

Remembering Guy Gibson by Professor Richard Morris

On Tuesday 18 May 1943 people in Britain and Allied nations around the world opened their newspapers to read of the RAF's successful strike against two great German dams in the early hours of the previous day.

Page | 1

News of the raid had already been given by the BBC. What the newspapers added were aerial photographs - extraordinary images that revealed the breach in the Möhne dam, and maps showing how the havoc had spread. The story reinforced a public sense that the balance of the war had tilted in the Allies' favour.

Also in the papers that Tuesday morning was a photograph of the man who had led the attack: Wing Commander Guy Penrose Gibson, DSO and bar, DFC and bar, and just twenty-four years old. The public was told of Gibson's skill and persistence, and of his valour. The force had been split into three waves, of which Gibson had led the first. The Möhne was defended by light flak, which had shot down the second aircraft to attack. Gibson had flown alongside the next attacking aircraft as it ran in, putting his own machine between it and some of the defences. 'In this way' said a report on his leadership of the operation, he had 'shielded the attacking aircraft'. The result of this brave tactic was that the fourth and fifth aircraft had been able to make their attacks without harm and release their weapons accurately. In result, the great Möhne dam had been broken.

Gibson had then led aircraft with remaining weapons on board to the Eder Dam - a difficult target surrounded by hills. This, too, had been breached. 'All crews' said the report 'were unanimous in their appreciation of Wing Commander Gibson's outstanding courage, and of his skill and coolness in leading and controlling, without which they do not believe that the operation could have been the success that it was.'

Gibson was awarded the Victoria Cross. In following weeks he was often pictured and in the news. When the king and queen visited the Lincolnshire airfield from which the raid had been launched newsreel cameras and photographers were there. In June when crews of the squadron attended an investiture at Buckingham Palace, Gibson was again in cinemas, magazines and newspapers. In July he was in a number of local newspapers as he attended public events in different parts of the country. Camera-friendly, apparently always smiling, he had become a national hero.

Guy Gibson had joined the Royal Air Force straight from school in 1936. His idea had been to learn to fly in the service and then make a career in civil aviation, ideally as a test pilot. But the war intervened and Gibson had taken an active part in it since its outbreak. By late September 1940 he had flown 39 operations with No. 83 Squadron, a unit then operating with the Handley Page Hampden, a twin-engine medium bomber with a crew of four. During this period Gibson flew to drop mines to sink German shipping, attacked warships in harbour, industrial targets in Germany, and Berlin. Much of September had been occupied with the so-called Battle of the Barges - Bomber Command's counterpoint to the Battle of Britain, attacking German invasion vessels in Channel ports.

After such effort it would be normal for a pilot to be rested for some months with non-operational duties. However, the night blitz on Britain's cities was beginning, and in late autumn 1940 there was not much that the RAF could do to counter it. But a new kind of defence was being developed: the night fighter guided by a combination of control from the ground and airborne radar. Such a technique would require fighter pilots to work as members of a team rather than as individuals. This is what bomber crews did. Fighter Command accordingly looked to Bomber Command for the loan of seasoned night fliers. One of those who volunteered was Gibson. He was posted to No. 29 Squadron and during the next thirteen months he flew 80 night-fighter sorties and shot down three enemy aircraft.

This brings us to December 1941. By now Gibson had been flying on operations more or less without pause since the beginning of the war. An enforced rest was thus inevitable, and in January 1942 he was given a new job as Chief Flying Instructor at an Operational Training Unit. But he was not there long. Just a few weeks later Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris took over as Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command. In 1940 Harris had commanded 5 Group, the division of Bomber Command in which Gibson had flown his first tour with No. 83 Squadron. Moreover, back in the autumn of 1940 Harris and Gibson had made a bargain. It was Harris who had nominated Gibson as the best of a 'hand-picked group of night pilots' to help Fighter Command oppose nightly attacks on Britain's cities. Harris had told Gibson that when he had served his term as a fighter pilot he, Harris, would 'give him the best command within his power'. And now he did so: in April 1942 Gibson took command of No.106 Squadron, a bomber unit based at Coningsby in Lincolnshire. At that time the Squadron was flying the mechanically problematic Avro

Manchester, but from mid-1942 the squadron began to re-equip with the aeroplane with which Gibson has ever since been associated - the Avro Lancaster.

The Lancaster carried a big load. Its undivided bomb bay enabled it to carry newer, larger bombs to distant places, and for the next eleven months Gibson led 106 Squadron to targets across Germany and in northern Italy. He was a demanding leader. He knew that everyone had their part to play, but his knowledge of the hazards faced by air crews led him to view their contributions in a different light to those in safer occupations. He had no time for slacking and detested faintheartedness. Moreover, like all commanders of bomber squadrons he was under daily pressure to provide as many crews and serviceable aircraft as possible for a given operation. Doing this did not always leave time to tell genuine and put-on problems apart - especially if you had been up most of the previous night waiting for your crews to return. So he was not universally popular. Equally, the results, reputation and morale of No. 106 Squadron all rose during Gibson's term as its commander. When he left to begin preparations for the Dams Raid in March 1943 106 Squadron's Adjutant wrote that the unit had gained 'the reputation of one of Bomber Command's leading squadrons'. While not everyone liked Guy Gibson, those close to him found him inspirational.

Gibson's term as commander of 106 Squadron had been linked to a fixed quota of trips. When this reached thirty he would cease to fly operationally and his period of command would end. Gibson had accordingly rationed his operations, which from September 1943 had settled to about three a month. He often chose the more dangerous-looking missions. While there were several regulars in his crew he also flew with different crew members. This was partly because of the difficulty of reconciling his quota of trips with those of colleagues who had arrived at different times, but it also helped newcomers by giving them experience and confidence. A newly-arrived navigator who flew with him as a supernumerary to Nuremberg in February 1943 recalled that Gibson ignored him until they were leaving enemy airspace. At this point Gibson asked him to take over the navigation. They crossed the English coast on time and track, and reached base at precisely the estimated time. Gibson made no comment until after they had landed. Then he said: 'That was a wizard piece of work, navigator.' The newcomer remembers that he felt as if he was walking on air for days afterwards.

Guy Gibson was a leader who made high demands of others, and held even higher expectations of himself. He possessed an exceptional persistence, going on not just until

the job was done, but sometimes beyond that point to make sure that it really had been done. His unwillingness to step back from operations might be seen as part of that tenacity. Where did it come from?

Gibson had been born in India in 1918. He was the youngest of three children. The eldest was Alick, born in 1915, who had been followed by a sister, Joan. Their parents had married in 1913. Eighteen years lay between them. Alexander Gibson, Guy Gibson's father, was 37 years old when he proposed to nineteen-year-old Leonora Mary Strike, the daughter of a Cornish master mariner.

Page | 4

Alexander had been born in Moscow in 1874. His father, Guy Gibson's grandfather, had trained as an engineer in Lancashire and then worked in St Petersburg and Moscow running works producing candles and soap. If we look further back the great-grandfather was also an engineer, who had worked both in Sweden and Russia, and for a time managed a paper mill in St Petersburg. We thus see a cyclical pattern: the Gibsons are a dynasty of engineers and technocrats who train and marry at home, migrate to work in industry and raise their families abroad, and retire to Britain in middle age.

Gibson's father, Alexander, continued the pattern. In his late teens he went to study forestry at Cooper's Hill college, and then to work as an officer in the Indian Forest Service. In India he specialised in the industrial extraction of turpentine and other chemicals from timber products

Gibson's parents set up home in a spacious bungalow in generous grounds on the edge of Shimla, summer capital of British India. Situated in the Himalayan foothills Shimla was politically important and scenically attractive. It was also a place of sport, of social intrigue, dancing and desires. Rudyard Kipling knew about Shimla's allures and risks:

By Docket, Billetdoux, and File,
By Mountain, Cliff, and Fir,
By Fan and Sword and Office-box,
By Corset, Plume, and Spur,
By Riot, Revel, Waltz, and War,
By Women, Work, and Bills,
By all the life that fizzes
The everlasting Hills,
*If you love me as I love you
What pair so happy as we two!*

Leonora and Alexander at first lived this life in the hills. Alexander was appointed chief conservator of forests in the Punjab. Materially they had everything they might wish for. Their household was attended by servants and bearers. The children's first years were passed amid colour, light, and the affection of their ayahs, to one of whom the children became devoted. Whether playing outdoors, being carried in baskets by bearers or camping with their father in the forest, the early years of the Gibson children were full of life and warmth.

But things changed. Convention said that the sons and daughters of India's British elite should be educated in Britain. This meant that when Guy reached the age of six he was sent to a cold, damp and very different place called Home. The sea voyage between India and Home took weeks so it was not practical for children to return to India for holidays or for parents to be in two places at once. Children of Gibson's class were thus often sent to boarding school and in vacations might find themselves parcelled out among relatives or even strangers. In Gibson's case the separation became even more acute. After India there was no stable family home. As the Gibson children grew up they were emotionally neglected by parents who had less and less to do with each other and pursued their own paths. There was support from grandparents and relatives, but the children were forced to rely a good deal on their own resources, and on each other.

Aback of this ran another misfortune. Leonora suffered from a personality disorder. In the words of a psychologist, she was prone to 'erratic, impulsive and excitable' behaviour, and 'particularly likely to be affected by alcohol'. Gibson's mother was indeed sometimes affected by alcohol, and in 1933 she was tried and sent to prison for successive offences involving dangerous driving and drink. After this Gibson saw little of her; worse was to come. Three days before Christmas in 1939 Leonora suffered severe burns when her clothes caught fire after entanglement with an electric stove. Leonora died on Christmas Eve. Guy was not at her funeral.

In short, Guy Gibson's childhood and youth were in some respects conventional and in others unusual, even tragic. At school he was recognised as a trier, but not regarded as especially gifted. How all this may have influenced his traits in leadership of self-sufficiency, resolution and directness is for discussion, but the success of the Dams Raid catapulted him to a new level. Only twelve days after the raid he received a letter from Professor Robert McCordock, who was keeper of an unusual archive in the Lincoln Memorial University in the United States. The archive contained autographed photographs

and original letters from figures like Albert Einstein, Henry Ford, Cole Porter, Mark Twain, and Benjamin Disraeli. McCordock was inviting Gibson to join this group.

Gibson's ego was further boosted in August 1943 when Winston Churchill swept him off to Canada on the liner Queen Mary. With him was a party of UK politicians and senior members of the military. The reason for their voyage was an Allied conference in Quebec to settle plans for the invasion of continental Europe. During the voyage Gibson spent time with Churchill's youngest daughter and addressed the Chiefs of Staff. In Quebec Gibson mixed with political and military leaders, met Canada's premier and President Roosevelt. He went on to tour Canada and America, to give lectures, boost morale at public meetings, meet the press, give broadcasts, socialise with film stars, and to collaborate with Roald Dahl on a proposed film.

Page | 6

Gibson returned to Britain at the end of 1943. Harris thought the idolization had done him no good. When an American tour was mooted for Leonard Cheshire a few months later Harris said: 'I have taken steps to inform the Air Ministry that I do not want Cheshire to go to America after our experience with the way that they spoiled young Gibson.'

This may be so but there is evidence that Gibson himself disliked being a celebrity. Under Churchill's influence he began to think of a post-war a career in politics. Early in 1944 he offered himself for selection as the Conservative Party's prospective parliamentary candidate for the seat of Macclesfield in Cheshire. In following months he worked at this alongside the ground duties to which the RAF now confined him and the appearances at rallies, parades and fund-raising events that were expected of him as a national hero. At this time he also wrote an autobiographical account of his wartime career - a vivid, atmospheric book called *Enemy Coast Ahead* that was published in 1946 and has been in print ever since. Some of his friends were puzzled by the book: they could not imagine how the Guy Gibson they knew could have become such an accomplished story-teller. But as we have seen, when Gibson set his mind on something, he persevered until he succeeded.

One thing he had set his mind on was re-joining the war. In September 1944, the book complete, he resigned his candidacy for Macclesfield and intensified his lobbying to return to operational flying. If he could not fly again in Europe perhaps he could join the Pacific war. During August he had taken part in several daylight operations as an onlooker. In mid-September there came a new sense of urgency. September 17th saw the launch of

Operation Market-Garden, the Allies' attempt to seize a crossing of the Lower Rhine by airborne assault, and drive a path to it from north Belgium. At bomber stations in Lincolnshire there were rumours that the war might end within weeks. Two days later Gibson took an opportunity to lead a 5 Group raid on the adjoining towns of Mönchengladbach and Rheydt in North Rhine-Westphalia, close to the Dutch border. He flew in a Mosquito - a fast, agile aircraft ideally suited to the task of precisely marking a target with flares. Gibson's task on this evening was to oversee the marking of Rheydt and to coordinate the attack. There were snags with the marking, but these were overcome and from the attackers' point of view the raid was relatively uneventful.

Gibson turned for home a little after ten p.m. About twenty minutes later his aircraft crashed and exploded close to the Dutch town of Steenberg. The remains of Gibson and his navigator, Sqn Ldr James Warwick, were buried in the town's Roman Catholic cemetery on the following day.

A week later Churchill asked the Air Ministry what had happened to his beloved Dambuster. He received no useful answer, and there has been debate ever since about what caused the crash. However, the records of reports from crews who had taken part, collected at debriefings after the raid, and analysis of these and other sources at Bomber Command in following days show the contemporary assessment to have been that Gibson was shot down by flak.

Harris described Gibson as 'great a warrior as these Islands have ever bred'. He was other things too. Despite his forceful reputation history remembers him as a sympathetic figure, and as one of the most committed operational leaders that the RAF has ever produced. Gibson's book *Enemy Coast Ahead* remains essential reading for its authentic accent of wartime Bomber Command. And for the public today he remains as much the national hero as he instantly became on that Tuesday in May 1943 when our grandparents opened their newspapers and saw his face, with its winning smile.