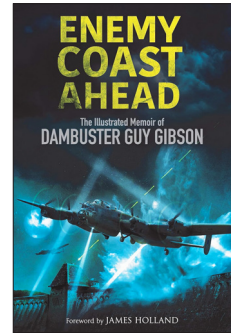


## Book Review

# Enemy Coast Ahead: The Illustrated Memoir of Dambuster Guy Gibson



Author: Guy Gibson

Publisher: Greenhill Books; (2019) (ISBN-13: 978-1-78438-490-6), 528 pages

Reviewed by Flight Sergeant Paul Marr

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### Introduction

On May 16th, 1943, 133 men climbed into 19 Lancaster bombers and flew into the night sky, and legend. This enduring image of the Dambusters Raid, lodged in the national imagination, is still celebrated as an incredible feat of arms. May 16th, 2023, marks the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Dambusters Raid and provides a wonderful excuse to revisit this incredible venture.

*Enemy Coast Ahead: The Illustrated Memoir of Dambuster Guy Gibson*, chronicles Gibson's wartime experiences from the start of the war until Gibson's Lancaster crosses the Dutch coast on returning from the now legendary bombing mission. This edition, the uncensored draft, includes the original introduction by, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Travers Harris, and a new foreword by James Holland. A respected Second World War historian in his own right, Holland has written on the Dambusters (*Dam Busters: The Race to Smash the Dams, 1943*), and his foreword provides context and nuance for the modern reader. This edition also has a marvellous album of photographs, in fact there are over a hundred images of Gibson's experiences. Additionally, Dr Robert Owen, the 617 Squadron Official Historian, adds notes to Gibson's narrative correcting many of the editorial and personal errors whilst also adding helpful detail to Gibson's, sometimes, offhand comments.

Wing Commander Guy Penrose Gibson, VC, DSO and Bar, DFC and Bar, joined the RAF in 1936 on a Short Service Commission with the ambition of one day becoming a civilian test pilot. There is nothing in his early life to indicate the hero he would become; indeed, he passed his initial flying training with only an average rating. He was sometimes rude and condescending towards junior ranks and ground crews. Nevertheless, despite his shortcomings, he was able to lead his men and squadron on an almost impossible mission in a display of courage and leadership that has seldom been matched and never surpassed. He was 24 years old. As Holland states in his foreword, Gibson was undoubtedly flawed 'but his flaws make his achievements all the more remarkable' (p. xv).

Written in 1944, the modern reader will find the language quaint, or even anachronistic. However, it adds a wonderful feeling of nostalgia, allowing the reader to situate the book in the context of the time it was written. *Enemy Coast Ahead*, as you would expect, comprehensively covers the formation of 617 Squadron as a special operations squadron and the Raid itself, a story that Gibson tells best. However, the book can also be viewed as a 'coming of age' saga; detailing as it does, Gibson's maturing from a 'green' naive pilot on 83 Squadron and his rise to becoming the warrior chosen to lead the Dambusters Raid. During two tours on Bombers, and one on night fighters he flew, Hampdens, Beaufighters, Manchester, and Lancaster bombers, and although never properly trained, the Mosquito. Gibson is estimated to have flown 74 Bomber missions and at least 79 as a night fighter pilot at the time of his death. A record that led Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Harris to comment, 'He lived to see the dawn of certain victory; and no one man did more to bring it about' (p. xvi). As Gibson tells his own story, the incredible evolution of how Bomber Command grew, in both size and effectiveness, to become the incredibly effective and ruthless weapon it was by 1944 is also revealed, almost exactly mirroring Gibson's meteoric rise.

Throughout there is a studied nonchalance about the narrative which comes to the fore in the recounting of illuminating, and often amusing, anecdotes. On a mission to Antwerp, flack hits Gibson's aircraft, and he realises, 'something is wrong'. We are left imagining the horror of the moment, Gibson is fighting to control his aircraft and to save the lives of his crew surrounded by enemy fire. Then Gibson laconically continues, 'A shell had entered by my feet, had got the toe strap on my rudder bar and then had hit its pivotal point and knocked it spinning forward on to Houghton's head, where it had laid him out. Quite an unlucky shot' (p. 126). There is also an amusing encounter between a labourer and a spitfire pilot at the height of the 'Battle of Britain' and a discussion on pay. It transpires that the labourer was paid two pounds more a week than the pilot, "but, of course, I work through alerts" (p. 166) explained the helpful worker.

The narrative includes numerous discussions on the inevitability of victory between Gibson and his comrades, written during wartime, and essentially commissioned as a public relations exercise, it is difficult to discern whether these discussions took place, or whether they were intended to boost the morale of the British public. In view of the publicity surrounding the

Raid at the time it is, perhaps, surprising that Gibson includes a note of remorse about the mission, and of the tragedy of war, 'No one likes mass slaughter and we did not like being the authors of it' (p. 352). A careful reading also reveals Gibson's preoccupation with death and dying, not surprising given how many of his colleagues, and friends, die throughout the war (here Dr Owen's notes are revealing and helpful). Whether these thoughts are an indication of Gibson's state of mind at the time of writing, or not, the undercurrent of fear pervading his experiences only accentuate his incredible courage and achievements.

*Enemy Coast Ahead* has something for everyone and therefore, comes highly recommended. For the avid historian there is a first-class memoir providing insights into how Bomber Command became a terrible weapon of war. Though the reader is warned, by Gibson himself, that he was working without access to notes and, indeed, there are numerous errors in names, places, and dates (mitigated in this case by Dr Owen's notes, but nevertheless demonstrate the pitfalls of relying on first-hand accounts for reliable 'history'). For the 'Dams', or air power, enthusiast there is an incredibly detailed first-hand account of the difficulties surrounding creating a bespoke squadron, with modified aircraft, fitted with an experimental weapon, for a dangerous mission in just ten weeks! And for the first-time reader there is a rattling-good adventure tale, the like of which is seldom told.

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