

ONE OF THE LAST DAMBUSTERS

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Squadron Leader Lawrence 'Benny' Goodman, who has died aged 100, was one of the last two surviving Lancaster pilots of No 617 (Dambuster) Squadron who were involved in attacking the German battleship Tirpitz in late 1944. And in the final weeks of the war he dropped the 22,000 lb 'Grand Slam', the biggest bomb dropped by the RAF.

Lawrence Seymour Goodman was born on September 24 1920 in West London and educated at Herne Bay College in Kent where he was a member of the Officer Training Corps. He completed an electrical engineering course before joining his father's film and advertising business in London.

He joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve in 1940 and began training as a pilot in Canada in June 1941. During an eventful passage back to Britain, an escorting destroyer was sunk and Goodman's ship was damaged.

Back in Britain, Goodman completed Lancaster conversion training in the summer of 1944 and was posted to 617 Squadron, based at Woodhall Spa in Lincolnshire. With its unique reputation as a special-duties squadron manned by highly experienced crews, it was unusual for a novice crew to be sent to 617.

He flew his first raid on August 18 – an attack on the U-boat pens at La Pallice in the port of La Rochelle – with an experienced captain before he took his crew to Brest a few days later. On their fourth operation they deployed to Scotland to carry out an attack on the German battleship, the massive Tirpitz.

The possibility that the battleship might cause havoc among the convoys carrying vital supplies across the Atlantic, and the crucial war materials for Russia, had dominated naval plans. RAF and Fleet Air Arm bombers had made several attempts to disable "The Beast", as Churchill dubbed the battleship, but they had failed, as had the gallant efforts of mini-submarines.

In September 1944, Lancasters dropped the 12,000 lb 'Tallboy' bomb which penetrated the steel armour of Tirpitz, forcing it to move south to Tromsø, inside the Arctic circle, for repairs. This brought it in range of bombers taking off from northern Scotland.

Drawn from Nos 9 and 617 (Dambuster) Squadrons, 37 Lancasters, led by Wing Commander "Willie" Tait, took off on October 29 1944. As the bombers approached through the cloud cover, the battleship put up a smoke screen. Goodman dropped his Tallboy into the smoke before heading to their base at RAF Lossiemouth.

After the raid on Tirpitz, Goodman flew on many notable operations; the majority involved dropping Barnes Wallis's Tallboy deep-penetration bomb using a precision bombsight. The bomb had an 11-second delay fuse to allow maximum penetration before exploding to create an "earthquake" effect.

In December Goodman attacked the synthetic oil refinery at Politz near Stettin on the Baltic coast, which had been marked by flares dropped by the Pathfinder Force. On return, after a flight of more than nine hours, fog had appeared over Lincolnshire and Goodman's Lancaster was the only one to land at Woodhall Spa, the remainder having been diverted to other airfields. At the end of December he attacked the E-Boat pens at Rotterdam and at IJmuiden.

After bombing the U-boat pens at Bergen in Norway on January 12 1945 and a return to the E-Boat pens in the Netherlands, the squadron turned its attention to destroying the crucial viaducts that carried the railways being used by the Germans to bring reinforcements to the front line in the west. On February 22 Goodman dropped his Tallboy on the Bielefeld viaduct, a particularly difficult target to hit from high level.

In March the squadron began receiving Barnes Wallis's 22,000 lb 'Grand Slam', the biggest non-nuclear air-dropped conventional weapon of the war. To carry this huge bomb the Lancasters had to be modified, with the fitting of a stronger undercarriage, as well as removal of the front and mid-upper gun turrets, some of the armour plating and the bomb doors. As the specially modified bombers took off, observers on the ground saw the straight wings of the Lancaster flex with the weight.

On March 19 the target was the Arnsberg viaduct. Goodman was flying one of the six Lancasters carrying the Grand Slam. He was the third to drop his bomb and later damage assessment confirmed the viaduct was destroyed.

Over the final weeks of the war, Goodman dropped more Tallboys, including one on the U-Boat construction yards at Hamburg. On April 25 he took off on his last operation, the attack on Hitler's retreat at Berchtesgaden in Bavaria. Despite being hit by anti-aircraft fire, he dropped his Tallboy. Later, he commented that "we certainly made a mess of the Waffen SS barracks."

Goodman was vigorous in praise of his ground crew. He wrote: "Working out in all weathers, often on wind, snow and rain swept dispersals, they were always there to ensure the serviceability of our aircraft and to see us depart. They waited in uncertainty eager to witness our return. For 365 days and nights they made it

possible for us to do our job. All of us who flew knew their worth.”

He remained in the RAF and transferred to Transport Command, flying the Stirling. He left the RAF in the summer of 1946 and immediately joined the Auxiliary Air Force flying the latest mark of Spitfire with 604 (County of Middlesex) Squadron.

He re-joined the RAF in September 1949 and over the next few years flew the Hastings transport aircraft. He later converted to the Canberra and was a flight commander on 80 Squadron based in Germany. After a tour in the Air Ministry he left the RAF in 1964 to re-join the family firm.

He obtained his British and American civil pilot's licenses and flew a Piper Comanche, of which he was part owner, until he was 93. He was an active member of the 617 Squadron Association and was in demand as a speaker raising funds for charitable causes, including the RAF Benevolent Fund.

In 1990 he was introduced to the local Heimatbund (Local History Society) in Arnsberg and became a minor celebrity attending official receptions when he was invited to sign the town's official guest book. On one occasion he was invited to the local Schützenfest and he attended in the full uniform of an honorary member. In 2017 the French Government appointed him to the Légion d'honneur.

Benny Goodman's marriage was dissolved and his son survives him.

Squadron Leader “Benny” Goodman, born September 24 1920, died July 18 2021