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Photo Essay: The D-Day Beaches from the Air

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Photo Essay

The D-Day Beaches from the Air

The Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies (LCMSDS) has a rich collection of aerial reconnaissance photos from the Second World War. The core of the LCMSDS air photo collection consists of some 300,000 images which were originally produced for First Canadian Army's Air Photo Interpretation Section during 1944 and 1945. Following the war this collection was sent to the Air Photo Interpretation School at Rivers, Manitoba, and it was subsequently transferred to the Canadian War Museum's (CWM) storage area at Vimy House. Terry Copp "discovered" the crates of air photos in 1982 when he was researching *Maple Leaf Route: Caen*. The CWM, then a very different organization than the one we know today, decided to deaccession the collection by placing them in a dumpster, but Copp was notified that if he could save the collection so long as it was done promptly. The late Shaun Brown, who was working on his Master's at Laurier, rented a cube van, drove to Ottawa and rescued the material from the loading dock.

A preliminary inventory of the collection was prepared and individual boxes related to key areas were analyzed to produce detailed contents lists. This inventory is the basis of our current finding aid. To complement the air photograph collection, the Laurier Centre also maintains an extensive collection of wartime topographic maps. These maps cover much of the same area as the air photos and are an essential aid in the interpretation of those photos. The following photo essay will profile one small part of the collection. You will find additional air photos and maps, as well as the preliminary finding aid to the collection, on the CMH website <www.canadianmilitaryhistory.com>.



Prior to Operation Overlord, the Allies worked hard to learn as much as they could about the enemy coast and defences. One of the best sources of intelligence was aerial photographs. This low-level oblique taken by a US Army Air Force reconnaissance aircraft shows a part of Juno Beach at Courseulles, where the Canadians landed on D-Day. Visible are the harbour as well as one of the main German bunkers on the west side of the harbour.

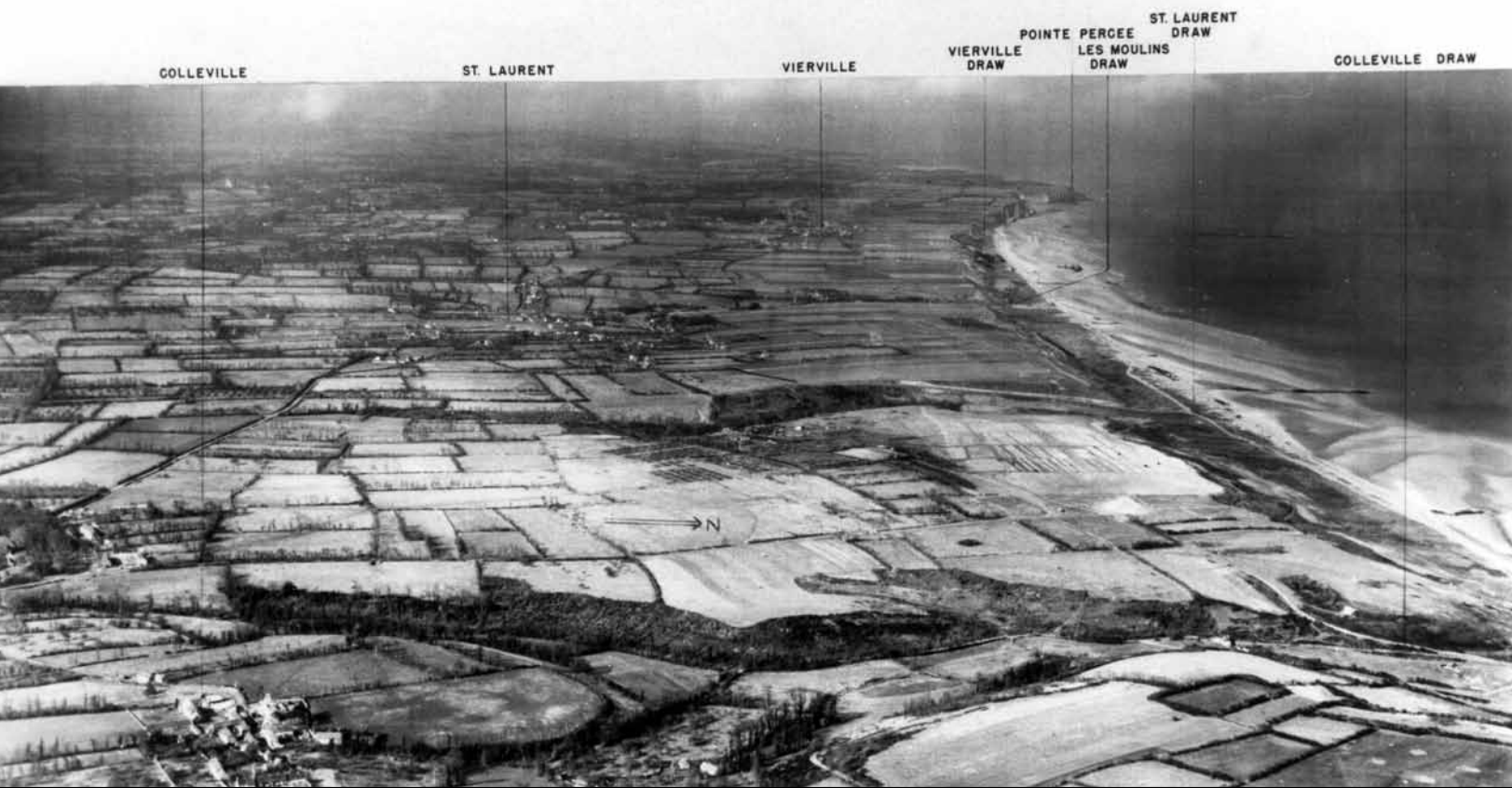
LCMSDS Air Photograph Collection

Opposite top: A low-level oblique air photograph of the beach at Courseulles-sur-Mer taken on D-Day. A number of landing craft are visible just off the beach as are dozens on vehicles and hundreds of men. (US Air Force Photo 51579)

Opposite bottom: Courseulles-sur-Mer photographed a month after D-Day. The transformation of the small harbour into an important point for landing Allied supplies – men, material, food, fuel, ammunition, etc. – is evident in the photo. A number of larger Rhino ferries and landing craft are 'parked' on the beach while other smaller craft are tied up in the harbour itself. The evenly spaced 'dots' on the west side of the harbour near the beach are a supply dump. (LCMSDS Air Photograph)



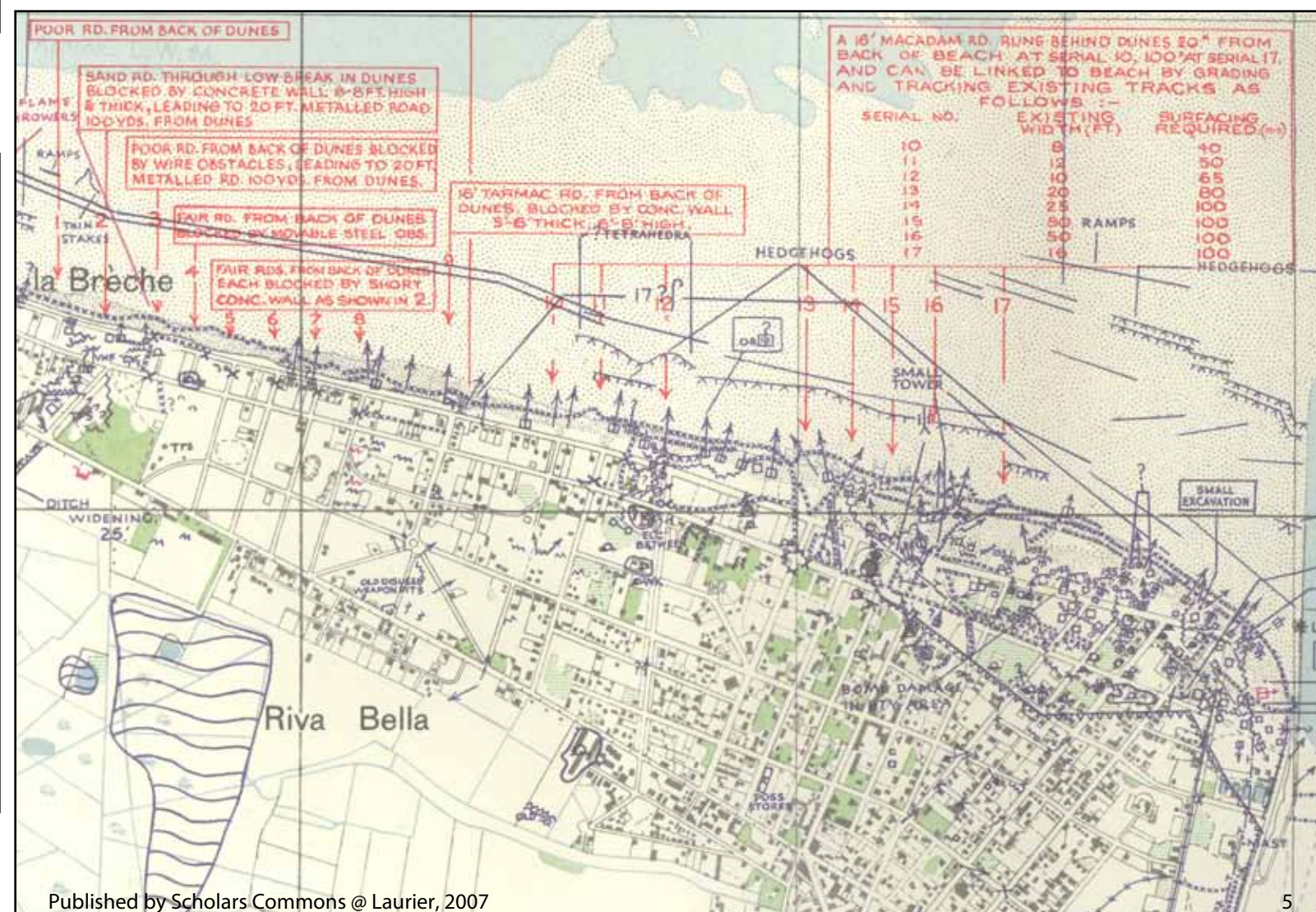


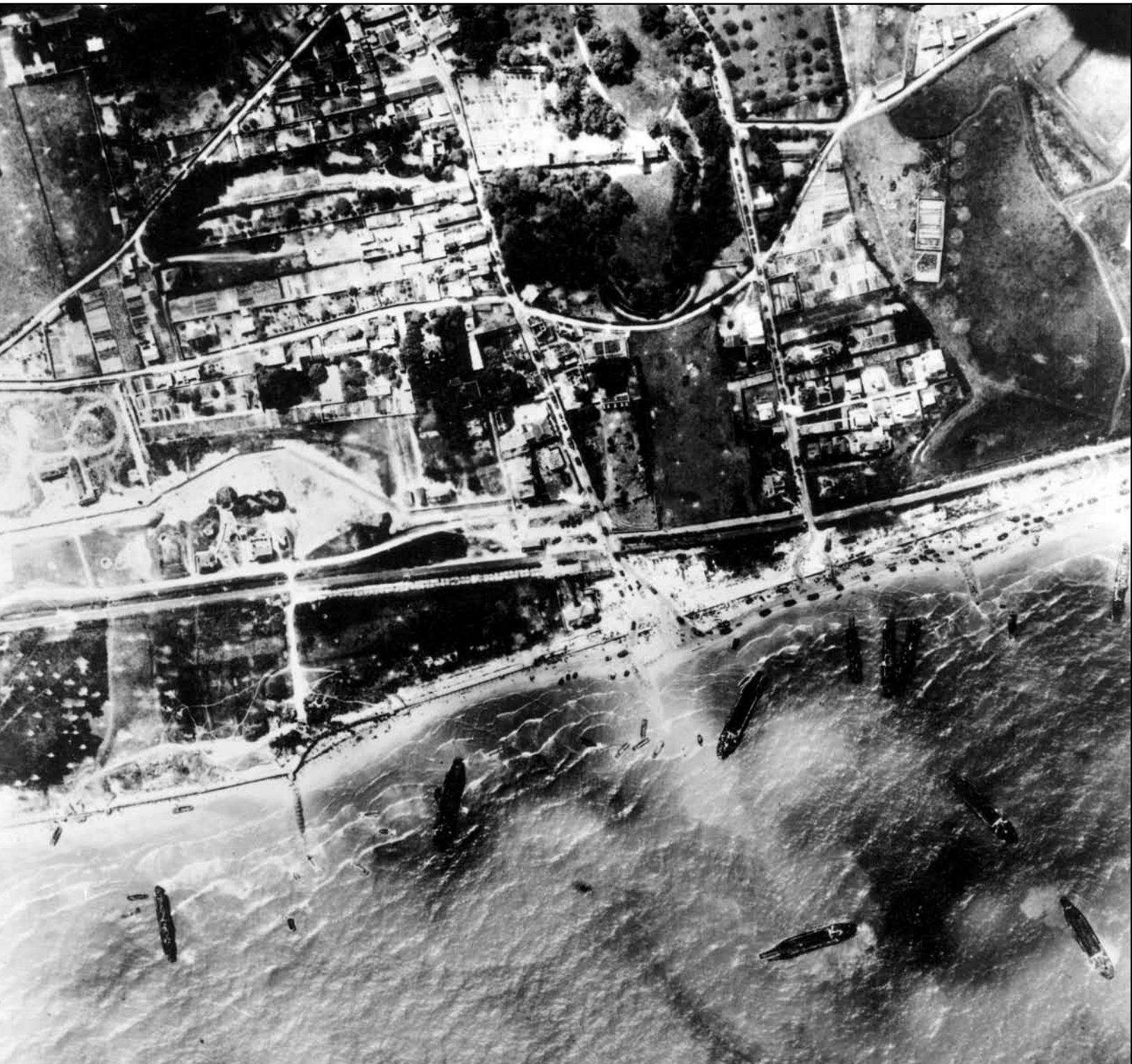


These two post-invasion air photos show Omaha Beach (top) and Utah Beach (bottom) where the Americans landed on D-Day. The vastly different topography of the two areas is apparent: Omaha with its formidable bluffs and wide open beaches of Utah. (LCMSDS Air Photos)



This air photo, and the map below, show Sword Beach at Ouistreham and the mouth of the Orne River where the British 3rd Infantry Division landed on D-Day. The air photo, taken a week after the invasion, clearly shows the damage caused by the pre-invasion bombing and shelling. Also visible is the anti-tank ditch built by the Germans. The map is a segment from a 1:25,000 scale topographic map defence overprint dated 12 May 1944. The defence overprint maps detailed all that was known about German positions.





Bernières-sur-Mer photographed on the afternoon of D-Day. This part of Juno Beach, assaulted by the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, was where the reserve troops of 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade were landed. Efforts to clear the southern edge of the town took longer than expected and a massive traffic jam (visible above) developed in the town.

(LCMSDS Air Photo)