

THE DAMBUSTERS AT HWACHON

By Mark L. Evans and C. Ross Bloodworth

The Korean War was almost a year old when the Navy blasted the Hwachon Dam on 1 May 1951. One of the most extraordinary strikes of the war, the raid is commemorated today by Fighter Attack Squadron (VFA) 195's nickname, *Dambusters*. On the ground, the war was degenerating into vicious trench fighting where gains were measured in yards. In the air, the men of the fleet did everything they could to take the pressure off, but flying over Korea presented unique challenges.

Retired Commander K. W. "Tex" Atkinson recalled: "Each of us spent hours cutting and shaping large charts into small sections. We covered them with clear plastic so that they could be easily stored. This prevented us from having navigational charts spread all over the cockpit while we tried to fly formation and keep track of where we were at the same time. A Navy pilot in Korea never knew when he would suddenly find himself on his own, flying over snow-covered mountains that all looked the same, battling 50-knot winds that constantly tried to blow him off course, with no radio beams to follow and a carrier to find that was somewhere far out to sea."

On 5 April the Chinese and North Koreans launched their fifth offensive aimed at pushing the United Nations (UN) forces back from the 38th parallel. Numbering 70

Above, a direct hit! A torpedo slams into the Hwachon Dam, as seen from a photographic F9F-2P *Panther* from VC-61's Det C. Right, famed artist R. G. Smith captures the moment as VA-195 *Skyraiders* sweep over the Hwachon Dam after releasing their "fish" on 1 May 1951.

divisions, the communists were determined to isolate South Korea's capital of Seoul with a double-flanking movement, and launched four Chinese communist army groups against the 75-mile front between the Hwachon Reservoir and Munsan. Two weeks of seesaw fighting stretched the 1st Marine Division thin. On 22 April when the 7th Marines were dug in around Hwachon and spotted movement on the nearby hills, they knew what was coming. Shortly after dark the stillness exploded as bugles, sirens, whistles, gongs and screams announced a huge Chinese attack. On their left the 6th South Korean Division disintegrated, exposing the Marines' flank.

A Marine officer recalled how the Chinese came "in wave after wave, hundreds of them. They were singing, humming and chanting, 'Awake Marines!'" Hitting the Marines with massive mortar barrages, they swarmed in



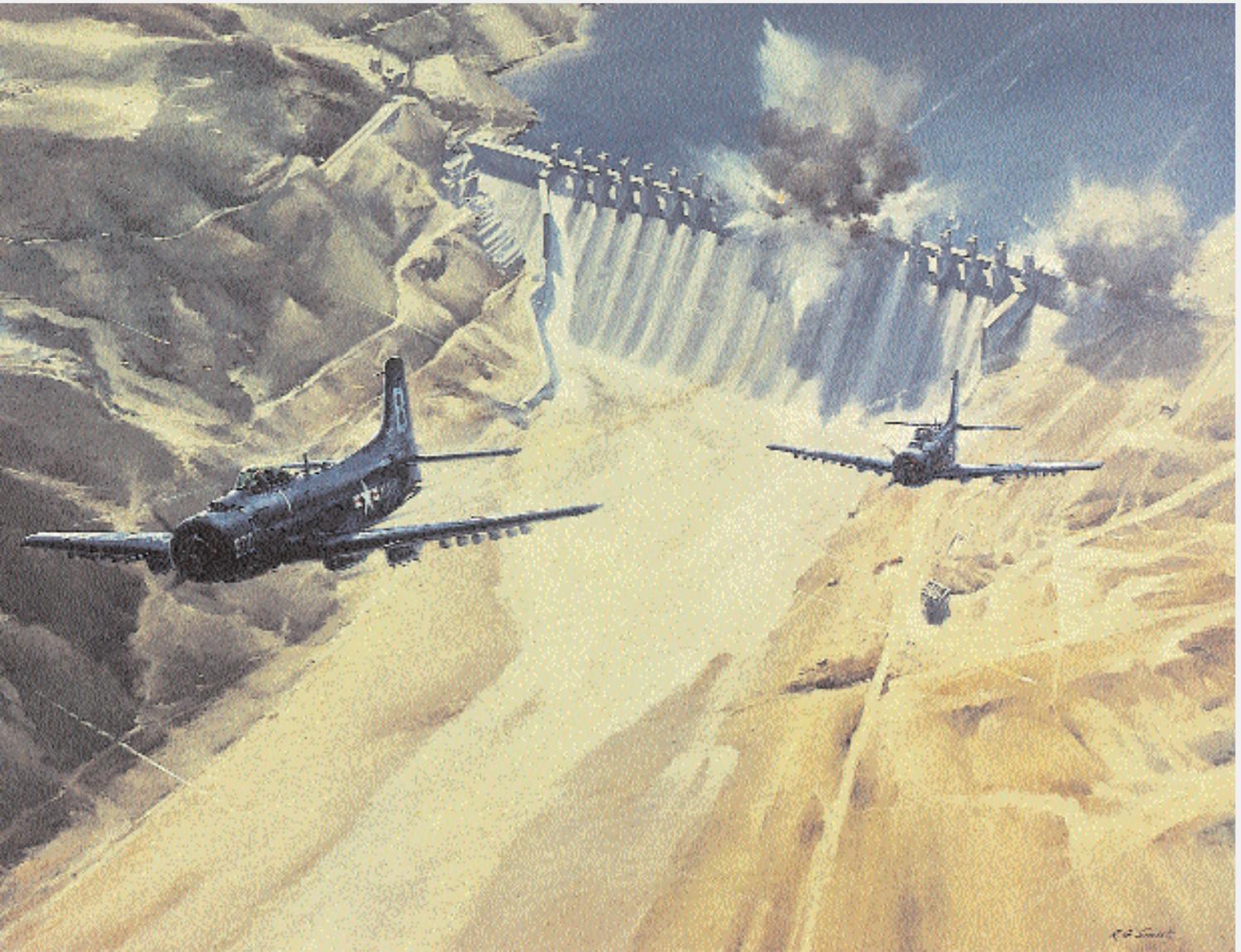


Image courtesy WRE Colortech/Sharlyn Marsh

for the kill, throwing hundreds of grenades. Another Marine remembered, “All this was in the pitch-black night with Chinese cymbals crashing, horns blowing and their God-awful yells.” Somehow, the Marines held, and survivor Sydney Greenwood recalled why: “I remember saying to a Marine next to me, ‘If they break through, we will be done.’ The Marine responded, ‘Don’t forget, there are Marines on that hill.’” Greenwood added, “That remark will last with me forever.” Still, as hard as they fought, the Marines could not hold back an avalanche, and on the 24th orders came to pull back.

Fortunately, as tough as the communists were on the ground, promised East Bloc air support failed to materialize, allowing the Marines to escape while giving the UN air forces the chance they needed to even the score. Chinese General Peng Dehuai bitterly observed that had the communists controlled the skies during these earlier offensives, “the American and British invaders

would already have been eliminated in Korea.” The truth was that in their effort to stop communist aggression, U.S. planners were increasingly forced to rely upon the firepower of the air-ground team to offset the enemy’s numbers.

With rising casualties, U.S. planners desperately searched for a way to break the deadlock, and looming foremost was the Hwachon Dam. Located almost 50 miles northeast of Seoul, the 250-foot-high dam impounded the waters of the Pukhan River, which were high due to the spring thaw. The enemy held two aces. If they blew the dam’s sluice gates, the released waters would flood the valley and stop further UN advances. If they held back the water by closing the gates, the river would be lowered to fordable depths and enable communist infiltration across the river against the exposed allied flanks. Either way, it had to go.

The attempts to blow up this dam rank as some of the



most determined of the war. The Air Force was the first to try, using Boeing B-29s to bomb the dam, but they barely dented the 2½-foot-thick gates. Unfortunately, the bombing spooked the enemy, who promptly blew most of the vital Pukhan bridges and opened some of the gates, flooding the lower river.

Racing against time, the Army sent in Rangers and mechanized cavalry on 11 April, but they were heavily outnumbered and forced back by fierce resistance. The final straw was when a larger ground attack actually took the dam later in the month, only to be driven out by a ferocious counterattack before they could destroy the sluice gates. The end result was that the dam had become a symbol to the communists of their continued defiance of the West.

Throughout this period, round-the-clock air strikes had begun to wear down the men of Task Force 77. Nonetheless, the grueling pace of mounting continual close support missions demanded nothing less than total dedication, and nowhere was this commitment more in

evidence than with Carrier Air Group (CVG) 19, which had racked up an impressive fighting record in WW II.

During this deployment CVG-19 comprised Attack Squadron (VA) 195 AD-4 *Skyriders*, Composite Squadron (VC) 3 Det F F4U-5N *Corsairs*, VC-11 Det 7 AD-4Ws, VC-35 Det 3 AD-4Ns, VC-61 Det C F9F-2P *Panthers*, Fighter Squadron (VF) 191 F9F-2Bs and VF-192 and 193 F4U-4s.

Deploying aboard *Princeton* (CV 37) with Carrier Division 5, they departed Yokosuka, Japan, on 16 April 1951, escorted by Destroyer Division 11. Rendezvousing with *Boxer* (CV 21) and *Philippine Sea* (CV 47) on the 18th, *Princeton* steamed into action the same day. The grinding routine aboard was almost bearable due to the high morale of *Princeton's* crew. No less than 31 sets of brothers—including one set of four and three sets of twins—completed the ship's company, a record almost matching the five Sullivans of WW II.

"We're just one big happy family," Captain William O. Gallery

said of his crew. "We of the *Princeton* have, as our policy, considered ourselves to be the crew of a floating hotel and gasoline and rearming station for the air group embarked. We will continue this policy."

Between 16 April and 22 May CVG-19 continued to improve upon its record, maintaining an overall availability rate of 92 percent and flying a total of 1,873 combat sorties against targets as far north as Manchuria. Cdr. Richard C. Merrick assumed command of CVG-19 on 7 July 1950. He cut a unique figure, carrying a Luger pistol "with a barrel as long as his forearm" it was said, a pair of 7x50 binoculars and a K-20 aerial camera. Merrick remained unruffled during the strike against the dam, operating everything but the Luger continuously, all the while puffing on his trusty pipe.

To complete his multiple missions of close air support, reconnaissance, interdiction and air bombardment, Merrick began this deployment with 121 aircrewmen, ranging from WW II veterans to

THE COMMUNISTS HAD LEARNED TO FEAR “THOSE BLUE AIRPLANES.”

men with no combat experience. On 18 April 1951 the group numbered 64 operational aircraft, including 10 F9F-2Bs, 3 F9F-2Ps, 27 F4U-4s, 4 F4U-5Ns, 15 AD-4s, 2 AD-4Ns, 1 temporarily assigned AD-4Q, 1 AD-4W and 1 HO3S-1 helicopter.

At 1440 on 30 April 1951, Commander Task Force 77 Rear Admiral Ralph A. Ofstie received an urgent message from the Eighth Army. The Chinese had just resumed their “spring offensive,” and the hard-pressed troops on the ground desperately needed help. If two or more of the floodgates could be knocked out, it might prevent the enemy from releasing all of the impounded water simultaneously to inundate the valley and bring operations to a standstill.

Ofstie gave Merrick the daunting task. Since the 20-foot-high and 40-foot-wide gates made a vulnerable target for aircraft, the enemy strengthened the dam with rocks. The 4,000-foot ridges surrounding the reservoir limited access to only two aircraft at a time, making their runs against such a tiny target even more difficult.

At the beginning of the war, air strikes had usually gone in low, sacrificing safety for accuracy. Communist anti-aircraft fire had always been a problem, but the hard-pressed men on the ground had to be supported, especially during the desperate retreat from Chosin the previous winter (see Nov–Dec 2000). The communists had learned to fear “those blue airplanes.” Pilots were used to flying around the clock to provide the support, knowing that it often meant the difference between life and death for the men on the ground. Eventually, seasoned pilots learned that the darkest, coldest nights were the best. The darkness shielded them from the prying eyes of the enemy, while the colder temperatures forced

enemy truck drivers to close their windows, making it harder for them to hear approaching aircraft.

However, alert to the danger, the East Bloc reinforced the North Koreans and Chinese around the dam, improving both the types and numbers of anti-aircraft guns and making any low-level attempt against it certain to be a costly one.

Reflecting the seriousness of the crisis, at 1600 *Princeton* turned into the wind and launched the first strike. Merrick commanded the



Opposite, VA-195 *Tigers* aboard *Princeton* (CV 37) examine their “secret weapon” against the enemy. Ltjg. Carl B. Austin (center) was assigned the honor of dropping the secret weapon, which he said had unusual ballistics, but “dropped all right.” Austin was also entrusted with the sacred password, “Down the drain.” Above, the next day they were back in the thick of the war. During a bridge interdiction strike over Wonsan Ltjg. Edward Phillips’ *Skyraider* was hit by heavy flak, but he was just happy to get back.

strike force, comprising six VA-195 ADs under squadron CO Lieutenant Commander Harold Gustav Carlson and escorted by LCdr. E. A. Parker’s flight of five *Corsairs* from VF-193. Each AD carried two 2,000-pound bombs and multiple 11.75" Tiny Tim rockets intended for the sluice gates, while the *Corsairs* carried 100- and 500-pound bombs for flak suppression.

Carlson led the first pair in while the others orbited overhead. CVG-19

noted that “the straight-away was very short and speed control was accomplished by extremely precise flying.” Actually, the approach was difficult enough without the added threat of enemy fire, but no sooner did the first pair go in than the valley erupted as the communist batteries opened up with everything they had. Swooping in low, the *Corsairs* blasted every anti-aircraft site they could identify, searching frantically for the telltale puffs that marked the guns, while the ADs

flew the gauntlet in rapid succession, straddling the dam and knocking a hole squarely in the middle.

Unfortunately, the strike was in vain. None of the bombs hit the vital gates and the one hit succeeded only in shaking loose a little of the dam’s surface, while the rockets simply skittered off the behemoth. The only bright spot in the day’s tally was that not a single plane was lost in what should have been a suicide mission, although several sported enough holes to startle the crews upon their return. Regardless, Gallery was still determined to answer the call. During

the debriefing, they discussed every option, but no viable solution presented itself until Gallery boldly suggested torpedoes. His premise was that the torpedoes would provide both the accuracy and the punch to tackle the dam, and prior to sailing from the Puget Sound Navy Yard, Bremerton, Wash., *Princeton* had actually loaded some MK 13 torpedoes left over from WW II.

A similar plan had been tried once before, though not with torpedoes.



Above, a torpedo finishes the job, blasting a hole in one of the sluice gates. Right, a pair of F9F-2B Panthers from VF-191 make a pass over Princeton (CV 37) on 23 May 1951.



During WW II three great dams provided the primary power for most of Germany's industrial heartland in the Ruhr region. Realizing their significance, the Germans packed the narrow approach along the valley with anti-aircraft guns, making any attempt to knock them out certain to be a nightmare. On the night of 16–17 May 1943, British wing commander Cdr. Guy Gibson valiantly led the 19 Avro B.MK I (Special) *Lancasters* of No. 617 Squadron in a strike against the Eder and Möhne dams by “bouncing” huge 9,250-pound bombs into them. For this epic raid Gibson received Britain's highest award, the Victoria Cross.

With this inspiring example, the flight crews worked through the night repairing the aircraft and arming them with eight MK 13s brought up from below decks where they were buried behind the other ordnance. Ensign Robert E. Bennett, one of only three pilots who had practiced antishipping tactics, said, “We trained extensively at coordinated tactics against shipping on a previous cruise, before Korea, and we got good at it.” Still, most of them had never dropped a torpedo, much less tried anything this unorthodox. In fact, Bennett recalled that he had never even seen an aerial

torpedo before Hwachon. Thus, they decided to include on the strike three VC-35 pilots who had already practiced torpedo drops, Lieutenants Arthur F. Clapp, Frank Metzner and Addison R. English.

The high hills surrounding the reservoir continued to limit the approach to a two-plane section run-in, while the remainder of the group circled overhead. Making the run-in over the heights surrounding the reservoir required a letdown to drop altitude without exceeding torpedo drop speed. In addition, the drop required limited water space to avoid grounding the torpedo, while still allowing sufficient time for the “fish” to arm. And the departure from the target had to be made down a narrow valley lined with anti-aircraft guns. To top it all off, with just eight fish available, only a minimum error rate was acceptable.

Bennett elaborated, “Too high and the torpedo would enter the water steeply and dive. Too low and the torpedo would skip off the water. There was difficulty also in slowing down to maximum drop speed, and if the ball wasn't centered, the torpedo wouldn't run true. The torpedoes were finicky little devils.”

Still, there was no other option, so early on 1 May 1951 Merrick led his second strike, consisting of eight ADs

from VA-195 and three from VC-35 Det 3, backed up by eight *Corsairs* from VF-192 and four from VF-193. Looking ungainly with their fish slung under their bellies, the *Skyraiders* had nonetheless been designed with just such a mission in mind, and they performed beautifully.

Arriving over the target at 1130, the pilots were amazed to find the valley ominously quiet. Expecting the guns to riddle them at any moment, they pushed themselves over and went in, only then being greeted by the first bursts of flak. Apparently, the enemy did not expect them to return so soon and was caught by surprise. While the *Corsairs* went after the guns or circled, each pair of ADs flew in at wave-top level, struggling to hold their letdown to drop altitude so that they did not exceed torpedo speed.

Running the gauntlet took nerves of steel, each pilot dropping his torpedo and then climbing sharply up the great bulk of the dam as it suddenly loomed over him, waiting breathlessly during those agonizing seconds for his lightened AD to respond. During their run Clapp and English discovered the hard way that their torpedoes were faulty. Both men were stunned to watch their fish swerve at the last minute and avoid their targets completely!

V F A - 1 9 5 D A M B U S T E R S

Lineage

Established as Torpedo Squadron (VT) 19 on 15 August 1943.

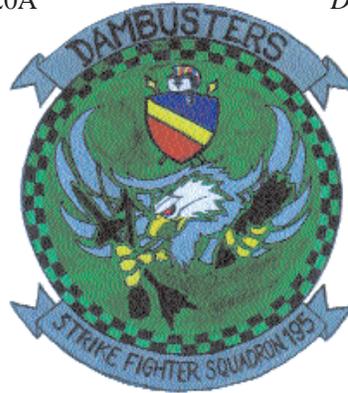
Redesignated Attack Squadron (VA) 20A on 15 November 1946.

Redesignated VA-195 on 24 August 1948.

Redesignated Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 195 on 1 April 1985.

During WW II the squadron flew its first combat mission during preinvasion strikes against the Japanese on Guam on 18 July 1944. It went on to participate in operations over Palau (Peleliu), the Bonin and Volcano Islands, the Philippines, Formosa (Taiwan) and Okinawa through the end of the war in 1945. Among its many accomplishments was participation in the Battle of Leyte Gulf, where the unit helped sink Japanese super battleship *Musashi*.

Following WW II the squadron was heavily engaged in the Korean War, including close air support missions for U.S. Marines trapped near the Chosin Reservoir in 1950–1951 and against hydroelectric power plants and industrial targets in North Korea in 1952, as well as its dambusting exploit at Hwachon.



The Vietnam War again engaged the *Dambusters* in repeated western Pacific deployments, beginning with special operations in 1964 and continuing through a strike against a thermal power plant in 1967. The squadron's participation increased right up to the communist invasion of South Vietnam in 1972, when it was involved in the mining of North Vietnam's harbors as well as heavy strikes north of the 20th parallel.

Since the Vietnam War, the *Dambusters* have continued their record, escorting reflagged Kuwaiti tankers through the Arabian Gulf and flying in support of Operations Desert Shield/Storm, together with maintaining constant vigilance against Iraqi aggression.

During their years of service, the *Dambusters* have been assigned variants of the Eastern TBM *Avenger*, Douglas A-1 (AD) *Skyraider*, Douglas A-4 (A4D) *Skyhawk*, Vought A-7 *Corsair II* and the McDonnell Douglas F/A-18 *Hornet*.

Nicknames

Fortunately, the other six torpedoes ran true, slipping momentarily beneath the surface, but then regaining their calibration and racing on to slam into the gates. The explosions echoed off the hills and sent great waves roaring across the reservoir. The center gate was ripped apart, the second gate was torn by a 10-foot gash and one of the abutments was damaged. Circling above, the pilots watched in awe as millions of gallons of water poured through the stricken gates in huge churning columns, flooding the valley for miles.

From this single raid, the enemy was denied control of the reservoir's waters for the rest of the war. The elated pilots returned to *Princeton* for

much needed rest. The squadron historian can perhaps be forgiven if he allowed his pride to get the best of him while listing his squadron's accomplishments. Near the bottom of a long list of targets hit, ranging from bridges to tanks and barrels of fuel, he added an unusual item: "Flood Gates: 2 Destroyed, 1 Damaged."

Such success was not without cost, however. Merrick, the air group commander, was tragically killed in action on 18 May 1951 when his *Skyraider* took a large caliber hit on the wingroot. His relief, Cdr. Charles R. Stapler, was also shot down less than a month later on 10 June. Following their return to NAS Alameda, Calif., the new CVG-19 commander, Cdr.

William D. Denton, Jr., told a local newspaper, "It's a damn bloody war. I think it's a more brutal war than WW II, frankly. In this war, you're going in every day. You know there'll be [antiaircraft artillery]—lots of it—and you'll have to fly through it day after day. It's just a steady job."

But that did not stop the *Dambusters* of VFA-195, who proudly earned their name on one remarkable day in 1951. ✈

Mr. Evans is a historian in the Naval Historical Center's Aviation History Branch, where Mr. Bloodsworth worked as an intern.

Special thanks to Cdr. Tex Atkinson for his contributions to this article.