



Most earlier accounts of the Dams Raid state that the aircraft that attacked the Möhne Dam came in from above the Körbecke Bridge, turning half right over the small spit of land before flying straight at the dam. It is now thought that they approached from the forested area south east of the lake, flying over the larger spit, before descending for the final attack. MAP DRAWN BY AUTHOR

1,500m. In that last 1,500m the pilot would have to get down to exactly 60 ft and stay level, the flight engineer would maintain the approach speed at 230 mph, and the wireless operator would ensure that the mine was spinning backwards at 500 rpm. Meanwhile the navigator would switch on the spotlights and check that the beams were touching. Flying at 230 mph, the aircraft would cover the 1,500m stretch in about 15 seconds.

It is not always noted that Chastise marked another important innovation in bombing technique. VHF radio sets, previously only fitted to fighter aircraft, were used by bombers for the first time. This meant that crews could talk to each other and therefore be controlled by a leader, or 'master bomber' as they were later to be known.

By the time Young, Maltby and Shannon had got to the dam Gibson had flown over it, without revealing the exact direction of attack, and came through the flak unscathed. He told the others that he 'liked the look of it'. So, just two minutes after this trio arrived, he began his run in. It seemed at first that everything had gone to plan – the mine was

spun correctly and was seen to bounce three times. But it did not reach the dam wall, exploding a few yards short. A great plume of water rose up into the air, but the dam held.

Back in Britain, in the operations room at 5 Group headquarters in Grantham, Wallis, Cochrane and other assorted staff had been joined by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris himself, who had driven the 120 miles from Bomber Command HQ in High Wycombe. When Gibson's 'Goner 58A' signal was received, indicating an unsuccessful attack, with the mine exploding between 5 and 50 yards short, a sense of gloom descended.

Gibson then called Hopgood into attack. Flt Sgt John Fraser, Hopgood's bomb aimer, later remembered Gibson describing the run-in as a 'piece of cake', which is certainly not what it seemed like to him. (How frightfully understated the slang of that time seems to us today.) As Hopgood crossed the stretch of water towards the dam, the anti-aircraft gunners on it were now ready. His aircraft was hit on one side. The flight engineer shouted a warning, Fraser dropped the mine, knowing that he had done so too late and heard Hopgood screaming 'For Christ's sake get out of here!' Hopgood struggled on, trying to lift the aircraft, and got it up to about 500 ft. The mine bounced over the dam and into the power station on the far side, causing a big explosion and a fire. Fraser, Minchin and Burcher, baled out but Minchin, already injured, did not survive the parachute drop. Hopgood and the other three died in the crash. Burcher and Fraser were captured. Fraser went back to Canada after the war and later he would name his first son John Hopgood Fraser after the pilot who had kept his aircraft aloft long enough to save his life.

The next few minutes were surely what earned Gibson his Victoria Cross, as he called up Martin to attack. In the words of John Sweetman, 'Gibson's leadership and Martin's courage ensured that the operation would not disintegrate.' Gibson flew slightly ahead of Martin on his starboard side, in the hope that the gunners would be distracted. However, something went wrong with Martin's mine: it veered off leftwards and exploded near the southern shore of the lake. Its casing may have been damaged when it was dropped accidentally onto the hard standing at Scampton that morning, or, perhaps, Martin hadn't got the aircraft exactly level as it was released.

Sqn Ldr Melvin Young, whose rowing Blue from Oxford may have helped him survive the two ditchings at sea which earned him the nickname 'Dinghy', was next. This time, Gibson flew across the defences