

Narrating Public History and the Bomber Command Controversy (2005-07)

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Controversy over historical events, assessments, and opinions are not unusual; nor **should** they be in a democratic discourse. After all, we disagree every day on issues of public policy, whether economic, social or community. When these current debates are seen through the vantage point of history, why shouldn't we expect that some degree of disagreement will remain – especially if the matters in question involve human **lives** and **fundamental** values?

Viewed in this retrospective light, it is not surprising that the role, effectiveness and justification for the massive Air Bombing campaigns over urban areas during the Second World War remain topics for public debate today – not only among academic military historians but also among interested non-academics.

Critical discussion of 'Strategic Bombing', or its variant of 'area bombing', took place even during the War. Some in the military high command questioned it on the grounds of **effectiveness**. A small number of English public figures questioned the **morality** of selecting urban targets. Towards the end of the War, even Churchill began to distance himself from the Bomber Command raids that pummeled Dresden, among other cities.

On the other hand, the efforts of the RAF Bomber Command, including the famous Canadian No. 6 Group under that command, enjoyed massive public support. The bomber aircrews rapidly became symbols of British offensive determination to 'taking the war to the enemy'. The needs of Bomber Command required huge industrial efforts: to design and fabricate aircraft, to train tens of thousands of crew members, to maintain elaborate logistical infrastructure or to design and manufacture munitions. These were supplied by a society engaged in total war, requiring the wholehearted conscious commitment of British, Canadian, Commonwealth and eventually American military and industrial systems. The Strategic Bombing campaigns were not the product of a single Air Marshall and a few thousand airmen – they were the product of a sustained combined effort by the Allied side as a whole.

My essential point is this: for 65 years (or longer) there have been different opinions on the role of Strategic Bombing, and hence on Bomber Command, in achieving the defeat of Nazi Germany. At one extreme, claims are made about the **inaccuracy** of the raids and their alleged ineffectiveness. At the opposite extreme, claims are made about the tremendous impacts on civilian morale, economic and social disruption, and dislocation of German military capacity. Even today, these extreme positions have their advocates. A more balanced assessment is that Bomber Command, together with American Air Force efforts, did make "a decisive contribution to the defeat of Germany", notably by destroying oil facilities, transportation systems and the massive destruction of cities. Nor should we forget the people. The death toll on the German side is estimated at 600,000 civilians, and many more military personnel. The death toll in Allied

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aircrew was approximately 80,000 individuals, of whom nearly 10,000 were Canadians (the third largest national group in this air war).

In May, 2005, the new Canadian War Museum entered into this debate on bloody air history. The new CWM was, as we know, greeted by the general public, by veterans, by media and by the professional historians as a ‘tour de force’. Its permanent historical galleries focus on “The Canadian Experience”, and it traces military activity and its impact on Canada over our 500 years of recorded history, plus millennia of unwritten history. The tone and messages of the CWM are never bombastic, never triumphant: it is clear, pointed, moving, and even eloquent. In total, there are 315,000 words of text and many thousands of artifacts on display in the main permanent exhibition. I want to underline this scope: 315,000 words in English text and an equivalent size in French text.

While praise for the CWM has been overwhelming, there has been some criticism. Mainly, this has come from one group or another, often veterans, who have felt that their contributions to Canada’s military past deserve more attention. As a whole, these complaints have been handled either by small adjustments, or by conversation and explanation. One criticism, however, went beyond all others – and this had to do with Bomber Command. More precisely, it focused on a single panel text, 85 words in all, entitled “An Enduring Controversy”.

This public criticism began quietly, a few months after the museum opened, when several veterans of the air war had seen the full exhibition and expressed anger at this 85 word text. (Note that the text was often referred to as a “plaque”, but it was in museology terms only a “text panel”, less formal or permanent). Our time in this Canadian Historical Association discussion does not permit us to go into all the stages and arguments of this dispute. I will only list the highlights, and these include:

1. Letters to museum staff, and to some of the museum Trustees – extensive letters, many with person essays, or photocopied chapters of books
2. Letters to members of Parliament and to Ministers
3. Letter to editors, and interviews with journalists

The argument of the critics was essentially this: the CWM was **in error** in its conclusion the effectiveness of Strategic Bombing. The CWM was **disrespectful** in its tone of writing. The CWM implied that the campaign was **immoral** – and, by implication, that bomber crews were accused by the CWM of being collectively guilty of war crimes.

The response by the government to all correspondence was clear, both publicly and privately: matters of content are the responsibility of museum staff alone. I want to stress this point. There were no improper political pressures from elected or unelected persons.

The response of the CWM staff was also clear: not a word should change because this tiny portion of the entire CWM exhibition texts expressed a fair comment and should be read and seen in its wider context. Behind the scenes, within museum offices and Trustee meetings, staff also voiced the fear that any text changes on this issue in response to public pressure would open the floodgates to demands for other changes – this would become a museum version of a ‘domino effect’.

Throughout 2006, individual air veterans continued to write, phone, and visit – and a real degree of discomfort was now being expressed to me and my staff by our Trustees. The Trustees asked for assurance that CWM staff had really been fair and thorough in their historical assessment. At this point, I decided to seek additional professional advice, and I invited four highly respected historians to advise me personally on their views of the Bomber Command exhibition module, and the 85 words in particular.

The four historians wrote their individual assessments in early 2007, and they were very consistent with the past 65 years of discussion over Bomber Command. That is: they disagreed. Two said: ‘don’t touch the exhibition’. One said ‘make some adjustment to text and tone’. And one said – ‘Take the whole text out – you don’t need it’.

My conclusion, in response to this highly divided advice, was that the CWM staff had fairly assessed the historical record, reported accurately, and therefore the text would not change.

The air veterans, now definitively backed up by the Royal Canadian Legion (which had not spoken publicly until this point) continued to complain that that was deeply offensive.

The turning point in this dispute came in 2007 when a subcommittee of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee decided to hold three days of hearings into this matter. The subcommittee had three principal members: two were Liberals and one a Conservative. Witnesses were called from various viewpoints: air veterans, the legion, and several historians. Four of us appeared from the museum as a group. Two members of staff explained and defended what was in the text. Our third witness was a recently-appointed Trustee, who was also a noted historian – Dr. Jack Granastein. He defended the historical accuracy of the text, but also added that he agreed it could be written in a different manner. And the fourth, witness was me. I also defended the text, explained museum procedures and added, in response to a question, that we would give respectful attention to the Senate Subcommittee’s views.

The Senate Subcommittee members reported in a manner which was similar to our four independent historians but with a different emphasis. The history is factually correct, they said, but the CWM should find a way of resolving its differences with the air veterans “to consider alternative ways of presenting an equally historically accurate version of its material, in a manner that eliminates the sense of insult felt by aircrew veterans and removes potential for further misinterpretation by the public”.

The Senate Subcommittee hearings and its report received **massive media coverage** – front page banner headlines in some instances. I am still incredulous at this – perhaps it is because some Canadian newspapers are more comfortable reporting on the politics of WWII than on the politics current international policy disputes. In any event, the media coverage was remarkable, prominent and sustained.

During these months, many of our Trustees expressed views and asked questions which were essentially the same as the Senate Subcommittee. Then in May, 2007, a new Chair of the Board of Trustees, Mr. Fredrik Eaton, was appointed and he directly expressed what had become the consensus of the Trustees: “the thing has to be fixed, but no one is saying we re-write history” was how he put things.

For my part, I had also concluded that the Senate report and our Chairman's views expressed something which would challenge museum staff but which made common sense. The text on Bomber Command's results needed additional information, it needed some nuance; it needed some adjustment to its tone.

The remainder of this story unfolded quickly. I prepared an initial draft text; it was carefully reviewed and revised by CWM staff; it was discussed in person, face-to-face, with several air veterans and advisers; and a final text that took comments into account was completed by the CWM. I want to draw attention to the very constructive roles in this work led by Mark O'Neill (Director General, Canadian War Museum and Vice-President CMCC), with the support of Dr. Dean Oliver (Director, Research and Exhibitions, CWM), Fred Eaton (Chair, Board of Trustees), and also Paul Manson (former Board of Trustee and former Chief of Defense Staff) and the work of Don Elliot, Duane Daly, Bill Carr and David Bashow of the Mayday Committee. Each of these individuals helped draw out a common sense to the dispute, participating in the discussions and the solution drafting.

The revised panel text was announced in August, 2007, with extensive media coverage. It was installed several months later and since then the museum has received only five comments: two from veterans who still feel justification should be added, and several from others who feel no changes should be made. In all, a handful.

There are a number of brief conclusions that I would like to highlight in this discussion. Two regard the specific content of what we adjusted and re-installed in the museum. Two are regarding public museums and history.

1. The changes to the CWM text – it is now 202 words long, rather than 85 – did **not** change in substance. It added content, and context, and is less likely to be misunderstood. (In a personal comment to CWM staff, Jack Granastein has said that it is better history.)
2. No viewpoint or advocacy position was the 'winner' or the 'loser'. In fact, because the CWM has written better history – more encompassing, clear and informed – we are all winners: historians, interested veterans, the public, and museum visitors.

Three of my conclusions regard the intellectual and public process of Museum Institutions in their historical presentations.

1. Public museums occupy dual roles of contributing to **civic education** and to **citizenship education**. These roles can be in conflict: the use of material history to explore issues of national identity, and social, economic or military achievements, is not the same as promoting critical thinking and independent judgment. In a mature institution, like the CWM or the CMC, we consciously recognize this complexity; we don't duck it. We must engage openly with both roles. I think the CWM's motto concisely expresses the challenge for the museum's researchers, curators and program planner: "Educate, Preserve, Remember".
2. Words count. Museums are consistently ranked in North America as among the most 'trustworthy' institutions. (As an aside, I think this is why so many advocacy groups are now opening so-called 'museums', as they want to appropriate the aura of trust.)

Maintaining public trust means we must be sensitive and careful with our choices of words, objects, and images. There is no room to shock for the sake of promoting debate – at least not in public museums of history. (Art galleries are another category altogether....).

3. It is essential to have thoughtful processes of involvement, response and consultation on any subjects with substantive social implications. But...to balance this... a credible museum must still maintain its curatorial voice, its expertise.

For example, it is unthinkable today to organize a major aboriginal exhibition on social or historical themes without appropriate consultation with First Peoples experts. It is unthinkable to hold a major exhibition on Holocaust themes without consultation with relevant individuals or communities.

Something as big, as deadly, as emotional and as controversial as the Bomber Command text required additional consultation, which was genuine. The outcome, after a period of public controversy, was thoroughly positive.

NEW TEXT:

THE BOMBING CAMPAIGN

The strategic bombing campaign against Germany, an important part of the Allied effort that achieved victory, remains a source of controversy today.

Strategic bombing enjoyed wide public and political support as a symbol of Allied resolve and a response to German aggression. In its first years, the air offensive achieved few of its objectives and suffered heavy losses. Advances in technology and tactics, combined with Allied successes on other fronts, led to improved results. By war's end, Allied bombers had razed portions of every major city in Germany and damaged many other targets, including oil facilities and transportation networks. The attacks blunted Germany's economic and military potential, and drew scarce resources into air defence, damage repair, and the protection of critical industries.

Allied aircrew conducted this grueling offensive with great courage against heavy odds. It required vast material and industrial efforts and claimed over 80,000 Allied lives, including more than 10,000 Canadians. While the campaign contributed greatly to enemy war weariness, German society did not collapse despite 600,000 dead and more than 5 million left homeless. Industrial output fell substantially, but not until late in the war. The effectiveness and the morality of bombing heavily-populated areas in war continue to be debated.

FORMER TEXT:

Strategic Bombing: An enduring Controversy

Mass bomber raids against Germany resulted in vast destruction and heavy loss of life.

The value and morality of the strategic bomber offensive against Germany remains bitterly contested. Bomber Command's aim was to crush civilian morale and force Germany to surrender by destroying its cities and industrial installations. Although Bomber Command and American attacks left 600,000 Germans dead, and more than five million homeless, the raids resulted in only small reductions in German war production until late in the war.