

Audacious raid which rivalled the Dambusters

It was a mission which, for audacity and sheer courage, rivalled the spectacular attack on the Ruhr dams. 70 years on, **Steve Snelling** charts the story of Operation Marlin through the eyes of a Norfolk bomber pilot who survived the epic sortie to Augsburg and back.

The jet black hair was bleached snow white with age, rendering his nickname redundant. Gone too was the bushy moustache which, though not quite of ‘handlebar’ proportions, had once made his face instantly recognisable outside of a flying mask. But the same brave spirit that had carried him through one of the toughest and most audacious missions of the second world war appeared undimmed by the passage of time.

There was something of the bulldog about Brian ‘Darkie’ Hallows. His crumpled face gave him the slightly battered look of an aging prize-fighter. A man of strong opinions and even stronger personality, he spoke in a deep, foghorn voice with a bluntness that bordered, at times, on the brutally frank about an experience so extraordinary that it all but beggared belief.

More than half a century on, he still couldn’t help guffawing theatrically at the seeming madness of it all, a 1,250-mile round trip mostly across enemy-occupied territory to make a pinpoint, low-level attack in broad daylight on a single factory in the heart of Nazi Germany.

“We just couldn’t believe it,” he boomed, recalling his first glimpse of the wall-sized briefing room map with a red ribbon stretching south across France, before turning east towards the Swiss frontier and then jutting north to the target, the Augsburg-based MAN plant that was one of the main suppliers of diesel engines to the German submarine fleet.

It all seemed too ridiculous for words, like some kind of sick joke.

After all, everyone knew the RAF had long since abandoned deep incursion, unescorted daylight bombing sorties as being far too costly. Surely it had to be someone’s idea of a prank.

“We all started giggling,” said ‘Darkie’. “We really did. We honestly thought it was a joke, but it wasn’t. The group captain was a bit cross. He stomped about the place and said: ‘If you’ll stop bloody laughing I’ll tell you all about it...’”

The story was a familiar one. The same anecdote, told in much the same words, had been recounted by ‘Darkie’ during our first brief encounter. A documentary chronicling the raid was due to be screened

on primetime television and ‘Darkie’ was one of a dwindling band of survivors wheeled out to publicise the programme.

I remember then being struck by the force of his personality, though for the most part he seemed determined to play down his part in the drama. Much had been left unsaid and, coming away, I was painfully aware I had barely scratched the surface. Another six years would pass before I set about filling in the gaps.

‘Darkie’ was then in his late 70s and had settled into peaceful retirement in Sheringham, just a few miles from his home town of Holt.

There, over the course of a memorable afternoon, I was held in thrall by a succession of stories, some funny, some serious, from a life crammed with incident.

We talked about his days growing up in Norfolk, of how his ambition to train as an RAF pilot had been initially thwarted resulting in a none too successful spell working in the family’s laundry and dry cleaning business. We talked about his decision to join the volunteer reserve and his frustration at being held back in an instructional role during the early part of the war. But mostly we talked about one day in April

1942 and his role in Operation Marlin, the desperately brave but costly attack on Augsburg that Churchill described as an “outstanding achievement of the Royal Air Force”.

Seventy years have now passed since that astonishing, headline-grabbing raid, a forerunner of the even more spectacular attack on the Ruhr dams, and ‘Darkie’, along with most of the leading protagonists, is no longer with us. But those growling recollections captured some 17 years ago survive as a ghostly echo not just of one of history’s most daring air strikes but of startling aeronautical debut made by an aircraft later hailed as “the finest bomber of the war”.

The four-engined Avro Lancaster, which had just begun reaching operational units in the winter of 1941-42, represented a massive leap forward for bomber crews compelled to wage war in aircraft that were often out-moded and under-powered. But, by the spring of 1942, the Lanc’s potential was still unproven and commanders and crews had yet to discover either its

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immense strengths or its limitations.

Already acknowledged to be a great weight-lifter, capable of delivering loads of bombs impossible in any other aircraft in RAF service, it was also relatively easy to handle and would, in time, prove the safest of all bombers to fly. But all that lay in the future and there was, among senior officers, an understandable desire to find out just what their latest weapon could and could not do.

Augsburg would be the testing ground and 12 crews from 44 and 97 Squadrons were chosen as the guinea pigs. But even allowing for the commanders’ undoubted faith and confidence in the Lancaster the mission selected was extraordinarily ambitious and appeared to fly in the face

of all the hard-won lessons learned in 2½ years of war. Or, as put another way by one of the RAF’s most distinguished historians, Operation Marlin, a daylight attack involving a round trip of 1,250 miles without escort, seemed to be “pressing fortune to its limits”.

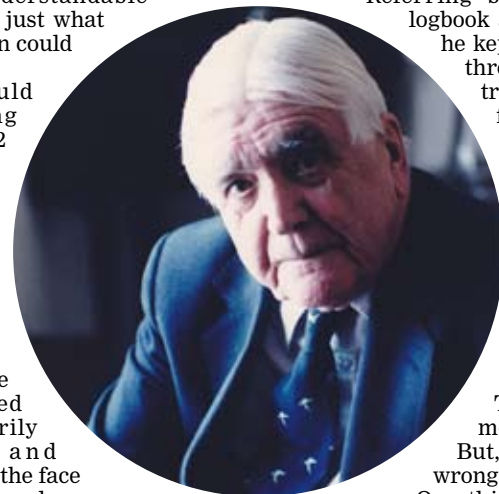
‘Darkie’, as was his wont, expressed his feelings in rather more blunt terms. “It would be fair to say we did not expect that all of us would be returning,” he said.

In fact, the target remained a closely guarded secret until the last moment. Of course, the crews involved knew that something unusual was in the offing.

Referring back to his flying logbook and the brief diary he kept, ‘Darkie’ recalled three days of rigorous training in formation flying at extreme low altitudes.

“At that time,” he said, “the navy was always asking for help from the air force to bomb German battleships such as the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau or the Tirpitz. And our money was on that. But, of course, we were wrong.”

One thing they were right about was the degree of hazards involved in their ‘special’ sortie. Even before discovering the truth about the target they feared the worst. In his diary, ‘Darkie’ noted: “Plenty was said about how important it was and all that stuff, so





we were obviously not intended to come back in any strength.”

Strangely, given the operation’s significance, several of the crews were relatively inexperienced. For all his hours spent flying since the outbreak of war, ‘Darkie’, who was then a 25-year-old flight lieutenant, had completed just five combat missions. Of these, only one had been flown in daylight and just two had involved bombing targets in Germany, both of them on the northern coast which meant minimal flying over Nazi territory.

Little wonder then that he should have been dumbfounded by the Augsburg op. Once he had overcome the shock that it was no joke, the enormity of the mission they were undertaking quickly sank in and he recalled listening in silence as the plan was explained.

The 12 Lancs, divided into four groups of three, were to fly in two squadron ‘vic’ formations, independently of each other, from their bases at Waddington and Woodhall Spa on a low-level flight path that would take them underneath the German radar as they crossed western France before turning east below Paris on their way to Lake Constance and up through Bavaria.

Key to the plan was a diversionary raid over northern France by a force of light bombers and an escort of Spitfires designed to lure enemy fighters away from the Lancasters’ route.

As precise timings were worked out

and detailed plans and photographs of the target studied it appeared as though nothing had been left to chance. “We reckoned we would get there all right,” recalled ‘Darkie’, “but we thought we would have a hard time getting back.”

However, the reality would prove altogether different. Not only did the covering force mission end too soon, but the 44 Squadron formation drifted off course on a route that took them dangerously close to a German air base to which enemy fighters were preparing to land just as the six Lancs roared past.

“Somebody must have made a mistake because they were well off track and ended up just where they shouldn’t have been,” recalled ‘Darkie’. Caught in the “wrong place at the wrong time”, the consequences were catastrophic.

In a frantic combat lasting little more than 15 minutes four of the six 44 Squadron Lancs were blasted out of the sky over Normandy with the loss of three complete crews. One entire ‘vic’ was wiped out, leaving just two bombers, including their leader, 23-year-old South African, Sqd Ldr John Nettleton, to press on, ahead of a 97 Squadron formation oblivious to the disaster that had overtaken their comrades.

“The first and last time I had seen them was when we were crossing the Channel,” said ‘Darkie’, “and I saw six little tiny dots, which I took to be Nettleton’s formation, well to the left of us. They continued off

Roof-top raiders: Artist Chris Stothard’s painting is a graphic representation of the low-level nature of the attack on the submarine diesel factory.

Inset left: Hero of Augsburg: Brian ‘Darkie’ Hallows in later years in retirement in Sheringham, the jet-dark hair which gave him his nickname now turned to white. He received a Distinguished Flying Cross for his part in Operation Marlin.



Facing the media: Survivors of the Augsburg raid, including, second from the right with cigarette, ‘Darkie’ Hallows, and, on his right, Sqd Ldr John Nettleton, who was awarded a Victoria Cross for his part in the operation.

what we thought was the correct course to pass near the fighter aerodrome, whereas we never saw a fighter the whole time. But, there you are, that’s how the cookie crumbles.”

Bravely, in the circumstances, the two, shot-up 44 Squadron Lancs forged on to reach and successfully bomb the target, though not without further cost. Roaring low over the factory roofs to drop their loads of four delayed action 1,000lb bombs, Nettleton’s partner, already bearing the scars of its earlier combat, was set ablaze by accurate anti-aircraft fire.

Trailing flames and smoke from fuselage and wing, the pilot managed to make a crash-landing that spared the lives of all but one of his gallant crew.

And then it was the turn of 97 Squadron’s formation.

“By the time we arrived the place was well and truly alerted,” said ‘Darkie’. “Up until then, we’d had a pretty uneventful trip. We’d shot up a nice looking train about 25 miles short of Augsburg, but that was all. Everything had gone pretty much to plan as far as we were concerned.

“During the run-in, from five to 10 miles away, the thing was to stay exactly on course and on the track we’d planned to come in on, which we duly did. Our leader, Sqd Ldr John Sherwood, had a marvellous navigator and he kept us absolutely spot on. We’d seen a very accurate model of the MAN works which we’d more or less memorised so that we knew exactly where we had to go and that’s what we did.”

Rushing low over the factory complex they ran into a storm of fire from gun positions defending the site and a nearby ack-ack train that had been dragged out of railway sidings.

“There was a hell of a lot of heavy stuff coming at us,” recalled ‘Darkie’. “It all looked rather alarming. We were flying in formation across the width of the factory and I had just clobbered the sheds I was meant to bomb when we were hit, badly in the right wing. A bloody great hole appeared about a yard wide in the wing where the main petrol tank was. And just as I was hoping and praying it hadn’t been hit, I suddenly noticed that Sherwood’s aircraft was streaming a white plume of smoke from its port wing which soon turned to smoke and flames.”

Within minutes, the Lanc was a blowtorch and ‘Darkie’ followed its fiery progress as it struggled towards open country before ploughing into a hillside where it exploded, killing all but the pilot who was miraculously thrown clear to be taken prisoner.

“We were absolutely certain there were no survivors,” recalled ‘Darkie’. “But I remember Sherwood’s wife saying, ‘Oh no, he’s alive. He’ll come back.’ Nothing could convince her to the contrary and she was right. He had been chucked out, complete with seat, and the Germans picked him

up.” Following behind, the final section of three Lancs made its bombing run, losing another aircraft over the town. This time there were no survivors.

But another eight bombs had been added to the 20 that had been dropped, of which 18 had struck the target, five failing to detonate.

By then, ‘Darkie’ was in a bit of a quandary as he withdrew with Flying Officer ‘Rod’ Rodley for company. “We had expected to bomb at dusk, so that the darkness would have come on quickly to cover us,” he recalled. “But by some slight miscalculation it was still fairly broad daylight. So we stayed fairly low to keep out of people’s way and, then, as soon as it got dark we climbed up to around 6-8,000ft, separated and found our way back alone.”

In all, five variously damaged aircraft made it home, though in Nettleton’s case it was only after a circuitous journey across Britain and out into the Irish Sea that finally ended at Squires Gate near Blackpool after 10 hours in the air. “It was quite extraordinary,” said ‘Darkie’. He must have had serious navigational problems, though what they were was never made public.”

Playing down the heavy casualties, the press proclaimed the Augsburg the most daring raid of the war. The ‘hedge-hopping’ fliers became instant heroes and were showered with honours. A richly-deserved Victoria Cross went to John Nettleton.

But ‘Darkie’, who received a Distinguished Flying Cross, still resented the failure to award a second VC to Sherwood, leader of the second formation. “The myth had grown up that Nettleton had been leading 12 aircraft, but he bloody well wasn’t. He led six and Sherwood led six and he did just as much and should have had a VC.”

Overall, ‘Darkie’ felt they had done “a good job” but at a loss rate that was unsustainable. “I reckon we clobbered it,” he said. “It must have disrupted them.” It did. Though subsequent research would show that production was only briefly interrupted and it is perhaps significant that no similar operation was ever attempted again.

For his part, ‘Darkie’ there was simply relief to have returned in one piece, albeit with damage sufficient to have his Lanc written off. “I was bloody glad to get back and very glad that we got four of our squadron’s six aircraft home.”

Before the end of the war, he would fly another 24 operations in Lancasters and Mosquitos, though never again would he fly another raid more scary than that April mission to Augsburg. “I had several other operations where I suffered damage and had a struggle to get back,” he said, “but Augsburg was the one that most frightened me...”