

The Dam Busters [PG] 1955 | UK | 121 min (new restoration)

UK release date **16th May 1955**

Director **Michael Anderson**

Screenplay **R C Sherriff**

Cinematographer **Erwin Hillier**

Cast **Michael Redgrave** (Barnes Wallis); **Richard Todd** (Wing Co Guy Gibson); **Derek Farr** (Grp Capt JNH Whitworth); **Ursula Jeans** (Mrs Wallis); **Basil Sydney** (Sir Arthur Harris); **Patrick Barr** (Capt Joseph Summers); **Ewen Solon** (Flt Sgt GE Powell)

This year marks the 75th anniversary of Operation Chastise, in which the Royal Air Force (RAF) secured a crucial victory at the height of the Second World War by dropping Barnes Wallis's "bouncing bomb" on German dams.

The 19 Lancaster bombers of 617 Squadron, led by Wing Commander Guy Gibson, took out both the Mohne and Edersee dams to flood the Ruhr valley in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's industrial heartland, destroying two hydroelectric power plants and damaging 125 armaments factories and several coal mines vital to the Nazi war effort.

Fifty-three British airmen lost their lives in the eight planes that were shot down or crashed during the surprise attack on the night of 16 May 1943, while approximately 1,600 civilians were killed – Allied prisoners of war and forced labourers among them. One of the targets, the Sorpe dam, sustained only a minor hit. The events of that night are nevertheless celebrated as one of the pivotal triumphs of the conflict.

The men of 617 Squadron became celebrities and would be hailed as heroes for the rest of their lives. Gibson was awarded the Victoria Cross and the group served the remainder of the war as a specialist precision bombing unit, testing experimental new devices including Barnes Wallis' Tallboy and Grand Slam "earthquake bombs".

The operation's legend was set in stone with the release of Michael Anderson's classic film in 1955, starring Sir Michael Redgrave as Wallis and Richard Todd as Gibson. Based on the latter's memoir *Enemy Coast Ahead* and Paul Brickhill's history *The Dam Busters*, this mainstay of bank holiday broadcasting dramatises

Wallis's battle to overcome British Air Ministry doubts, and his own, about the possibility of realising his fantastical innovation.

Dr Nick Hayes, of Nottingham Trent University, says that *The Dam Busters* was one of "a plethora of British war films made in the 1950s" commemorating the conflict "as a high point, a time when the nation came together, where we stood alone for much of the time.

"The postwar world, initially at least, is one of austerity and decline. It's been suggested also that the films made in the 1950s celebrate officer heroism and leadership at a time when middle-class economic and social leadership is being questioned.

"One of the things I find interesting about *The Dam Busters* is the portrayal of Wallis as a lone, eccentric inventor, battling against bureaucracy, which is a significant distortion but it melds well with certain key British imagined national characteristics.

"We remember the war now in many ways through those black-and-white movies made in the 1950s – *The Cruel Sea*, *The Colditz Story*, *Reach for the Sky*."

The Avro Lancaster itself, the strategic behemoth born from the Manchester medium bomber's 1930s-era DNA, also became a legend in its own right thanks partly to the film. The raid and film also burnished the image of Bomber Command, portraying a cleaner image than the carpet-bombing of German cities in which Harris's crews also engaged.

A new chapter in the myth of British derring-do was written.

After: Joe Summerland and Jon Sherman, *The Independent*, 16 May 2018

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