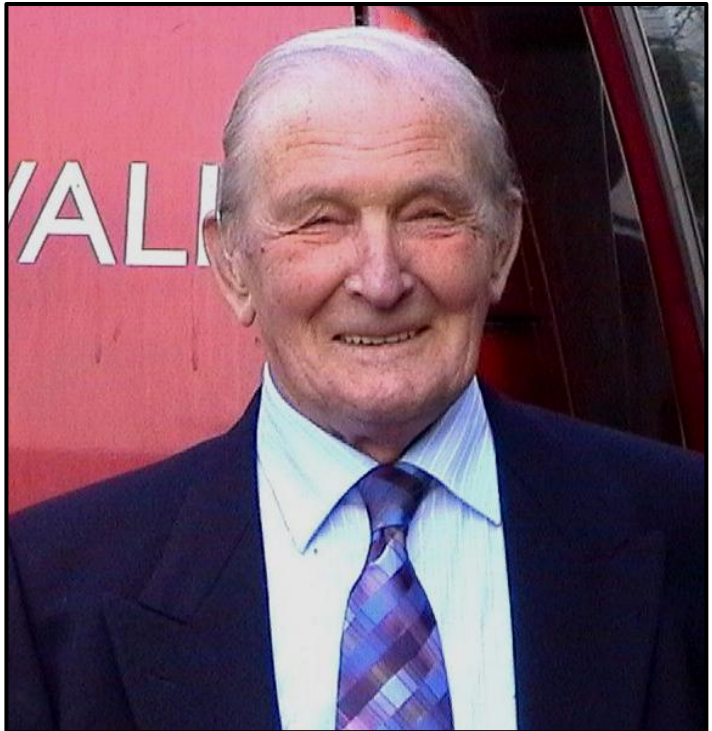


# “THE LAST OF THE DAMBUSTERS AND THE ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS”

By Lawrence Holmes 10 Group ROCA

May 2013 is the 70th anniversary of the famous Dambusters Raid which was carried out on 17 May 1943 by the specially formed 617 Squadron. On Thursday 16 May BBC2 broadcast a 60 minute programme called ‘The Dambusters - 70 Years On’ featuring the last of the British Dambusters, 91 year old George ‘Johnny’ Johnson. Two other original Dambuster members still survive in other parts of the world, pilot Les Munro from New Zealand and front gunner Fred Sutherland from Canada. But my story below concerns English bomb aimer Johnny Johnson.



George ‘Johnny’ Johnson DFM  
‘The Last of the Dambusters’ at  
Malpas, Cornwall in 2007.

As a younger man I was well aware of the Dambusters story. I had seen the 1954 film of the raid many times, read many books on the subject, and I had seen Nigger’s grave at RAF Scampton when attending ROC Camps at the station in 1983 and 1984. But my heroes were indeed Guy Gibson, actor Richard Todd and of course dog Nigger ! I was not aware

of the detail of any of the other participants of the raid. All that changed in 2006 and 2007. On 14 July 2006 the Westcountry News carried an article about the Dambuster Raid and the new plans to remake a modern version of the 1954 film. The article strongly featured bomb aimer George ‘Johnny’ Johnson and gave his address as Torquay which was in 10 Group ROCA area. They called him ‘The Last of the Dambusters’ and he was 84 years old.

At the time I was the Chairman of the Poltimore Club, which was a small club formed at general ROC stand down in September 1991, for former officers of 10 Group ROC. Over the years since 1991 we had stabilised at about 20 to 25 members and partners and we held just two meetings every year when we had a meal. The October dinner was always semi formal with grace, loyal toast, a guest speaker and a final toast to the Royal Observer Corps. As Chairman I was the one responsible for arranging the guest speaker for the October event. We had had some superb guests ranging from WW2 pilots (including one who had baled out over Berlin), to a motorised glider pilot who flew from Cornwall to New Zealand, to our own Geoff Paine who told us all about his brother who flew Halifaxes in WW2. When I read about Johnny Johnson living in Torquay I knew I just had to try to get him to our next Poltimore Club dinner.

By various means I found out his address, contacted him and was delighted when he agreed to come to our next Club dinner on 7 October 2006. My wife and I picked Johnny up from his retirement flat in Torbay and took him to our dinner venue which was the prestigious St Mellion Golf Club near Saltash, Cornwall. We had a lovely private room with a large oval table which amply seated the 25 people attending. With a speaker like Johnny Johnson we had no shortage of people wanting to attend our club event ! I had put on the table various items of 10 Group silverware in the form of cups and shields, appointed a Mr Vice, and people were dressed for the occasion. After the loyal toast, I stood up and introduced Johnny and he gave a fascinating talk about his life in the RAF, with 617 Squadron and, of course, he took us through the raid minute by minute.

Johnny's pilot was tough American Joe McCarthy and they were to attack the Sorpe Dam. Five Lancasters were scheduled to attack the Sorpe but in the end only McCarthy's did so. Thankfully Johnny's aircraft returned safely and he was awarded the DFM for his part in the raid. He remained in the RAF until September 1962 when he became a teacher. At the end of the evening 10 Group ROCA Chairman Tony Child took Johnny back home to Torbay and I thought that was to be the end of my association with 'The Last of the Dambusters'. This was not to be.

As well as being in ROCA, I was also the Treasurer of the Cornish Aviation Society (CAS), and CAS too always wanted good speakers so I suggested Johnny gave a talk to the Aviation Society which was based at RAF St Mawgan. Our Chairman Ian Coleman duly contacted Johnny and he readily agreed to give the Cornish Aviation Society a talk on 11 April 2007, much on the same lines as his after dinner speech to the Poltimore Club in 2006. Very often we offered to put up speakers in the Mess at St Mawgan or in a member's house and also take them to dinner in the Mess before the meeting. In Johnny's case he accepted the dinner invite but opted to stay with myself and my wife Christine at our house in Malpas, near Truro. We were then to take Johnny back to Torbay the next morning. Because we all thought that the event was worthy of going on local radio, I contacted Radio Cornwall and they said that they would like to interview Johnny live on air on the early morning show at approximately 8-00am the following day 12 April !

Several of us were to join Ian and Johnny in the Mess for a meal but unfortunately due to traffic, Ian and Johnny were late and missed the evening meal and poor old Johnny had to make do with a plate of sandwiches provided by the Mess Manager ! Johnny's talk to the Cornish Aviation Society was much the same as the one he gave to the Poltimore Club and by 2200hrs we were on our way back to my home in Malpas. With Johnny and I, was my son in law Martin Jezard who had been the NRC Team leader at Plymouth but had since taken up a pilot career in commercial flying. The three of us arrived home and I immediately asked Johnny if he wanted a drink and gave him the choice of coffee, hot chocolate or a single malt ? Johnny's eyes lit up and he eagerly opted for the single malt. Over the next hour or so it also proved to be more than just one malt !



Johnny Johnson with Denis Ellery on 11 April 2007 at RAF St Mawgan. Denis was the Ch/Obs at nearby St Columb ROC post when he and a group of the post observers formed Cornish Aviation Society in 1977. Denis became the first Chairman and is now a Vice President and Life Member of the Society.

For the next 90 minutes, sitting in our lounge, Johnny enthralled us with tales about Guy Gibson, Nigger, Scampton, and what it was like lying prone in the nose of a Lancaster bomber flying at almost zero feet over Germany at night. He and the crew of his Lancaster flew over the Mohne Dam on their way back to England and Johnny was clearly amazed at the sight of the dam breach made by Gibson and all the water flooding the valley below. He got quite excited and critical when we asked him about the planned new film of the 'Dambusters' and said that the producer had told him that they were going to change the name of Gibson's dog from 'Nigger' to 'Digger' because they did not want to cause offence ! Johnny accused them of wanting to change history.

He also had no time for what he called 'latter-day arm chair historians' who decided that the dams raid was a wicked act. 'They don't know – I do, I was there' he commented sarcastically. All too soon our near midnight conversations came to an end and we all retired to a well earned night's sleep.

At 0730hrs the next morning I welcomed the Radio Cornwall radio car complete with a very smart lady presenter named Hannah Stacey in my driveway. After some moving around to get a satellite signal, Hannah asked me to fetch Johnny. Whereas I was dressed quite casually, Johnny arrived for the interview immaculately dressed in blazer and flannels, white shirt and smart tie. Hannah asked him all manner of pre live interview questions about the raid which he answered in a very correct way and I realised that he thought the pre interview was the actual interview. We could hear the live morning programme going out from the radio in the radio car and on cue Hannah addressed Johnny and the live interview on Radio Cornwall was underway. Johnny almost stood to attention throughout the whole of the interview such was the military training of the man. At the end of the live broadcast thanks were given, Radio Cornwall left and we had a leisurely breakfast before Chris and I drove Johnny all the way back to his home in Torbay.



Radio Cornwall presenter Hannah Stacey interviewing Johnny Johnson on 12 April 2007 at Malpas, Cornwall.

Hosting Johnny Johnson at the Poltimore Club Dinner and being with him for the Aviation Society meeting was a privilege and a life remembering event particularly our late evening conversations. He is a charming, well spoken man, has a remarkable memory, and is a gentleman. The next day a large bouquet of flowers arrived for my wife with a note which read 'Many thanks for your hospitality – Best Wishes Johnny Johnson'. What a man! A few days after that a large letter arrived and inside were several photographs. One was of Johnny and his crew standing at the front of their Lancaster bomber. Johnny had written on the photo the words 'To Christine and Lawrence with thanks and best wishes. George (Johnny) Johnson DFM'. For some years afterwards we exchanged Christmas cards with Johnny then he moved from Torbay to live near Bristol to be close to his family.



Above is the signed photograph given by Johnny Johnson to Christine and Lawrence Holmes on 15 April 2007. Johnny is far left front row and tall pilot Joe McCarthy is third from left front row.

I also took a 27 minute video of Johnny's talk to CAS, a 4 minute video of Johnny being interviewed by Hannah Stacey and a 9 minute sound recording of his Radio Cornwall live interview. All in all a good historical record.

Another item of Dambuster history I have in my 'knick-knack cabinet' is a small piece of a 'bouncing bomb' which I bought many years ago from Obs Capt Sid Deedman. He and a group of people from 14 Group ROC had managed to get hold of a salvaged practice bouncing bomb and had cut it up into many pieces which they were selling for, I think, £10 a piece as a fund raising exercise.

From the broader Royal Observer Corps perspective of the Dams raid, many posts must have reported the low flying Lancasters in the early part of 1943. Many training flights were made by 617 Squadron, some out into the North Sea and some as far south as Cornwall where Guy Gibson spent much of his childhood. I have never seen any old post logs describing such plots nor have I seen any Ops Room Recorders charts showing the tracks. Maybe the high security surrounding the raid stretched as far as the ROC ? But wouldn't it be nice to find just one such log ? But then I said that about the Glenn Miller flight and none has been found !