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# Dambusters

Max Arthur

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## Praise for Dambusters

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'A vivid and moving account of the personality clashes, hopes, fears and regret surrounding one of the most famous bombing operations of all time' Daily Mail

'May well rival his seminal *Forgotten Voices of The Great War* . . . His précis of the complex story of how the scientist Barnes Wallis overcame all the obstacles to breaching the Dams, in which British bureaucracy proved as daunting as German efficiency, is a masterpiece of concise storytelling' Sunday Express

'A gripping tale capturing the exhilaration of the expedition, while contrasting the sense of loss of 56 men of Bomber Command. A thrilling read for anyone with a nose for a good true tale' News of the World

'What a story. And I do not believe that it has ever been better told' Stephen Fry

MAX ARTHUR, who served with the RAF, is the author of The Sunday Times bestselling and award-winning ~~Forgotten Voices of the Great War~~ and ~~Forgotten Voices of the Second World War~~. His other titles include the classic work on the Falklands campaign, *Above All, Courage*, and *Symbol of Courage: A History of the Victoria Cross*. He is the military obituary writer for the Independent.

Above All Courage: First-hand Accounts from the  
Falklands Front Line

The Busby Babes: Men of Magic

Faces of World War I

Forgotten Voices of the Great War

Forgotten Voices of the Second World War

Last Post: The Final Word from our First World War Soldiers

Lost Voices of the Edwardians

Men of the Red Beret: Airborne Forces 1940-1990

Northern Ireland: Soldiers Talking

Symbol of Courage: The History of the Victoria Cross

There Shall be Wings - The RAF: 1918 to the Present  
(now published as Lost Voices of the Royal Air Force)

The True Glory: The Royal Navy, 1914-1939  
and

The Navy: 1939 to the Present Day  
(now combined and published as Lost Voices of the Royal Navy)

When This Bloody War Is Over: Soldiers' Songs of the  
First World War



This book is dedicated to the 55,573 airmen and ninety-one women of the WAAF who lost their lives while serving with Bomber Command during the Second World War, and in particular, to the fifty-three air crew of 617 Squadron who failed to return from the raid on the dams on the night of 16 to 17 May, 1943.

In recognition of the achievement of Bomber Command, Winston Churchill wrote to Sir Arthur Harris, Air Officer Commander-in-Chief:

'All your operations were planned with great care and skill. They were executed in the face of desperate opposition and appalling hazards, they made a decisive contribution to Germany's final defeat.

'The conduct of the operations demonstrated the fiery gallant spirit which animated your aircrews, and the high sense of duty of all ranks under your command. I believe that the massive achievements of Bomber Command will long be remembered as an example of duty nobly done.'

In the writing of Dambusters I have listened to many hours of recorded interviews and read a number of personal accounts, and been in contact with the five remaining members of 617 Squadron who flew on the dams raid, as well as the ground crew. Throughout the book I have given some historical background, but the heart of the book lies in the personal accounts of an event that took place during one remarkable night in May 1943.

These are the personal testimonies of those who were involved in the raid on the dams, and these are their words - I have been but a catalyst.

Max Arthur  
London, 2000

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I have been a fervent admirer of Max Arthur for some years now. His voice has more authority than a hundred other historians because it is a voice that is almost always silent. How common it is for us to pay lip service to the idea that history can be better understood by listening to the men and women who lived through it than by reading the abstract judgments of historians sitting at desks, but how easy it nonetheless is to fall into the trap of becoming one of those judges shrewdly, gravely, astutely assessing strategy and admonishing policy from the safe distance of the present. Into this trap Max Arthur never falls; he never intrudes on the lively witness of those who were there. His business is the scrupulous sourcing, selection and presentation of written and spoken testimony and its presentation to us uncontaminated by dogma, doctrine or theory.

I have recently had the good fortune to meet some of the very few living participants in 617 Squadron's legendary 1943 raid on the Ruhr dams: one of the highlights of my life was taxiing in a Lancaster bomber with Ray Grayston, flight engineer on Leslie Knight's AJ-N 'Nut', the plane that destroyed the Eder Dam. I was writing a screenplay on the Dambusters for the film-maker Peter Jackson. Like almost any Briton, Australian or New Zealander, I had been brought up on Michael Anderson's masterly 1954 film. I am one of those who cannot hear the Eric Coates's 'Dambusters March' without tears pricking my eyes. The combination of imagination, engineering brilliance, obstinacy and determination that lay behind Barnes Wallis's development of 'Upkeep', the bouncing bomb (which we now know was a bouncing and spinning bomb), together with the dedication, fortitude, daring, skill and bravery of the nineteen seven-man bombing crews who deployed that bomb makes for a story that will be told for all time. But it should be told right and Max Arthur knows how that is done.

The bomber crews of World War Two suffered great attrition, but they suffered neglect and silence too. Those who were not there have been all too keen to tell us how wicked the Allied bombing policy was, and the dams raid itself has been written off by some as a waste of men and resources. Even if all this scepticism were justified - and I do not believe that it is - collective guilt, shame and disapproval of political and military aims and means should not alter our view of the remarkable expertise and breathtaking courage of the crews themselves.

Reading this book teaches one a valuable lesson. All the voices, in their humour, self-deprecation and unflinching honesty confirm that the heroism underlying the actions of the 617 Squadron crews was the kind of quiet heroism that consisted of doing a job, a job that was fearsomely technical and difficult and undertaken in appallingly cramped and uncomfortable conditions. Being a part of that famous raid was not about being flamboyant and boisterous or being wittily laconic into the intercom, it was about practice, practice, practice (for what they knew not

Then, on the day, it was about the constant monitoring of data - glide paths, magnetic compass deviations, dead reckoning pinpoints, calculations of fuel according to atmosphere and altitude and so on. These men were not just brave, beefy chaps; they had real brains. Lancasters cannot take off at night in formation and fly low for hundreds of miles, drop an enormous bomb that is spinning at 5000 revolutions per minute from exactly the right height, at exactly the right speed and exactly the right distance from the target and then move on to another target before returning home - all the time under fire from enemy anti-aircraft batteries - without a particular kind of steady, unblinking courage, tenacity and will that is out of the ordinary, so much out of the ordinary in our age that it might now be said to be extinct.

What a story. And I do not believe that it has ever been better told.

Stephen Fr

**THE DAMS RAID, 17 MAY 1943**

RAF Scampton  
 Granton  
 London  
 Rotterdam  
 The Netherlands  
 Belgium  
 France

intended to force Germany's defensive efforts away from the Eastern Front and back to Germany. The Dams Raid was also planned to flood a large part of the Ruhr industrial area. The dams were to be breached by specially designed "bouncing bombs". The raid, codenamed Operation Chastise, was carried out by 617 Squadron, Royal Air Force, subsequently known as the Dambusters.

After the Dams Raid, it took more than 2,000 workers four months to rebuild the Möhne dam wall. The power station at its base was never rebuilt. The breach was finally sealed on 25 September 1943, but the powerhouse below the dam was never rebuilt. Throughout the Ruhr, disruption to communications, electrical supply and production machinery severely restricted production for many months.

19 aircraft took part in the raid; 8 were shot down; 63 of the 133 aircrew were killed; 3 were taken prisoner of war.



- Ruhr industrial area
- The three targets
- ▲ Dam attacked in error, but not breached
- ◊ The three alternate targets
- ★ "Bouncing bomb" test area
- Mission operations room
- Operation order routes to targets
- Operation order return routes
- Approximate position of crashes

Of the 1,850 total deaths from drowning, 749 were forced labourers (Ostarbeiter) from Ukraine. At Nijmegen, the 800 dead included 528 female forced labourers from the Soviet Union.

The leader of 617 Squadron, Guy Gibson, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his part in the raid. He was killed after a bombing raid on Rheylt on 19 September 1944, when his plane crashed near Steenbergen, on its return flight.

# DAMBUSTERS

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A Landmark Oral History

Max Arthur

Foreword by Stephen Fry



The concept of an air raid to destroy the dams of Germany's industrial heartland the Ruhr district - was no sudden whim by Britain's military planners. As early as 1937, as Hitler's Reich-building activities and aggressive rearming policy sent waves of alarm across Europe, the British Government started looking at ways to defeat a new and rearmed German military machine if war became inevitable.

In 1939, just days after the start of the war, the RAF launched daylight bombing attacks on Wilhelmshaven and, later, on Heligoland - and sustained unacceptable losses. The policy changed to high-level, night-time bombing, targeting major industrial areas; however, an assessment in 1941 showed that only about ten per cent of bombers sent to the Ruhr area reached their target - and only one in three dropped their bombs within five miles of the industrial sites themselves. Bomber Command was not yet the effective weapon of destruction it would become later.

In the meantime, America had been drawn into the war in late 1941, and US servicemen were starting to arrive in Britain to support the Allied offensive in Europe. A change in attack came with the appointment in February 1942 of Air Marshal Arthur 'Bomber' Harris as Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command. He was not averse to mass raids on cities and, if necessary, the destruction of civilian targets - indeed, Lord Cherwell, one of Churchill's foremost scientific advisers, drew up a list of fifty-eight German cities which, if destroyed by attrition bombing, would bring the Reich to its knees. The first thousand-bomber raid was launched against Cologne on 30 May 1942. But one thing remained certain, high-level bombing of industrial targets was costly in both men and machines. German efficiency meant that factories were quickly rebuilt and plants dispersed over wider areas, making them even harder to target. With little alternative, however, Harris persisted with his bombing policy. Events on the Eastern Front, however, gave the Allies a whiff of hope that the tide might be turning in their favour. In June 1941, Hitler launched an invasion of Russia, but by the end of 1942, his army had become bogged down in Stalingrad where the fierce determination of the defending Soviet troops and the cruel winter conditions combined to bring the invading army to its knees. A decisive strike against the weakened Reich might mark a turning point in the European theatre too.

When the idea of targeting the Ruhr dams had first been discussed in 1937, it was abandoned because such massive structures appeared to be impossible to break, but all the same, various scientists started independent research into ways to crack the dams and bring German war production to a standstill by depriving the industry of the water supplies essential for steel manufacture.

Their problem was to establish how much explosive would be required to breach the dams and then find a way of placing it accurately on the target. If the



were to succeed they would require the full co-operation of the RAF and the best scientific minds in the country - and with the risks inherent in any such exploit the military commanders would have to be convinced that the chances of success and the ensuing level of damage would justify the risk to human life.

After many meetings and presentations by eminent scientists and inventors, it was decided to go ahead with a plan to bomb the dams using a revolutionary weapon developed by the genius and tenacity of Barnes Wallis.

## Forming the Squadron

After the decision had been made in February 1943 to mount a raid against the Ruhr dams, there was a race against time to form and train a squadron to carry out by the mid-May deadline. This, it was calculated, would be the time when the reservoirs were at their fullest and the pilots could rely on the light of a full moon to help them bomb on target.

The new squadron would have to be made up from men of 5 Group of Bomber Command, flying Lancasters, the only aircraft capable of carrying the necessary bombload. Flying standards and skills would have to be of the very highest, so the best choice would be experienced, ideally tour-served crews, even though many were due a well-earned break. As the chiefs of Bomber Command considered this tough new appointment, one man, the vastly experienced twenty-four-year-old Wing Commander Guy Gibson, DSO and bar, DFC and bar, stood out as the choice to lead the new squadron. He had developed the already high-performing 106 Squadron into the finest unit in 5 Group – he was always looking for new ways to improve operational effectiveness and was the first to have all his aircraft equipped with cameras to assess bombing accuracy.

At the end of his tour with 106 Squadron in March 1943, and ready for some leave with his wife in Cornwall, Gibson was surprised to be posted to 5 Group Headquarters on 15 March. His first impression was that he was to help with the writing of a book, and he kicked his heels for three days. In the meantime Air Marshal 'Bomber' Harris instructed Air Vice-Marshal the Honourable Ralph Cochrane, Air Officer Commanding 5 Group, to form a special squadron under Gibson for a raid against the Ruhr dams. On 18 March, Cochrane met with Gibson to sound out his willingness for one more operation, and the day after, Gibson was tasked with bringing together a crack bomber squadron and training them for a top-secret mission – for which not even he knew the target. Despite Gibson's claim that he had 'picked them all myself', this was not correct. A cadre of the captains and aircrew were known personally to Gibson, but others appear to have been recommended to him, or selected for him – this is supported by the fact that some were soon posted out from 617 once training began.

Lancasters for 'Operation Chastise' were delivered to Scampton – coded 'A' plus a serial letter. Gibson's aircraft was 'G' for George, Shannon's 'L' for Leather and so on.

### **Wing Commander Guy Gibson**

I had been at Group Headquarters, Grantham, one or two days and had tried to

get down to the factual business of writing, when the AOC sent for me. Air Vice-Marshal Coryton had gone, to the deep regret of everyone in the Group, and the new Air Vice-Marshal was the Honourable Ralph Cochrane, a man with a lot of brain and organising ability. In one breath he congratulated me on my bar to the DSO, in the next he suddenly said, 'How would you like the idea of doing one more trip?'

I gulped. More flak, more fighters; but said aloud, 'What kind of a trip, sir?'

'A pretty important one, perhaps one of the most devastating of all time. I can't tell you any more now. Do you want to do it?'

I said I thought I did, trying to remember where I had left my flying kit. He seemed to be in such a hurry that I got the idea it was a case of take-off tonight.

But two days went by and nothing happened. On the third he sent for me again. In his office was another man, one of the youngest Base commanders in the Group. Air-Commodore Charles Whitworth. The Air Vice-Marshal was very amiable. He told me to sit down, offered me a Chesterfield and began to talk.

'I asked you the other day if you would care to do another raid. You said you would, but I have to warn you that this is no ordinary sortie. In fact, it can't be done for at least two months.'

I thought 'Hell, it's the Tirpitz. What on earth did I say "Yes" for?'

'Moreover,' he went on, 'the training for the raid is of such importance that the Commander-in-Chief has decided that a special squadron is to be formed for the job. I want you to form that squadron. As you know, I believe in efficiency, so I want you to do it well. I think you had better use Whitworth's main base at Scampton. As far as aircrews are concerned I want the best - you choose them. Wing Commander Smith, the SOA, will help you pick ground crews. Each squadron will be forced to cough up men to build your unit up to strength.'

Cochran went on, 'Now, there's a lot of urgency in this, because you haven't got long to train. Training will be the important thing, so get going right away. Remember you are working to a strict timetable, and I want to see your aircraft flying in four days' time. Now you go upstairs to hand in the names of your crew to Cartwright; he will give you all the help you want.'

'But what sort of training, sir? And the target? I can't do a thing -'



Wing Commander Guy Gibson, at twenty-four already a vastly experienced bomber pilot, who set up and trained the air crews of 617 Squadron.

'I am afraid I can't tell you any more just for the moment. All you have to do is pick your crews, get them ready to fly, then I will come and see you and tell you more.'

'How about aircraft and equipment?'

'Squadron Leader May, the Group Equipment Officer, will do all that. All right Gibson.'

He bent down to his work abruptly. This was a signal for me to go.

## **Flight Lieutenant David Shannon**

PILOT, AJ-L

I was trained and commissioned as a pilot into the Royal Australian Air Force. After arrival in the UK I trained on Whitleys and was posted to 106 Squadron commanded by Guy Gibson. I did some thirty-seven or thirty-eight ops with 106, then they wanted to take me off flying and send me for training. I didn't like that so I applied to go on to Pathfinders and went off to 83 Squadron. I'd only been there twenty-four hours when I got a call from Guy Gibson.

'I'm starting up another squadron for a special raid,' he said. 'I can't tell you what it is, but if you'd like to join me again, I'll be only too willing to have you back.'

I said, 'Yes.'

I arrived to join Gibson's new squadron at the end of March 1943, and as it was a brand-new squadron, we had no equipment, no aeroplanes - nothing. So the first thing was to get the whole thing going, which was a mammoth job for Gibson.

to do from scratch. We hadn't even been designated as a squadron with a number at that time, and it was just known as Squadron X for quite a long time. Gibson was given carte blanche, and he personally, with the aid of a Senior Air Staff Officer from 5 Group, chose all his crews that he wanted to form this new special squadron.

I'd been selected from 106, and a great friend of mine, John Hopgood, known as 'Hoppy', came too, along with another pilot - a Canadian, Flight Sergeant Burpee. I think we were probably the first three that Gibson chose, because he knew us; then he went through the records of other aircrew and selected the squadron until he'd built up a force of two flights - twenty-one crews in total - including himself, as the squadron commander and then two flights of ten.

By the time we got there, all the selections had been made by Gibson and the people assisting him in 5 Group Headquarters. By the end of the first week in April the squadron had been formed - twenty-one crews of seven men each - so there were 147 men as aircrew and supporting ground staff - mechanics, fitters and administrative staff. So there were some 500 as ground staff. He had a mammoth operation to undertake in such a short space of time, but he was given full assistance. Orders had come down from Bomber Command through 5 Group to get on with this, because time was short. Nobody knew why time was short, but that was the order.

## **Wing Commander Guy Gibson**

It took me an hour to pick my pilots. I wrote all the names down on a piece of paper and handed them over to Cartwright. I had picked them all myself because from my own personal knowledge, I believed them to be the best bomber pilots available. I knew that each one of them had already done his full tour of duty, and should really now be having a well-earned rest; and I also knew that there was nothing any of them would want less than this rest when they heard that there was an exciting operation on hand.

We would also require ten aircraft to begin with, with all their gear. Later we would need more. This was a big job; there were trestles, trolleys, spare wheels and bumble motors. Cartwright knew his job inside out - he promised that they would be delivered at Scampton the next day.

Next morning to the personnel officer, to fix up the ground staff. We were taking a few ground crews from each squadron, but in the case of the NCOs it would be necessary to have the very best men available. I asked for them and got them. Then along to the WAAF officer to see that we got our fair share of Mess drivers and cooks - very important.

By now things were beginning to get beyond me. I went to the stationery department and got a little book and wrote down everything to be done in a long column. Every time anything got fixed up, I would tick it off, but by the end of the day, there weren't many ticks to be seen. Then would come the visit to the Senior Air Staff Officer, the Air Officer Commanding's deputy. This was Air-Commodore Harry Satterly, a big, blunt man who had the habit of getting things done quickly.

and well. His help was invaluable – in fact, I don't know what could have happened without him.

---

So, by the end of two days the squadron was formed. It had no name and no number. We had worked too fast for that branch of the Air Ministry which gives squadrons new numbers and identification letters, and we decided to call it simply Squadron X.

## **Flight Sergeant Ken Brown**

PILOT, AJ-F

I was flying with 44 Squadron. My C/O was a VC winner, Wing Commander John Nettleton, who had led the Augsburg raid in April 1942, and we were briefed to go to Berlin. After the briefing he said, 'Brown, report to my office immediately after the briefing.' Which I did and he said, 'You are transferred to a new squadron.'

I wasn't too happy about that. I said, 'Sir, I'd rather stay here and finish my tour with Forty-four.' He explained in his very curt manner that this was impossible. It was a name transfer and he could do nothing about it.

So we went to Berlin and on our return we got packed up and off we went to No. 617. But before we went, the Wing Commander wished me well and said, 'Do you realise Brown, you're going to be the backbone of this new squadron.'

We arrived over at Scampton and started to look around as to who was there. There were an awful lot of DFCs, not so many DFMs. We realised that perhaps we weren't really all what we were set up to be.

My wireless operator sauntered up to me and said, 'Skip, if we're the backbone of this squadron, we must be damn close to the ass end.' I began to wonder how I'd got there.

When I was going through Manchester training and Lancaster training there was a fellow by the name of 'Mick' Martin who perhaps was to become one of the RAF's greatest. He was my instructor at that time. So was a fellow that we knew as 'Terry' Taerum (who became Guy Gibson's Navigator on 617). Everyone in the outfit knew Terry. He was teaching GEE at the time. GEE was a navigation aid. I was new at the time, so Terry was sort of our expert.

## **Sergeant Ray Grayston**

FLIGHT ENGINEER, AJ-N

I stayed with Les Knight and we completed a tour of thirty ops – I think I was about two short, but they agreed I could count that as a complete tour to stay with the crew. At the end of that we were due to be stood down, but they approached us and asked would we stay together to do one more trip. We agreed to that – we had a very good crew. Then we were told to go with our own aircraft and our own ground crew and go to Scampton. We arrived and there was not a lot of information available – everybody was new – we knew our own crew but some

were teamed up as new crews. We agreed as a crew we'd stay and do whatever they wanted us to do.

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## **Flying Officer Harold Hobday**

NAVIGATOR, AJ-N

The first squadron I was on was 50, and we'd almost finished our tour - and not many people finished tours because, I'm afraid, the loss rate was so colossal. I decided I'd like to go on a special navigation course, and I was duly put up for that - then we were invited to go on a special squadron as a crew. And much to the dismay of the person who put me up for this special navigation course, I decided that I'd rather go with my crew to this new squadron. We didn't know what it was all about, but we thought it was something special. We had done quite well on 50 Squadron, and I think that's why we were chosen as a crew to go to 61 Squadron.

I opted for the new squadron because I didn't want to let my crew down, and I was quite keen on bombing. I loved the life. It may sound terrible now in peacetime to think you liked bombing people, but I liked the idea of the crew staying as one integral part of the set-up. I wouldn't have liked the thought of another navigator taking my place in my own crew. We were strictly volunteers, but the CO of our old squadron put it to us. Gibson had something to do with it, and our record must have been the main reason why we were chosen.

I do remember that I spent a sleepless night worrying whether I should go on this special squadron or go on the course - because one doesn't like to ask somebody to put you on a course, and when they've arranged everything, to say 'No, I'm sorry but I'm not going.' But I had to make this choice, and I spent a lot of time worrying about what to do for the best. But I decided the crew should come first, and I would stay with them rather than go on the course - which would have meant promotion for me.

We were all keen to find out what it was - but we didn't find out until just before the raid exactly what we were going to attack - but we understood it was something really special and it was rather nice to be involved in something that special.

## **Flight Lieutenant Les Munro**

PILOT, AJ-W

I'd trained as a pilot and reached 97 Squadron in December 1942, and served there until March '43. At that stage myself and crew had done around twenty-one trips, and 5 Group HQ called for volunteers from crews nearing the end of their first tour or commencing their second. I had a discussion with my crew and we decided that we would volunteer - although we didn't know what we were volunteering for, other than that it was for a special operation and a squadron was being formed for that purpose. So, if they wanted volunteers, we were

prepared to volunteer.

~~The crew were reasonably happy about it. Nobody expressed any particular concern or opposition to volunteering for a special duties squadron. I wouldn't have taken the crew with me if they hadn't been happy. But it was a natural assumption that it was going to be a difficult job. Looking back I think it was just a question of, 'OK, they're looking for volunteers for something. Here we are nearly at the end of our first tour. Let's have a go.'~~ But it was a matter of conjecture as to what we were volunteering for.

My first bomb-aimer had started passing out at high levels, so I'd had a succession of bomb-aimers. And when I arrived at Scampton, I'd got another bomb-aimer, Jimmy Clay.

## **Flight Sergeant Robert Kellow**

WIRELESS OPERATOR, AJ-N

The offer presented to us sounded interesting, and with our faith in each member's ability, we made up our minds there and then that we would accept the offer and move across as a crew to this new squadron.

## **Sergeant George 'Johnny' Johnson**

BOMB-AIMER, AJ-T

617 Squadron was formed in March '43 and the American, Joe McCarthy, the captain, was asked if he'd join it - it was to be a squadron of all experienced crews. It was scheduled as a special squadron for a special trip - and it was stressed at that stage a special trip. It consisted of twenty-one experienced crews, all of whom had done one tour or fast approaching it - some had done two.

## **Flight Sergeant George Chalmers**

WIRELESS OPERATOR, AJ-O

At the time when 617 Squadron was brought together, I was stationed at RAF Abingdon and we were doing blind flying - flying approaches - and I got a little bored of this job and I think my squadron commander got a bit tired of me - so between us we agreed I'd go back on operations and 617 just happened to be the squadron. So it was quite by chance on my part, other than the fact that I wanted to go back on operations.

When I arrived at Scampton, I was crewed up with Flight Sergeant Townsend in an NCO (non-commissioned officer) crew - which I asked for at the time. It wasn't so much a selection as an agreement. I was an NCO myself and I always had an affinity with sergeant pilots. I felt you had more comradeship with a chap of your own rank. You'd live with them and you messed with them as well. That was the main reason, the comradeship, I think.



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