

Book Reviews

Dam Busters: The Race To Smash The Dams 1943

By James Holland

Reviewed by Group Captain (Retd) Ian Shields

Introduction

Those fans of James Holland's histories (including his very well-received *Italy's Sorrow* and *The Battle of Britain*) will welcome this latest book that traces from early inception through execution and into the aftermath what is undoubtedly the most famous (and therefore mythologised) single air raid of the Second World War. Given its place in the popular imagination of both that War and of the history of military aviation, it is surprising that more books have not been written on the raid, but as James Holland highlights, there have been remarkably few. Although he does not make such a claim, this book appears to set out to be the definitive history of the raid; given that time has allowed both a more balanced view of the history of the Second World War and access to previously classified material (both denied to Paul Brickhill, author of the best-known, until now, 1951 account *The Dambusters*) to what extent does he succeed?

Those familiar with James Holland's approach will recognise his style in this 400+ page volume. He adopts a very narrative approach, supported by excellent research with a wealth of details and considerable evidence of many hours spent delving into primary-source material. He also includes a great deal of the human story, dwelling, understandably on Gibson, but as a man with all his strengths and weaknesses. He is critical, but in a fair, balanced and justified way, of many of the senior figures, including Portal and Harris, and uses

these insights into the key players to make this a living, and frankly fairly easy to read, story. For this is the main criticism of the work: it is very much aimed at the popular history market rather than the more serious study of military history or of air power. And it is James Holland's informal style, concentrating as much on characters (and therefore his interpretation - albeit well-supported by facts - of these characters) that may put some readers off. But if you get beyond the seemingly banal the history is sound.

Two surprising things came out for me from reading this book. The first is how accurate in many ways the 1955 black and white, Richard Todd epic film was, given the restrictions of secrecy at the time. And the second is how very short the timeline was from inception to execution in 1943: the sub-title of "The Race to Smash the Dams" is exactly right. The book captures this race against time, as well as some of the spirit of the age, very well, and rightly highlights both the engineering triumph that the raids represented, and the human costs of Operation CHASTISE. Nor does James Holland flinch from highlighting the limitations of the raid, primarily by poor target selection, and the dispute between the RAF and the RN over first-use of the weapon. He perhaps slightly downplays the impact on both morale at home and on the Anglo-American relationship, but that is perhaps more a matter of personal judgement. More annoying was the number of typographical errors: in a book that has a full-price ticket of £20 this was poor.

Has, then, James Holland written the definitive book of the raid? In many ways yes: his grand narrative covers all sides and all angles, and his research is impressive. I remain slightly cautious about his populist and human-angle approach, but then this book is aimed at the wider reader. It is certainly a very easy read, and deserves consideration for a place on the bookshelves of all air power students.

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