Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project.

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Start of Transcription

00.00: October 15th St Ignatius School Abbotsville Sidney.

00.10 (LC): Well, first and foremost, thank you very much for the opportunity you have given me of being with you this afternoon and talking to you. I suppose I ought to apologise because unless I misunderstood one of the masters, if I weren’t here, you’d be in class – would you? Oh, so I’d better not be too long had I!

00.43: I wonder if I can ask, what it is that you’d like me to talk about? Do you want me to talk at all about the war - or not? Dambusters? Well then, I’ll say just a little to begin with, about the Dambusters. You know something about the squadron, do you? You’ve seen the film.

01.14: Well the Dambusters was a special duties squadron, that was formed in the beginning of 1943 and it was given the particular job then of blowing up 2 or rather 3 dams - in Germany. The Moehne and the Aida and the Scorpie dam. The problem was this – I’m assuming you don’t know about the attack – you’ll excuse me if I’m telling you what you know. The problem was this – that in order to destroy the wall of the dam – you had to detonate a bomb, with a lot of explosive in it, at a definite depth, of I think, about 20 feet – in actual physical contact with the wall of the dam. You clearly couldn’t drop a bomb straight down from high up, so that it would hit the water just at the edge of the dam, that would be impossible to be that accurate and even if you did, the bomb would get deflected in the water and move away – probably. You couldn’t torpedo it because there were torpedo nets in front of the wall. So there was a scientist – a well known scientist – called Barnes Wallace – who, ever since he was young, had gone into engineering and designed a whole number of things, including the first British airship, nearly all of which have been rejected by the government. All his life he spent designing things – which were first class designs - and most of which have been turned down. But the remarkable thing about him, is that he has never lost…he has never given up trying. The more you push him down, the more he bobs up again. He’s 87 now, and he’s still designing. Well, he thought of a new idea – he watched his son – at some stage or another – throwing a stone into water, you know, if you throw a stone flat, it hits the water and it bounces. So, he designed a bomb that bounced. The idea was that it would hit the water, bounce, bounce over the net, keep bouncing, hit the wall of the dam and he would make it rotate, so that it would go down the wall of the dam and because it was rotating, it would keep in contact and then blow up.

04.07: From the pilots point of view – and I wasn’t on this attack – so I can – I’m free to say what I want to – the difficulty for the pilot was that the aircraft had to be exactly 60 feet above the water. If it was 70 feet, the bomb dropped into the water and didn’t bounce. If it was 50 feet, it blew your tail off. And there was no instrument, no altimeter, that could gauge your height that accurately. So, Guy Gibson, the CO of the squadron, the leader, suddenly thought one day, the idea of putting a searchlight in each wingtip, which would coincide at exactly 60 feet. And a bomb aimer was put in the nose and he had to keep his nut down and watch these pools of light and he said, “down, down down”, until the met into just a single pool and of course if thy got bit lower, by crossing, in no uncertain terms he told his captain to get up a bit. So that was the way that that attack was carried out. I was difficult because there were mountains round the lakes, rounds the dams, and the aircraft had to drop very steeply and then in a very short space, level off, at 60 feet and be at a precise airspeed – as far as I can remember – of 240 miles and hour. So, it did require some accurate flying. It was a dangerous operation and I think that 6 aircraft were lost over the target – 2 on the way in – 6 over the target – as far as I can remember. I joined the squadron later, and we were given a different target. The Germans then – the Nazis then – had a number of secret weapons, they had a V1, which was a pilotless aircraft, filled with high explosive, faster than any fighter we had, so it was difficult to catch. It’d fly in, then when it reached London, on an estimated time, the engine would cut out and down it would come, with its high explosive. The second was a V2 which was a rocket, and of course, that was unstoppable and that landed in London. But there was also a third, which I think is not quite so well know, and that was the V3. And this was a large gun, in effect, which was going to fire – there were 3 of them - each could fire one 500 pound every minute, into London. And they were protected, deep in the ground, by 50 foot of reinforced concrete. And there was no bomb on earth that could penetrate 50 foot of reinforced concrete. And so, Hitler thought this was an infallible weapon. But Barnes Wallace, then thought up, a different kind of bomb, which was really a deep penetration bomb, called Tallboy. And this, if dropped from 16,000 feet, would penetrate 90 foot into the ground and then explode and blow the gun up from underneath. Hitler had not thought of putting 50 foot of reinforced concrete underneath his little gun.

08.05: The snag was, that the bomb had to be dropped from 16,000 feet within 15 yards, maximum, of the outside of the periphery of the silo in which the gun was. And when I said to Barnes Wallace that dropping a bomb within a range of 15 yards, from 16,000 was going to be difficult, all he said was:, “Well if you’re going to pepper the whole of Northern France with my bombs, I don’t see why I should take the trouble to design and build them.” That was all the sympathy we got from Barnes Wallace. Well now, in order to do, have any hope of doing this, we had to devise a new method of precision bombing and our job became that, it was one we’d always wanting, of learning how to destroy a military target or an industrial target, without taking civilian life. The only way of doing it, was to start with a marking aircraft – that is to say have 3 aircraft in the lead whose job it would be to put on top of the target, absolutely accurately, a marker. That is to say, a coloured magnesium flare, which would burn very brightly of a particular colour, so there would be a coded colour for that night. To exclude the possibility of a dummy been put down somewhere else. And my particular job, with two others, was to put the marker on the target. We asked permission to try out this technique, in France, because to do it in very heavily defended Germany, on a single squadron, without support, would have been – to say the least of it – dangerous. And we were given permission, by Churchill and the cabinet, it had to go up to cabinet level, we were given permission, to have one trial, on a factory outside Limoges in France. Now Limoges is probably a town you haven’t heard of, but it’s a town that makes most beautiful china. And outside the town, was a factory, the Gnome Rhone factory, which is making aero engines for the Luftwaffe. And our instructions were to destroy it, but not to take one civilian life, if we did, we would not be given permission to do any more trials in France. One snag was, that at the time that we were due into the target - which is just before 1am in the morning – there were 500 girls on night shift. Now how would you destroy a target, with 500 girls inside it, without hurting any of them? Can you tell me?

11.36: [Unidentified speaker 1] Before you drop the bombs you drop… [inaudible at 11.37-11.40]

11.43 (LC) Anybody else?

11.46 [Unidentified speaker 2] You’d fly over the factory before you drop the bombs to let them know you’re coming in, so they all get out’.

11.50 (LC) Yeah, well he’s got the right answer, both would have done. We did three low level runs, over the target. When I say low level, I mean at about 20 feet.

12.10: (LC) Well we were trained as low level flyers, we were doing it day after day, night after night, so… and in fact, although it may sound dangerous, it was safer because anti-aircraft guns, in those days, couldn’t depress over five degrees, so if you were right down on the deck, as we called it, below tree level, you were safe. The danger was when you came up, you had to go either in and out of the trees or just come up over a tree and quickly down again. And we did three low level runs, as low as we could get, in a four engine Lancaster, which I can assure you, makes a lot of noise, over this factory. And the girls, fortunately took the hint, except for one. And she by nature was curious, and Id like to take the opportunity of warning you that curiosity, sometimes, can be rather a dangerous characteristic. And this girl decided that she wouldn’t go any further than the ditch, outside the factory, and she squatted down in the ditch to see what was going to happen. Well, fortunately, all the high flying aircraft, dropped their – they were very big bombs, they were 10,000 pound bombs – into the factory and none outside it, so that all the girls were safe, except this one, who was hit by a bomb splinter, but fortunately not very badly injured. So that opened the way for us to go on using this technique, and as I say, developing a way of picking out a target that was important, but saving civilian life. So briefly, in a word, that’s something of the Dambusters. Except one final thing. The Dambusters, was a composite squadron of many different countries. And the largest contingent, outside we English, were the Australians, and I’m not sure, whether we had more difficultly, keeping our heads up, above water, against the Australians, or, in carrying out our job. But anyhow, I can assure you that for me, for the rest of my life, I will carry, most grateful and affectionate memories, of the Aussies, with whom I was privileged to fly and serve. My bomb aimer was an Australian, and he used to tell me he thought and keep me in order, and I think was the best bomb aimer I ever had. And I think that we, in Britain, will never forget the debt that we owe, to other countries, who came from so far away, to help us in our struggle.

15.31: But having said that, the big question remains – this question remains – that war, was fought in the first instance, of course, in order to stop aggression, in order to stop Hitler. But it was also fought for something higher than that. We who fought it, and we were a generation like you, who rejected war, we could see no sense in war, but we were plunged into it. And we believed, perhaps naively, but we did believe, that when the war was over, there would be foundations to build a world in which peace would flourish. Peace and freedom and justice and the opportunity for everybody to lead the kind of life they wanted. A world in which there would no longer be violence. For out if violence, as we all know, comes a danger of war, and out of war comes a danger of world war. And this is something that we as a human race cannot afford again. And so, the question that remained in our minds, when all that was over, at a cost, if you don’t know it, including all sides who fought, of 55 million lives. The question was – what are we going to do, to see that this never will happen again? It was a question that I myself couldn’t answer, and my life unexpectedly took a turn in a direction that I’d never even thought of, into the world of the disabled.

17.42: It came about because whilst I was trying to make up my mind what to do and unable to know what to do, I came across an old man dying of cancer, in hospital. And the hospital could do nothing more for him, there was nothing that could be done to make him better, only to keep him in bed and nurse him, said, ‘I’m sorry but he must go, because there are others waiting to come in and we cannot afford to block this one bed, for perhaps a year, for one man, for whom we could do nothing, when there are others who could be treated and sent home’. And not being able to find anywhere else for him to go, even though we were a welfare state then, when the state said it would od everything for us, when we were in trouble, in return of course, for a petty healthy weekly payment, by us. In spite of the fact that he was an ex-serviceman who’d been too old to serve, but had dropped his age ten years and got in - and a lot was done for ex-service men in those days – nowhere would take him because he was incurable. So, for want of anything else, I asked him if he’d like to come into the large empty house in which I was living. I never thought he would, but I thought I must offer him something. Rather to my surprise, he said, ‘yes, I’d love too.’ Having no money with which to pay a nurse, I obviously couldn’t get a nurse, so the only thing I could do was to try and look after him myself. And a local nurse came in, and said, ‘well it’ll be perfectly easy, I will show you what to do - and you do it.’ And she gave me, what she called, a concentrated course of nursing in three evenings. She told me that I was a very bad pupil, which I have to admit was probably true. She made me do everything by numbers, so that I wouldn’t forget it – which of course, I did forget. Anyway, I’m not going to go into what happened to Arthur and all the various things that came about while he was in the house.

20.12: To me it was just a temporary interlude, but, unexpectedly, somebody else came. An old lady of 91. Who was bed ridden, living in a flat, on her own. And before I knew what I was doing, I found myself saying yes, Ill take her. I knew her as ‘granny’. She was stone deaf, had to go right up to her ear and shout at the top of your voice and even then, she wouldn’t hear it if she didn’t want too. And if you said something very quietly, that had nothing to do with her at all, she always seems to hear it. And 70 years ago she’d been a district nurse, so that everything I’d tried to do for her, she said had to be done differently. So, I can assure you, that we had a difficult time, getting to know and understand each other’s way of working. However, for me, this was a beginning of a completely new world, a world that I never knew existed, of the disabled. And I discovered that every country in the world, without exception, whether its rich, or whether its poor, is not providing enough of the right facilities and care for the young disabled. If somebody of 18 or 20 goes out today and dives into a river, or the sea, and shall we say, hits a submerged rock, and breaks his neck, as can happen and becomes paralysed, or has an accident on the road and becomes paralyzed, his body is disabled – he will go to hospital, he will go to rehabilitation centres, he’ll get all the treatment in the world and there will come a time when the doctor says, ‘there is nothing more I can do – the rest of your life, you will be like this – in a wheelchair.’ Well now, as I say, his body is disabled, but his mind is not. His mind is like yours, and his heart – he has all the hopes for his life that you have. Principally, he wants to feel that in the world, there will be an opportunity for him to express himself in his own, perhaps to be creative. He will want to marry, he wants to fell wanted, he wants to be just a normal human being, but he can’t and society normally, puts him either in a hospital, or in some big institution. And we think, that for most of them, it is better that he should have a small home, with perhaps 20 or 30 at the most, which is informal, as much like a home as you can make it – that with all the expert aids and gadgets and care, that exist today, to give a disabled person independence and the opportunity of doing something.

23.50: For instance, I know one girl, who got polio and she can move no part of her body whatsoever, except one big toe. She can’t breathe, she’s kept alive by a breathing machine. She can’t talk, but she can see, and she can hear. And to that big toe, is attached a little microswitch, and by moving it, she can do the following things – she can put on a hi-fi, she’s musical and she loves music – she likes pop as well as classical music. So, she can choose her music. She can put on the telly - select her station, adjust her volume. She can put on the radio, and more important – she can operate a typewriter – she can type. So if you go and see her, you can have a conversation, you’d talk to her and say, ‘hello Hilary, how are you today?’, she’d give you an answer. And I can assure you that she is very shrewd, although, she lies totally – I think you’d be shocked if you saw her – she lies totally helpless, with her tongue just hanging out, unable to move, even her eyes. And she answers you on this typewriter. She composes poetry, she’ll have a joke with you, she’ll size you up.

25.27: Now, when you think of somebody like that, there two lesson we have to learn. The first is, look at her determination. Look at the way that she’s not thinking of what she’s lost, now most of us in life, something goes wrong, we get upset. We think if only I hadn’t done that, we keep harping on what things might have been had we not had such and such a disaster or so on. She’s forgotten about all that she’s lost. She’s only thinking about what remains. And she’s making the most of it. But the second thing is, this would not have been possible, she could not lead the life she’s leading, which is a very meaningful, constructive life, had it not been for all the others who’ve helped her. The doctors, the engineers who designed this electronic box – the ‘Possum’ – the respirator, and so on. The nurses, who’ve nursed her back to where she is now, and her parents and friends who keep her in her own flat at home. We ourselves, that’s myself and my wife, have homes in a number of countries – 25 countries altogether – and each of them are running themselves, finding their own money, except for one in Northern India, which is much bigger than the others and for which the money comes from Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, here in your school – form two, I think – is very generously keeping one of the children in this home [inaudible at 27.19].

27.24: What I’m trying to say, is this - that if we ask ourselves - what can I do, to build a kind of world, that we want, a world in which peace and justice and freedom will flourish? The answer is, that every single one of us, has got a part to play, even if somebody is totally helpless – like Hilary – if they are making the most of their opportunities and their resources, then their contribution is as valuable, as that of somebody who is powerful and fit and perhaps wealthy. That’s not the standard by which we judge things, we judge people by the achievement, by what they’ve done. But I’ve come to think, that this is not the true test. I don’t think the achievement, counts so much. Achievements can be washed away overnight, you can work all your life and build something up, and overnight, it’s destroyed. But what counts, is the effort, the sacrifice, and this is not washed away – this is remembered, it continues. And this is the criterion, by which God will judge the value of our actions. Let us do what we can and leave the rest to other people and to God. And if we look at the starving millions in West Bengal, or in drought-stricken Africa, or wherever it might be and say, ‘what can I do’? The answer is, we should not look at the problem - the problem is so vast, we think ‘I can do nothing’, so we are put off. We should look at ‘what can I do’, that’s all that matters, in whatever field we happen to choose - and do it. And I would say only one thing to you – never stop doing something, or be put off from doing something, because it seems so too inadequate, too small. Everything that we, as human beings do, - cause we are human beings, will be inadequate, it will have faults, it will be small – no use persuading ourselves we can do anything big. The important thing is, have we made the most of our opportunities, such as they are. And I find, going about the world, that this generation - your generation - is a compassionate generation. It is one that is interested and concerned in the underprivileged – mine wasn’t. We knew nothing about it, we knew nothing about the poor and the starving, but now, you’ll never find a school that hasn’t got some project, is doing something. And to me, this offers the greatest hope of all, for the future. And although you will have been told this before, I will say it again, that the world that you hand on, as you grow older, to your children will be the world that you make - and so I thank you for the opportunity of meeting you today, and I’d like to offer every one of you, my warmest wishes, and ask Gods blessing, not only on your school and your coming exams – but in your future lives wherever they may lead you. Thank you very much.

31.21: Speech Ends.

31.27: End of Recording

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