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# **In Defence of Bomber Command - And all those who flew with it.**

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Of the controversies arising, from the conduct of World War II, the one that has created almost the most discussion, argument and dissention is the role played by Bomber Command of the Royal Air Force and the actions of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, its commander-in-chief. Harris was the one senior allied commander who did not share in the post-war accolades and honours bestowed on others in similar positions to him.

Some historians; even some German leaders, claim Bomber Command made a great contribution to forcing victory for the allies - in fact, were instrumental in ending the war in Europe sooner than would have been the case had the bombing raids not been successful. Others aver that many of the bombing attacks were unnecessary, and wrongly claim that they were targeted on cities that neither produced nor transported nor harboured military hardware or personnel. And, there are claims, that those of us in Bomber Command who took part in the raids, as well as those that planned them, directed them and approved them, were all war criminals in no lesser degree than those who were proved guilty at the Nuremburg trials and since.

As I have titled this address 'In Defence of Bomber Command', I hope to impress you with the argument that it was the intention of those who planned, approved and participated in Bomber Command and United States Eighth Air Force bombing attacks on Germany, Italy and Occupied Europe, to strike at the heart of enemy military production, transport and personnel.

First though, let me take you on a journey, a flight which in 1943 would have taken anything from four to eight hours but today will only take a few minutes.

So please, close your eyes and visualise the sights, hear the sounds and inhale the smells which some of your family or friends lived with in days and nights 70 years ago.

Close your eyes and you will see the briefing room in a Nissen hut, on an English Bomber Command airfield. There is a map on the wall and strands of coloured wool stretch from the airfield across England, across the Channel or North Sea, across Europe to a place on a map deep in enemy territory.

Listen and you will hear the intelligence officer, the meteorologist, the navigation, signals and gunnery leaders brief the crews on the route, the enemy defenses, the colours of the day, the weather to and from the target and the reason for the attack.

Now you will see an aircrew mess and on the tables in front of the men there is an operational supper of baked beans and perhaps an egg.

A little later we are in the crew room. The men are dressing in their flying suits, their fur-lined boots and jackets, their white polo neck sweaters. They are clasping flying helmets, maps, sextants, navigation bags and parachutes.

Can you see them getting into a truck, motoring around the perimeter of the airfield, stopping beside their aircraft, getting out, having a last minute cigarette and a nervous leak? With your eyes still closed, listen, listen and you will hear the sound of the mighty Merlins starting up, port inner, port outer, starboard inner, starboard outer. Now visualize the aircraft trundling around the taxiway, waiting for take off? Do you feel, with the crew, the tightening of your stomach, as the green light flashes, as the captain and flight engineer open the throttles wide?

Keep listening and you will hear the mighty roar of four engines as the aircraft speeds down the runway and takes off into the dark. Now there is the rattle of gunfire as the gunners test their guns over the Channel.

Can you hear the sound of the navigator's voice calling out changes of course to the captain? Suddenly, urgently, there is a cry from the gunners as they sight an enemy aircraft moving in from ahead or above or behind.

Keep looking behind your eyelids and you will see the light flak - the greens, the reds, the whites, coiling lazily into the air, thankfully below you. You will see the puffballs from heavy flak off to starboard, to port and above. If you sniff you will get the smell of cordite as the flak gets too close and the crew know that the enemy are getting their range and their position more accurately.

Keep your eyes closed and you will see the target - the searchlights probing the sky for a victim, the target indicators from the Pathfinders floating lazily down to the fires on the ground below.

Keep listening and you will hear the calm voice of the bomb aimer - 'left, left, right, steady, steady' and you will hear him call 'bombs gone, flashlight away'.

Now you will sense the feeling of relief as the captain turns the aircraft for home and warns the crew not to relax.

Soon you are back in the briefing room and there is a murmur of voices as the crews are being debriefed. There is a savoury smell of cigarettes and coffee but there is anguish on the faces of the men as they read the names on the operations board which do not have a 'landed time' against them.

You can open your eyes now and I hope you have relived, in the last few minutes, something of the many hours your airmen grandfathers, fathers or relatives spent flying in Europe in 1942 and 1943 when the losses on a tour with Pathfinder Force were 83 per cent - a survival rate of 17 per cent of those of us who flew with P77 at that time.

It was Winston Churchill who set the pattern for the attacks by Bomber Command. In late July 1940, after Dunkirk, he wrote to Lord Beaverbrook, Minister for Aircraft Production - *When I look around and see how we can win the war there is only one power. We have no army that can defeat the Nazi military power. Our sea blockade of Germany is broken and shortly Hitler will have the recourses of Africa and Asia to draw from. Should he fail to invade the UK he will rebound eastwards, there is only one thing that will stop him and that is devastating attacks upon the Nazi homeland by very heavy bombers from this country, without which I do not see a way through"*

The effectiveness of the bombing policy, initiated by Churchill, was confirmed by Dr Albert Speer, the German Minister for Armament Production who wrote after the war: 'The strategic bombing of Germany was the greatest lost battle for Germany of the whole war, greater than all our losses in all our retreats from Russia and in the surrender of our armies in Stalingrad'. Furthermore, Speer reported to Hitler on 19 January 1945: 'It has now been determined that the attacks which take place so often in night are considerably more effective than daylight attacks, since heavier bombs are used and an extraordinary accuracy in obtaining the target is reported. Consequently, even if during the first quarter of 1945, the repair work and plants are completely untouched, the theoretical production figures, which seemed possible in the last quarter, will not be reached.'

The views of Speer, a dedicated Nazi, emphasise the contribution of Bomber Command in helping win World War II for the Allies.

It is the Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, who receives most of the opprobrium from those who denigrate the efforts of, Bomber Command. Yet, Harris was only carrying out the orders of the War Cabinet as relayed to him by Air Ministry who, on 5 May 1942, directed him to 'begin operations against primary industrial targets including Cologne, Duisburg, Dusseldorf and the North German ports'.

For some time, in fact right up to the first thousand bomber raid against Cologne on the moonlight night of 30/31 May 1942, which was my first operation against the enemy, the efforts of Bomber Command did not yield the hoped for results.

The Cologne raid had three major successful effects. The first was that it did great harm to local industry, the second was that it proved to the German high command that the Royal Air Force was capable of striking hard at German industrial installations. The third, and possibly the most important effect was that the success of the raid materially lifted the morale of the British people, because it proved to them that, despite the British army being driven from mainland Europe and the catastrophe of most European countries being overrun by the Germans and the horrendous loss of merchant ships at sea, there was a force capable of striking back at Germany.

The thousand bomber raid on the night of 30 May, 1942 was my first operational sortie. It was followed two nights later by a thousand bomber raid on Essen. Bad weather caused this to be relatively unsuccessful but when on leave in London shortly after, it was evident to me that the morale of the people had been raised by the realisation that they had a force capable of penetrating the enemy defences.

About six months later navigational aids such as Gee, H2S and later on, Oboe, began filtering through. Although these helped the bomber crews find their targets, something more was needed, some means of controlling and directing the main force on to the targets and aiming points. Hence the reason for the formation of Pathfinder Force.

It had been proved that experienced crews, using Gee, were reasonably effective but the problem was that even experienced crews did not last long. What was needed, according to the Deputy Director of Bomber Operations at Air Ministry was a force of well trained, experienced crews capable of finding the targets and aiming points and leading the less experienced crews to them.

For this reason Pathfinder Force was formed under the command of Group Captain DCT Bennett, an Australian officer who was regarded as the finest navigator in the Royal Air Force and an exceptional pilot.

Pathfinder crews had to complete an extended tour of operational duty that regrettably increased casualties in the Pathfinder Force to the extent that our survival rate in early 1943 was just 17 per cent.

Bennett said of Bomber Command crews: *The contribution of an aircrew member of Bomber Command who completed an operational tour or died in the process, measured in terms of danger and death, both in intensity and duration, was, in my view, far greater than any RAF, Navy or Army fighting man. The contribution of a Pathfinder in the same terms and indeed of responsibility; was at least twice that of other Bomber Command crews. "*

Pathfinders were the only members of the RAF awarded a distinguishing emblem - an eagle in gilded metal, worn on the flap of the left breast pocket until and subsequent to the completion of an extended operational tour. If the extended tour was not completed for reasons other than wounds sustained on an operational flight, the authority to wear the badge was withdrawn.

From the moment he went to Bomber Command in 1942, Arthur Harris' stated principle aim was *'to devastate Germany by relentless bombing until the Nazis were forced to surrender.'*

Later he was supported in this policy by the United States Eighth Air Force under the command of General Carl Spaatz. Between Bomber Command and the Eighth Air Force, Germany was to be subjected to around the clock bombing as weather conditions permitted.

It was the industrial cities of the Ruhr (known to the aircrews as 'happy valley' and Berlin (the 'big city'), that were the main targets in 1942 and 1943. German defences were heavy and the main force casualty rate crept up to the prohibitive 10 per cent per operation.

On 10 June 1943 the Allied chiefs issued the Point Blank Directive which stated *the mission of the United States and British bomber forces is to conduct a joint US/British air offensive to accomplish the progressive dislocation and disruption of the German military, industrial and economic systems and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened."*

In September 1944, the air commanders were ordered to undertake *the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic systems and the direct support of land and sea forces"*

These directives indicate that both Bomber Command and the United States Eighth Air Force were commanded to concentrate their effort on industrial and military targets and not, as is alleged by their accusers, on the civilian populations of Germany, Italy and the occupied countries of Europe.

Heavy losses were sustained in pursuing this objective. For example the attacks on the oil refineries at Ploesti which produced 1/3 of Germany's oil took 24 raids, involved over 1000 aircraft, cost 305 heavy bombers and 3000 British and American aircrew.

There were some mistakes in the program of area bombing. Civilians inadvertently did become casualties but the intention was to bomb military targets, not the civilian population. By February 1945, Bomber Command and the Eighth Air Force had destroyed the war-making capacity of 45 out of the major 60 cities manufacturing munitions and other lethal products and Harris and Spaatz were instructed to concentrate thenceforth on oil refineries.

Of all the bombing raid controversies, the most controversial is the 1945 attack on the city of Dresden by RAF Bomber Command and the US Eighth Air Force.

On the night of 13 February 1945, 796 aircraft of the Royal Air Force Bomber Command bombed Dresden. In daylight next day 413 aircraft of the United States 8th Air Force bombed Dresden.

Dresden was as legitimate a target as any other major city. When the attacks took place it was by no means certain that the war was coming to an end. The city was an important industrial centre. Its many factories had been converted to manufacture military hardware - bombsights for the Luftwaffe, radar and electronic components, fuses for anti-aircraft shells, gas masks, engines for Junkers aircraft, optics for bomb sights, artillery sights, submarine periscopes and cockpits for Messerschmitt fighters. *The Dresden Yearbook* for 1942 boasts that the city was "one of the foremost industrial locations of the Reich".

Furthermore, Dresden was an important transportation hub for the German troops fighting the Russians about 80 miles east of the city.

Dresden also had a history of anti-Semitism. Of the pre-war Jewish population of about 6000, a hundred and ninety-eight remained on February 13, 1945. "I will bear witness" the diaries of Victor Klemperer, describe in relentless detail how the humanistic city of his youth turned into a place of terror that ostracized, humiliated, tortured and finally annihilated its Jews

Dresden was ill-equipped to protect its people from air attacks. It had few Anti-aircraft guns and inadequate air-raid shelters which contributed to the death toll. More people died in the Allied attack on Hamburg in July 1943, in the German bombing of Stalingrad in August 1942, in the American raids on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Yet Dresden has been made, quite erroneously into an outrage of Anglo-American barbarism.

Soon after the raids Joseph Goebbels lied in telling reporters in neutral countries that Dresden had no war industries, falsely claiming that the raids were acts of cultural desecration and wanton mass murder

The exaggerated death toll was publicised in the 1963 book, *The Destruction of Dresden* by discredited historian, David Irving and by Kurt Vonnegut in his 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

There is a marked difference between the post-war reconstructions of Dresden and Berlin. Berliners insist on showing visitors the full array of its' crime scenes - outside the Berlin Philharmonic Concert hall is a sign explaining that nearby is the location of the villa that housed the infamous Triple T4, the Nazi program for exterminating disabled people. Conversely, Dresden has gone to great lengths to hide signs of its Nazi past but a memorial bench on the Bruhl Terrace, the park above the Elbe river walk, still has a marker, "For Aryans Only" which serves as a reminder of the Nazi days. Paradoxically, it is a Jewish

architect, American David Libeskind who has designed the recasting of the Military History Museum in Dresden's Albertstradt district.

In response to a suggestion that the bombing of Dresden was vengeance, David Libeskind responded that "it was not vengeance. There was a military reason - to subvert the German troops that were still fighting the Allies. The war was not over. Who knows what the consequences might have been if the bombings had not been undertaken"

George Packer concludes - "The challenge of Dresden is to acknowledge all of the war's victims, without yielding to the temptation of equivalence; to see the evil of all war and also to the evil that led to this war to remember that the firestorm that killed thousands of people, saved others."

Neither I nor my Bomber Command colleagues understand why the Dresden raids have been singled out as being so uniquely terrible. Were they any more terrible than the 26 April, 1927 bombing of Guernica by the Condor Legion of the German Luftwaffe which left that small Spanish town a pile of rubble, blood, broken bones and dead bodies? Was it any more terrible than the bombing and destruction by the Germans of Rotterdam, of Warsaw, of Coventry, of the blitz on London and other major cities? Surely it cannot be compared with the deliberate targeting of London by the V One's and V Two's which were programmed to fall indiscriminately on areas of civilian occupation. Was it more terrible than the American nuclear bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima which are arguably credited with the early ending of the war against Japan?

In my opinion the defence of the bombing of Dresden is two-fold - one that it was a justifiable military target and secondly that there was a war on - a war that had been started by the elected leaders of Nazi Germany, that it was the war started by them in 1939 that killed the citizens of Dresden and the citizens of so many other cities, towns and villages in a score of countries.

So, how can the commanders and the aircrew of Bomber Command and the Eighth Air Force be pilloried for the destruction of Dresden in 1945 or any other part of Germany, Italy and occupied Europe? The real question to be answered is "Was the bomber offensive itself morally flawed?"

That question must be answered by referring back to the reason for the bombing - that there was a war on, a war that had been started by the elected government of Germany. Moral arguments against the bombing that overlook, dismiss, devalue or ignore that point are fundamentally flawed.

Has morality any place in war at all? Lord McCaughey, in 1931 summed up the argument that talk of morality in war is ridiculous when he wrote *the essence of war is violence; moderation in war is imbecility.*"

It is war itself that is immoral but once war has broken out, the important thing to do is to win it at any cost, particularly if that cost can be met by the enemy.

What might have happened if the Germans had completed their conquests? Auschwitz killed at least one million. Treblinka took 700,000 lives; Belzec 600,000; Sobibor 250,000; Majdanek 200,000; Kulmhof 150,000 - and to these must be added those who died in Belsen,

Buchenwald, Dachau and other concentration camps. Citizens of Great Britain whatever their religion, would not have been spared had Germany been victorious.

Neither the wrongs inflicted by the Germans, nor the devastation and death caused by Bomber Command make either of them right put Bomber Command at least were trying to right the wrongs wrought by the indisputable fact the elected leaders of Germany were the cause of the destruction of their cities and death of their citizens.

The attacks on Germany, Italy and the occupied countries of Europe by Bomber Command cost the lives of many thousands of Britons, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, South Africans and those from other countries of the British Commonwealth. More than 54 percent of Bomber Command aircrew died in the war. A grim statistic. Some lay the blame for these deaths directly at Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris.

There are several views on Harris.

Scientist Freeman Dyson, who in his early 20's spent the war cosily ensconced as a civilian in the operational research section of Bomber Command headquarters has written that Harris accepted no criticism, never admitted his mistakes and was as indifferent to the slaughter of his airmen as he was to the slaughter of German citizens.

Other, and opposing views are those of the airmen Harris commanded. We recognised that it was the duty of Harris to mount and direct an all-out offensive against Germany. We subliminally recognised that we were likely to die but we knew equally that Harris cared for us and we reciprocated his affection.

We who flew in Bomber Command regarded Harris as a compassionate man and a great leader. We believe it is tragic that his memory is demeaned, as are the efforts of those of us he commanded, by others who fail to recognize that Harris, his aircrew and ground staff, were largely instrumental in saving much of the world from coming under German occupation and control with its inevitable consequences.

Winston Churchill summed up the efforts of Bomber Command when he said "Night after night, month after month, our bomber squadrons travel far into Germany, find their targets in the darkness by the highest navigational skill, aim their attacks, often under the heaviest fire, often with serious loss, with careful, deliberate determination and inflict shattering blows on the whole of the technical and war-making structure of the Nazi power. On no part of the Royal Air Force does the weight of war fall more heavily than on the bombers. I have no hesitation in saying that this process of bombing the military industries and communications of Germany and the air bases and storage depots from which we are attacked, affords the most certain, if not the shortest, of all the roads to victory".

The casualty statistics of Bomber Command are stark. 125,000 aircrew were engaged in operations against the enemy. Of those -

- 56,927, 45%, were killed on operations
- 11,250,9% were killed in crashes in Britain, giving a 54% death rate
- 3,750,3%, were seriously injured in crashes in Britain
- 15,000, 12% became prisoners of war
- and 1,250, 1% evaded capture after being shot down

leaving just 37,500, 3 in every 10 of us who took part, physically unharmed.



The Royal Australian Air Force air-crew who fought with Bomber Command numbered just over 1 % of all Australians who enlisted in World War II, yet of the 10,000 Australians in the Command, the 4150, 42%, who died, accounted for 22% of the 18,675 Australian deaths outside Australia, not necessarily in combat.

As a comparison to those horrendous figures, in World War One, in which the total Australian battle casualties far exceeded those in World War Two,

- at Gallipoli, of the 50,000 Australians who took part, 17 % were killed
- and on the Western Front, 12.5% died

both low in percentage terms, in comparison with the 54% death rate of Australians in Bomber Command.

To conclude, my question for you to mull over tonight with your pre-dinner drink is

- was the leadership of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris and the means adopted by Bomber Command to defeat Germany and Italy and the 54% air-crew losses incurred by those means, justified by the ultimate victory of the Allies?

Ladies & Gentlemen, think it over.