

THE FERRYHILL DAMBUSTER



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RONALD BATSON

Lanark Terrace in Ferryhill is a typical North East street: two neat lines of houses with satellite dishes at the roof level and cars parked outside.

No 23 is on the east side, and from its doorway, Joseph and Elizabeth Annie Batson waved off two of their boys to fight in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War.

The oldest, Ronald, would return a hero as a Dambuster who flew 60 sorties in his career; the youngest, Douglas, would not come home as he would be killed in a snack bar when an American bomber crashed on it in the w Drar's deadliest aviation accident.

There were 133 airmen who took part on the daring raids with the bouncing bombs against the German dams on May 16-17, 1943. Of them, 53 were killed and three were captured – although Ronald made it safely home to enjoy eggs and bacon on touchdown.



In the Freckleton air disaster of August 23, 1944, 58 people on the ground were killed when a B24 Liberator bombed crashed onto the Sad Sack Snack Bar and exploded, killing 38 children aged between four and six in the neighbouring infants school. Douglas, 20, is buried in Duncombe Cemetery in Ferryhill.



Ronald was the first of the brothers to join up, in March 1941. He had been born in 1920, attended to Alderman Wraith Grammar School in Spennymoor and had become a grocer's assistant before war broke out.

He qualified as an air gunner and by September 1942 had teamed up with a 6ft 3in American pilot, Flight Lieutenant “Big” Joe McCarthy. McCarthy’s bravado caught the eye of Wing Commander Guy Gibson who asked him, and his crew, to join the secret Squadron 617 – the squadron tasked with breaking the German hydro-electric dams .

The crew of Lancaster ED285/AJ-T sitting on the grass, from left, Sergeant G Johnson; Pilot Officer DA MacLean, navigator; Flight Lieutenant Joe C McCarthy, pilot; Sergeant L Eaton, gunner. In the rear are Sergeant R Batson, gunner; and Sergeant WG Ratcliffe, engineer, at RAF Scampton on July 22, 1943.



Ronald and the crew had already flown more than 30 sorties when, in April 1943, they began training with Barnes Wallis' bouncing bombs on reservoirs.

A still from the film The Dambusters showing a rotating, bouncing bomb.

Their part in Operation Chastise, of May 16, 1943, was to fly their Lancaster AJ-T – “T for Tommy” – to attack Sorpe dam. The other dams at Mohne and Eder were to be attacked with the spinning bombs bouncing across the top of the water like skimming stones, but the lie of the hills at Sorpe prevented that and demanded a direct hit on the dam.

Despite taking off half-an-hour behind schedule because of a hydraulic leak, McCarthy was the first to bring his plane over Sorpe dam. However the presence of an unexpected church spire interrupted their planned low level flightpath.

McCarthy made nine dummy runs over the dam before, on the tenth approach, aimer Johnny Johnson dropped their bomb from a height of just 30ft.

It hit the centre of the dam, exploded, sent a plume of water 1,000ft high – but the dam didn't burst

Sorpe was made of earth and wasn't expected to erupt in the way the concrete dams at Mohne and Eder did. Mohne in particular burst open, spilling a tidal wave

down the valley that killed at least 1,500 people – many of them foreign prisoners being held in forced labour camps. The loss of electricity and water also inconvenienced the enemy's industry. As T for Tommy turned for home, Ronald, the front gunner, spotted a goods train below on a railway line. McCarthy gave him permission to attack it. As he fired on it an unexpected fusillade flew up at the plane – it was a heavily guarded ammunition train that was firing back.

The Lancaster made it home to RAF Scampton, in Lincolnshire. It survived a bumpy landing as one of its tyres had been shot out, and its crew were able to enjoy a celebratory breakfast – they had joined a truly elite club of Dambusters, whose daring and skill would be the subject of films and books and great interest for decades to come.

With McCarthy, Ronald flew more than 60 sorties. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal in February 1944, and in July, he was retired from frontline service and became an instructor.

And in August 1944, his younger brother, Donald, was killed in the worst aviation accident in Britain during the war.

A US B24 was returning to RAF Warton, near Blackpool, from a test flight when it was caught in a thunderstorm. The skies

were so dark, the thunder was so loud and the rain was so torrential that the scared children in Holy Trinity School in Freckleton, a village next to Warton, began singing nursery rhymes to raise their spirits.

As it attempted to land, the plane clipped a tree and then a building, losing its wing. Its fuselage ploughed into three houses and then straight through the Sad Sack Snack Bar, killing 14 people, including Donald, who were inside. The wreckage collided with the school and exploded, engulfing the infants' wing in a fireball.

In total, 61 were killed.

Presumably, Ronald was in Ferryhill when his brother was laid to rest in the cemetery. When he was demobbed, Ronald – who seems to have been known universally as “Ronnie” – lived in Newton Aycliffe and worked for Block and Anderson, a business machinery company that specialised in Banda duplicators, which turned out documents with purple print on super smooth and smelly paper. This work took him to Lancashire for a while, but he retired to Leeholme, near Coundon, in the 1990s and he died there in 2006. He was cremated in Durham

