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Heavy Bombers and Civil Affairs

First Canadian Army in France, July-September 1944

Terry Copp and Michelle Fowler

Books and articles about D-Day and the Battle of Normandy continue to appear in an unending stream but a number of important issues remain to be fully explored. This essay examines the role of First Canadian Army and its subordinate formations in two areas that have received little attention: decisions with regard to the use of heavy bombers in support of land operations and aid to the civilian population administered by Civil Affairs (CA) officers. The two issues are intimately linked because the major challenges facing the CA organization were products of the destruction of French towns by the heavy bombers of the RAF/RCAF and the US Army Air Forces. The first part of the paper will show that the Canadian government – by its own choice – had no say in Allied strategic planning in general, and bombing policy in particular. Thus it fell to Lieutenant-General H.D.G. Crerar, commander of the First Canadian Army in Northwest Europe, to apply Allied bombing capacity in support of his forces, the subject of

Abstract: The liberation of France in 1944 came at a high cost to the local populations who were caught up in the struggle for their freedom. The Allies' decision to use heavy bombers in support of land operations was made out of military necessity but it had the terrible consequence of killing and wounding large numbers of French civilians. To deal with the dislocation of war all large Allied army formations possessed Civil Affairs detachments which sought to alleviate the impact of battle on the civilian populations by helping to provide the basic necessities of life including clean water, food, shelter as well as providing security and governance where needed. In the towns of Caen, Le Havre, Boulogne and Calais, as well as others liberated by First Canadian Army and its subordinate formations, the Civil Affairs detachments were largely dealing with the aftermath of the bombing by Allied aircraft.

the following part of the paper. The remainder of the piece relates how the Civil Affairs organization of First Canadian Army organized relief for civilian populations in areas targeted by the heavy bombers.

Throughout the Second World War the government of Canada systematically avoided any attempt to become involved in the strategic direction of the war. Prime Minister Mackenzie King and his principal

advisor, O.D. Skelton, were determined to maintain Canadian independence by rejecting any suggestion that they should follow Robert Borden's example of seeking a voice in Commonwealth foreign and defence policy. The consequences of this policy were outlined in a memorandum written by Lester B. Pearson, then the Official Secretary in the Office of the Canadian High Commission in London, who noted that, "so far as policy and planning in this war are concerned, our status is little better than that of a colony." Our role, he concluded, was to supply soldiers and pilots who will be told where and when to fight "as a result of deliberations in which we have had no part...I dislike this role of unpaid Hessians."¹

Pearson's memo and similar protests from other diplomats were ignored in Ottawa where the Prime Minister rejected all attempts to re-create the Imperial War Cabinet instituted by Lloyd George in 1917. For King such proposals meant "responsibility without power" and he preferred a policy that avoided both.² It was therefore not surprising that Canada was neither informed nor consulted on the terms of the Atlantic Charter in 1941 and was invited to participate in photo ops – not discussions – at the two Quebec

Opposite: A bulldozer clears rubble from the streets of Caen on 10 July 1944 shortly after the liberation of the city. Most of the civilian casualties as well as the damage was caused by Allied bombers.



Prime Minister Mackenzie King (left) and his principal advisor, O.D. Skelton (right), were determined to maintain Canadian independence by rejecting any voice in Commonwealth foreign and defence policy. The two men, along with King's sister, Jennie Lay, visit Kingsmere, King's summer home in the Gatineau Hills of Quebec, in July 1923.

Conferences. One result was to place the burden of upholding the status of the Canadian military as the national service of a sovereign state and not just subordinate components of Allied formations under British and American command.

As preparations for the invasion of France, Operation "Overlord," were finalized, Canadian land, air, and naval forces were integrated into British command structures. Both the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force would continue to serve in this manner but the decision to form First Canadian Army in 1943 reinforced the Canadian government's policy of requiring the Canadian Army commander to formally certify that "Overlord" and all subsequent plans were "feasible operations of war."³ Even if the government had no desire to be committed by participation in Allied military planning it had a fundamental responsibility to ensure that large bodies of Canadian citizen soldiers were not sacrificed, unwittingly or not, in unduly risky operations of which Canadian authorities had less than complete knowledge.

The existence of First Canadian Army in the Allied order of battle raised other questions which many wished to avoid. An army-sized formation is made up of two or more corps which in turn normally consists of two or more divisions. Large numbers of ancillary troops are attached at both the corps and army level along with medium artillery regiments, engineers, and much else including Civil Aid detachments. Under ordinary circumstances an Army has considerable latitude to plan and carry out operations under a directive from the Army Group commander. After General Bernard Law Montgomery was appointed to command the Anglo-Canadian 21st Army Group neither Lieutenant-General Sir Miles Dempsey (Second British Army) nor Lieutenant-General H.D.G. Crerar (First Canadian Army) were allowed much room for independent action. Montgomery controlled as many aspects of operations as he could by bypassing both Army headquarters to deal directly with Corps commanders when it suited him.⁴

Montgomery had other reasons for wishing to limit the independence

of First Canadian Army. He had little confidence in Crerar and would have preferred to deal with Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, whom he regarded as the only competent senior Canadian officer and, equally important, the only one who would not play the Canadian card if a dispute arose. Crerar, he correctly feared, would wish to be seen as the leader of Canada's national army, an aspiration complicated by the fact that only one of the two Corps in his Army was Canadian. Montgomery repeatedly postponed activating First Canadian Army Headquarters and initially sought to limit Crerar's responsibilities. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke, understood Montgomery's views but he noted:

I want you to make the best possible use of Crerar, he must be retained in Command of the Canadian Army... You can keep his Army small and give him the less important role, and you will have to teach him. We had the same trouble in the last war and had to replace Byng by Currie although the latter was a very medium commander.⁵

Brooke's comment about Byng and Currie is both inaccurate and typical of the condescending attitude of senior British officers. Crerar would have to learn to deal with this as best he could. While waiting for Montgomery to activate First Canadian Army, a small headquarters was established and the Civil Affairs sections of both 2nd Canadian Corps and First Canadian Army began their work. Every Army and Corps in the Allied sector was mandated to assume responsibility for refugees, relief supplies, medical assistance, and other functions during periods of active operations in their formation's sector.⁶

Ideally, co-operative arrangements with local authorities on these and other key questions

such as currency and public finance should have been in place, but American hostility towards French leader Charles de Gaulle meant that no agreement existed when the Allies landed in France. Fortunately, de Gaulle took matters into his own hands, reaching Normandy on 14 June and claiming authority for his National Committee of Liberation. He appointed a close associate, François Coulet, as Civil Commissioner and Colonel P. de Chevigne as Military Commander for Normandy. Although full recognition of de Gaulle and his provisional government was postponed until

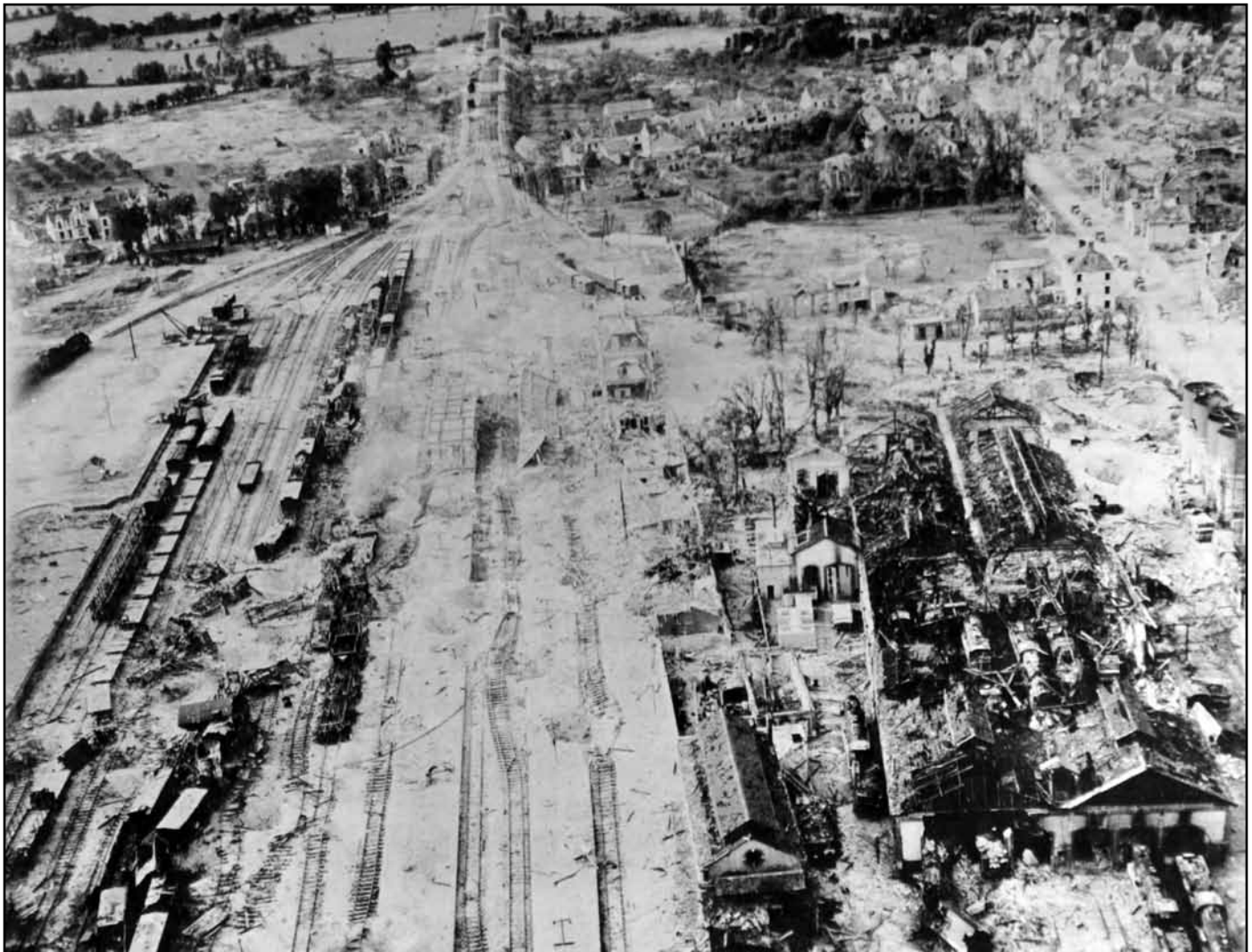
October 1944, British and Canadian Civil Affairs officers worked with Coulet and his nominees without difficulty.⁷

Montgomery activated 2nd Canadian Corps on 11 July after 2nd Canadian Infantry Division arrived in France. The Corps remained under British command as part of 2nd Army until the end of July, taking over the city of Caen and responsibility for civil affairs in a city devastated by Allied bombing. The issue of civilian casualties from air raids on France has attracted considerable attention from historians in recent years. The publication of Eddy Florentin's 1997

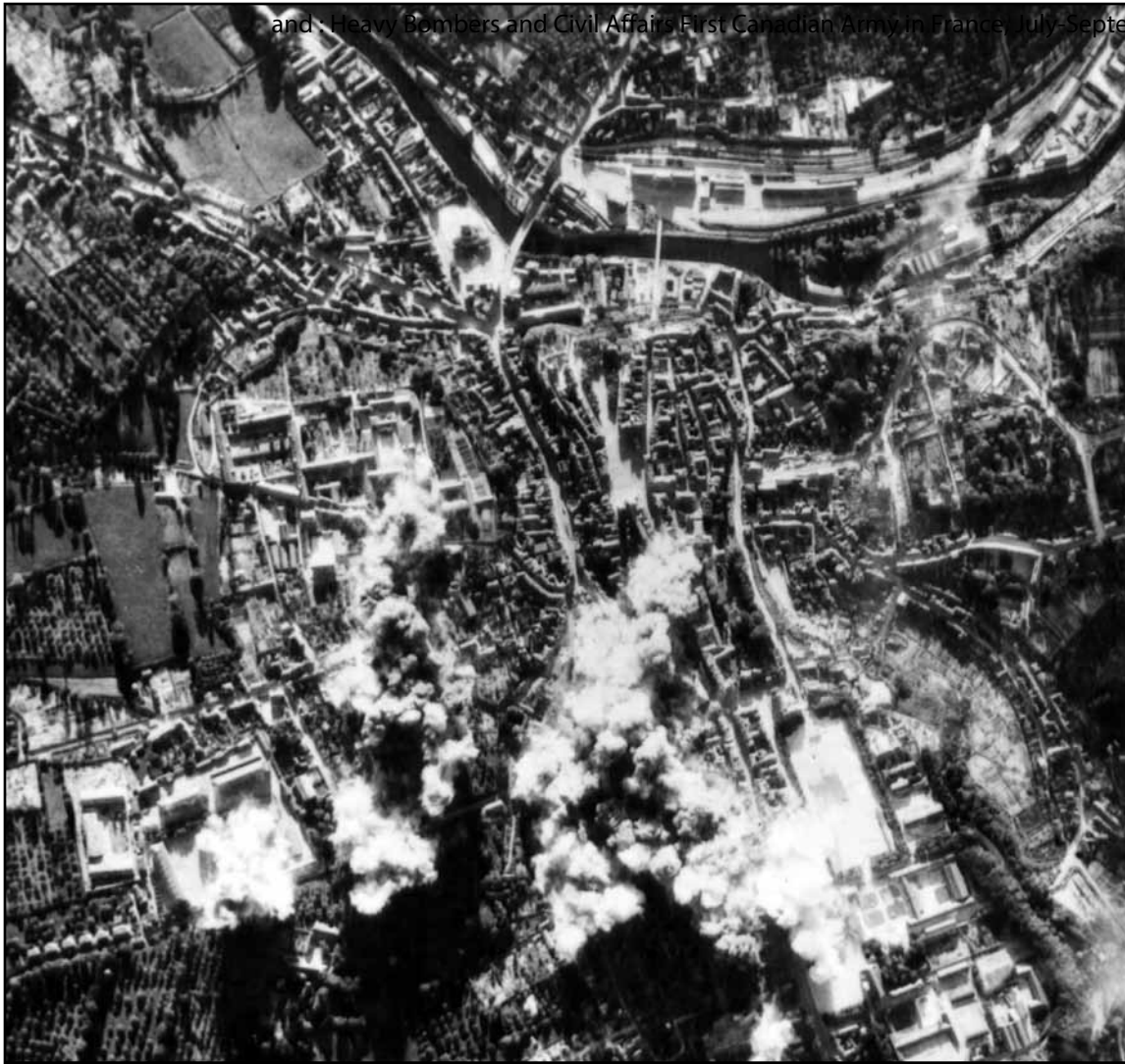
book, *Quand les alliés bombardaient la France 1940-1945* with its estimate of 60,000 French fatalities from bombing has led researchers to review the debate over Allied bombing policy and to produce important case studies.⁸

In 1944, attacks on the French rail system as part of the "Transportation Plan" inflicted considerable collateral damage to town and cities and their French inhabitants. At the time, the policy was explained in terms of preventing German reinforcements and supplies from reaching the battle area. Churchill's protests led to a decision to abort the operation

Allied bombers regularly attacked transportation targets in French towns and cities in the days and weeks before D-Day as a way of preventing the movement of German supplies and reinforcements to the front. This photo of Argentan shows how the railway marshalling yard and engine sheds have been effectively destroyed by aerial bombing, but there has also been significant damage to the residential areas of the town.



US Air Force Photo AC53626



Left: St. Lô was heavily targeted by Allied bombers in June 1944 in an effort to interdict German movements towards the battle area. However, it is clear from this air photo of a raid in progress that along with bridges, roads, railways and other transportation targets, significant residential areas of the town were also hit.

Opposite: This photo shows the destruction of St. Lô following its liberation by US Forces in late July 1944.

if civilian deaths exceeded 10,000. No such reservations were in place for raids in direct support of the D-Day landings and the destruction of towns like Lisieux and St. Lô on the eve of the invasion was accepted as an operational necessity.⁹ Caen had also been bombed on D-Day and afterwards, but these events were soon overshadowed by the decision to use the heavy bombers to support the land battle and break the stalemate in front of Caen. Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris accepted Montgomery's request to employ Bomber Command in Operation Charnwood, the assault on Caen, 8 July 1944, but on his own terms. For Charnwood Harris insisted on a "bomb line" 6,000 yards from the nearest Allied troops and selected four map squares (four square kilometers) in the northeast section of Caen, well beyond the

ring of fortified villages the British and Canadian troops would have to overcome. The bombing added exceptionally to the destruction that rendered 80 percent of the city's housing inhabitable and killed more than 2,000 civilians.¹⁰ The soldiers waiting to begin their advance were greatly impressed with this display of raw power but none of the enemy defensive positions were struck.

F.S.V. Donnison, the official British historian for civil affairs and military government, described the fall of Caen on 9 July 1944, "as the most formidable civil affairs task yet encountered,"¹¹ emphasized by the arrival in town of the first CA detachment in the early afternoon of 9 July. The massive Allied bombardment of Caen presented CA with many challenges. The immediate need to evacuate 9,700 people, including upwards of 800

wounded, proved to be a daunting task, further complicated by the irony, presumably not lost on the population of Caen, that the same forces which had brought down such destruction on their town were now sending in CA teams to prevent unrest. The official history describes the Senior Civil Affairs Officer (SCAO) in Caen, Colonel Charles Milne Usher, attached to a detachment under the command of Second British Army, as being consumed by guilt and running "here there and everywhere in his kilt" to calm the population.¹² The 52-year-old former captain of the Scottish rugby side, taken prisoner at the Battle of Mons during the Great War, educated at Royal Military College (Sandhurst), and fluent in French, was not an atypical CA officer.¹³

The immediate needs in Caen were dealt with by the formation



of joint CA and French committees, which also worked together to plan for rehabilitation. Although there was considerable concern about the overzealous behaviour of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), it was widely recognized that French liaison officers, under the direct control of the French civil authority, provided reliable mediators between local officials and army CA. Although unexpected, rapid intervention by the local authorities to advance the welfare of French citizens set a precedent for CA in France for the remainder of the war.

Reports from Civil Affairs officers provided a detailed description of the "agony of Caen" which ascertained that:

...most of the streets were so badly cratered or blocked with debris that they were impassable; that shortage of water was acute and that it was suspected that available supplies were contaminated; that the sewage disposal system had failed; that there was neither

electricity or gas; that of a normal population of 65,000 the estimated number remaining was between 20,000 and 25,000, of whom 13,000 homeless were concentrated in three public buildings, the Lycée Malherbe, the Eglise St. Etienne and the Hospice du Bon Sauveur... One prison was destroyed and the prison staff had disappeared; the

other prison was badly damaged; the courts were partially destroyed; the fire and civil defence services were without water and lacked fire-fighting equipment...

Words fail to describe the anguish of Caen. It had indeed paid a fearful price for its liberation. However, the civilian morale



Library and Archives Canada PA-138268

French rescue workers removing bodies from destroyed buildings following an air raid, Caen, 10 July 1944.



This air photo taken on 13 June 1944 shows that the centre of Caen has been largely destroyed by Allied bomber attacks prior to the heavy attacks carried out as part of Operation Charnwood on the night of 8 July 1944.

was high even through most inhabitants could not understand the reason for the severe Allied bombardment of the city. A skeleton civilian administration was available. The refugees were well organized and well cared for. Arrangements for the care of civilian casualties were good despite the customary shortage of medical supplies. Health was extremely good; 20 cases of typhoid and four cases of diphtheria were the only known cases of epidemic disease. Although bread was in short supply and there were certain other deficiencies, food was adequate.

By the evening of the 10th, Civil Affairs rations for 20,000 persons, supplies of soap, anti-louse powder, creosote and chloride of lime had reached the town.

Water points had been provided for both military and civilian use. Civil labour had been directed to assist the bulldozers in clearing the principal streets so as to permit military traffic. It had been ascertained that damage to water mains was not severe and that if enough pumps were obtained from the military sources the water supply could be restored. Arrangements were made to supply these pumps.¹⁴

This was the situation facing the Civil Affairs officers of 2nd Canadian Corps on 11 July when the city came under Canadian control. With the Orne River in the centre of the urbanized area as the front line, the most pressing tasks were to bury the dead, clear roads, and remove refugees who now suffered

additional collateral damage from German artillery fire. "Within a week over 9,700 refugees had been evacuated including 800 wounded and many hundreds sick and infirm people."¹⁵ Joint French and Canadian committees were established to oversee this and other urgent matters. The Canadian Civil Affairs experience in Caen established a template for co-operation with French authorities which proved invaluable throughout the summer. When the Canadians advanced towards Falaise in August, the refugee problem continued to challenge CA officers as thousands of civilians had fled south seeking refuge in what was to become the battle zone between Caen and Falaise.

First Canadian Army was finally made operational on 23 July. Brigadier W.B. Wedd, the Senior Civil Affairs Officer at Crerar's headquarters, worked easily with his French counterpart Lieutenant-Colonel P.H. Pierrené, delegating authority to "spearhead detachments" and establishing a special section for refugees.¹⁶ Canadian Army Headquarters played no part in the decisions to bomb Caen or its industrial suburbs, but Crerar and his senior advisors were determined to use the "heavies" to break the German defences south of the city. Operation Totalize began on the night of 7 August when 641 bombers targeted villages that were part of an interlocking defensive position manned by soldiers of two German divisions. Almost all civilians had been evacuated by the Germans and most of the bombs fell in open fields, but the bombing was seen as an important contribution to the success of the first phase of Totalize so the plan to employ the Eighth Air Force

against a second line of defences went ahead. All but 24 of the 292 American aircraft bombed accurately but short bombing killed 65 Canadian and Polish soldiers while injuring 250 more.¹⁷

Despite this, Crerar insisted on a further bombing effort in support of Tractable, the second attempt to reach Falaise. This time 77 of the 811 bombers, including aircraft from RCAF squadrons, misidentified their targets and wrecked havoc among troops in the rear areas. More than 150 Allied soldiers were killed and 241 wounded in four separate incidents.¹⁸ This second tragic event might have put an end to the use of heavy bombers on the battlefield were it not for the intervention of General Crerar. Immediately after "Tractable" he wrote to Air Marshal Harris thanking him for his willing co-operation stating that he remained "a very strong advocate of the rise of heavy bombers in closely integrated support of the army."¹⁹ Harris, who clearly would have preferred to end

such operations, was persuaded to continue supporting First Canadian Army.

Civil Affairs officers dealt with the aftermath of the August battles that resulted in "a great deal of damage to civilian property."²⁰ The population had largely been evicted by the Germans and had found shelter in mines, quarries, and open fields. As the spearhead detachments advanced behind the frontline:

...French Liaison officers proved of the greatest value. Between Caen and Falaise, many villages were razed to the ground and farm buildings... were in ruins. Livestock were left unattended and rounding them up placed an additional burden on the spearhead detachments who, in the depopulated areas, were sometimes forced to do the work themselves. Carcasses of horses and cattle littered the fields and roadsides...Falaise fell on 17 Aug. It was a smoking shell of a town.²¹

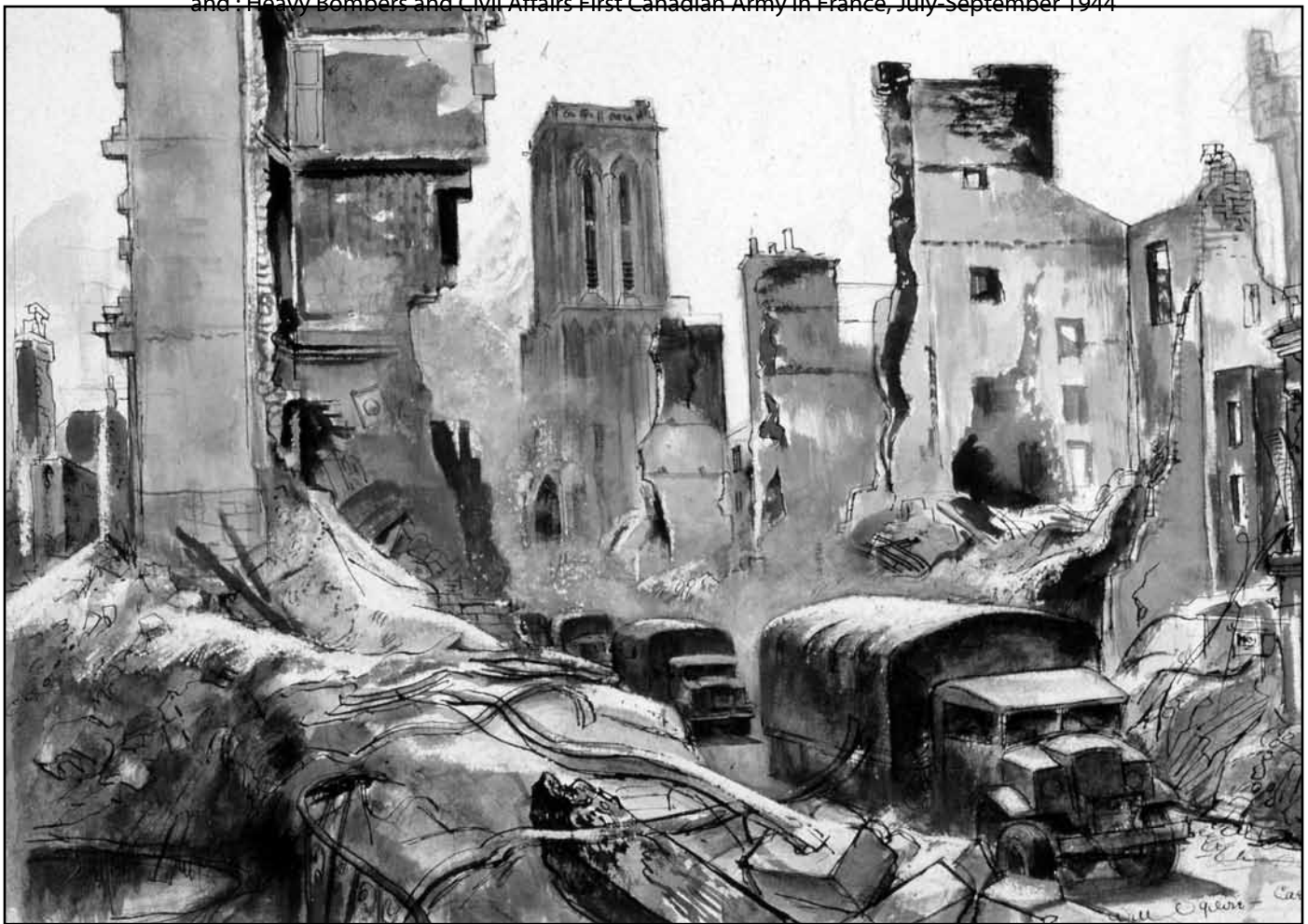
The refugee detachments assigned to 2nd Canadian Corps was responsible for the initial care of the displaced, providing food, water, and medical assistance. As the army advanced towards the Seine River, "Friends Ambulance units, French enlisted personnel and members of the Corps Feminin (Volontaires Françaises)" took over responsibility.²²

Crerar's headquarters was directly responsible for the operational decisions to employ heavy bombers on the battlefield and for Civil Affairs in the Caen-Falaise plain. On the Army's left flank a very different situation developed. Lieutenant-General Sir John Crocker and his staff officers at 1st British Corps headquarters resented their subordination to Crerar and their exclusion from a major operational role.²³ Crocker, an experienced professional, had commanded his corps in the D-Day landings and planned Charnwood, the battle for Caen, but after 9 July the corps'

Two French women walk through the ruined streets of Falaise, 17 August 1944.



Library and Archives Canada PA-132820



Will Ogilvie – Convoy in Caen.

task was simply to protect the left flank and conform to the Canadian advance.

There was no reason to employ air power in support of such operations and most of the towns between the Dives and Seine Rivers were liberated without major destruction or civilian losses. The corps' Civil Affairs detachment did not have to deal with the aftermath of the bombing of Caen and this may have contributed to their approach to planning Operation Astonia, the battle for Le Havre. Montgomery's directive of 20 August emphasized the need "to secure the port of Havre very early" as the harbour and railways "will be required for the maintenance of the armies." Crocker, according to his biographer, welcomed Operation Astonia, "as the sort of semi-independent operation"

that allowed him to be free of Canadian Army control.²⁴ His staff drew upon intelligence from the Army Air Photo Interpretation Section but Crerar was content to send his senior staff officer, Brigadier Churchill Mann, to the planning conference. Mann took notes but did not intervene. Crocker was also authorized to communicate directly with 84 Group, 2nd Tactical Air Force, and RAF Bomber Command - normally Army-level responsibilities.²⁵

Operation Astonia has become the most controversial battle fought by 21 Army Group in France because Crocker's plans included the employment of heavy bombers without any apparent concern for civilian casualties. The most recent study of the tragedy notes that "Le Havre took a greater tonnage of bombs in September 1944 (though

with fewer incendiaries) than Hamburg in July 1943...the human toll of the September bombings was 1536 dead and 517 missing... Le Havre ended the war ranked as France's most damaged city, with an estimated 82% rate of destruction."²⁶

No good explanation has been offered for the decision to target sections of the old city which were not related to the coastal gun batteries or the forward defences but Crocker may have hoped to shock the German garrison into surrender by a demonstration of raw power. Arrangements to target the city on 5 September included a follow-up leaflet raid urging German troops to surrender. Crocker did meet with the German garrison commander before the bombing to explain the scale of the Allied attack. The battleship *Warspite*, RAF bombers, and two

full divisions supported by two armoured brigades, the specialized armour of 79th Armoured Division and the "Kangaroos" of 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel regiment were preparing an assault.²⁷ Colonel Eberhard Wildermath refused to surrender or to evacuate civilians and on the afternoon of 5 September, 348 aircraft attacked the city with 1,880 tons of bombs. A second attack on the night of 6-7 September and a third on 8 September brought the total to 4,000 tons dropped on the city before the ground attack with heavy bomber support on the outer defences began.²⁸

Enemy resistance ended in less than 48 hours with mass surrender of more than 11,000 German troops. Crocker offered his thanks to Air Marshal Harris in a note praising "the absolute accuracy of bombing and timing on every occasion"²⁹ and General Crerar, anxious to have Harris' support in the capture of Boulogne and Calais, sent a congratulatory message to him a few days later. These messages led Harris, or his public affairs officers, to send Flight Lieutenant R.F. Delderfield to write a story on this successful example of close support of army operations.

Delderfield, who would become one of Britain's leading postwar novelists, was shocked by what he found. The Civil Affairs officer Delderfield consulted "stated bluntly that...an entire residential area of the town had been razed to the ground" in the raid of 5 September and "other residential areas were hit on successive days."³⁰ Delderfield later met with French civilian officials and British army officers, the latter praising the accuracy and effect

of the bombing that proceeded the actual attack. He returned to Bomber Command and produced an article on "the effect of our bombers on the outskirts and docks" plus a confidential report which was restricted to senior officers of Bomber Command.³¹ Delderfield's report, which influenced Harris to oppose a similar attack on Flushing in October and to resist further efforts to employ his bombers against targets in occupied Europe, was not a factor in the very different plans developed for Operation "Wellhit," the attack on Boulogne.

While 1st British Corps was preparing for the assault on Le Havre, 2nd Canadian Corps' armoured divisions raced north into Belgium. The corps' infantry divisions, however, were assigned the much less glamorous task of clearing the enemy from the Channel Ports: Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division reached the outskirts of Boulogne and Calais on 5 September and 2nd Division left Dieppe, liberated

without bombing or a battle, for Dunkirk the same day.

The Channel Ports were heavily fortified for all around defence presenting a formidable challenge, but the newly promoted Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery was impatient. His conflict with Supreme Commander General Eisenhower over the "single thrust" versus "broad front" strategy had not yet been resolved and he told General Crerar that with "one good Pas de Calais port," additional transport and an increased airlift he could sustain the advance to the Ruhr that he hoped to accomplish using the Allied Airborne Army in what became Operation "Market Garden."³² Crerar told Montgomery that the Canadians were going "to button things up properly, taking a little more time if necessary, in order to assure a decisive assault."³³ Canadian caution was influenced by the fact that Major-General Dan Spry's 3rd Canadian Infantry Division was to attack Boulogne with two infantry brigades, not the two divisions that were used

An RAF Halifax bombs Le Havre on 10 September 1944.



LCMSDS Air Photo Collection

at Le Havre. Spry's other brigade was probing the Calais defences.

Civil Affairs planning for operations in Boulogne began in earnest on 7 September, when the CA staff at 2nd Canadian Corps moved to the town of Colembert about 16 kilometres east of Boulogne. A detachment organized specifically to deal with refugees, and augmented by *Volontaires Francaise*, moved into the vicinity.³⁴ Working closely with Lieutenant-Colonel Ernest Coté, 3rd Canadian Division's Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General (AA & QMG), the staff at CA, 2nd Canadian Corps developed plans for both Boulogne and Calais. Lieutenant-Colonel Coté was born in Edmonton

in 1903. He was educated at College St. François Xavier and the University of Alberta. Bilingual but very much a Franco-Albertan, Coté worked for the French language service of Radio Canada until 1939 when he joined the Royal 22e Régiment. Appointed AA & QMG 3rd Canadian Division in early 1943 he was involved in planning the administrative and logistical aspects of the division's role in Operation "Overlord." After the war Coté served in a number of diplomatic posts including Ambassador to Finland.³⁵

Of immediate concern to Coté and the CA officers were fears of a security leak which precipitated the evacuation of a ring of villages around

Boulogne. As a result, CA staff and members of the 219 CA Refugee (R) detachment, working in conjunction with the mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer, his staff and members of the *Secours National*, developed an evacuation plan, and presented it to 3rd Canadian Division.³⁶ The scheme envisioned close cooperation between several French civil representatives including the mayors of neighbouring municipalities, the resources of the *Secours National* and CA. The plan called for the direction of the population to evacuation zone collection points, followed by processing by a CA officer, members of the gendarme and a representative of the *Secours Nationale*. At that time, the refugees became the responsibility of French civil authorities. Food would come from CA rations and captured German foodstuffs. The mayor of Montreuil and a CA officer selected a number of evacuees to return to their respective municipalities to act as security guards. At this point, the 219 (R) CA detachment received instructions that the welfare of refugees was the sole responsibility of French authorities, but the unit should be at the mayor's disposal and meet with civil authorities daily to keep abreast of the situation. This prompted the CA diarist to claim, "it is a first-rate example of the French looking after themselves and we assisted them."³⁷

A much more difficult task soon confronted CA and the French authorities when the German garrison commander Lieutenant-General Ferdinand Heim ordered the evacuation of the civilian population. More than 8,000 civilians left the city. Captain J.S. Martin, 3rd Division's Historical Officer, described the stream of refugees:

they glanced at our uniforms and murmured "Canadiens." Moving slowly their brightly coloured clothes in sharp contrast to their unhappy



expressions, these people bore enormous burdens... Small dogs, some in baskets and some peering from brief-cases and others straining eagerly at leashes were plentiful. Few if any of these people realized that food, shelter, and transport is to be provided for them...³⁸

Several thousand civilians had refused the order to evacuate the city. When a French Liaison Officer (LO) provided Lieutenant-Colonel Coté with information suggesting an acute food and medical supply shortage, especially for children, Coté arranged to have the CA spearhead detachment enter Boulogne with the lead troops as a way of informing civil authorities that food and medical support would be available to them on the day of liberation.³⁹ An additional CA detachment was to enter Boulogne to look after non-welfare work. Coté insisted on meeting with the individual CA detachments to personally explain the division's expectations, suggesting the importance of this exercise from both a humanitarian and goodwill perspective. Since CA detachments travelled with minimum rations and not sufficient equipment to cook for everyone, suggestions arose that branches of the Secours National should form teams to cook and serve food. The plan called for civilian teams, transport and the 219 CA (R) detachment to withdraw from Boulogne after addressing immediate concerns there and go into reserve for use in Calais; one CA detachment would remain as the only CA presence left in Boulogne. By 17 September, reports suggested that 3,000 refugees from Boulogne were staying in the surrounding communes, cared for by local authorities, using 9,000 rations per week from the army, in addition to their own stocks.⁴⁰

Operation "Wellhit" began on 17 September when Bomber Command aircraft struck at the outer ring of defences. Almost 800

aircraft obeyed the instructions of an RAF group captain "who was in radio communication with master bomber overhead."⁴¹ While some "creepback" inevitably occurred, the bombing patterns were tight and accurately placed. When prisoners were interrogated they reported that while little damage to the concrete defences was done, morale was strongly affected.⁴² The battle for Boulogne lasted for six days and considerable damage to the city was done by artillery and the tactical air force but civilian casualties were limited.

Although the evacuation and refugee situation in the Channel Ports was by far the largest CA concern, CA staff found themselves working with French authorities on other non-refugee matters every day. Much of the work took place in the communes and towns surrounding Boulogne, and in addition to Montreuil, CA was active in Samer, St. Omer and Desvres. By 12 September, 2nd Canadian Corps CA, working with their attached French LO, Commandant Mengin, established civilian medical teams as well as police and work teams selected from members of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI). Meanwhile 150 French trucks were awaiting instructions to take food into the besieged city. It is little wonder the 2nd Canadian Corps CA diarist was deeply impressed with the French volunteers: "they are prepared to look after very large numbers and throw themselves into the task of organizing their reception with enthusiasm and little reservation."⁴³ Displaced persons were also an issue. While front line troops battled for Boulogne, CA and local French authorities spent much of the week in which Boulogne was being liberated dealing with displaced Belgians in Desvres; a colony of 100 Jews in Samer that had survived a concentration camp arrived alongside Polish persons seeking to join Polish forces. Other Poles remained captive

in an FFI prison. Canadian CA officers specializing in public safety and a Canadian officer fluent in Polish assigned to the prison for vetting purposes had to distinguish between Red Poles loyal to the USSR, and Blue Poles loyal to the London government.⁴⁴

Once in Boulogne, CA called on the FFI to assist in some mopping up operations and to act as an auxiliary police force. Close cooperation with the resistance group proved to be "mostly useful to CA and the army,"⁴⁵ but working with resistance groups and other French civil authorities was not without its challenges for First Canadian Army. French LOs had their hands full in their role as intermediaries. Events challenged civil-military cooperation, such as the discovery of a German weapons cache in Boulogne. More than 50 French Naval firemen with unclear credentials announced they were in Boulogne to remove all German weapons. Coté immediately ordered the weapons' destruction. Questions arose about the viability of supplying some of the weapons to FFI personnel, but that met resistance from some French officials. With disagreement on all sides, the French LOs tried their best to come up with a compromise. Lieutenant-Colonel Coté expressed dismay that French LOs spent far too much time on matters such as these which, in his opinion, were clearly under divisional control.⁴⁶ But, in the spirit of cooperation, staff at 2nd Canadian Corps reminded Division that the liaison officers "rendered excellent service in the past, they had a duty to both 21st Army Group and their government and it was not possible to order them not to concern themselves with French matters."⁴⁷ Nor did Commandant Mengin complain about working with First Canadian Army despite the loss due to theft of his car and equipment by two Canadian soldiers.⁴⁸ Instead, Mengin went about his business assessing the



Above: The original Canadian Army Overseas Photo caption for this image read: "CANADIANS FEED CHILD REFUGEES - These hungry children, refugees from Dunkirk, are being fed by Canadians who provided soup, vegetables, bread and meat. Food for these youngsters was given top priority when Canadians liberated their city."

Below: French civilians flee the pending Allied attack on Dunkirk.



situation in Boulogne, and assigning local government officials to their new posts in the newly liberated city. Mengin then rejoined CA and 3rd Canadian Division to plan the Calais operation. Only six days earlier, Mengin had prevented a FFI group in Ardres from attacking a canal bridge near Calais held by Germans, emphasizing that FFI should only do such operations under instruction from First Canadian Army. Several incidents proved frustrating, but failed to quash the cooperative nature of civil-military relations. However, the First Canadian Army war diarist did make note that a strong central civil authority was of great importance as "over-zealous activities of resistance groups in France continue."⁴⁹

On 12 September the headquarters of 2nd Canadian Corps CA moved to Landrethun-lès-Ardres, approximately 15 kilometers southeast of Calais. Even based from this location, Boulogne was still more important, but plans for Calais pushed forward, using the Boulogne CA plan as a model. Lieutenant-Colonel Côté insisted on some changes to the CA plan. Unhappy with the 219th Detachment's indecisiveness on the distribution of foodstuffs, Côté chose other CA detachments to take on the responsibility for refugees in the evacuation of Calais and supervised the entire CA operation himself. By 21 September, the 318 CA detachment was at Ardres and had at its disposal Commandant Mengin and *Volontaires Françaises* for the Calais operation.

The collapse of enemy resistance in Boulogne allowed Civil Aid detachments to open medical facilities, soup kitchens and waterpoints. Within days, many refugees returned and the city was alive again on the road to recovery. British Army engineers of a Port Construction and Repair Group began work the next day as the Canadians left to get ready for another siege, Operation Undergo

– the attack on Calais and Cap Gris Nez.⁵⁰

The approaches to Calais provided a sharp contrast to the hills and forests of the Boulonnais region. The countryside was open and flat, crisscrossed with canals and drainage ditches. The 36-kilometre long Calais-Cap Gris Nez sector of the Atlantic Wall contained six major fortified zones including new concrete defences and strengthened Vauban fortresses from previous wars. Pressure from Montgomery who wanted the Canadians to begin operations to clear the approaches to Antwerp meant that the troops who fought at Boulogne had no time for rest. On 25 September, both 7th and 8th Brigades began to advance as the last of the heavy bombers struck the outer defences. Reports of the limited effect of bombing on the defences of Boulogne led to an exceptionally large bomber mission with over 900 aircraft committed to the attack. Weather conditions forced two-thirds of the crews to abort their attack.⁵¹

Neither bombs nor shells did much material damage and the battle for Calais required the same deliberate infantry-armour tactics employed at Boulogne. Flame throwers again proved their worth by helping to clear houses, slit-trenches, and especially pill boxes. The first burst of flame invariably led to white flags so the key was getting the vulnerable weapons into position.

The civilian population of Calais, estimated at 20,000, had according to German sources refused to evacuate the city in the two weeks before the assault began. On the afternoon of 28 September, word that the "German Commander was about ready to surrender" reached Civil Affairs staff and General Spry agreed to suspend operations while a meeting was arranged. Lieutenant-Colonel Ludwig Schroeder was stalling for time but an agreement was reached on a 24-hour truce to allow the civilians, now anxious to leave, to

abandon the city. More than 12,000 refugees fled Calais during the truce. Civil Affairs detachments working closely with "local and sous-prefectural authorities"⁵² managed the exodus without serious incident.

On 30 September, 3rd Canadian Division was ordered to move north into Belgium to prepare for an assault crossing of the Leopold Canal part of the battle to clear the approaches to Antwerp. The Canadian Civil Aid Detachments moved with their formations and within 48 hours the Canadian role in the liberation of France was over. There were no ceremonies to mark the moment and no subsequent attempts to tell the story of their interaction with French civilian authority.

It is difficult to ascertain with any authority the failure to tell the story of Canadian civil affairs in Northwest Europe. Certainly there was a history written by Major A.K. Reid, of the Historical Section, but it remained a Canadian Military HQ report, it was not included in C.P. Stacey's official history and was only briefly referenced in F.S.V. Donnison's official volume on civil affairs in Northwest Europe. Concerns did arise that Reid's narrative, based on the experiences of three formations, excluded much of the CA work done in the European theatre. Major A.S. O'Hara, a Canadian civil affairs officer, expressed these concerns to Reid. "If your history confines itself to First Canadian Army, 2nd Canadian Corps and 1st British Corps it will be rather incomplete." It would exclude "those (officers) attached to 2nd Army and 30 Corps. In addition, probably all the outstanding rehabilitative CA work was done by detachments and individuals operating under L of C. [Line of Communications]"⁵³ Also, civil affairs archival documents reveal that Major Arthur Reid, based at the historical section in London after the war, considered himself to be an amateur playwright, taken by the London theatre scene, possibly

at the expense of the Canadian CA narrative. Civil Affairs files reveal the following quote from Major A.K. Reid on 13 November 1945, "This job seems to be taking much longer than I had anticipated and I do not know when I will be finished. I will not really mind staying in England until next March or so as I have just sold the option on a play – written in 1938 – which is supposed to be coming on at the Criterion Theatre about then. And, of course, I want to be around when rehearsals start so that my immortal script is not too mutilated!"⁵⁴ Major Reid's last correspondence concerning the Canadian CA narrative occurred in January 1947 where he wrote that he was "now a civilian and expect to be writing film dialogues for Arthur J. Rank."⁵⁵

Notes

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3. Paul Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General: A Biography of General H.D.G. Crerar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) pp.248-249.
4. Stephen Hart, *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2007).
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6. C.A. Dennison, *Civil Affairs and Military Government – Central Organization and Planning* (London: HMSO, 1966).
7. A.K. Reid, *Canadian Participation in Civil Affairs/Military Government, Part III: France, General Historical Survey, July-October 1944*, Historical Section, Canadian Military Headquarters, 1946, Report No.149, p.2.
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11. F.S.V. Donnison, *Civil Affairs and Military Government Northwest Europe 1944-1946* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1961) p.86.
12. Donnison, *Civil Affairs and Military Government Northwest Europe*, p.86.
13. "Col. Charles Milne USHER D.S.O., O.B.E., Hon. M.A. (Edin)," <<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~usher/ushersct/5540.htm>>, accessed 22 October 2011.
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15. Reid, *Canadian Participation in Civil Affairs/Military Government*, p.9.
16. Reid, *Canadian Participation in Civil Affairs/Military Government*, p.3.
17. Copp, *Montgomery's Scientists*, p.95; C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Own Printer, 1960), p.223.
18. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.243.
19. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.245.
20. Reid, *Canadian Participation in Civil Affairs/Military Government*, p.12.
21. Reid, *Canadian Participation in Civil Affairs/Military Government*, p.12.
22. Reid, *Canadian Participation in Civil Affairs/Military Government*, p.12.
23. Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General*, pp.284-287.
24. Douglas E. Delaney, *Corps Commanders: Five British and Canadian Generals at War, 1939-1945* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), p.160.
25. Delaney, *Corps Commanders*, p.162. See also 2nd Canadian Corps Intelligence Summary No. 57, "Intelligence Before Le Havre," Library and Archives Canada [LAC] RG 24, vol.13, p.712.
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27. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.334.
28. Knapp, "The Destruction and Liberation of Le Havre in Modern Memory," p.485.
29. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.335.
30. R.F. Delderfield, "Confidential Report on the Recent Bombing of Le Havre," The National Archives (UK), AIR 20/15840. Note: This report was reprinted in *Canadian Military History* 20, no.4 (Autumn 2011), pp.69-74.
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33. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.337.
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35. See E.A. Coté, *Réminiscences et Souvenirs* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2005).
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37. War Diary, Headquarters 2nd Canadian Corps Civil Affairs, September 1944, LAC RG 24, vol.16633, App.4.
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39. War Diary, Headquarters 2nd Canadian Corps Civil Affairs, September 1944, App.4.
40. War Diary, Headquarters 2nd Canadian Corps Civil Affairs, September 1944, App.5.
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42. Copp, *Montgomery's Scientists*, p.112.
43. War Diary, Headquarters 2nd Canadian Corps Civil Affairs, September 1944, App.5.
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47. War Diary, Headquarters 2nd Canadian Corps Civil Affairs, 20 September 1944.
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52. Reid, *Canadian Participation in Civil Affairs/Military Government*, p.17.
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55. Ibid., app.41.

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