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Bombing of Dresden still a matter of debate

By MURRAY CAMPBELL

Churchill had doubts about the morality of the Allied plan, MURRAY CAMPBELL says

The bombing of Dresden was different, Canadians knew, from the very first sketchy details.

But with more than 40,000 war dead by the second month of 1945, there was little objection in the country to any tactic that could bring the conflict to an early end.

The accounts written within hours of the attack speak of "great processions" of U.S. and British bombers and "the roar of Allied bombs" marking a "thunderous assault" on the German city.

About 1,200 planes raided Dresden three times in scarcely 15 hours on Feb. 14-15, 1945, as part of Operation Thunderclap, which had been approved by British prime minister Winston Churchill and the other wartime leaders.

In the initial attack, Britain's Royal Air Force dropped about 1,360 tonnes of high-explosive bombs, followed by 1,090 tonnes of incendiary missiles. A second wave of RAF planes and a thud by U.S. bombers quickly followed. The one-two combination of explosive and incendiary bombs was enormously deadly. The explosives blew the roofs off buildings and the exposed timbers were set alight by the incendiary devices. This eventually created a self-sustaining firestorm with temperatures peaking at more than 1,500 C. The air above the bombed area became extremely hot, and thus rose quickly. Cold air from beyond the bombed zone then rushed in on ground level, sucking people into the fire "like leaves into an autumn bonfire," as one writer put it. Many who took shelter in cellars died of suffocation.

"That's good bombing," RAF Wing Commander Maurice Smith was reported to have said as he wheeled the 244 Lancaster bombers under his control away from Dresden.

The first reports out of Sweden spoke of 70,000 casualties -- an extraordinary number, even at a time when RAF and U.S. planes controlled the skies and nightly bombed German cities with negligible strategic value.

About 15 square kilometres of the ancient city were destroyed, including more than 14,000 homes, 72 schools, 22 hospitals, 19 churches and scores of commercial and government buildings.

Six decades later, the precise death toll remains uncertain. Historians generally believe 35,000 to 60,000 people perished in the two days of bombing, but some accounts suggest that the city was packed with refugees fleeing the Soviet assault from the east and that the count could easily be 10 times higher.

The moral questions surrounding the raids on Dresden and other centres were more easily defined. Three days after the bombing, an Associated Press report from Paris (based on an off-the-record briefing by an RAF officer) said the Allies had decided to adopt deliberate bombing of German cities "as a ruthless expedient to hasten Hitler's doom."

The story, accurately reflecting the content of Allied memos released after the war, says the purpose of the bombing was to create confusion on the ground to prevent the Germans from moving reinforcements from the western front to the eastern front, and to sap the morale of the enemy.

The AP story also frames the debate that has raged about the Dresden bombing for the past 60 years.

"The decision [to bomb civilians] may revive protests from some Allied quarters about 'uncivilized warfare,' but they are likely to be balanced by satisfaction in those sections of Europe where the German air force and the Nazi V-weapons have been responsible for the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians by tens of thousands," it says.

German radio commentators complained about the "ignoble moral aims of enemy warfare." Churchill later professed his doubts about the strategy of bombing civilians, but there was no sustained controversy at the time in Canada -- in its newspapers, at least -- where people were exulting that the long, bloody war was nearly over.

"There was a time some years ago when it did not seem possible that we could win this war," Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery told soldiers of the 1st Canadian and 2nd British armies on Feb. 18. "The present situation is that we cannot lose it."

Indeed, Canadian units had broken through the border into Germany and were picking off targets against enemy resistance that intensified after the fighting moved from the watery fields in the Netherlands, but which still proved inadequate.

"First Canadian vanguards, muddy and tired from their terrific effort of the [first week of the assault into Germany] stood and cheered as wave upon wave of fighters and fighter-bombers tore into the attacking Nazis, and magnificently aimed artillery sent sheets of steel through the enemy's ranks," an AP reporter wrote on Feb. 14.

On the eastern front, the Soviets continued to make gains, capturing seven towns in Silesia, as they bludgeoned their way toward Dresden and Berlin. After 49 days of street fighting, Budapest finally fell to the Red Army.

The cost to the Germans in the battle for the Hungarian capital was staggering. Initial reports said about 49,000 troops were killed and 123,000 captured, though there was an expectation that those numbers would rise.

As well, the Soviets captured hundreds of tanks, cannons and storehouses of food and ammunition.

Canadian troops entering Germany were making captures. Their soldiers found that German farmers had been living well and that there was an abundance of foodstuffs, in stark contrast to the widespread starvation the troops had encountered among the Dutch.

The gusto of Canadian soldiers amazed Sergeant Paul Goyer of Montreal as he took a break from fighting near the Rhine River. "So help me, you'd see guys plug a German, reach for a cigarette, break its neck and knock off another Heinie all in one motion."

On the domestic front, however, the war was pinching. In just one week, Canadians were hit with new restrictions on the availability of coal, gasoline and sugar, and Toronto residents were told by federal-government officials that they could not move without permission, to ensure that essential workers had accommodations.

Coal was in such short supply in the last winter of the war that movie theatres and other "non-essential" sites were threatened with closing, while hotels were told they should lower the temperatures of their lobbies and public rooms to 60 F (16 C). The sugar ration was reduced by two pounds (0.9 of a kilogram) a person annually -- to less than half a pound (0.2 of a kilogram) a week -- while the annual ration of gasoline for 1945 remained static at 120 gallons (545.5 litres).

Despite the privations, a group of British war brides arriving in Toronto were luxuriating in the abundance of Canada, even proclaiming the food "wonderful."

A semblance of normal life continued. A new Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, *Utopia Ltd.*, was opening in Toronto to acclaim, as was the Kiwanis Music Festival, while the playoffs in the University of Toronto interfaculty hockey league were set to begin.

Notable social progress was being made, too, as the Toronto Board of Education voted to adopt the principle of equal pay for equal work, to ensure that male and female elementary teachers were paid the same salaries.

In Germany, meanwhile, Hitler imposed martial law in areas threatened by invasion, and threatened execution for anyone who shirked "the difficult struggle for the continued life of the Reich."

Special "courts of summary justice" were announced on German radio to deal with people who, in some vague way, endangered the country's "fighting determination." Defendants would win acquittal or be handed the death penalty, with execution soon after.

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