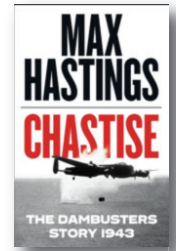


BOOK REVIEW:

Chastise: the Dambusters story 1943

by Max Hastings

HarperCollins Publishers: London; 2019; 364 pp; ISBN 9780008280536 (soft cover); RRP \$38.40



On a clear moonlit night on 16 May 1943, 19 Lancaster heavy bombers of No 617 Squadron Royal Air Force (RAF) took to the skies on a mission to destroy the dams above the Ruhr Valley, the heartland of Nazi Germany's industrial might supporting the German war effort. The success of the mission has become legend, although the results achieved were not as significant as the RAF planners had anticipated.

Max Hastings is a noted journalist who has covered numerous conflicts around the globe and is the author of 28 books. He is the recipient of many prizes: *Bomber Command* won the Somerset Maugham Prize; and both *Overlord* and *The Battle for the Falklands* won the *Yorkshire Post* Book of the Year Prize. His monumental work of military history, *Armageddon: the battle for Germany 1944-1945*, was published in 2005. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature; an Honorary Fellow of King's College; and was honoured with the Pritzker Military Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing in 2002. He was knighted in the same year.

Max Hastings grew up embracing the story of the Dambusters; however, he believes that the raid should now be considered with a more careful analysis. In *Chastise*, he examines the raid within the context of the wider activity of Bomber Command and the overall conduct of the war in 1943. He defers to other historians throughout the book and thereby does not introduce much material not previously known; however, he gives the reader cause to consider the brutal decisions made by wartime leaders in a circumstance of total war.

The destruction of the German dams had been considered by the RAF High Command as early as 1936; however, the means to inflict the destruction was not available in the early phases of the war. The visionary concept of engineer Barnes Wallace for a "bouncing bomb" to skip across the water and settle against a dam wall to destroy it was inspirational, but was not readily embraced by the Ministry of Defence because of other wartime priorities. The dogged perseverance of Wallis over several years eventually gained support and planning for the mission commenced.

The shape of the lakes contained by the dams, the surrounding terrain and the requirement to deliver the weapons from very low level demanded the formation of a squadron to train aircrew specialised in low level operations – a deadly activity over a hostile Europe. While No 617 Squadron was led by very experienced aircrew, half of the aircrew complement was transferred from a neighbouring squadron, some of whom had flown

very few sorties in Bomber Command. They would pay a high price for their inexperience.

Of the 19 bombers that launched for the mission, only 11 would return – a loss rate of aircraft of 42 per cent with 56 aircrew also lost, all but two, killed. Thirteen Australians took part in the raid and eight survived the war. The considerable challenge of completing the mission and the extremely dangerous nature of the low-level attack was recognised with the award of the Victoria Cross to Wing Commander Guy Gibson, the commanding officer, and decorations to 32 of the participating aircrew.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, commander of Bomber Command, opposed the mission as it diverted aircraft away from his priority of bombing German cities. Ironically, on completion of the raid, he was accorded much of the credit for its success.

In 1943, the war was not going well for Britain and the destruction of the Möhne and Eder dams and the flooding of the Ruhr Valley caught the imagination of the world. It lifted the spirits of a war-weary Britain. While the damage inflicted upon the German war machine was not as extensive nor as enduring as anticipated, it caused the German High Command to expend resources on defending dams across the homeland, diverting matériel and personnel away from the wider war effort.

Below the Möhne Dam, the primary target, there were several towns and barracks housing prisoners of war and a slave labour force. Modern estimates are that between 1300 and 1500 died in the flooding of the valley below, of whom around half were prisoners or foreign workers, and many were women.

Chastise provides a comprehensive review of the operation and confronts the shortcomings of the planning processes of RAF higher command. The poor planning for the third wave of aircraft by senior commanders is one such example. Throughout the book Hastings emphasises the human dimension while providing an overview of the activity. His description of the raid and the challenges that confronted the aircraft crews will engage the reader.

Chastise is well researched and referenced. It contains an excellent index, an informative set of appendices and a series of maps proving an overview of the mission and the attacks. A series of photographs capture the essence of the time and provide a pictorial montage of the 133 aircrew who participated in Operation Chastise. *Chastise* is suitable for both the casual reader and the student of the history of air warfare.

Bob Treloar