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A Ruthless People

The Dam Busters. By Paul Brickhill. (Evans. 15s.)

By H. E. BATES

PAUL BRICKHILL is a young Australian who fought with distinction for four years in Fighter Command before a Messerschmitt blew up both cannon magazines of his aircraft in Tunisia in the spring of 1943—a circumstance that landed him in the notorious Stalag Luft III for the rest of the war, and, as it turned out, made him a writer. His impressions of prison life in Germany have already been set down in two books, of which the second, "The Great Escape," deals so well with the aspects of escape as they affect a diverse, determined and astoundingly resourceful body of men that it will always be able to stand side by side with Eric Williams's classic of the individual. Brickhill now turns his attention to an operation, the bombing of the Moehne and Eder dams in 1943 by specially chosen crews, under the leadership of Guy Gibson, that reveals, as surely and even more memorably than the mass Stalag escape that in war the British are, in their deceptive way, perhaps the most ruthless people in the world.

In 1939 a quiet scientist named Barnes Wallis started to think of the Moehne and Eder dams as power-sources to be destroyed: from then onwards he began to devote his life, night and day, to the business of blowing up these dams, releasing their 350,000,000 gallons of water and wreaking hell in the industrial basin of the Ruhr. Before the job was completed, nearly four years later, at a cost of 150 men, in a brilliant and terrible attack, Barnes Wallis found himself involved in a long and private war of frustration, fought on the opposing side by a bureaucracy

that finally appeared in the guise of a high official who actually told him "to stop your nonsense about destroying dams," and shouted "Mutiny!" three times. It is most interesting to learn, now, that Barnes Wallis had a German counterpart, a certain Oberbürgermeister Dillgardt, "an unusually perspicacious man," whose "layman's mind worked along the same path as Wallis's" Dillgardt repeatedly and stubbornly informed the Nazi authorities, in a series of long and tiresome letters, how very inadequately the Moehne and Eder dams were defended, until he, too, was defeated by a mind which said: "Sir.—There is no further need for regular reports to be sent to this office regarding storage level of these dams Heil Hitler!"

Happily Barnes Wallis was eventually more fortunate, finding a great champion in Lord Tedder, who writes the foreword to this book. "There have been those who allege that the air weapon is necessarily indiscriminate and that the aim of air power is destruction for the sake of destruction," Lord Tedder says. "This book is the story of a team that gave the lie to that allegation." This is very true; but I think, also, that the book shows much more than that. The bombing of the Moehne and Eder dams appears to me not only to be possibly the most determined, fearsome and ruthless single air operation of the war; it symbolises, in a single horrific episode, unreal now and terrible in its bloodiness and bravery, certain remarkable aspects of the British character that found their outlet through Bomber Command.