

A Conspiracy of Silence?

The Popular Press and the Strategic Bombing Campaign in Europe

Laurie Peloquin

The controversy surrounding the decision by Bomber Command to target German cities populated mainly with non-combatants rages even today. It has been said that these were decisions made in secret, so secret that not even the airmen who flew the missions knew what they were really striking. In his book *Weapons and Hope*, physicist Freeman Dyson states, "I was one of the very few people who knew what were the objectives of the campaign, how miserably we were failing to meet these objectives, and how expensive this was for us in money and lives," and, "I felt deeply my responsibility, being in possession of all this information which was so carefully concealed."¹ His assertions formed the basis for material presented in the CBC production of *The Valour and the Horror* episode entitled "Death by Moonlight: Bomber Command," which claimed:

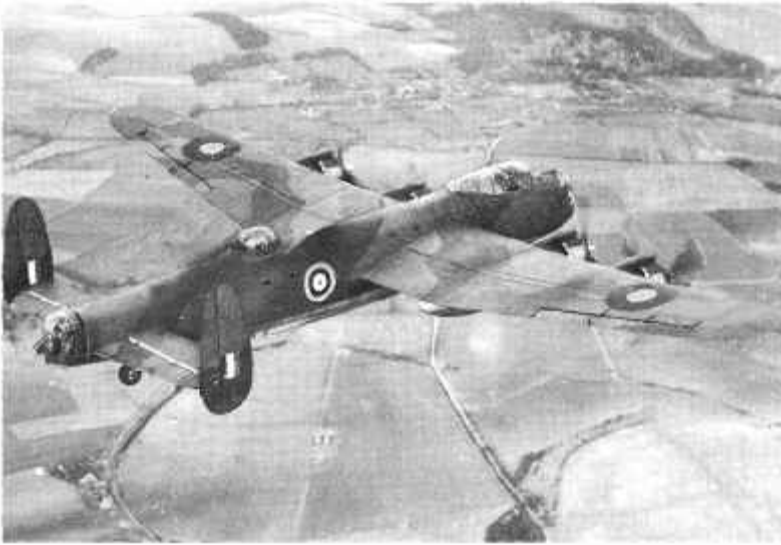
British High Command knew how few bomber crews would survive and deliberately hid the truth. That's not all that was concealed. The crews and the public were told that the bombing targets were German factories and military installations. In fact in 1942 a secret plan was adopted. Germany would be crushed through the deliberate annihilation of its civilians.²

An examination of the popular press available in Canada during the height of the bombing campaign against German cities, July 1943-April 1944, strongly contradicts these

Opposite: These headlines appeared in Canadian newspapers in 1943-1944, many of them as the lead to front page stories.

assertions. Reports appeared in the daily newspapers and weekly newsmagazines which outlined both the physical destruction and the civilian losses of the designated cities. The press provided their own analysis of the significance of objectives, results achieved against both production plants and morale, and RAF/RCAF losses which were being incurred. Technological advances which improved Bomber Command's ability to batter the enemy were explained to the lay reader. Newspapers graphically detailed the hardships suffered by the inhabitants of the stricken cities, and offered justification to the Canadian people explaining why war was being waged against non-combatants. The information on the bombing campaign was available to any who chose to read about it.

In July 1943 a fierce new bombing offensive began, designating one city, Hamburg, for "total destruction."³ The intention was twofold: to reduce the industrial capacity to produce war materiel, and to adversely affect the morale of the civilian population.⁴ "The Battle of Hamburg" consisted of four heavy raids against the city over the period of July 24-August 2, 1943. As well as being the second largest city in Germany, Hamburg was the centre of German U-boat production and contained some aircraft-industry plants. The raids resulted in massive destruction throughout the city, over 40,000 people dead and more than a million displaced. Throughout summer and autumn the RAF made several attacks against



The Avro Lancaster (top) and the Handley Page Halifax (above) formed the backbone of the RAF Bomber Command during the Second World War.

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a variety of cities, including Berlin. In November, the Battle of Berlin was launched in earnest. It continued until the end of March, when preparations for the D-Day landings began. The results against Berlin were not as devastating as in Hamburg, but Bomber Command succeeded in causing extensive damage, thousands of deaths and rendered many more thousands homeless.

The newspaper reports were blatant about the intention of the attacks. "The air bat designed apparently to flatten Germany's greatest port began Saturday night" stated an article in the *Toronto Star*.⁵ The *Christian Science Monitor* referred to, "this attempt efface Hamburg from the military map."⁶ The *Globe and Mail* described the battle as "a sustained effort to wipe Germany's second city off the map and blot out its great submarine works."⁷ The attempted assault upon morale was not overlooked by the press either. It was pointed out that Hamburg had been the site of the first unrest in Germany leading to the armistice in 1918.⁸ These same articles went on to depict demonstrations in Hamburg after the air raids calling for the end to the war.⁹ An American newsmagazine reported, "the suffering is so tremendous that many people have been plunged into apathy."¹⁰ The newspaper reports conveyed the belief that the annihilation of Hamburg was necessary in a military sense by the references to "Germany's greatest port" and its "great submarine works." They also suggested that the war might be brought to a swift end by the disillusioned German populace forced to face the miseries brought on by the bombing campaign.

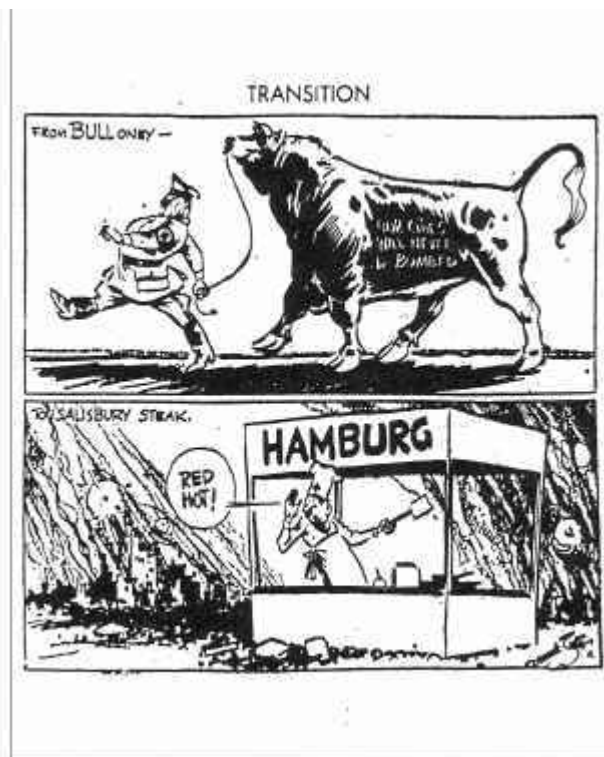
After the raids, the press reported on the conditions in Hamburg and the perceived results achieved by Bomber Command. Headlines proclaimed, "Hamburg blitzed to chaos—lives from hand to mouth"¹¹ and "Hamburg Ceases to Exist."¹² Several reports spoke of damage to submarines and the dockyards in general.¹³ Some papers mention destruction of specific industrial premises such as the Deutsche Werft and the Blohm & Voss submarine yards.¹⁴ These accounts are confirmed in the post-raid records¹⁵, although another popular report regarding the collapse of a tunnel under the Elbe river proved to be false.¹⁶ The successes of Bomber Command against German industry were quickly disseminated to the public.

Wreckage caused to strategic targets were not the only stories to be found in the newspapers. Accounts of the death toll ranged and scenes of violence were related in great

detail. "When the giant demolition bombs fell, they blew away blocks of houses, making rubble of entire districts and blasting bodies out into the streets, even into the trees of Hamburg's parks."¹⁷ A similar description appeared in *Time*, "In the ruins, on the streets, in the branches of trees where bombs had blown them, lay the dead, their eyes wide open, staring."¹⁸ Eyewitnesses reported, "the bus which took them out of town wound through heaps of debris and bodies."¹⁹ Although the term "firestorm" was not yet used, the fact that a great conflagration developed in Hamburg as a result of Allied bombing was duly reported.²⁰ According to a German radio broadcast reported in a Canadian newspaper, "heavy terror attacks caused extensive fires in several areas."²¹ Descriptions came back from RCAF pilots, who pictured these scenes, "Hamburg was so bright with fires, it looked like a prairie sunset," and "Hamburg was blazing like a paper box."²² The drama and horror of Hamburg's predicament was summed up by the reporter in *Time* who said, "Dante's Inferno was incomparable with Hamburg. Entire city districts were wiped out."²³ It was clear by the newspaper reports that much more damage was being wreaked in Hamburg besides that caused to military targets.

The Battle of Hamburg ended with a final assault on the night of August 2, 1943. Bomber Command's sites then fixed on Berlin, with the main attack set to begin in November. After the destruction caused in Hamburg the press also turned its attention towards Germany's capital city. The Battle of Hamburg was seen to have initiated a large scale evacuation of the population of Berlin, fearing that they would be the next targets. According to *Newsweek*, "so sharp was the impact of the bombings on the Germans that steps were taken to begin the evacuation of Berlin."²⁴ This was explained by another publication as being the result of refugees from Hamburg fleeing to Berlin, "where their tale spread terror among the people of the capital."²⁵ The press regarded blows to the morale of the people of Berlin as quite significant. According to one source, "On the morale front it ranks ahead of all other German cities. When the others were raided the outcry of the Germans

was bitter but local. When Berlin was hit groans rose from all over Germany."²⁶ That Berlin was to be the next major target for the bombing campaign was neither unknown nor concealed. The *Kitchener Daily Record* noted, "that lengthening nights will bring Berlin itself into the range of heavy day-and-night bombings by October or November."²⁷ The approaching offensive generated optimism in some spheres, with comments such as, "The Hamburg assault probably presented the broad pattern of what should really be regarded as the Battle of Berlin, and should be one of the great, decisive battles of the war."²⁸ The *New York Times* was even more enthusiastic, stating that, "The coming attempt to make the German capital uninhabitable is part of the plan to which the Allies are definitely committed, namely, to bring the Axis to the point of submission by air attack alone."²⁹ The approaching offensive against Berlin was both publicised and anxiously awaited by the popular press.



Kitchener Daily Record, August 3, 1943.

The descriptions of the Berlin raids, which began in August with the official "Battle" commencing in November, were similar to those of Hamburg, but also included a sense of excitement at finally being able to hit the Reich capital. Headlines read, "R.A.F. 'Hamburgs' Berlin with 2,000 Tons of Bombs"³⁰, "Hundreds of Bombers Spread Ruin in Berlin in Thunderbolt Smash"³¹ and "Nazis Helpless, Make Them Hopeless by Air Attack, U.S. General Urges."³² Maps of the centre of the city were reproduced illustrating all areas which received damage, with special focus on government buildings.³³ In December, *Newsweek* declared, "RAF's Fiery Battle of Berlin Tops Assaults on Three Fronts" and echoed the words of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris by describing that Berliners "may have sensed that they were about to reap the whirlwind for what the Luftwaffe had done to so many other cities."³⁴ Again, the Bomber Command objectives were explicitly defined in the press. "The morale of Berliners and Germans was as much the R.A.F.'s target as the sprawling factories, Government offices and railway communications of their capital."³⁵ The same article quotes Arthur Harris as being prepared to continue the Battle of Berlin, "as opportunity serves and circumstances dictate until the heart of Nazi Germany ceases to beat." On the same subject, *Saturday Night* describes Harris as,

"a realist in the best sense as the Germans are beginning to understand. He will continue to bomb them until they understand it completely."³⁶ Press coverage of the Battle of Berlin was straightforward and detailed, and often included descriptions and numbers of dead civilians. As with the Battle of Hamburg, nothing was held back from their audience.

Details of Allied casualties were also readily available in the newspapers, with losses often being displayed in the headlines. From the opening volley of the Battle of Hamburg the press circulated accurate statistics on the numbers of planes lost in raids against Germany.³⁷ A few newspapers actually make reference to Air Ministry communiques³⁸, which must have been issued on a regular basis to account for the comprehensive figures provided in almost every newspaper. The Canadian press always included the numbers of RCAF planes shot down as well as the total lost. They also publicized the average number of crew on each bomber,³⁹ leaving no doubt that lost airplanes meant lost lives.

Newsweek introduced its readership to bombing techniques as well as navigational and meteorological innovations. Weather reconnaissance units were formed in April 1943 to provide accurate, current data to assist in planning bombing missions.⁴⁰ *Newsweek* heaped praise on the RAF's "met men" who, "have now acquired the skill that permitted the RAF to stage a raid on Berlin despite weather that could have spelled death to the bombers."⁴¹ The release of this 'secret' innovation served to reassure North American readers that everything possible was being done to keep the aircrews safe. More encouragement was provided by the explanation of the Pathfinders. *Newsweek* told how these specially equipped airplanes preceded the main force, located the target and marked it with coloured flares. They furnished specific descriptions of the sky marking techniques.⁴² They also published accurate details about H2S, the navigational aid which enabled the Pathfinders to locate the target.⁴³ Not even the mechanics involved in finding a target and bombing it were concealed from the public.



Kitchener Daily Record, August 28, 1943.

The newspapers defended the bomber campaign by demonstrating how it was benefitting the war effort. "Bombing Pays Off With 'Invisible Dividends'"⁴⁴ read the headline in *Saturday Night* in December 1943. It was referring to the damage caused to German industrial production. This was a common theme, often repeated. "The damage done—if it is great enough—justifies the loss of planes"⁴⁵ was one way of explaining the loss rates which were being reported. Estimates of lost production appeared regularly, such as, "If Hamburg's industries now are completely wrecked, Germany's U-boat production would be forced down by approximately one third"⁴⁶, "an RAF rule of thumb: one raid of 2,000 tons requires a month's organization work by 18,500 men, destroys as much as 75,000 Nazi's can produce in a month"⁴⁷ and, "this destruction has broken off 20% of Germany's industrial strength, with the deadline of that capacity rated at 35%. The safety margin, therefore, is narrowing with deadly precision."⁴⁸ The meaning of these statements might be rather obscure but it was obvious that the bombing of German cities was having some effect on their industrial capacity. The press justified the bombing of civilians by describing decreases in the ability of the populace to produce war materiel. "The air offensive against Hamburg had shaken the psychological resistance inside Germany deeply, affecting the working capacity of the entire population."⁴⁹ According to *Saturday Night*, "workers cannot produce if they are denied the bare necessities of life."⁵⁰ Bomber Command, as reported in the newspapers, was causing significant damage to German war industry, whether by hindering the capacity of their factories or by retarding the ability of their workers.

The press also regarded the bomber offensive as a means of retribution against Germany for its previous incursions against Britain. *Time* presents this analysis, "German propagandists had once spoken gloatingly of the destruction which their Luftwaffe visited on British cities; they could find no words now to quell the rising terror of their people under the Allied bombs."⁵¹ Comparisons of the destruction in German cities to the "blitz"

in London were also made. One description of the state of Berlin after a raid begins, "the human scene was much like London's."⁵² Another account pictures a bomb scene in great detail, then reveals that they are talking about wreckage in London before they go on to tell about Berlin.⁵³ Comparison to another famous scene of destruction appears in some reports. *Newsweek* said, "Hamburg...became a study in destruction that compared with Stalingrad."⁵⁴ This analogy also applied to Berlin, an area of which was, "transformed into a miniature Stalingrad of destruction."⁵⁵ Germany was portrayed as deserving the hits it was taking, if only to equalize the existing status quo.

Bomber Command's own intention of harming the morale of the German people was also picked up by the press and presented to the public as a positive byproduct of attacking cities. Some exaggerated reports appeared, such as, "their spirit broken by constant Allied aerial assaults, thousands of Germans are committing suicide rather than face an uncertain future,"⁵⁶ although most were more realistic, describing "the gradual wearing down which continual air bombardment produces on the individual's ability to stand up against it."⁵⁷ One report contended that, "the greatest and perhaps most decisive result of the Allied air offensive may be the destruction of German morale."⁵⁸ As the RAF carried out its objective of bombing cities, it became apparent that housing in Germany would become a growing problem. "A No. 1 topic in the Reich as a result of the raids is housing,"⁵⁹ read one report. A headline in *Saturday Night* proclaimed, "A Housing Shortage Helps Nail the Nazi Coffin," with the article relating how, "the psychological effect of overcrowding and bad housing is considerable."⁶⁰ The press appreciated the efforts made to injure civilian morale in Germany and passed the information along to the public.

Hopes were high among the journalists that the bombing campaign would bring a quick end to the war. They spoke of the air war as, "designed to bring Germany to her knees,"⁶¹ and, referring to the upcoming winter offensive, "this may possibly turn out to be

the blow that collapses the Reich."⁶² Air Marshal Arthur Harris is cited as an expert observer of the proceedings. He believed that, "Germany can be rendered helpless to carry on the war within four or five months,"⁶³ given the proper equipment. General "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the U.S. Army Air Forces was equally as optimistic, predicting that, "Allied air blows will knock out Germany or leave the Nazis too groggy to resist invasion."⁶⁴ The *Toronto Daily Star* cites unnamed sources as suggesting, "that the Berlin offensive might be timed to precede an ultimatum to Germany from Prime Minister Churchill, President Roosevelt and Premier Stalin to surrender unconditionally or face even greater destruction."⁶⁵ The air offensive and any civilian casualties it caused could be easily justified if it succeeded in defeating Germany.

As early as July 1943 speculation emerged in the press that the bombing of German cities was really just preparation for an actual land invasion. The Combined Chiefs of Staff had approved this objective of the air war on May 14, 1943.⁶⁶ *Christian Science Monitor* proposed, "It is barely possible it may be the prelude to an important Allied amphibious operation in Northern Europe."⁶⁷ Under the headline "The Sights Are Lowered" in September 1943, is an article which describes the disappointment of the airmen when they realize, "instead of fighting for victory from the air, they were fighting toward further victory by the ground armies."⁶⁸ By November even the timing of the land offensive was being publicized, "For by spring the Allied invasion of Europe will almost certainly be under way."⁶⁹ The use of the words "almost certainly" implies that the press was merely speculating on the possibility, and not that they had received any official dispatch on the subject. Nevertheless, as time went on the language became more confident, as *Newsweek* asserted, "the winter offensive, prelude to invasion, was on."⁷⁰ As the air war failed to bring about the fall of Germany, those at home could take comfort in reading that it was preparing the way for a final, decisive battle on land.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the bombing campaign was its role as a

second front at a time when the Allies could not afford an assault on Germany by land. It forced the Germans to divert substantial amounts of equipment and manpower away from the main battle with Russia. This facet of the air war was known and revealed to the North American readership in an overt manner:

On the western air front the Germans have concentrated 50 to 60% of their total strength in fighter planes. They have stripped the Russian front to a thin cover of fighters, almost denuded the Mediterranean front. All their new fighter production is being sent to the west, and with it their best pilots.⁷¹

In an article on Arthur Harris entitled "The Germans Hate This Man," he is praised for having, "forced (the Germans) to divert hundreds of guns and night fighters from other operations."⁷² Claims appeared in print that, "90% of (Germany's) pilot recruits have been switched from bombers to fighters ... the Allied air war against western Germany has forced the Nazis to tie up at least 2,000,000 men for air defence ... the Nazis have concentrated 75% of their air force fighter strength in the west of Europe, draining the Russian and Italian fronts to the minimum."⁷³ *Time* maintained that, "the second front that the Russians demanded actually came into being between September 1942 and September 1943. This was the air offensive against Europe."⁷⁴ Justification of the bombing of German cities was easily supplied by the assistance it gave by diverting German forces from other fronts and by finally bringing the war back to Germany. As one journalist wrote, "Some Germans, at least, had learned a most shocking lesson: that Germany can no longer wage war exclusively on non-German territory."⁷⁵

The intent of the Combined Bomber Offensive in 1943 was contained in an official document known as the Pointblank Directive. If any part of the bomber campaign was to have been kept secret, it would have been a formal order such as this. As the directive stated, the mission was to:

conduct a joint United States-British air offensive to accomplish the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and

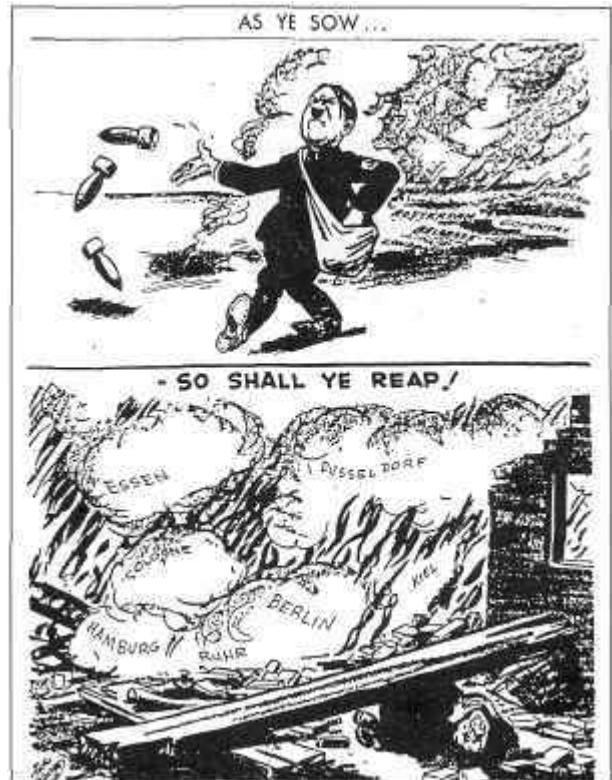
economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened.⁷⁶

This information, which, due to its sensitive nature, would have been expected to remain within government and military circles only, became available to the public in September 1943. Although not printed in all the popular newspapers and newsmagazines, the American publication *Newsweek* presented a paraphrased account of the objectives. The following aims appeared, written by Peter Masefield, a British aviation writer:

- 1) To destroy Germany's industry in the factories,
- 2) To disrupt the supplies and communications which are the life blood of production.
- 3) To destroy the physical capacity of the workers to carry on the war by smashing their homes and their means of livelihood.
- 4) To lower and, in the end, break the morale of the German people in the home front.⁷⁷

The similarity to the original Pointblank Directive is indisputable. Whether the goals which the Combined Bomber Offensive hoped to attain were purposefully or accidentally leaked to the press, or whether a knowledgeable journalist just inferred the substance of its intent, the information was readily available to the public.

The popular press available in Canada presented a plethora of information on the bombing of German cities in 1943-44. All important aspects, objectives, results and justifications of the air war were distributed to the Canadian readership. The press presented specific details on damage carried out against German cities, and did not spare the public from knowledge of the death and destruction being wrought against the German civilian population. Except for some technical advances, which the newspapers did not seem to have learned about, and the exact wording of government directives, the press coverage was comprehensive. Neither did the popular press feel compelled to criticize the bomber offensive or the targeting of German cities in any way. It was shown as part of the ongoing effort to bring down Nazi Germany. Assertions of secrecy or surreptitious behaviour on the part of Bomber Command are conspicuously absurd in the face of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.



The Globe & Mail, August 28, 1943.

NOTES

1. Freeman Dyson, *Weapons and Hope*, pp. 119-120.
2. Brian and Terence McKenna, *The Valour and the Horror*.
3. "Bomber Command Operation Order No. 173," found in Martin Middlebrook, *The Battle of Hamburg*, p.95.
4. *Ibid.*, p.95.
5. *The Toronto Daily Star*, July 27, 1943, p. 1.
6. *Christian Science Monitor*, July 28, 1943, p. 1.
7. *Globe & Mail*, July 31, 1943, p.1.
8. *Toronto Daily Star*, July 27, 1943, p.1; see also *Globe & Mail*, July 31, 1943, p.1 and *Kitchener Daily Record*, July 31, 1943, p.1.
9. *Ibid.*, see also *Toronto Daily Star*, July 30, 1943, p.1.
10. *Time*, August 16, 1943, p.35.
11. *Toronto Daily Star*, August 5, 1943, p. 1.
12. *Kitchener Daily Record*, July 31, 1943, p.1.
13. *Time*, August 16, 1943, p.35; *Toronto Daily Star*, August 3, 1943, p.1; *Globe & Mail*, August 4, 1943, p.1.
14. *Newsweek*, August 9, 1943, p. 32 and *Kitchener Daily Record*, July 31, 1943, p.1.
15. Middlebrook, p. 156.
16. Reported in *Newsweek*, August 9, 1943, p.32; *Kitchener Daily Record*, July 31, 1943, p.1.

17. *Newsweek*, August 9, 1943, p.32.
18. *Time*, August 16, 1943, p.35.
19. *Kitchener Daily Record*, July 31, 1943, p. 1.
20. For a description of the firestorm see Middlebrook, pp.252-280.
21. *Kitchener Daily Record*, July 28, 1943, p. 1.
22. *Toronto Daily Star*, July 28, 1943, p. 1.
23. *Time*, August 16, 1943, p.35.
24. *Newsweek*, August 9, 1943, p.32.
25. *Saturday Night*, August 7, 1943, p. 13.
26. *Newsweek*, August 16, 1943, p.26.
27. *Kitchener Daily Record*, July 30, 1943, p.1.
28. *Saturday Night*, August 7, 1943, p. 13.
29. Reported in the *Globe & Mail*, August 4, 1943, p. 1.
30. *Kitchener Daily Record*, August 24, 1943, p. 1.
31. *Toronto Daily Star*, September 1, 1943, p.1.
32. *Ibid.*, August 25, 1943, p.1.
33. *Newsweek*, September 6, 1943, p. 23; *Kitchener Daily Record*, August 24, 1943, p.1.
34. *Newsweek*, December 6, 1943, p. 19.
35. *Time*, December 6, 1943, p.31.
36. *Saturday Night*, September 11, 1943, p. 10.
37. *Time*, August 2, 1943, p.40 reports 12 planes lost in first attack, a number confirmed in *Bomber Command War Diaries*, p.411. Similar reports appear in all periodicals cited, over many days.
38. *Kitchener Daily Record*, July 28, 1943, p.1 and *Toronto Daily Star*, August 24, 1943, p.1.
39. *Toronto Daily Star*, August 24, 1943, p. 1 and *Globe & Mail*, August 25, 1943, p.2.
40. Middlebrook, *Bomber Command WarDiaries*, pp.363, 373.
41. *Newsweek*, December 6, 1943, p.20.
42. *Ibid.*, February 14, 1944, p.27.
43. *Ibid.*, January 10, 1944, p.25 and February 14, 1944, p.27. For a comparison see Price, Alfred *Instruments of Darkness*, p. 122.
44. *Saturday Night*, December 18, 1943, p.6.
45. *Newsweek*, October 18, 1943, p. 19.
46. *Toronto Daily Star*, August 3, 1943, p.2.
47. *Time*, December 13, 1943, p.36.
48. *Toronto Daily Star*, November 16, 1943, p.1.
49. *Toronto Daily Star*, August 7, 1943, p.2.
50. *Saturday Night*, December 18, 1943, p.6.
51. *Time*, August 16, 1943, p.35.
52. *Ibid.*, December 6, 1943, p.31.
53. *Ibid.*, November 29, 1943, p.28.
54. *Newsweek*, December 6, 1943, p.28.
55. *Toronto Daily Star*, September 1, 1943, p.1.
56. *Ibid.*, August 26, 1943, p.1.
57. *Saturday Night*, December 18, 1943, p.6.
58. *Newsweek*, November 6, 1943, p.21.
59. *Ibid.*, April 10, 1943, p.26.
60. *Saturday Night*, August 14, 1943, p. 10.
61. *Time*, August 30, 1943, p.33.
62. *Newsweek*, November 8, 1943, p. 19.
63. *Globe & Mail*, August 4, 1943, p.1; see also *Saturday Night*, August 7, 1943, p. 13 and September 11, 1943, p.20.
64. *Time*, December 20, 1943, p.26.
65. *Toronto Daily Star*, November 24, 1943, p.1.
66. Webster and Frankland, Volume IV, p.273.
67. *Christian Science Monitor*, July 28, 1943, p.1.
68. *Time*, September 27, 1943, p.33.
69. *Newsweek*, November 8, 1943, p. 19.
70. *Ibid.*, December 6, 1943, p.20.
71. *Time*, August 30, 1943, p.33.
72. *Saturday Night*, September 11, 1943, p.10.
73. *Toronto Daily Star*, November 16, 1943, p.1.
74. *Time*, September 6, 1943, p.28.
75. *Ibid.*, August 9, 1943, p.38.
76. Webster and Frankland, Volume IV, p.273.
77. *Newsweek*, September 13, 1943, p.25.

Laurie Peloquin is currently completing her M.A. at Wilfrid Laurier University