

Teachers Notes

by Robert Andrew

Battle Order 204: A bomber pilot's story

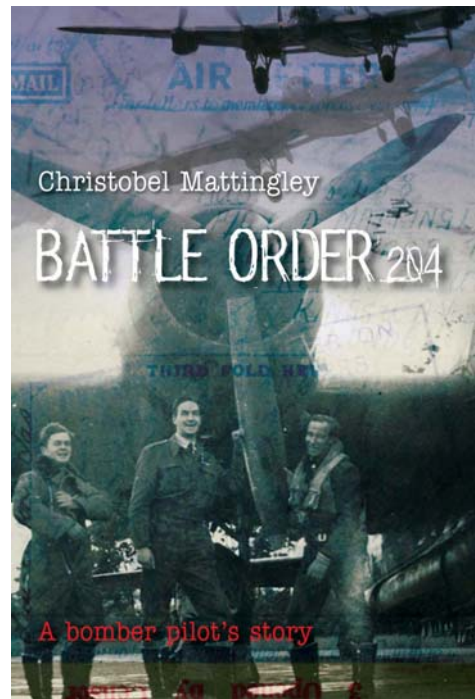
Christobel Mattingley

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Recommended for ages 13 – 16+ yrs

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INTRODUCTION

Battle Order 204 is, in many ways, unusual as an historical text. It is a scrupulously researched piece of historical re-creation as well as a prose narrative which uses, to great effect, the stylistic features and narrative techniques of historical fiction. This has been achieved because the re-creation is the result of close collaboration and a deep understanding between an accomplished fiction writer, Christobel Mattingley, and her husband David, a WWII bomber pilot and the central focus of the text.

The great strengths of this text are that it not only describes in vivid detail the experience of becoming a WWII bomber pilot, but it also explores the inner life of a war hero. This is where the text offers some unique opportunities in the classroom. In particular it could be used to contrast differing accounts of war and the motives and views which underpin these accounts.

It is ideal as a text for cross-curricular programs; clearly between English and History, but also areas of study concerning ethics, philosophy and religious belief. These are all central to the concerns of the text and its reflections upon the profound and enduring effects of war.

The chapter questions have been left deliberately open to re-working as either formative or summative tasks and essentially represent a set of suggestions for teachers and students to take further as their interest and understanding of the text develop.

THEMATIC CONCERNS

- Heroism and fate
- Responsibility and loyalty
- Courage
- Team work and comradeship
- Patriotism and idealism
- The hidden costs of war
- Death
- Grief
- Youth and experience
- Masculinity and codes of male behaviour
- Religious belief and faith
- The impact of the past upon the present

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

Students will need to know some basic chronology and historical fact in order to begin the text, but the text itself is carefully constructed to give important background information as it is being read.

Students could make a time-line of significant events of WWII. As you read the text, insert the important events David Mattingley's experiences at the appropriate point on the time-line. This could be done as a group or a whole class activity.

The British television documentary *Bomber Crew (2004)* is an excellent accompaniment to the text. It details the experiences of a group of young people who undergo a mere fraction of the training their grandfathers undertook as bomber crew during WWII.

GENERAL RESEARCH TOPICS

These are suggested extension activities, which could be used in a cross-curricular manner, or to enrich the text in English classes. They could be used as a parallel assessment task while the text is being read.

- Who was Bert Hinkler and why was he famous?
- Explain why the results of the Munich conference would throw a *long shadow* over the summer holidays.
- '*Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few.*' Find a copy of this famous speech and discuss the reasons for it still being remembered today.
- Explain the role and significance of the Atlantic convoys in WWII.
- *Enemy Coast Ahead* is the title of a famous biography. Who is it about and why was he famous?
- Who was 'Butch (Bomber) Harris', and why is he controversial in the present day?
- What is the meaning of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? Research its use as a term and also investigate the term 'Shell shock.'
- Research some of the more famous air raids conducted against Germany during WWII – for instance, the Dam Buster or Dresden raids - and analyse their military significance.

INTERTEXTUALITY

There are many prose fiction texts which could be used in conjunction with *Battle Order*. Some of the more well known texts, such as the Biggles books, could be used as the source of extracts to make some comparisons between their authors' ideas of heroism and the glory of war and those expressed in *Battle Order 204*. It could be an interesting language study to note the similarities of the 1940's flying idiom in two texts with very different views on the nature and value of war and fighting.

The biography of the famous bomber pilot hero Guy Gibson, *Enemy Coast Ahead*, could also be used as a useful source of comparison.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* uses the Dresden raid as a significant motif in the novel. Vonnegut was an American prisoner of war who was forced to help clean up after the raid. He spoke often about the effect of this on his view of life.

The *Dam Busters* film could be used to establish heroic stereotypes and attitudes to war which *Battle Order 204* examines and often challenges. Likewise, *12 O'clock High* tells a similar story from an American perspective. *Memphis Belle* is a very useful resource as it was based upon closely researched events from a particular raid and shows, in a psychologically authentic style, the experience of flying in a bombing raid.

The film *Apollo 13* presents the opportunity to examine courage and team work in a different historical period, but in a similar context of fear and crisis.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Either as an expository piece of writing, or an oral presentation, explain the extent to which you think it is important to remember and to re-create experiences and lives from the past. You can use examples from your own life, as well as examples from history.

'Faction' is a term that has been coined to describe fictionalized writing about factual truth. Consider the features of 'faction' compared with more conventional historical narrative. What do you think are

the advantages and disadvantages of each? Select an event from your own life and try to write one version using the 'faction' style, and another using conventional historical writing style.

Consider the narrative structure of the text. What effect does the parallel narrative of the **Battle Order 204** sections have on the carefully developed description of David's progress towards this traumatic, heroic and pivotal event in his life?

LANGUAGE STUDY – THE **BATTLE ORDER 204** SECTIONS

Writers use certain language features to create different effects for their readers. Look at Christobel Mattingley's use of language in the first six grey-shaded "Battle Order 204" sections that occur throughout the book. (See pp 2-3, 66-67, 144-145, 162-163, 186-187.)

In each of these Battle Order 204 sections, look for the following:

- Direct speech
- Historical slang
- Sentence length and punctuation
- Sound effects, such as alliteration and repetition
- Use of imagery and figurative language

How does the author convey both historical detail and establish tension in these chapters? Try to give examples of the language features you have found and explain their effect in developing the tension.

CHAPTER BY CHAPTER QUESTIONS

BATTLE ORDER 204 (1) Bomb Doors Open!

Consider the significance of references to heaven and hell at the end of this chapter.

Track further references to religion and ideas of heaven and hell throughout the novel.

CHAPTER 1: A PASSION FOR PLANES

- (a) What immediate differences in tone and setting do you notice at the beginning of this chapter?
How is shift in tone achieved? (Consider punctuation and the use of images and simile to establish the setting and their effect upon tone.)
What effect does this have on your response to Part 1 of Battle Order 204?
- (b) What aspects of David's boyhood served as training for later?
- (c) What personal qualities and interests emerge in this chapter, which will be important for the future?
- (d) What were David's views on war at this time? Were they realistic?
- (e) What was his parents' reaction to his decision to enlist?
- (f) What were his motives to enlist? To what extent do you think they were naïve or complex?

CHAPTER 2: NAME, RANK AND NUMBER

- (a) Write a brief, first person account of your experiences at training camp and your first impressions of the air force. This could be in the form of a diary entry or a letter home.

Think about:

What moral problem was posed for David?

How did he justify his point of view?

What would you do in **his** situation?

Do you think there are any situations at the moment where you might have to consider whether to fight for a belief and take people's lives?

Do you believe there is such a thing as a just war? How would you identify it?

- (b) Prepare a short oral presentation or a planned class discussion on an aspect of the moral dimension of a pilot's role in wartime.
- (c) From this chapter, select a piece of writing which you think is particularly vivid in its evocation and depiction of flying and read it to the class. Try to explain the features of the extract which you think make it so effective.
- (d) Why were most Air Force trainees sent for further training as bomber pilots?

Battle Order 204 (2) D Dog

Two thousand and ninety two men going through this ordeal of fire.

For some it was the first time.

For some it would be their last time.

For some it would be their only time. (p43)

How does the author use this quote to summarise the action of Part 2 and how does it create mood?

CHAPTER 3: SLOW BOAT TO BRITAIN

- (a) What were the reasons for tension on the *SS Umgen*?
- (b) How is the young men's understanding of the world being broadened?

CHAPTER 4: LOVING LIFE

- (a) Imagine you are the author; give reasons to justify the title of this chapter.
- (b) Establish the significance of the buildings in the image on the facing page of the chapter.
Write a poem, using this image as a stimulus. Try to use it as a metaphor to express your broader feelings about WWII or war in general.
- (c) *'There but for the grace of God,' murmured one.*
'Poor devil. He was only doing his job for his country,' David said quietly. (p58)

What has happened?

What does this tell you about the attitude of the young men to their enemy?

Do you think you would think and feel the same in these circumstances?

Battle Order 204 (3) Target Dortmund

Why is it important that we know the complexity of the instruments in the cockpit?

Why is Dortmund being bombed?

CHAPTER 5: CONFRONTING DEATH

- (a) How do David and Peter manage the anxiety of looming action and possible death?

Try to explore both the diversions of the countryside and its distance from the war, and their training for action and preparations in case of capture or crashing at sea.

Consider their religious convictions and how important these are to them.

Are there circumstances in the present day where people become more ready to express their religious convictions?

- (b) *'It's a ghost city!' David exclaimed, more appalled by the utter devastation than he had been so far. 'And this is what we're being trained to do to German cities,' he grieved silently. (p77)*

Why do you think David is grieving?

CHAPTER 6: AIRBORNE AGAIN AT LAST

- (a) David's friendship with David McNeill is very significant to him at this point of his time in Britain and also later:

Do you think friendships become more significant in time of war?

What other friendships become important to David over the course of the story?

Do you think friendships would remain unchanged for the airmen when they return home?

Do you think their experiences would affect their relationships with loved ones who remained in Australia?

- (b) What aspects of the poem *High Flight* most powerfully reflect the feelings and ideas of David as he prepares to fly in combat?

CHAPTER 7: WIMPEYS AND CREWING UP

- (a) On page 104 we are told David had to make the most important decision of his life so far.

What was this decision and why was it so important?

What does the 'picking teams at school' analogy refer to?

Give the pros and cons of the method used.

- (b) In what ways were David's choices shown to be justified by the end of the chapter and by the end of the book?

CHAPTER 8: HEAVIES AND 'BUTCH' HARRIS

- (a) What event improved the crew's already solid confidence in their skipper?

- (b) List the reasons David's crew felt confident in him.

- (c) What does Frank's fate tell us about the reality of flying ops? What effects would this have had upon David?

- (d) What was the first mission David flew? What did you find surprising or unusual about it?

CHAPTER 9: 625 SQUADRON

Describe the 'other duty' David had to perform at Kelstern.

What was officer Jackson suffering from?

Give reasons to justify whether you think his treatment was fair.

Battle Order 204 (4) Hit!

What was the 'appalling blaze below' and why was it appalling?

What is the effect of the short sentences describing the injuries to 'Dog' and David?

CHAPTER 10: HOLLAND, HAPPY VALLEY AND FRANCE

- (a) What was 'Happy Valley', and why was it 'happy'?
- (b) Why do you think humour and understatement feature so much in the language of the airmen?
- (c) Try to explain what euphemisms common to the airmen tell us about their attitude to their closeness to death.
- (d) What was so difficult about the 'waiting'?
- (e) What figurative language is used to describe fear? How does it convey the sense and nature of fear?

Battle Order 204 (5) Put on Parachutes!

What do you think would be the likely consequences of baling out at this point?

Why do you think the crew decided to stay in the aircraft?

Why do the crew have morphine on board and why does David reject the morphine?

CHAPTER 11: J JIG

'There but for the grace of God' is mentioned again. What is the context of this? What does it tell us about David's relationship with his crew and with other pilots?

CHAPTER 12: ERKS AND ARMOURERS

What do these people do? Why are they important? What images of them are created by the writer in order to give a sense of their point of view and feelings?

CHAPTER 13: HOLLAND AND OPERATION HURRICANE

- (a) What is the effect of the 'scarecrows? Is it clear what they are?
- (b) *The whole city was like a writhing mass of bloody entrails, a seething mass of flames.* (p184)
What figure of speech is being used here? What does this suggest about the experience of those on the ground?

Battle Order 204 (6) Take Up Crash Positions!

Would they make it? Was this the ending each man had always known might be his – burned to death as his plane crashed down? (p187)

What is the effect of these questions on the reader? Who is asking them and to whom are they directed?

CHAPTER 14: 'THREE OF OUR AIRCRAFT ARE MISSING.'

- (a) What is David's response to romantic relationships in the midst of war? (p194)
What does he decide are his only loves? (p195)
How do the other members of the crew respond to their loved ones at this time?
Why does David think of Peter and his last letter at this time?
How does the author use this tragedy to show the feelings of family at home?

- (b) What is the significance of the Rupert Brooke poem that is recited on page 202 and why is this ironic?
- (c) *But the sore heart would be with him for a long time.* (p203)
What does this refer to and what does it foreshadow?

CHAPTER 15: 'BOLD, CAUTIOUS, TRUE, AND MY LOVING COMRADE

- (a) Explain '*half an inch between life and death*' (p206)
- (b) What was a *tour*? Why was it important to count ops?
- (c) What new bad news did David receive? How did this affect him?
- (d) Why is David senior after only eighteen ops?
- (e) What was the task he had hoped he would never have to do? How does the depiction of David performing this task develop and reinforce one of the major themes of the text? (p215)

CHAPTER 16: G GEORGE AND D DOG

- (a) David visits King's College chapel in Cambridge in the previous chapter – what do you think is the significance of churches and spires as recurring motifs in the text?
- (b) *Wonderful how the faith and vision of men so many centuries ago, and their magnificent handiwork, still proclaimed hope and salvation. Now, other men, in circumstances so different, also needed the message.* (p219)
Why do the 'other men' need the message? How is this shown in the text?
- (c) What is the response of the crew to 'their Dave' flying with another crew? How do you explain this?
- (d) What is a talisman? Why were they important? What is David's talisman and what does it tell us about him?
- (e) What is the significance of the last sentence of this chapter?

Battle Order 204 (7) A Perfect Landing

- (a) What is the purpose of the line of dots separating the paragraphs in these chapters? Can you find the literary term which describes this?
- (b) *'Thanks, Skipper. You're a damn good pilot. You did a bang-on job.'*
'There's bags of sympathy,' Drew offered.
'The kite's a sieve,' Pop reported.
'Like me,' their skip replied. 'Dog's back in its Kelstern kennel and there's life in the two young Dogs yet.'
They grinned. No damage to their Dave's sense of humour.
'It was a good prang,' they assured him. 'And Jerry can't claim us,' they boasted. (p231)
What does the language of the direct speech in this extract tell us about the airmen and their response to their narrow escape from death?
- (c) In similar circumstances today, how would direct speech sound? Try to write a brief exchange between aircrew in 2007, which would offer an authentic response to an act of courage.
- (d) *By 1 am, the 10 hours since Dortmund seemed like a lifetime.* (p231)
Explain the significance of this quote, both at this point in the text and in the context of the whole story.

CHAPTER 17: A FRACTURED SKULL AND A HEADLESS CREW

- (a) Explain the irony of the chapter title. In what sense is the crew headless? What expression of speech is 'headless crew'?
- (b) Describe the crew's response to David's injuries.
- (c) Why are the rest of the crew telling Murga about the flight? What is Murga's response to this?
- (d) What does Drew's letter on p.240 tell us about the closeness of the crew and their attachment to David?

What is Drew's attitude to some aspects of the English?

- (e) David's 'heart was also a casualty of war' after his wounding. Why is this so? For how long do you think it would remain a casualty?

Battle Order 204 (8) Outstanding Devotion to Duty

David was awarded the DFC. In what ways do you think his devotion to duty was *outstanding*?

Do you think the idea of devotion to duty is outdated? Can you think of situations in the present day where the term *devotion to duty* could be applied?

CHAPTER 18: 'IT IS SO GOOD TO BE ALIVE!'

- (a) What other injuries are described at the beginning of the chapter?
- (b) Consider the long-term consequences of these injuries for the airmen. How would they affect the rest of their lives?
- (c) What is David's response to his status as a 'War Hero'? Can you explain it in the light of what you have learned about him as a man over the course of the book?
- (d) *Brian, now at Binbrook, the RAAF 460 Squadron station near Kelstern, visited on Boxing Day and together the brothers went to fog-shrouded Lincoln. They struggled along the slippery cobbled streets, glimpsing medieval buildings ghostly in the drifting mist, and slowly toiled up Steep Hill. Then suddenly as they reached the top they emerged from the fog to see the cathedral in all its ancient splendour bathed in sunshine. David caught his breath. It seemed an epiphany, an allegory of the triumph of light over darkness. Entering through the great west door they paused to take in the sweep of the lofty arches with the light streaming through the windows above and his soul sang with the glory of the great church, hallowed by worship for almost a thousand years. As they sat quietly in the nave the sound of the mighty organ rolled forth, reverberating through them like a score of musical Merlin engines. Then from the exquisitely carved Angel Choir voices soared in the powerful anthems of Handel's Messiah.*

David felt washed, bathed, soaked, steeped in its healing affirmation. He truly knew that his Redeemer lived and whatever might happen, held him in His almighty love. (pp 250-251)

This passage describes an *epiphany*. What is an epiphany?

This piece of writing is notably lyrical and figurative and echoes Biblical and religious language. The sounds of the words as well as the images, combine to make the sensation and emotion - as well as the literal detail of the experience - vivid and powerful. Why is it important to the development of our understanding of the deeper concerns of the text that this experience be re-created by the author in such a way?

- (e) How does this passage offer the reader a culmination of the religious and moral motifs developed over the course of the text?
- (f) What is wrong with Murga?

CHAPTER 19: VICTORY AT LAST!

What is the significance of the torn diary on the facing page of the chapter?

As a percentage, what was the casualty rate for bomber command?

CHAPTER 20: 'IN HOSPITAL AGAIN. NOTHING SERIOUS. DON'T WORRY.'

- (a) What is David's response to the end of the war?
- (b) Why does David decide to pursue teaching after the war has ended?
- (c) *What a waste, David breathed. What a cruel waste. The words of the 'Lament for the Battle of Flodden' were running through his mind. 'The flowers of the forest are a' wede away.' And he could hear the dirge of bagpipes, as they had heard them when David lad proudly had taken him to Edinburgh Castle eighteen months ago. The fierce crushing pain which gripped him was like a pleurisy of the heart, flooding it, drowning it in the bitter tears he could not shed. (p278)*

What is the 'waste' David refers to? Why is this a *devastating blow*?

- (d) *Immeasurably enlarged. Sadder. Wiser. Wondering. (p281)* Explain each of these words in the context of David's experiences.

CHAPTER 21: GOING HOME

He had made a journey to the centre of his being. A long deep journey. (p285)

Discuss the meaning of this quote. Find a poem which you think expresses your understanding of this journey. You could use a poem cited in the text, from your poetry anthologies at school, or you could find one yourself.

EPILOGUE

What were the *three more installments* of the cost of David's years as a pilot? Why do think the word *installments* is used? What are its connotations?

ABOUT THE OTHERS

When reading 'faction', it is easy to forget that what is being described in a fictional style is based upon true events and people. Read the histories of the other airmen in the story and reflect upon the effects of their experiences in David's bomber crew over the rest of their lives.

Write an account of the Dortmund raid from the point of view of one of the other crew members. Take careful note of his personality and try to evoke his 'voice' using first person narration. What would be the difference between Drew, Boz and Pop, when writing a first person narrative?

Write a brief speech, where you detail the experience of the Dortmund raid from the point of view of one of the crew, but don't say who it is. See if the class can guess - from the tone and point of view of the recount - which voice is talking.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

CHRISTOBEL MATTINGLEY

Christobel Mattingley is one of Australia's most respected and admired writers. She writes as she lives, with compassion, sincerity and a firm commitment to social justice. Her books include a major historical work on the Aborigines of South Australia (*Survival in our own land. 'Aboriginal' experiences in 'South Australia' since 1836 / told by Nungas and others*) and a best-selling biography of Deny King, *King of the Wilderness*.

The award-winning author of more than thirty-five books for children, Christobel Mattingley's readership spans more than one generation. Awards include the 1982 CBCA Junior Book of the Year Award for *Rummage*. Other award-winning books include *Windmill at Magpie Creek*; *The Miracle Tree*; *The Angel with a Mouth Organ*; *No Gun for Asmir*; and *The Race* (an Honour Book in the 1996 CBCA Picture Book of the Year awards). *The Magic Saddle* is widely regarded as a children's classic.

In 1990 Christobel received an Advance Australia medal for her contribution to literature in Australia, and in 1996 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia for service to literature, particularly children's literature, and for community service through her commitment to social and cultural issues. In 1999 she was the winner of the Pheme Tanner Award for her life of contribution to children's literature.

ROBERT ANDREW

Robert Andrew has been teaching English and History in high schools in Australia and the UK for twenty years. He is currently teaching at Pembroke School in Adelaide.