

NBHS Old Boys 'Dam Busters'

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EVEN in today's modern aircraft, it would be considered an ambitious plan.

The raid, labelled "Operation Chastise", called for the crews to bomb from an altitude of 18metres (60feet) and at the exact speed of 354km/h (220miles) so their bombs would bounce across the water and strike the dam wall without breaking up.

All this while the Lancaster bombers were attracting heavy anti-aircraft fire from sites on the dam itself and surrounding hills.

Officially listed as No.617 squadron, they were better known as the Dam Busters and their legacy has been secured in history due to their heroic acts, which generated more than a dozen books, a 1955 film and a 1984 video game.

Today marks 70 years since that famous battle, widely regarded as a major turning point in the war.

The leading Lancasters arrived at the Mohne Dam, the first of the four dams attacked, at midnight on May 16, 1943.

The anniversary is being widely commemorated in the UK, with a flypast planned at the 617 Squadron base at Scampton, Lincolnshire.

Two members of the Dam Busters – Jack Leggo and Robert Kellow – spent time in the Hunter growing up.

Mr Leggo was born in Sydney but moved to Speers Point where he attended Newcastle Boys High School with Newcastle-born Mr Kellow.

The pair survived the war and returned to the Hunter after their service.

Mr Leggo was knighted in 1982 and died in Brisbane in 1983. Mr Kellow died in 1988.



Top Jack Leggo and below him Robert Kellow

Obituary

Sir Jack Leggo

The chairman of Pioneer Sugar Mills Ltd. Sir Jack Leggo, 67, died in the Wesley Hospital, Brisbane, on Monday after a brief illness.

Sir Jack, who was knighted in 1982, first gained fame as one of the RAF Dambusters of World War II, flying with the famous 617 Squadron on Lancaster bombers out of Lincolnshire.

As a 27-year-old flight lieutenant, he was a navigator on the third Lancaster to attack the Moehne Dam with a special skip bomb. The successful raid on the dam was said to have cut the time of the war in Europe by six months, with floodings from the dam paralysing the Nazi armaments industry.

In addition to being chairman of Pioneer Sugar Mills, Sir Jack also held board positions with Mayne Nickless Ltd, International Computers Ltd, the AMP Queensland branch board and the Australian Interstate Pipeline Co.

Sir Jack is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.



Avro Lancaster Heavy Bomber



The crew, l. to r., Jack Leggo, Tammy Simpson, Robert Hay, Toby Foxlee, Mick Martin



Moehne Dam 5 hours after the attack

FLYING HIGH: A Lancaster bomber.



Beyond the bravery of war

EVERYONE's had a brush with fame, haven't they? It could be a chance personal meeting with a famous sportsman or some other celebrity, maybe a singer, or an actor, or someone simply extraordinary and inspiring.

I mention this today for two reasons. The first is an odd brush with fame I had 55 years ago as a snotty-nosed youngster, though I didn't realise it until years later.

For a few fleeting moments here in Newcastle, I shook hands with British Royal Air Force pilot Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, of Victoria Cross fame, who once led the legendary No. 617 Squadron, succeeding its daring wartime Wing Commander Guy Gibson.

The other reason is that overnight was the 71st anniversary of the famous "Dam Buster" air raid by Britain's 617 Squadron in World War II.

At midnight on May 16, 1943, the squadron of Lancaster heavy bombers began attacking a special target, three

heavily defended dams deep in Nazi Germany's industrial heartland.

To get there, they skimmed over enemy territory at night at an altitude of only 100 feet (30 metres) to avoid radar detection, then flew even lower, to 60 feet (18 metres), near the dams.

They flew so low that one bomber burst into flames after hitting high voltage power wires, while

another went so low it touched the sea, tearing off its low slung bomb and scooping up seawater.

The heavy bombers suffered severe casualties but their ingenious "bouncing bombs" spectacularly breached two vital dams, the Mohne and the Eder, damaging the enemy's war effort.

Critics still question the value of the costly raid, but it had a morale boosting propaganda impact beyond measure. It sent the message that the Allies were winning. D-Day and the liberation of Europe came only 13 months later.

About 123 airmen in 19 Lancaster heavy bombers took part in the May 1943 Dam Busters raid, but 56 men did not return.

Two surviving May 1943 Dam Buster crewmen were Aussies and came from the Hunter Valley.

One was (later Sir) Jack Leggo, a



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navigator, and the other was Robert Kellow, a wireless operator. Both had once attended Newcastle Boys' High school.

A memorable British film of the air raid was made in 1965 and it may soon be remade by movie maker Sir Peter Jackson of *The Hobbit* fame.

So, who then was Group Captain Leonard Cheshire whom I was about to meet this cool night, probably winter 1959, as part of an unofficial "Welcome to Newcastle" party of two?

Our doorstep ambush took place in a draughty foyer off Brown Street, in the city, at the entry to the Winn's Shortland Room.

My mum had dragged me along to meet Mr and Mrs Cheshire whether they liked it or not. Both were Catholic converts and humanitarians.

They must have just married. She was the former Sue Ryder and famous in her own right.

They were on their way to a speaking engagement upstairs and their local guide was a genuine "sky pilot", the affable amateur aviator and parish priest Father Joe Walsh whom we knew from attending his Star of the Sea church on The Hill.

We met the visiting couple and then they were gone. Rather generously (as we were on foot), Father Joe bundled us off into the Cheshires' recently vacated limousine and under a noisy police motorcycle escort, we roared up the hill to Father Joe's presbytery (where the motorcycle wallpapers had no doubt been promised a warming tot of whisky from the housekeeper). We drove around the block a

few times, sirens blaring, I seem to recall.

At first glance though, Group Captain Cheshire VC hadn't impressed me. But never prejudice a person. Tall, slim, quiet, dark with a high, balding forehead and deep set eyes, Group Captain Cheshire seemed almost an ascetic, but he had a friendly smile and a sense of humour.

I later found that "Chesh", as he was called, inspired great loyalty and respect. His devoted ground crews at one early RAF posting used to sing, "We are Cheshire Cats".

He'd become the RAF's youngest group captain in World War II, but pressed for a return to an operational command.

Tired of his office job, he dropped his rank to Wing Commander to take over 617 Squadron after the Dam Busters raid.

He then changed unit members from low-level bombing, as they had done successfully against the German dams, to high-level bombing, dropping huge bombs to blow up sites such as secret Nazi rocket bases, factories and U-boat pens.

Cheshire developed hair-raising, precision bombing techniques. Leading by example, he led No. 617 on 40 more raids to achieve fame as Britain's greatest bomber pilot. Fellow pilots, aircrew and ground crew all called him "lucky".

The elite unit's members, all volunteers, were assigned the most dangerous missions. Because of this, they were popularly regarded as a "suicide squadron".

Of the original 18 pilots who blew up the Mohne and Eder dams, only five survived a fortnight after Cheshire took over.

He kept flying and flying, however, on dangerous bombing missions yet always survived. It was almost as if God had other plans for him.

By July 1944, the highly decorated Cheshire had completed a staggering 102 missions.

On his 103rd mission, Cheshire was Britain's official observer at 39,000 feet, (12,000 metres) up in the air over Japan when the Americans dropped their atomic bomb on Nagasaki. He was appalled, became a changed man and his thoughts turned to peace.

The war soon ended and in 1948 Cheshire took an old man dying of cancer with nowhere to live into his home in Hampshire, England.

It was the beginning of an unexpected lifelong mission to help others.

It ended with him travelling the world seven months a year for charity fund-raisers.

Biographer Russell Braddon, who first went to see Cheshire expecting to meet an aloof, religious fanatic, instead found the "sanest man" he'd ever met. He also discovered Cheshire had a genius for getting people to do things for him.



HUMANITARIAN WORK: Mr and Mrs Cheshire at the Winn's Shortland Room in 1959.

Cheshire had decided to promote peace in a practical way, by funding homes for the destitute, disabled and chronically ill.

By 1974, there were more than 100 homes for the mentally and physically disabled bearing Cheshire's name. Sixty more were established by Cheshire's wife - Sue Ryder, founder of the Forgotten Allies trust in Europe, to care for the disabled victims of the Nazi regime.

"We knew nothing of the underprivileged," Cheshire told *Herald* reporter Jenny King in 1974 during a brief return visit to Newcastle.

"Sue and I belonged to a generation that was inward looking, [only] concerned with the problems at home. I think the [future] threat won't be from a Hitler, but in the gap that exists between the poor and the wealthy parts of the world," he said.

"It is in an our interests to close it. Otherwise we are leaving our children a dangerous legacy."

By 1985, the (merged) Ryder-Cheshire Foundation had 200 homes, including a small group home at Singleton caring for young, disabled people who would otherwise have to live with the elderly in nursing homes.

Cheshire died of motor neurone disease in mid-1982, aged 74 years. The year before, Britain made him a life peer in honour of his charitable work, running 250 homes for the disabled in 45 countries. His remarkable wife died in the year 2000, aged 77 years.

Now, putting aside Cheshire's astonishing charity work, one strange fact stood out for me, at least. According to Braddon, Britain's greatest bomber pilot had a fear of heights.

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INSPIRING: Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, VC in Sydney in 1966.