on the Saumur railway tunnel in Northern France, cutting an important enemy supply line.

In September 1944, the squadron operated from an advanced base in Russia against the German battleship Tirpitz, and a second attack was made in October from an advanced base in Scotland. On 12th November 1944, in conjunction with No. 9 Squadron (which had also participated in the two previous attacks) the ship was attacked for the third time and was capsized in Tromsø fjord, Norway. All three attacks on the Tirpitz were led by Wing Commander JB "Willy" Tait, who had succeeded Wing Commander Cheshire as CO of No. 617 Squadron in July 1944. Further attacks on dams were made in October/December when the Kembs and Urft dams were attacked; the Kembs dam was successfully breached. On 14th March 1945, a Lancaster of No. 617 Squadron (PD112 "S-Sugar", a B.I (Special)) captained by Squadron Leader CC ("Jock") Calder, dropped the first of the 22,000lb Grand Slam bombs - the biggest high-explosive bombs developed by any country during the war - to wreck the Bielefeld railway viaduct in Germany. The last operation by the squadron was an attack on Hitler's famous mountain retreat - "the Eagle's Nest" - at Berchtesgaden.

During its comparatively short period of active service No. 617 won 2 VCs and more than 150 other decorations.



## Minutes of the last meeting

### CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Minutes of Meeting held on May 21st. 2013

Petty Officers Mess: HMCS Tecumseh

Meeting called to order by President David S. at 7:10 PM.

A total of 14 members were in attendance

**Minutes** of last meeting were approved by Bob McP. and Don S.

**Treasures Report.** Due to the missing Treasurer the report was given by Pres. David S.

Motion to accept report was put forward by Pres. David S. and was passed unanimously.

**Old Business:** no old business was brought forward.

**New Business:** An intervention was called for Member Darrel K. who has lost all his sense while bidding on EBay. Discussion followed.

**Break.**

**Ticket Raffle** by Member Neil P. Many happy winners.

**Return to New Business.** Members were advised about the

**Military Collectors' Club of Canada. Annual Show and Convention. To be held at the  
Ramada Conference Centre.  
11834 Kingsway Ave. Edmonton.  
August 17 9:30 AM—5:00PM & August 18th,2013, 10:00 AM —4:00 PM  
Over 100 trade/display tables  
For further information contact Doug (780) 483-7985 or dstyles@shaw.ca**

#### Show and Tell

Darryl K.- Old Kings Own badge, Discusses new badges being designed , Mark 14 Randal Knives Grmen Survival Knife etc.

Bob McP.- Picture of North Korean "Generals with all their medals.

Dave L.-German Chaplains broach and 1914-18 badge. Real or fake?

Tony G –Framed medals and badges. Include Mons Star.

Herb - 1941 Binoculars purchased at Kamloops gun show. Cartridges US Civil war era. Battle field find. News paper clipping found in one cartridge.

Al D.-17 people in Calgary to receive Medal from Korean Gov't. Discussion.

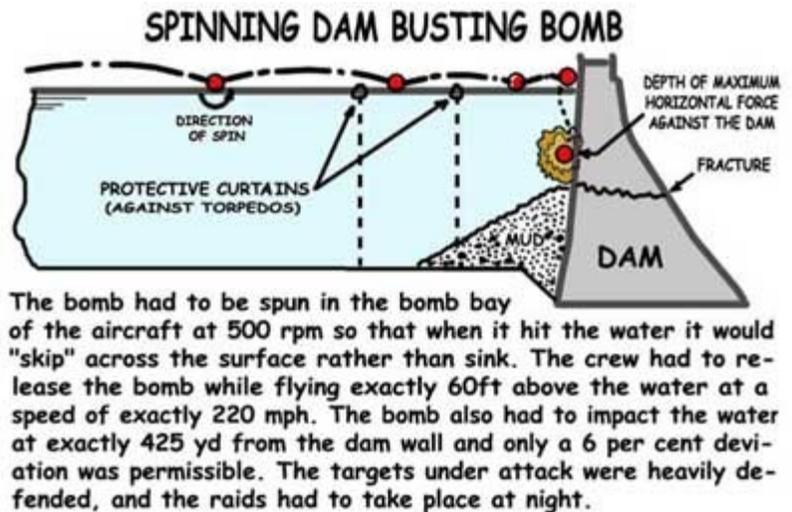
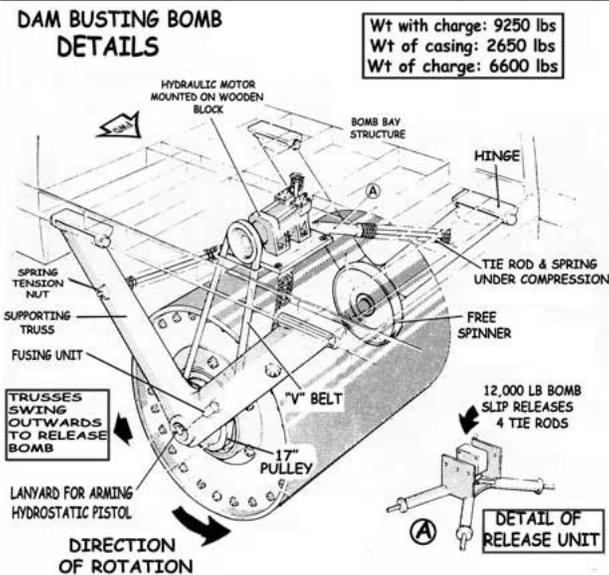
Bob McP.- 1st war medal

David G. New stamps issued by Post Office. Princess Mary Book.

Call to adjourn meeting. By Tony G and seconded by Darrell K

#### D-Day Remembrance

*. . . Our sons, pride of our nation, have this day set upon a mighty endeavor .... They will be sore tired, by night and by day, without rest .... The darkness will be rent by noise and flame. Men's souls will be shaken with the violence of war .... Let our hearts be stout, to wait out the long travail, to bear sorrows that may come, to impart our courage unto our sons wheresoever they may be .... These men are lately drawn from the ways of peace.... They yearn for the end of battle, for their return to the haven of home.... Some will never return. Embrace these, Father, and receive them, They heroic servants, into Thy kingdom.—President Franklin Roosevelt, June 1944*



Exactly how profound an effect the Dambusters raid had is always up for debate. Certainly they could not have happened at a worse time for Germany. Josef Goebbels conceded the attacks had been successful. Hitler was furious. Power stations, war factories, and railways were all destroyed. In the Moyne Valley every bridge for 30 miles was destroyed. All the spare parts that would have normally been used for repairs had been swept away along with everything else.

Thousands of Germans were killed as the waters rushed through the valleys. Electricity and water supplies were cut off. Water, of course, was crucial in putting out the fires from bombs. It was no coincidence the Royal Air Force carried out large scale raids in the days immediately after.

It was symbolically crushing, too. The dams were national monuments, signs of strength. They were supposed to be impenetrable. And the bombing itself was psychologically damaging because it was pinpoint. A new phase in the air campaign. The Luftwaffe had been trying to achieve this accuracy for sometime. The RAF beat them to it.

The cost of repairs was estimated at around £6bn in today's money. It was known in Germany as the Katastrophe. Unsurprisingly they have never been forgotten, or forgiven. The Axis had just surrendered in north Africa and the Nazis were preparing a major push on the eastern front. Dealing with the aftermath of the attacks would mean the diversion of resources they could barely afford. Some 7,000 plus workers, including some Hitler Youth, were tasked with the clean up. Many of those had been building the Atlantic Wall. That loss of resources would have an effect the following year - 1944, D-Day.

Back in Britain it was treated as nothing less than a cause for national celebration. The crews became immediate heroes. The front pages carried the news of the raids. Even the New York Times splashed on it. Churchill, who was in Washington at the time, used the raid to his advantage in an address to Congress. US airmen were of course heavily involved in the ongoing bombing campaign.

Admittedly the German response was phenomenal. By October both the Mohne dam and Eder dam had been rebuilt. From scratch, to the same design. Only this time much better protected. An extraordinary feat by any measure. But perhaps we should be guided instead by Albert Speer, the German Armaments Minister who took control of the rebuilding programme. Some years later he assessed the attacks in this unemotional way: "That night, employing just a few bombers, the British came close to success which would have been greater than anything they had achieved hitherto with a commitment of 1,000 bombers."



Möhne Dam after the attack