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## Dambusters actors sent to boot camp

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**A group of drama students has been put through a 1940s-style RAF boot camp to prepare for a Radio Lincolnshire drama.**

The actors - ex and current students at the University of Lincoln - have learnt everything from how to make their beds with military precision to how to survive in hostile territory - all while being balled at by a fearsome sergeant major.

It's all part of the effort to inject maximum authenticity into a specially written play telling the story of the Dambusters raid, which took place 70 years ago this week.

The daring World War II operation saw the aircrews of Squadron 617 fly Lancaster Bombers from their RAF Scampton base - just three miles or so from Radio Lincolnshire - and wreck three dams in Germany's industrial heartland.

Led by Wing Commander Guy Gibson, the raid - for which Barnes Wallis invented the bouncing bomb - disrupted water and electricity supplies in a key area for the manufacture of Germany's war munitions.

### **Last Dambusters**

The play will be performed at RAF Scampton on the anniversary of the raid as part of the RAF's sunset memorial ceremony.

'It's being staged in a hangar where the Dambusters used to park their Lancasters,' explains Michael Hortin, who is heading up the station's anniversary programming. 'Guy Gibson's office is just metres away.'

Featuring audio visual content - like bouncing bomb footage - alongside the live action, the performance is set to be an evocative and immersive experience for the invited guests, including two of the three surviving Dambusters.

'Both are now in their nineties,' Hortin explains. 'Both will see the drama, which will be a bit of pressure for the actors.'

But they'll be used to it after the two-day boot camp at nearby RAF Cranwell, where the service trains its officers.

'The sergeant major was very strict,' chuckles Hortin. 'He upset them at times, but they loved him afterwards.'

The two young actors playing the officers had the daunting job of delivering a presentation to current RAF personnel on how the raid would be carried out.

'They needed to understand what it was like to be in the RAF during the war. They needed to know about the hardships and the differences between ranks.'

### **RAF support**

The play - written by university lecturer Conan Lawrence and a former drama student together with Radio Lincolnshire presenter Howard Leader - will go out live on Radio Lincolnshire, with a few public performances taking place in the days to follow.

Leader, a volunteer of the RAF Reserves, has been closely involved with the station's anniversary coverage. 'He provided a

fantastic way in,' Hortin says. 'We've had a huge amount of RAF support, while historical aviation groups have helped us track down people who remember the raid - like Guy Gibson's driver. There's no way as a local radio station we could have done all this.'

For their part, the station will be presenting both the RAF Museum and Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage with recordings of their interviews with veterans and local people about the RAF in wartime Lincolnshire, excerpts of which have been broadcast in the run-up to the anniversary.

Over the last few weeks, the station has recreated 1943 bulletins based on archive local paper reports and the RAF's 'thick black book of losses' suffered by Bomber Command each year. It's a grim tale.

'I'd go through and count the Lincolnshire deaths,' Hortin tells Ariel. 'It's hard to get your head around how many were lost. Today we might report on a road accident and say that it's the 45th on Lincolnshire roads this year. Well, 1100 Lincs-based airmen died in the first five months of 1943.'

The famous Dambusters suffered their own casualties on the night of the raid, with 53 of 133 aircrew killed, while on the ground in Germany almost 1300 died including 749 Ukrainian prisoners of war.

### **As it happened**

Radio Lincolnshire will be tracking the events in real time 70 years on from the raid - from the moment the planes took off at 9pm on May 16 through to the return of the final Lancaster at 6.15 the next morning.

'For four hours from midnight eight of the 19 planes that set off were lost,' Hortin says. 'I'm keen that every person who went on the raid - whether they survived or went down - is mentioned.'

Reporter Rod Whiting - who has met groups of veterans at crash sites in Holland and Germany in the build-up to the anniversary - will report from the dams on the night of the raid.

He also hopes to speak to some of the Germans and Ukrainian prisoners who took refuge from the floods on the roofs of buildings.

### **Tail gunner Norman**

There will be musical interludes, too, with the station commissioning 15-20 locally composed folk songs.

'Some are about 617 Squadron, including one about Guy Gibson and another about a tail gunner called Norman. Others have broader themes,' Hortin explains.

Despite the passing of the decades, he believes that the coverage will strike a chord with listeners living in what used to be known as 'bomber county'.

The days when Lincolnshire had 29 airfields, 720 Lancasters and 50,000 RAF personnel are gone - these days, only a few squadrons remain in the county - but the history has made its mark.

'You drive around and see little crosses where planes have come down,' Hortin reflects. 'The story of the Dambusters and the part Lincolnshire-based squadrons played in the war is very much in the county's DNA, in its heart.'



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