

Air Vice Marshal David Arthurton OBE

Director Strategy and Military digitisation

On 14 September 2023, I had the privilege of being invited back to the Royal Air Force College Cranwell as guest of honour at a Prizegiving and Graduation Dining in Night for cadets of Modular Initial Officer Training Course 22, and Reserve Officer Initial Training 70, a role I never envisaged myself fulfilling back when I was but a humble officer cadet. Ascending the steps of College Hall and entering the rotunda gave me pause for thought, almost 30 years to the day since I first arrived at that august institution.

I have been very lucky and enjoyed a rich and varied career in the RAF, completing a broad range of flying tours and welcome exposure to the Joint operational environment during two tours at PJHQ. Having commanded the Combat Air Force in my last appointment, my promotion to 2* was accompanied by a pivot to the world of digital technology, something I had used my entire career, but where I now find myself in the driving seat. As Director of Strategy and Military Digitisation, I enjoy the challenge of embedding digital technology into the heart of Defence, seeking to mirror the transition we have all enjoyed on our personal devices since the advent of the smartphone.

So how to inspire the next generation of cadets, on the cusp of bursting forth into the RAF, brimming with energy and fresh thinking that will shape the future of our Service? There is much we can draw from our past that must shape our future approach. Having been fortunate enough to command 617 Sqn, I will reflect on the acts of Barnes Wallis, Guy Gibson, and the brave members of that tight-knit, elite flying unit who pulled together as a team to prevail despite the odds stacked against them. The themes of innovation, courage, leadership, and teamwork were exemplified by the Dambusters.

Without the innovative engineering brain of Barnes Wallis, the Dambusters would not have had the means to conduct their audacious mission. Through his engineering genius, tenacity and iterative approach, he invented UPKEEP, the munition with which 617 Sqn would conduct Operation CHASTISE, their successful attack on the Mohne, Eder and Sorpe dams on 16/17 May 1943. However, the creation of upkeep alone was not enough to prevail against the enemy. Guy Gibson led his hand-selected team through a rigorous training regime which developed crew skills of the highest standard. I recall the late Johnny Johnson's first-hand account of training for the Dams Raid, delivered during a Dining in Night at Coningsby in 2013, where he described flying at ultra-low level around the UK, at night, testing the crews' mettle against representative targets. A truly awe-inspiring account that had the room captivated. On the night of 16/17 May 1943, execution of the mission demanded the highest standards of courage, skill and teamwork from the crews, who discharged their mission superbly, delivering a decisive blow to the enemy.

The spirit and ethos forged by the Dambusters in 1943 hold true to this day, not only in the modern day 617 Sqn but a host of operational units across the RAF. Yes, the threat we face and our ability to confront it have continued to evolve; however, the underlying tenets of the approach that served them well in the Second World War hold true today. Turning to my current role and quest to embed digital technology across defence, I seek innovation as profound as that delivered by Barnes Wallis, courage in the adoption of new technologies, such as AI, and the underpinning themes of leadership and teamwork will be required to drive this change deep into the heart of Defence.

I believe the threats we will face in the future are as significant as those faced by 617 Sqn during the execution of Operation CHASTISE. To prevail in such an environment will require us to embrace the same themes that served 617 Sqn so well in the past. The spirit and ethos of the Service, imparted during officer training today, are as relevant as they have ever been and will help forge the next generation. However, we need to contextualise this, embracing those guiding principles yet being clear eyed and open minded enough about the adoption of new technology and not being wed to the 'way we have always done this'. Through a combination of our core values and appetite to adopt cutting edge technology, we will stay true to our ethos and drive our operational capability forward, allowing us to prevail in the most challenging of circumstances and protect the nation.