



Members of the East Lancs Railway Preservation Society: Jack Manley, John Manners, Joe Calverley, John Whitworth, Mike Sovfleet, Dave Sweatman



# A Dambusters Run

There's nothing quite like viewing the stunning Peak landscape from above ... Joy Hales accompanies wartime Flight Engineer Joe Calverley DFM aboard a Pennine Helicopters' flight

**W**hat could be better on a glorious summer day than a drive the length of Derbyshire to the moors of the High Peak. As I by-passed Chapel-en-le-Frith and headed towards Glossop on the A624 the countryside was looking its glorious best. My destination was the Grouse Inn, flanking the road at the top of a hill, and an excited group of people chatting round a kiosk in an adjoining field told me I'd found the right place.

Not only was this the first time I'd been in a helicopter, but my honorary co-pilot on the Pennine Helicopters' Dambusters Run was 89-year-old Joe Calverley, a former 617 Squadron member born in Shuttlewood, near Bolsover, who had first flown down the valley 68 years before in preparation for the heroic raid to bomb the Mohne and Edersee dams in the Ruhr valley. This

was his second flight with Pennine, the first having been organised by fellow volunteers on the East Lancashire Railway as a birthday gift. Five fellow volunteers had again come with him from Burnley as support crew.

After booking in at the kiosk with operations manager Julia Ruddy, waiting in a field for the helicopter to arrive and anticipating this aviation

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'first', I was almost picturing myself back in the days of the Barnstormers. Fortunately, pilot Capt Chris Ruddy has years of experience, an enviable reputation and absolutely no aspirations to be a stunt aerialist. The thunderous clatter of rotor blades announced the arrival of the helicopter.

There was just time for a health-and-safety chat from Julia and a look at the map to see what our route was before ground crew members Charlotte and Kev carefully stowed us in our seats, with Joe sitting in place of honour next to the pilot. There was one last warning about not putting cameras out of the window, then very quickly and smoothly we were in the air.

This must surely be the most perfect way to appreciate the beauty of these moors as well as their vastness. As a helicopter can fly much lower and faster than a plane, the ground swoops by – a waterfall appears on the right, a lone walker striding out glances up as you skim over hills and cloughs,



glimpsing the shadow of the helicopter marked out on the terrain below. It seems barely seconds before the dams of the Derwent Valley appear – a glorious sight as we skate by them and the valley opens out below.

You can't imagine that the group of men practising low-level flying along this valley nearly 70 years ago thought anything could be more of a contrast to the bombing raid they were preparing for – that tense moonlit flight, waiting for the burst of light and sound that signalled anti-aircraft fire and desperately hoping to get through it all safely and head back home. We

fall silent at the drama and beauty of the scene and can only imagine the skill required to accomplish their mission and safely master such difficult terrain.

It seems just a moment before we're doubling back up the other side of the valley and then sweeping away over the moors. It's hard not to feel proud to live in a county that can boast such a glorious landscape. Enjoying this chance to appreciate the dark peat moors from a different perspective and revelling in the sensation of flying, we're suddenly brought back to the wartime raid by the sight of a group of

people exploring the debris at one of the many aeroplane wreck sites. As we pull in closer we are greeted by cheery waves and we fly off leaving them below.

All too soon we're coming in to land and, quite honestly, I'm tempted to try and hide on board to experience it all again! However, the ground crew are waiting to escort us from the helicopter and usher in the next group of passengers. Fortunately the nearby inn offers a friendly welcome and a chance to sit in the sun, enjoy a drink, unwind and ponder on the flight before the long drive home. ▷

Pennine Helicopters flies from various sites in the Peak District, Lancashire and South Yorkshire. They offer a number of themed flights, including a 'Last of the Summer Wine' flight around Holmfirth, as well as the Wharfedale Wander and Yorkshire Three Peaks in the Dales plus flights for devoted Manchester United, City or Bolton Wanderers fans.

However, leisure flights are only one side of the company's work. The power and manoevrability of their Bell LongRanger helicopter (one of only five in the country) make it ideal for a number of purposes. The hot weather earlier this year saw



Joe Claverley with pilot Chris Ruddy  
Ground crew Kevin Milner and Charlotte Ruddy



them helping to fight moorland fires in Yorkshire, the Peak District and at Woodhead, flying with the a Kestrel bucket underslung which allows them to release controlled amounts of water to maximum effect. Pennine has also been dropping logs to

various moorland sites for the National Trust – blocking gullies to stop water draining from the moors and so keeping the peat moist – an invaluable environmental project to help

preserve this unique landscape. **For details contact Pennine Helicopters Ltd, Oakdene Farm, Saddleworth, Greater Manchester OL3 5LU Tel 01457 877833 [www.penninehelis.co.uk](http://www.penninehelis.co.uk)**



A group of walkers inspects the wartime wreckage of a plane



## ‘Kango Joe-L’, Joe Calverley DFM talks about his memories of the raid

As Flight engineer it was my job to nurse the four Rolls-Royce Merlin engines through thick and thin. The Skipper said to me at the beginning “So long as you keep those four engines turning I don’t give a damn” – so I did. I stood next to the pilot and if he was injured or killed then I had to take over. Fortunately it never happened – I’m really glad of that.

‘I was born in Shuttlewood, near Bolsover, but we were living in Burnley when I was called up. I was just coming up to 19 and half way through an apprenticeship as an electrician. It was a case of “What shall I do?” and after I’d got over the trauma of being dragged into the forces I realised that the best thing for me was to join the crews of Bomber Command. I was put into a bomber squadron and taken over to Canada for four weeks’ training to learn everything about the engine (it was a Douglas D4 - the nearest to a Merlin) and what to do if different things went wrong. I joined 101 squadron in Lincolnshire and then was transferred over to 617 squadron and we began training up straight away for the dams.

‘It took about five or six weeks – in Wales, on the east coast over the sea, and in the Derwent Valley where the terrain was the most like the Mohne dam. I went over these dams so many times that if I close my eyes I can picture it: just skim over the top, then hard to starboard to miss a hill and then swing over to port to miss another hill then climb. If you didn’t... well, there are at

least four or five Lancasters by the Mohne dams that failed to take the right banking. The mission was so secret we didn’t know what the hell we were doing or where we were going. We had all sorts of ideas. We were talking about landing in swimming pools or bombing swimming pools, bombing canals. We didn’t have a clue until the briefing with Guy Gibson. He told us “You’ve been flying at a hundred feet, you’ll be going down to 60.” Silence. Then one lad said “Sir.” Gibson said “Yes”. “Have I to bring my wellies?” No hint of a smile crossed his face.

‘We set off at about 10.30-11 ish, but over Norway met heavy anti-aircraft fire. We had one engine out on fire and another playing up. I kept it going for a while; then the skipper complained of rudder trouble. When we checked the rear gunner was dead and the rudder was damaged, so we had to fly with the other engine that was beginning to fail. Shrapnel from the anti-aircraft fire had killed our navigator and radio operator and there was so much damage with two engines out and the chance of explosion from the fuel pouring in. We were the last to go in with orders to do what we could if the dam wasn’t breached. If we hadn’t been hit so badly we would have received the code word that the dams had been breached, which meant we were to drop the bombs and get straight back - but we never received the word – we were in trouble. We were losing height so we dropped the bomb where we were and turned to try to get back. We



finished up putting the plane in the sea three miles off Cleethorpes, the remaining four of us got into a dinghy and the plane sank where it was. We were lucky: if there'd been a lone German fighter anywhere about he'd have machine-gunned us. To me the most hurtful part is that when the plane went down those three lads went with it. We couldn't bring them back – that hurts the most.

'We were straight back on another mission. Not long after we got a new plane and a full crew again and we went after the Tirpitz in the Norwegian fjords. When we dropped the bomb on it our rear gunner reported that ours had hit stern – to this day I've always said "Good – Hitler wanted a kick up the backside".

'Apart from that I did 63 raids. When we went over and dropped those bombs I always had in my memory the sight of what had happened in London, Liverpool, Sheffield and Coventry – the women, children and old people killed. But they suffered just the same. The raid

over Cologne always sticks in my mind. When we got over there it was a sea of flame – I asked 'What do we bomb?' War is a dirty game but we couldn't turn around and say "I'm not going there, I'm not doing that again" because we didn't know whether we'd get shut in some prison if we did. In Germany they'd have put them against a wall and shot them. I wouldn't do it again, not for anything. I will admit that a number of times I've come back got to the dispersal point, got the ladder and got down and been sick. Your gut is so churned up, you've had no food, but you're sick. Many mornings when I've gone back gone into the billet, thrown my gear on the bed and said "That's it, I'm not going any more. I've had enough." Then the next day gone into the mess hall and heard of friends who'd gone and immediately it goes through your mind that you have to go on. I wouldn't like to go through it again. After the war we were all searching for work and I went home to Burnley.'