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Stephen A. Bourque

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Operational Fires

Lisieux and Saint-Lô – The Destruction of Two Norman Towns on D-Day

Stephen A. Bourque

In the early morning hours of 6 June 1944, Royal Air Force (RAF) Bomber Command, including 13 Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) squadrons with No.6 Group, began the Allied invasion of Normandy. They attacked six coastal artillery batteries located from just south-east of Cherbourg to the east of the invasion zone near Cabourg. Called Operation Flashlamp, it was the largest RAF bomber operation of the war to date and it took the Lancaster and Halifax bombers about six hours to complete the mission. There was no pretence of precision as approximately 100 heavy bombers attacked each of these four-gun batteries with between 500 and 600 tons of munitions.¹ Within two hours of Bomber Command's departure, bombers from the United States Eighth and Ninth Air Forces were over their coastal targets. In some cases they added a second strike at some of the artillery positions that the RAF had just hit.² With the ground troops moving to the shore, the 21st Army Group staff ordered the heavy bombers to shift inland, to attack their next set of targets: 14 French towns well beyond the beaches. The bombers' tasks were to delay the movement of German operational reserves toward the coast and the fragile Allied beachhead. They were to do this by destroying bridges over the rivers and by turning the centres of these ancient towns into rubble. In the process, they killed and wounded thousands of French civilians.³

Abstract: Standard accounts of the Allied invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944 usually focus on the combatant's experience. These narratives describe, in detail, the role of British, Canadian, American, and even German military units. The British glider and airborne landings to the east, the divisional assaults on the five beaches, and the American airborne landings to the west, and the ultimate breakouts near Caen and Saint-Lô define Operation Overlord for most historians and general readers. This article challenges that conventional narrative by introducing the perspective of French citizens who experienced 6 June under the bombs of RAF Bomber Command and the US Eighth Air Force. The bombing of Saint-Lô and Lisieux are just two examples of the massive bombing campaign that remain today part of the French perspective on the Second World War.

Although authors continue writing books about D-Day, the Allied invasion of Normandy, and the campaign in France, most readers probably consider it essentially a complete narrative. The standard account essentially tells the story of the brave Anglo-Americans forces that landed on the Norman coast in June, defeated Rommel's German defenders, and secured a bridgehead. After hard-fought engagements near the coast, around Cherbourg, and in the *bocage*, American armor units pierced the Nazi defensive line near Saint-Lô. After eliminating the German troop concentration near Falaise, the American and Commonwealth armies joined in a massive sweep toward Paris and

the German border. Meanwhile, overhead, heavy bombers pounded the beaches and then resumed the Combined Bomber Offensive into the heart of the Third Reich, destroying the cities and factories that fuelled the German war effort. Today, bookshelves groan under the weight of histories that generally tell this story from the Anglo-American point of view, with some attempt to include the Germans in the story.⁴ Most of these studies glorify the performance of this or that unit or the decisions of a particular general showing why he was the key to the Allied success. In the early years of the twenty-first century, Frenchmen and Anglo-Saxons alike portray the advance across France, *la voie de la liberté*, as a triumphant procession. Certainly, that was the message of Ronald Reagan's famous speech in the 1980s that set the tone for most American's understanding of the invasion and its aftermath.⁵

Yet, this account is not the whole story. In train stations, harbours, and villages across France, there are small memorials and plaques, such as an impressive one in Metz commemorating those railroad workers killed by Allied bombings during the war.⁶ Although in the first decade of the new century the French civilians seem to have forgotten these events, Eric Alary and other French historians have begun looking at this part of the war in more detail and conclude that American and British bombers



A single Halifax from 431 Squadron RCAF is photographed attacking a target in France on 25 June 1944.

killed approximately 60,000 French civilians, and destroyed or seriously damaged entire cities and towns in the process of “liberating” the French people.⁷ More sensational and public oriented is Eddy Florentin’s *Quand le Alliés bombardèrent la France, 1940-1945* (When the Allies bombarded France), originally published in 1997. While Florentin’s work has some flaws in specific numbers and interpretation, his overall thesis is accurate: Allied bombers pulverized towns and cities, often without warning and catching French civilians generally unprepared for the assault.⁸

One of the few American historians to acknowledge the aerial destruction of these cities was Martin Blumenson, who saw much of this landscape first-hand during the campaign. He opens his chapter on the battle for Saint-Lô with:

By the middle of June 1944 this once “charming and serene little city” had become “no more than a heap

of smoking rubble.” On the day the Allies invaded the Continent, 6 June, Allied planes had bombed the power plant and railroad station and then made concentrated and repeated attacks that seemed to the inhabitants to have been motivated by the sole intention of destroying the city. Almost 800 civilians lay dead under the ruins by the morning of 7 June, and Allied bombers returned every day for a week to increase the devastation.⁹

But Saint-Lô was not alone. In addition to attacks along the beach before the invasion and hundreds of attacks by smaller aircraft, Allied civilian and military leaders selected more than a dozen other cities and towns in the three departments of La Manche, L’Orne, and Calvados for destruction. As a result, by the end of 7 June, the day after the actual landings, at least 8,500 French civilians lay dead, many more thousands wounded, and ancient towns and their historic

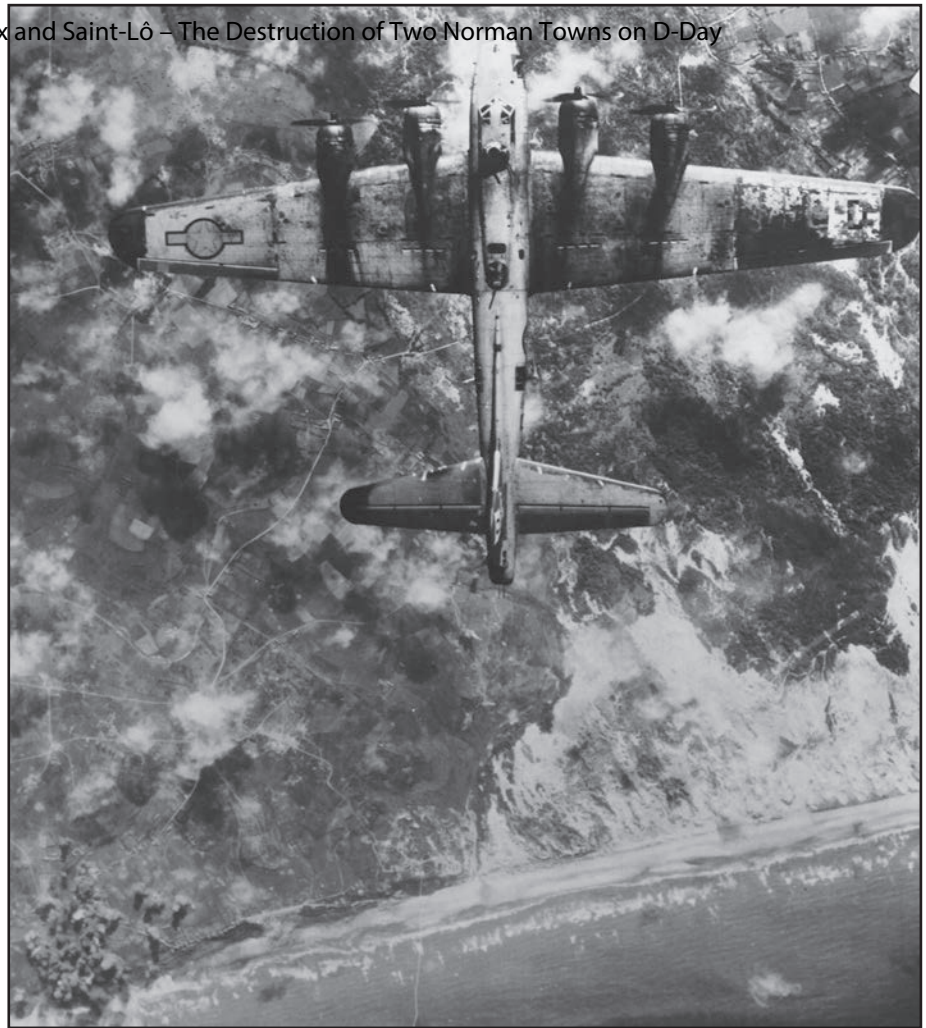
treasures reduced to rubble as a result of the Allied air attack in support of Operation Overlord.¹⁰

Yet, we find very little written in English on this bombing campaign and few historians, even social historians, have an appreciation for either the magnitude of this assault or its effect on the French civilian population. Most Anglo-American authors have either ignored the problem of Allied bombing or followed the path blazed by Cornelius Ryan in the late 1950s and ignored the fate of those who lived on the ground and the role of heavy bombers in the campaign, other than commenting on the ineffective bombing assault on the beach.¹¹ The commanders, General Dwight Eisenhower, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, have little to say about this part of the operation, other than the bombing on the beach.¹² Aviation historians almost totally ignore the bombing of France and

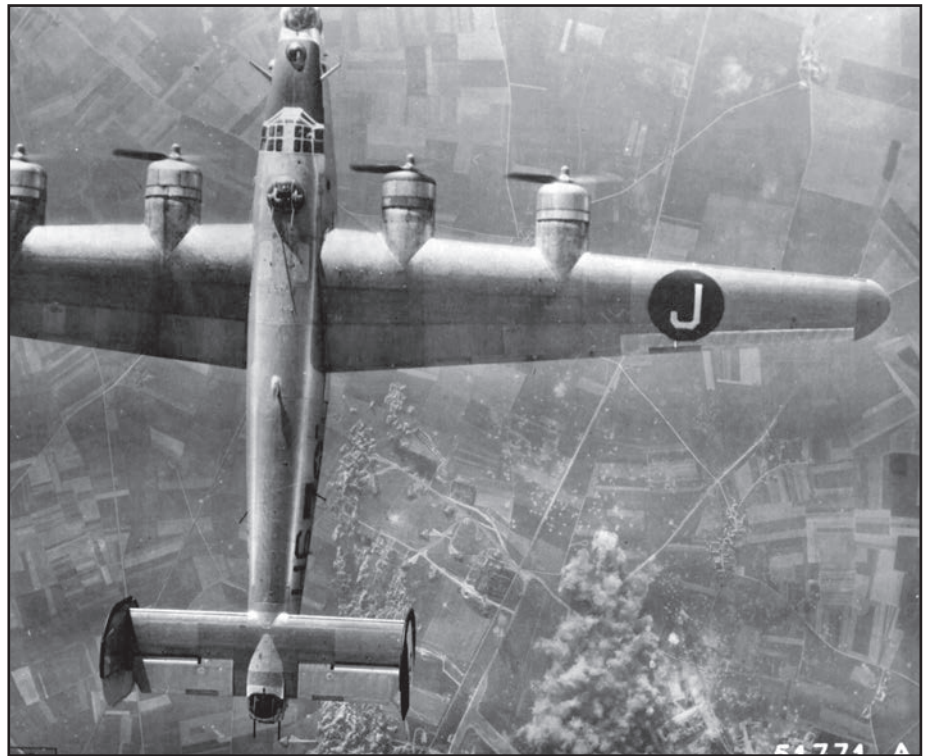
concentrate on the Combined Bomber Offensive against Germany and the transportation plan over the major rivers.¹³ Even the massive official history of the US Army Air Forces in World War II devotes only one superficial paragraph to this massive bombing effort, which actually lasted until 17 June.¹⁴ Yet through 1944, almost half of all bombs dropped by Allied bombers were on France, not Germany, as bombing enthusiasts are prone to argue.¹⁵

Not until William I. Hitchcock's recent *The Bitter Road to Freedom* has this massive bombing assault received any serious scholarly discussion in English.¹⁶ In addition to Hitchcock's work, other English-speaking scholars are beginning to discuss the underside of this liberation. Publishing almost simultaneously with Hitchcock, Andrew Knapp at the University of Reading and its Centre for Advanced Study of French History has begun to systematically expose this hidden aspect of the campaign in Europe.¹⁷ French historian Olivier Wieviorka's *Normandy*, recently translated into English, provides a brief overview of the bombing campaign in relation to the landing strategy, but few details to distract readers from the overall theme of his book.¹⁸ These efforts, however, are all still relatively recent, and certainly reflect a "new perspective" on the Second World War.

Caen, the most important city in Normandy and the centre of road and rail traffic, is the focus of most of these recent narratives. The Allied air forces bombed Caen on 6 and 7 June. Attacks, they go far beyond the definition of raids, hit the city at 1330 hours, 1630 hours, and the following morning at 0230 hours. The city's centre was destroyed and these attacks killed between six and eight hundred citizens and refugees.¹⁹ And, as readers of this journal know, Caen's agony was not over. For a month British and Canadian forces



US Air Force Photo 51591 AC



US Air Force Photo 51771 AC

Aircraft of the US Eighth Air Force attack targets in France in support of Operation Overlord. Top: A B-17 Flying Fortress attacks the heavily-defended French port of Boulogne on 5 June 1944; Bottom: Smoke obscures much of the airfield at Châteaudun, France during a raid by B-24 Liberators on 14 June 1944.

sparred with the strong but desperate German forces. On 7 July the heavy bombers again returned to set the stage for Operation Charnwood by bombing the northern suburbs. Two days later, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division moved into the city, north of the Orne River. Not until 20 July, following Operation Goodwood and yet another attack by heavy bombers, would the remains of this once proud city be free of German forces.²⁰

This article examines the destruction of two other cities on D-Day: Lisieux and Saint-Lô. Lisieux's war experience is generally unknown to most North Americans, except those British and Canadian soldiers who fought their way through the German defences during the campaign. Saint-Lô, on the other hand, is one of the most famous cities of the campaign, as the site of another massive bombing which opened the hole through which General Omar Bradley's forces broke into the open in Operation Cobra. Unfortunately, few English-speaking students of the Normandy Campaign can describe what happened to these ancient cities on 6 and 7 June.

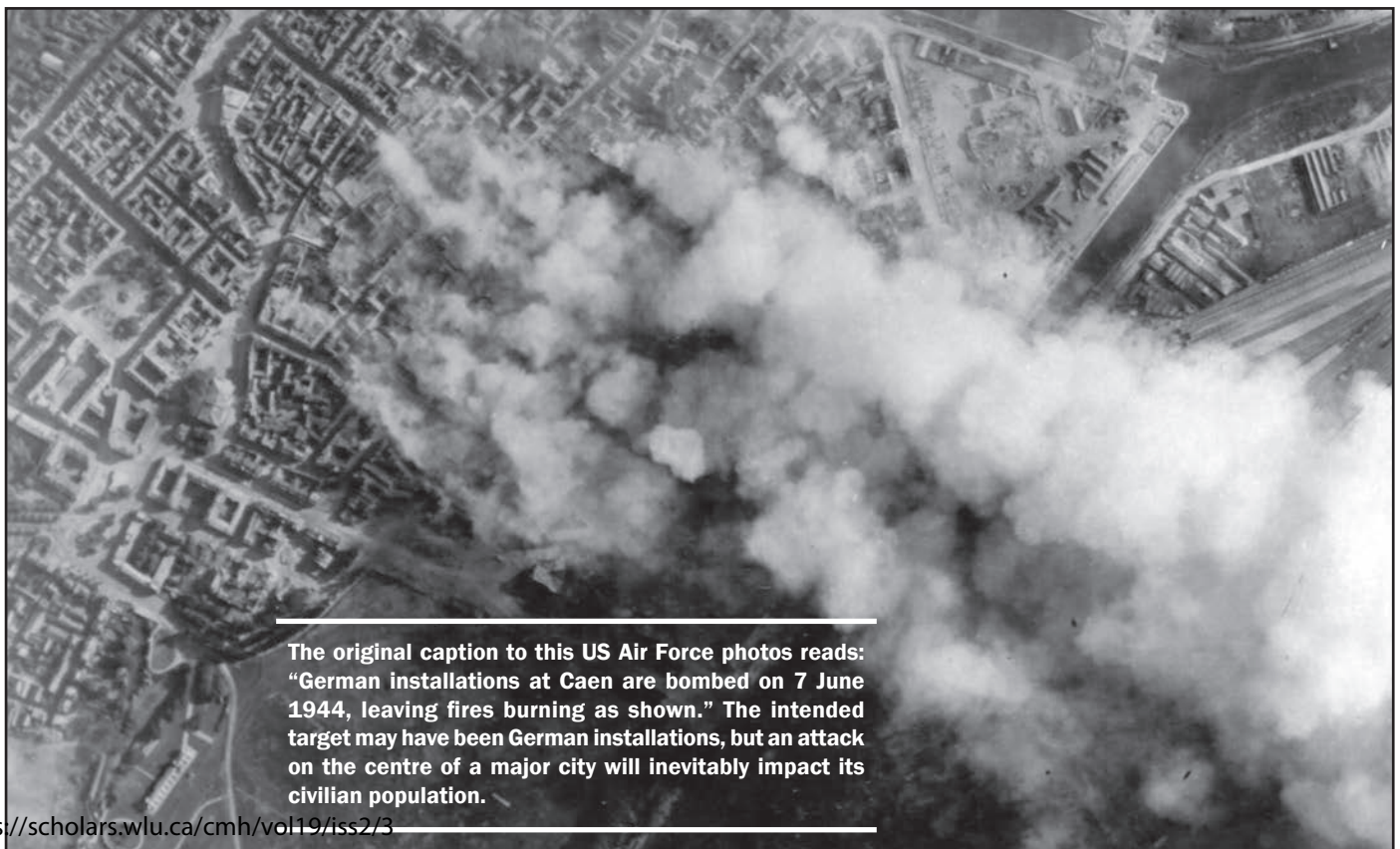
Lisieux

Lisieux is a small city on the main route from Paris, 65 kilometres east of Caen. It rests on the east bank of the Touques River, a narrow waterway a little more than 100 kilometres in length, with two bridges for motor vehicles and another railway bridge moving through the town. By 1939 it was best known as the home to Saint Thérèse, a devout young lady who died in 1897, only 24 years old, and canonized by popular demand in 1925.²¹ In 1944 one of the helicopter's early inventors, Paul Cornu, the first to achieve free flight while carrying a passenger in 1907, still lived there.²² Its most important historical site was the ancient Cathédrale Saint-Pierre, which its citizens began constructing in 1170 and finished it in the 13th century. On the eve of the German invasion, it had approximately 15,000 inhabitants.²³

The most direct route for German units moving to Normandy from the north or from Paris was through Lisieux, making it a natural place

to interdict reinforcements and supplies. In April the 12th SS Hitler Youth Panzer Division, had moved into the area. Its central location and developed road network allowed the division to consolidate rapidly and move either toward the Norman beaches or more likely, in the view of the German senior commanders, north toward the Pas de Calais region where they expected the main invasion. Only a few hours from the beaches, this unit could cause havoc if it arrived before the Allied forces were ready to receive it.²⁴ To prevent this movement, Allied army planners identified three choke points in the city, consisting of bridges and stone buildings, on the west side of the Touques River, and directed that they be destroyed to prevent the enemy from using this main route.²⁵

Since the beginning of 1944, Lisieux's citizens had been anticipating the invasion. Few suspected that their city would immediately become part of the drama.²⁶ Monday, 5 June, was very calm and there were only a few Allied aircraft in the air. The citizens went to bed as usual, only to be awakened in



US Air Force Photo 60597 AC

The original caption to this US Air Force photos reads: "German installations at Caen are bombed on 7 June 1944, leaving fires burning as shown." The intended target may have been German installations, but an attack on the centre of a major city will inevitably impact its civilian population.

This is a facsimile of a leaflet dropped by the Allies warning French civilians to evacuate their cities. It reads:

ALLIED LEAFLET

Dropped in a very inaccurate way the day before the strategic bombardments

Urgent message from the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces

TO THE INHABITANTS OF THIS CITY

So that the common enemy is overcome, the Allied Air Forces will attack all transportation hubs and all the ways and means of communication vital to the enemy.

Orders to this end have been given

You who read this leaflet, you are in or near to a major centre essential to the enemy for the movement of its troops and matériel. The vital objective close to you will be attacked without delay.

There is an urgent need for you to leave the zone of danger where you are with your family for a few days.

Do not clog up the roads. Disperse to the countryside as much as possible.

LEAVE AT ONCE!

YOU DO NOT HAVE A MINUTE TO LOSE!

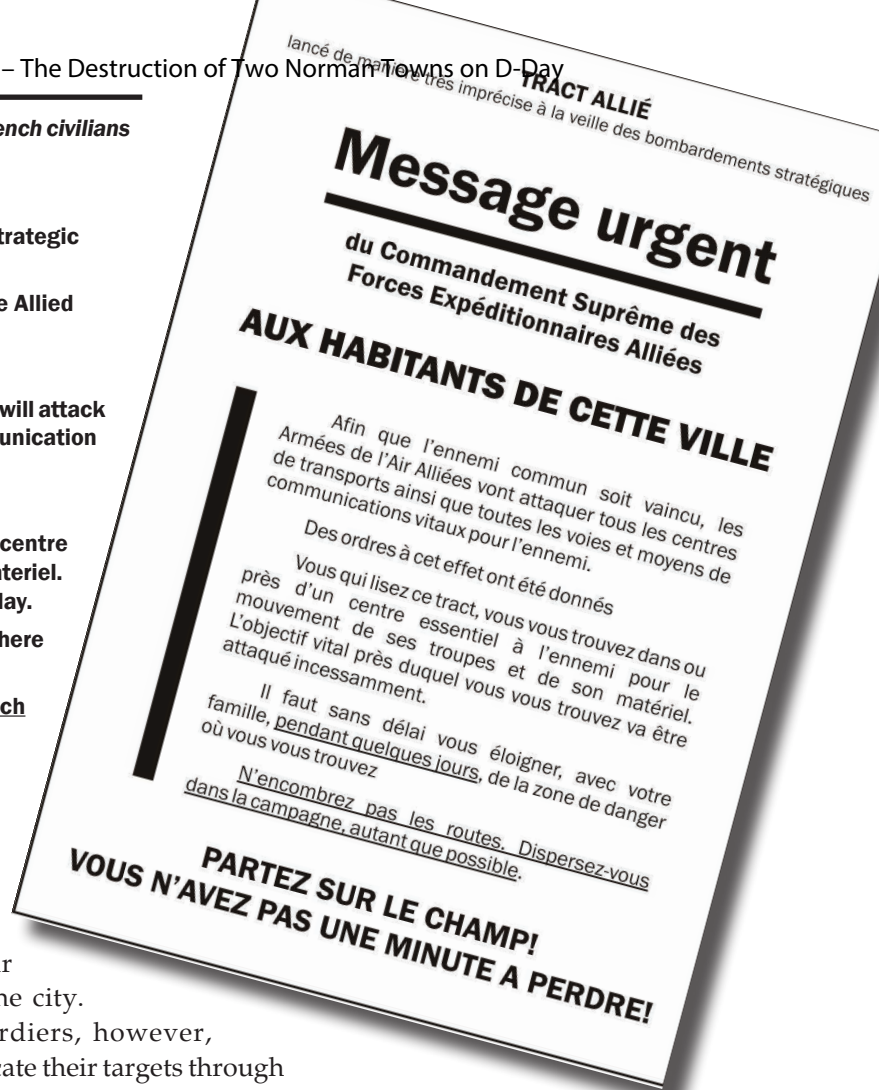
the middle of the night by an intense, distant, cannonade. Coming from the direction of the coast, it was obvious that the invasion had begun. As dawn arrived, the sky was full of aircraft and sounds of the fighting increased in intensity. The *Lexoviens*, as they are called, poured into the streets looking for details. Rumors, such as false reports that the Allies had already captured both Honfleur and Caen, circulated among the crowd. Few had radios, since the Germans had confiscated them earlier, and there was no way to verify the news.²⁷

Before the sun came up, reconnaissance units from the 12th SS Panzer Division passed through the centre of the city, heading west toward the sounds of the fighting. Unit commanders noted the citizen's apparent calm, and, in spite of the obvious sounds of war, they appeared to be beginning the day as if it was just like any other. The rumble of battle continued all morning and Allied aircraft seemed to be everywhere above the clouds.²⁸ No one on the ground realized that at 0900 hours 81 B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft were overhead and prepared

to drop their bombs on the city.

The bombardiers, however, could not locate their targets through the cloud cover and turned back to England.²⁹ As the morning turned into afternoon, the citizens heard less from the beaches, and the firing was not quite as loud and more intermittent. Allied aircraft, primarily fighter-bombers, flew over the town and sometimes machine-gunned the German convoys along Route 13. Watching these events, the citizens now waited with foreboding that the cannonade would surely come their way.³⁰

Allied commanders were not happy that the main east-west highway was still open on the afternoon of 6 June. They knew that the 12th SS Panzer was on the move and that Hitler had ordered SS General Joseph (Sepp) Dietrich, commander of the 1 SS Panzer Corps, to throw the invaders "back into the sea."³¹ Determined to stop German units from heading to the front, they directed the bombers to repeat the aborted mission again and to strike



Lisieux before sunset. Around 2000 hours, 72 B-24 Liberators crossed the English Channel and flew towards the city. This time, since the leaders expected that the cloud cover would prohibit any precision, they ordered the crews to use "overcast bombing techniques," a euphemism for area bombing, without regard to either accuracy or civilian casualties. To make accuracy more problematic, increasingly bad weather forced the aircraft to fly higher than anticipated, now up to 23,000 or 24,000 feet. Still, many aircraft were unable to find either this or any target, and headed back to England. However, 25 B-24s fought through the weather and headed for Lisieux intent on dropping their 73 tons of explosives on their assigned objective.³²

At 2020 hours, the Liberator squadrons appeared over the city centre and began dropping their munitions, just as the citizens sat

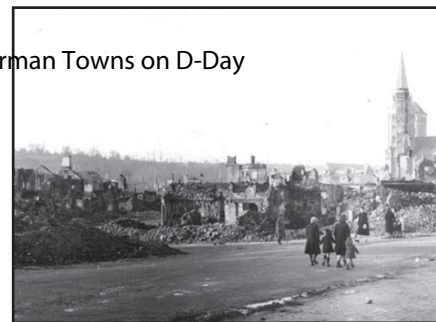


down for their evening meals and young children went to bed.³³ The streets were empty, as the evening curfew had just taken place, and almost everyone was at home. Young Gerald Hanocque had just climbed into his bed when he heard the sound of the Allied aircraft in the sky. He was not concerned, as he had heard this sound many times before. Suddenly, bombs began falling very close to his house. He ran to his window and saw the nearby hospital engulfed in a huge cloud of smoke. Then a new barrage of bombs hit and windows began blowing out and walls shook violently. Then it was over. The attack shattered all the windows in his home but he was still alive. He helped his father clean up the mess and began patching holes in the walls and covering the missing windows. So far, he had been relatively lucky.³⁴

Not so fortunate was six-year-old J.P. Cordier. Writing 40 years after the event, he still remembered his parents discussing the question of leaving their house and escaping the city to avoid the bombardment. However, his mother was pregnant and they decided it was better for them to stay put in the safest part of the house. When they heard the planes turning towards their city they took shelter, according to their practiced routine, at the bottom of the staircase landing on the ground floor. It was in the centre of the house and seemed to offer the best protection. Suddenly a bomb exploded, destroying the house's back wall and knocking him out. As he briefly regained consciousness, he called out asking for water, and remembers his mother answering him. Then he again passed into a coma that lasted

several hours. His neighbor rescued J. P. and brought him across the street to an undamaged house. Students from the local seminary, looking for survivors, carried him to the local hospital. Delirious, he remembers arguing with the nurses who were cutting his socks off his mangled leg, just before they amputated it. When he awoke again he was in the hospital along with his wounded sister. Both of his parents were dead, he was missing a leg, and his house was burnt to the ground. Nothing was left.³⁵

Along with his parents, at least 40 *Lexoviens* were dead with many more wounded. Madame Andrée Petit, who ran a small cafe on the main road to Caen, in the community of Saint-Désir just west of the city, remembered that after the bombing many people asked her what they should do? Should they stay? Leave? With German troops moving down the highways and fighting possibly nearby, which would be safer, staying or leaving? She had a handicapped sister living with her and two young children, so she decided to remain. So did many civilians that night.³⁶ With much of the city still standing, most hoped the danger had passed. Rather than leave the city, many returned to their beds.³⁷ However, the attacks were not over. At 0120 hours the next morning (7 June) 102 Halifax and Lancaster heavy bombers appeared over the damaged, sleeping city. For



Above: Various ground views of the destruction in Lisieux.

Below: The grave markers of the Faucon, Grenet and Mignot families who were killed in the Allied bombing of Lisieux.

Opposite: This air photo shows Lisieux as it appeared on 13 August 1944. The effects of repeated bombings are clearly visible as much of the city is heavily damaged.



Author's collection





US Air Force Photo 53184 AC

B-26 Marauders of the Ninth US Air Force attack the Lisieux Marshalling Yards during the summer of 1944.

20 minutes bombs reigned down on the city, destroying Saint-Désir and hitting other sections of the town.³⁸

Twenty minutes seemed like eternity to those on the ground. To young Gerald Hanocque, the bombs seemed to fall as a never-ending string of rosary beads. The force of the explosion, like an earthquake, caused the old city structures to shake off their foundations and tumble to the ground. The city burst into flames with most of the destruction around the Église Saint-Désir, where the main road from Paris and the rail line crossed the river.³⁹ Madame Petit found herself, after the first explosion with her wounded son in her arms. Then, another bomb hit the lower part of the house, killing her sister and wounding her in the head and legs. The explosion destroyed the part of the house that served as the cafe, trapping her seven-year-old daughter, Ginette, and a young waitress, among the debris. She

was able to free the young woman, but Ginette was injured too badly. "Mama, I will die but the war will be finished," she told her mother. As Andrée tried to comfort her daughter, she expired, becoming as she had wished: an angel.⁴⁰

In the morning, with the bombers gone, the burning buildings seemed eerie against the low-hanging clouds and a light rain. Hanocque remembered there was silence; "a silence of desolation." It was a vision that Gérard who does not give his age but appears to be in his early teens, was never able to get out of his head. His memories were made worse by the images of death, and destruction all around him. He remembered watching Dr. Prévost, removing the rubble from his home, "brick by brick," to find the remains of his wife and daughter. And he was saddened that the local hero Paul Cornu died that night, along with his brother's wife and six children.⁴¹

But the city's agony was still not over. At 1400 hours, 74 B-24s from the 2nd Bomb Division returned to the city, determined to keep the Germans from using it as a route to the coast. From 20,000 feet they dropped over 678 tons of explosives, including 120 1,000-pound bombs and 22 2,000 pound bombs. This attack completed Lisieux's destruction. Fires raged for three days, with no one to put them out.⁴² The next day, the weather cleared enough for an accurate photographic reconnaissance mission. The photo shows the fires still burning and, in the words of the analyst who examined the photos, "much destruction in the town."⁴³

These three attacks killed at least 781 Lisieux citizens and a large number of refugees from the coast whose identity will never be known. Of course, many more were wounded and would suffer with the memories of those 48 hours.⁴⁴ The bombers damaged the town's two main

highway bridges, but the Germans quickly replaced one of them. While the demolished buildings slowed some traffic, it had little effect on German movement to the battle area.⁴⁵ In fact, the rubble nature of the city, providing natural machine gun emplacements, contributed to the German's stubborn defence against the British 51st (Highland) Division, which lasted for four days during the so-called pursuit to the Seine. The Highlanders finally drove the Germans out of the city on 23 August, after fighting that resulted in more civilian casualties.⁴⁶ The first stage of Lisieux's agony came to an end on that summer day. Now, its remaining citizens tried to put the pieces of their lives back together, rebuild their city and reconcile their relationship with the arriving British forces.

Saint-Lô

Since its earliest days, Saint-Lô was an important Norman market town and crossroads. The ancient part of the city, the *Enclos*, rested atop a rocky perch that dominates the slow-moving Vire River. In addition to the ancient Église Nore-Dame, begun in the 13th century, the old city was rich in historic and architectural treasures extending back more than 500 years to the beginning of the Middle Ages. By 1944, as a result of the war, the population had dropped from 16,000 citizens in 1936 to 12,800. Unlisted on the official roles were a large number of refugees from the coastal areas and places under more intense German occupation.⁴⁷ With a regional road network almost as important as Caen's, the city's central location made it a natural objective for any force landing in the area. Of

course, as most Frenchmen knew, the invasion would take place in the Pas de Calais, far from the tranquillity of this market town.⁴⁸

Allied planners had identified three targets in the city: Target C1 was the main bridge crossing the river just below the *Enclos*. Target C2 was a crossroads just south of the escarpment. Target C3 was identified in the written order, but not on the target map, and there was probably some confusion as to the bombers' exact aiming point. There was no question about the fourth target. On the map was a big "X" in the middle of the old city, simply labelled as a "choke point." The army wanted the bombers to rubble the ancient city.⁴⁹

Saint-Lô's citizens went to bed as normal on the evening of 5 June. Although rumours of the impending invasion had been in the air for weeks, they apparently had no special

The ruined city of Saint-Lô photographed following its capture by the US Army at the end of July 1944. The destruction was caused by a combination of Allied bombing throughout June and July and the fighting to capture the city at the end of July.

US Air Force Photo 61321 AC





The damage caused by bombing in Saint-Lô was extensive.

concerns. Suddenly, around 2330 hours an anti-aircraft gun opened up on a cargo aircraft, probably one that had just carried American airborne forces to their drop zone, and it burst into flames. Now everyone was awake and by early morning, news of the landings had spread throughout the city.⁵⁰ The French Resistance knew what was going on, since the Allied high command had broadcast the warning that the invasion was underway, and they began cutting telephone lines. As the word of the landings spread, the citizens had little thought of returning to sleep. By dawn, they were able to hear the fighting that was taking place along the coast, 35 kilometres away. An American aircraft dropped leaflets on the city, urging the citizens to

evacuate. Most did not.⁵¹ No one on the ground realized that, shortly before 0900 hours, 78 American bombers from seven B-17 squadrons had approached Saint-Lô intent on destroying it. None of the squadrons were able to locate the city and they turned back toward England without dropping a bomb.⁵²

During the day, citizens who realized that they might be caught in intense fighting when the American arrived took precautions, such as hiding their valuables and stocking up on food and water. All day they heard the sounds of the fighting in the distance, and watched as German vehicles moved though the town towards the front lines.⁵³ A few Allied aircraft attacked the main electric plant around 1000 hours without out

any serious result. Fifteen minutes later, the aircraft returned again, knocking out the city's power. These minor raids probably deceived some citizens as to the nature of the fighting that would come: entertaining and rather painless. Throughout the day, those with a view to the countryside beyond the city, watched as American fighter-bombers from the Ninth Air Force attacked German units moving toward the coast.⁵⁴

One can only imagine what was going through the minds of those in Saint-Lô, who had generally been spared the destruction that much of France and Europe had already experienced. For example, Jean Roger, a 23 year old who was affiliated with the local resistance, found the day exciting. Planes in the sky, agitated Germans, American prisoners, the sense of imminent liberation, kept him and his fellow citizens on edge. For him the day was "full of joy, curiosity, anxiety, waiting, impatience and a gut feeling that perhaps the invasion may have failed."⁵⁵ However, the Allies were still coming and at 1330 hours British Radio broadcast an appeal to evacuate the city, and get at least three kilometres away. Unfortunately for the French, the Germans had confiscated most radios and few heard this appeal, and even fewer understood the consequences for not complying.⁵⁶ The first real indication that the war was getting closer was a strike by about 14 Mustang fighters which strafed and bombed railcars and troops near the train station.⁵⁷

By late afternoon, fighting was heavy and the situation at Omaha and Utah beaches was especially tense, as battalion after battalion of

Saint-Lô burns following an aerial attack on 7 June 1944. Note the US P-38 Lightning in the top left corner of the photo. This aircraft would have been taking post-raid intelligence photographs.

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Immediate Report K2337





US Air Force Photo 52676 AC

This aerial photograph captures a raid in progress on Saint-Lô during June 1944.

German troops moved forward to join the fight. The road through Saint-Lô that should have been destroyed in the early wave of attacks and the last choke point between the southwest and the coastal battle line, was still open. Allied reconnaissance determined that the LXXXIV Corps' reserve, the 30th Mobile Brigade, and other units were moving through the city. Army planners expected more units to pass through this critical crossroads by morning. They wanted it blocked and directed the Eighth Air Force to give it another try.⁵⁸

Michelle Chapron was 13 years old at the time. She was from Carentan, but lived in Saint-Lô while she was going to school at

the local college. She boarded at the home of Madame Gravey who had four children and rented out rooms to people needing a temporary place to stay. Monsieur Gravey had apparently been arrested earlier in the spring, and was locked up in the local prison. Michelle had returned to her room on 5 June in preparation for classes the next day. Awakened that night by the sounds of the invasion she was, like everyone else, excited and unable to get back to sleep. Her grandmother lived in another part of the city and, once she discovered the school was closed, she raced across town, about eight kilometres, to join her. Arriving after noon, she discovered her grandmother and

aunt, not quite sure what was going on and they spent the afternoon trying to get news about the events along the coast. Then the bombs fell and they watched from a safe distance as the inner city burst into flames.⁵⁹

In another part of the city, Jean Roger and his mother were sitting outside her house. He saw the approaching American bombers and marvelled at how fantastic they looked. Suddenly a sensation came over him that "directly changed his life. They are bombing!" They ran downstairs to find his father, and look for shelter. Along with about 20 other people, they found a cellar and took cover.⁶⁰ Although the cloud cover

was still thick, 36 out of 72 bombers found Saint-Lô. In the space of just a few moments they dropped over 101 short tons (202,800 pounds) of bombs on the city centre.⁶¹ The attack came as a surprise to most citizens.

Concerned that the Americans had not accomplished the mission, the planners directed the RAF Bomber Command to block the city. At 0200 hours (7 June), it arrived with 110 Lancaster and Halifax bombers, each capable of carrying 14,000 pounds of bombs. With possibly 700 tons of bombs aimed at the *Enclos*, there was no pretending that this was a precision mission and, guided by the flames from the earlier Eighth Air Force strike, dropped their bomb load in the heart of the old city.⁶² Michelle Chopin and her grandmother were outside as the next wave of bombers arrived, and watched as the city was bombed even heavier than the early one. She remembers watching large waves of aircraft passing very low over her house. The bombs themselves made a howling sound

as they headed towards the ground, followed by the explosive's crashing sounds and bright flashes. Terrorized, she hid with her grandmother and aunt in a, hopefully, safe room in the house. One of the neighbours, who had "a véau Verdun," (a Verdun leg, obviously referring to a wound from the Great War), led them to a place that would be safer. It was for them, "*la nuit du grand cauchemar*," the night of the grand nightmare.⁶³

While the bombings are important to these survivors, even more poignant are their memories of the following morning. Michelle Chapron returned to the Gravey home and found left. Madame Gravey and her four children, ranging in age from two to nine were dead. In addition, Madame Barbier, a professor at the college and her daughter also died, as did another student. Michelle's race across town the previous afternoon had saved her life. Of course, her memories never went away. Her hand-written testimony, done in a beautiful script,

conveys the horror and terror she still felt many years later: "Her soul was profoundly wounded when she was a teenager."⁶⁴ Forty years after the event, Jean Roger was left with one memory of that night: his city was "butchered."⁶⁵

This impression was confirmed the next day by an American photo-reconnaissance mission that took pictures of what was left of Saint-Lô. The photographs showed that most of buildings in the *Enclos* were destroyed or severely damaged. The photos show large concentrations of craters in the centre, south, and east of the city centre. The railway station was partially destroyed. However the most important target, the main bridge across the Vire River, had been hit directly only once. What the airborne photographers could not report, or comment on, was the human cost of this attack.⁶⁶ It is almost impossible to accurately count the number of deaths within and around Saint-Lô. In addition to its citizens, many refugees from the

A US Army jeep is parked amongst the rubble of Saint-Lô following the capture of the city at the end of July 1944.



US Air Force Photo 61322 AC

countryside and the coast had found shelter with family and friends. Of course, in the confusion of regional combat and the intense burning in the city, many bodies were simply never recovered. Estimates and casualty reports extend from a low of 500 dead to over 3,000. It is reasonable to assume that approximately 1,000 civilians perished that evening, and thousands more were physically and psychologically injured.⁶⁷

The horror for the survivors of this city was not over. Fighters and bombers from the Ninth Air Force visited the city many times over the next six weeks, and bombed the city centre on at least four more occasions. Finally, after an intense two-week battle that cost over 5,000 American casualties, German troops left Saint-Lô for good on 19 July, the city's rubble actually facilitating the enemy defences.⁶⁸ A week later, the US VII Corps lined up along a section of the highway northwest of the ruined city. After some delays and missteps, 1,500 B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers dropped over 3,000 tons of bombs in an imaginary box two miles wide by four miles long, occupied by the German Panzer Lehr Division. Within 48 hours, the breakout from the Normandy was in full force.⁶⁹

What does it mean?

By 7 June, approximately 2,500 Allied troops lay dead and another 7,500 wounded on the five landing beaches and near the airborne drop zones. Seldom mentioned in the English texts is the fact that approximately 3,000 French civilians also lay dead and thousands more wounded in the three departments near Normandy – La Manche, L'Orne, and Calvados – as a result of the Allied air attacks in support of Operation Overlord.⁷⁰ By the time the war was over, Allied bombing had killed at least 8,000 Normans and



Photo by author

A monument to the civilian bombardment victims now greets visitors as they enter Saint-Lô today.

over 60,000 French civilians. Cities and infrastructure across France were in ruin.⁷¹ This paper has addressed only two of at least 15 cities attacked that day in the Normandy area of operations. Certainly, civilians on the Eastern Front suffered far more than those in France. Yes, the German civilians, under the bombs in Hamburg, Dresden, Köln and Frankfurt suffered more casualties also. But the French experience represents one of the largest collateral damage events, to use the current terminology, in modern history. When I raise these issues with my students, the classic hero-based Normandy narrative emerges. "Not possible" or "the French are lying." When confronted by the evidence, a common response is, "That was the price of liberation," which is the well-named article by William Hitchcock in a recent issue of *Military History Quarterly*.⁷² Such flippant remarks, however, miss this story's important issues.

Why do we know so little? Perhaps it is because most of this event took place beyond the observation

range of the ground forces and that it was such a "milk run" for the bomber crews compared to strikes against targets in Germany, that they had little to say about it. Maybe it just got lost within the confusion of the madness that accompanied the landings on 6 June. It certainly is not the kind of story that places American, British, and Canadian leaders and airmen in a positive light. It also may be indicative of modern Anglo-Saxon military historian's aversion to consulting the sources that exist in languages other than English. However, what is also interesting to this author is the absence of outrage in most of the French literature. Although the French death toll at Normandy was perhaps four times that suffered by New York during Osama Bin Laden's attack on the World Trade Center, there had been little written outrage until the 1980s.⁷³ Most likely, the French governments and people that emerged from the ashes in 1945 had just too much on their agenda to complain. Rebuilding, reconciliation, the Cold War, the futile attempts to hold empires in Asia and Africa, and the collective confusion over fighting each other made it best to avoid asking too many questions.

But now, more than 60 years later, it is time to correct the historical record. Were these bombings effective and did they materially contribute to the success of the Normandy offensive? How did the surviving citizens of these martyred villages interact with Anglo-Americans in the decades after 1945? Was De Gaulle's alleged comment that the United States would defend Europe until the last European a not so subtle reminder of these early events? Were the "Yankee go home!" slogans painted on walls in the early Cold War the work of Communists as alleged? Or was it the work of survivors who truly wanted the Americans out? How did a mature

J.P. Coldier or a Jean Roger, react to visiting American tourists in the 1950s and 1960s? These are, in my view, the kinds of questions historians should now be asking about the campaign in Normandy. Was destroying these cities required, as Eisenhower argued, because of “military necessity,”⁷⁴ the right answer? Certainly, understanding the air campaign against French towns and cities is, for those in the English-speaking world, a new perspective on the war.

Notes

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4. Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day: June 6 1944* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Douglas Brinkley, *The Boys of Pointe Du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U. S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006); Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Stephen Darlow, *D-Day Bombers: The Veterans’ Story: RAF Bomber Command and the US Eighth Air Force Support to the Normandy Invasion 1944* (London: Grub Street, 2004); Carlo D’Este, *Decision in Normandy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1994); Gordon A. Harrison, *The European Theater of Operations: Cross-Channel Attack, United States Army in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1951; reprint, U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1993); Russell A. Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004); Richard Hargreaves, *The Germans in Normandy* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire (UK): Pen & Sword, 2006); John Keegan, *Six Armies in Normandy* (New York: Viking Press, 1982); Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959); Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants, the Campaign of France and Germany, 1944-1945*, ed. Louis Morton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). These are just a few of the many great books on the campaign that minimize the effects of the campaign on the French population and its infrastructure.
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6. Richard G. Davis, *Bombing the European Powers* (Maxwell, AFB: Air University Press, 2006), Data Base, and author’s visit in 2007.
7. Lindsey Dodd and Andrew Knapp, “‘How Many Frenchmen Did You Kill?’ British Bombing Policy Towards France (1940-1945),” *Society for the Study of French History* (2008), pp.469-70; Eric Alary, Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon, and Gilles Gauvin, *Les Français Au Quotidien, 1939-1949* (Paris: Perrin, 2006), p.504.
8. Eddy Florentin and Claude Archambault, *Quand Le Alliés Bombardaient La France* (Paris: Perrin, 1997).
9. Martin Blumenson, *The European Theater of Operations: Breakout and Pursuit, United States Army in World War II* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1961; reprint, US Army Center of Military History, 1993), pp.146-7.
10. Estimating casualties is a frustrating enterprise. Even Gordon A. Harrison, author of the United State’s Army’s official history of the D-Day landing, could not get an accurate count. See Harrison, p.330, note 90. French historians, Jean Quellien and Bernard Garnier, under the auspices of an interagency working group, estimate the total losses for these three departments at approximately 14,000, with sixty per cent a result of the aerial bombardment. Jean Quellien and Bernard Garnier, *Les Victimes Civiles Du Calvados Dans La Bataille De Normandie: 1er Mars 1944-31 Décembre 1945* (Caen: Editions-diffusion du Lys, 1995), p.13. Quellien and Garnier, as pointed out by British Scholar Andrew Knapp in a note to the author, “are probably the most reliable figures, based on extremely careful examination of the records of each locality, which sought to eliminate accidental ‘double counting’ whereby a single individual might appear as deceased both in the place where (s)he died and in his/her place of residence.”
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12. Bernard Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic* (London: Hutchinson & Company, 1947), pp.126-27; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1948); Arthur Tedder, *With Prejudice: The War Memoirs of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Tedder, GCB* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966).
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19. Quellien and Garnier, *Les Victimes Civiles Du Calvados*, p.67; Deputy Chief of Staff, *Eighth Air Force, Normandy, Field Order 727*, p.29; Florentin and Archambault, *Quand Le Alliés Bombardaient La France*, 407-13; Hitchcock, *The Bitter Road to Freedom*, pp.29-31.

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29. Control, "AAF Statistical Digest," Field Order 727.
30. Hanocque, "Les Bombardements-Lisieux."
31. D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, pp.140-41; Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, pp.333-335).
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Dr. Stephen A. Bourque is a professor of history at the United States Army's School of Advanced Military Studies. After his military career, he obtained a Ph.D. from Georgia State University, and taught for eight years at California State University-Northridge. He returned to Fort Leavenworth in 2005 and joined the faculty at School of Advanced Military Studies in 2009 where he is the course author for The Evolution of Operational Art. He is the author of *Jayhawk! The VII Corps in the Persian Gulf War 2002*, *The Road to Safwan* (2007), and other publications. Since 2008, he has been studying the Allied bombing campaign against France during the Second World War.