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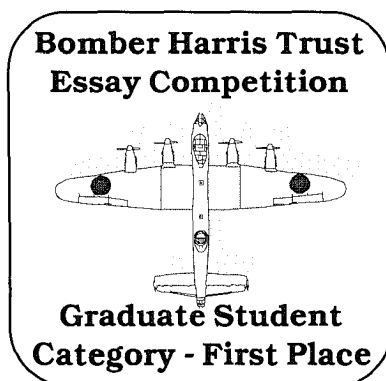
"Black, White and Grey"

Wartime Arguments for and against the Strategic Bomber Offensive

David Ian Hall

The strategic bomber offensive against Nazi Germany has attracted more than its fair share of attention, most of which has been highly critical, both on moral as well as pragmatic grounds. Scholarly articles and books, in addition to a much larger number of sensationalized popular accounts, have appeared at a steady rate since the end of the war.¹ More recently, journalists and television producers – capitalising on the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the Second World War – have taken an interest in this controversial yet highly marketable and therefore profitable subject. Partly revisionist, and deliberately emotive, their "factions" (part fact and part dramatic recreation or fiction) all too often have focused narrowly on a single, spurious theme; the Anglo-American bomber offensive was orchestrated and conducted by a group of "bloodthirsty bone-heads and blimps," whose policy of saturation bombing was a grievous crime against humanity.²

Brian and Terence McKenna's 1992 Canadian television (CBC-TV) documentary-drama *Death by Moonlight: Bomber Command* stands out as a clear example of an historical event which has been taken out-of-context and seriously misrepresented through over simplification for television.³ In their haste to convey the brutality and senselessness of war, the McKennas presented a highly personalised and factually inaccurate account of Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) bomber operations in Europe from 1943 through 1945. Their programme left most viewers with the



impression that Canadian airmen, in concert with their British and American allies, waged a relentless, militarily ineffectual and wholly unjustified war on innocent German civilians.

Roughly a year later, a British Broadcasting Corporation programme, *Time Watch*,⁴ examined the bomber offensive through an iniquitous question and answer session involving victims, ex-participants, historians and other expert witnesses. In rather short order this round table discussion deteriorated into a vitriolic shouting match. If its aim was to show the raw edge emotions still evoked by this subject, some 50 years on, then it was a huge success: if not, what was its point? To be fair, both the CBC and the BBC programmes offered a glimmer of hope that a meaningful debate was forthcoming; each, however, forsook the difficult task of distinguishing the innumerable and perplexing anomalies of the Anglo-American air offensive in favour of an inane black and white portrait of right and wrong with aircrew and air staff respectively singled out as innocent dupes and evil incarnate.

Few today would deny the magnitude of horror that is modern war, least of all those who took part in either planning or flying bombing operations over Germany. To what purpose then do the crude and simplistic conclusions made by the air offensives most recent critics serve the cause of history, other than in a most disingenuous manner? They most definitely do not provide an objective account of these tragic

events for those who know little about them. The CBC, for example, sent a researcher to the RAF Air Historical Branch in London only after public criticism in Canada forced an investigation into the McKenna's programme *Death by Moonlight*.⁵ More worrisome still are the results of a poll commissioned by *The Sunday Times* in April 1993. The newspaper revealed that 56 per cent of British children between 11 and 16 years of age obtained their knowledge of the Second World War from television.⁶ If such a study were conducted in Canada the percentage would be considerably higher; the Second World War is not taught in Canadian schools and very few universities offer courses in Canadian military history. This might lead one to argue that television producers, among others, have a great responsibility to ensure that their educational programming is both accurate and objective.

This essay, therefore, aims to redress the balance in this hotly contested debate by examining some of the wartime arguments both for and against the bomber offensive, in particular, it highlights the contrasting views of two men who served at Bomber Command Headquarters during the height of the campaign, Wing Commander T.D. (Harry) Weldon and RAF Chaplain L. John Collins.⁷ The analysis itself inevitably concentrates upon the interpretation of the laws and strategic factors which governed the use of air forces in the Second World War, the course and development of the strategic air campaign, and the ethical position taken toward it by the Church of England.

The history of the bomber offensive is extremely complex. If the documentary evidence condemning it, and those responsible for it, was that clear and irrefutable, historians would not still be debating the subject as fiercely as they do. The Anglo-American bomber campaign did not take place in a moral void or an ethical wasteland as some of its most recent critics have suggested. A lively debate on its merits and morality took place both before and during the war. In fact, almost all of the principal arguments for and against mass aerial bombardment were set out well before the war began.

Writing to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, in May 1939, Father Stephen Bedale, Warden of Kelham Theological College, called on the Church to speak out

against the "killing of helpless civilians by terror bombings."⁸ He wanted the Archbishop, as head of the official church of the state, to demand from the government a definite disavowal of any intention to resort to methods of terrorism in the likelihood of war. Bedale was not pro-Nazi, insincere or unpatriotic, or even a naive pacifist who objected to war in any shape or form. Rather, his objections were some of the more lucid ones to come out of a small but increasingly vocal protest movement in Britain against aerial bombardment.

Bedale regretted the fact that the Church had been unable to forbid all resort to war, but he was not against Christian men bearing arms to resist or remedy injustice. Citing the teachings of both St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine he re-confirmed, unequivocally, that "to the state the temporal Sword has been committed by God for the maintenance of natural justice, and in the last resort that Sword must be used."⁹ This right, however, as interpreted by Bedale, did not extend to the indiscriminate slaughter of noncombatant (or more precisely, the wounded, women and children). Consequently, he believed that the Church had a moral responsibility to more or less insist that the use of force be limited, and that considerations of natural compassion and common humanity be maintained when the force of arms was employed. Any resort to strategic bombing, claimed Bedale, would be tantamount to adopting a policy of terrorism that deliberately ignored these limits.

The delicate and potentially far-reaching matter of the church participating in a public censuring of government policy was taken up by the Archbishop's personal chaplain, Reverend Alan C. Don, Dean of Westminster. Don proceeded cautiously, writing to Sir Kingsley Wood, the Secretary of State for Air, for clarification of the government's position on waging air warfare. Kingsley Wood appreciated the extent to which the subject of air bombardment and the fate of non-combatants worried the British public, both with regard to actual events over the last few years, namely in Spain and China, and their own more personal apprehensions about the future. He was, therefore, happy to oblige Lambeth Palace with a thorough and refreshingly honest reply. Kingsley Wood described the three basic principles that governed Britain's approach to

The primary aircraft of RAF Bomber Command –

Right: A Handley Page Halifax of 405 Squadron RCAF.
(CFPU UK 1981)

Below: An Avro Lancaster going about its job over an enemy port.
(CFPU PL 144407)

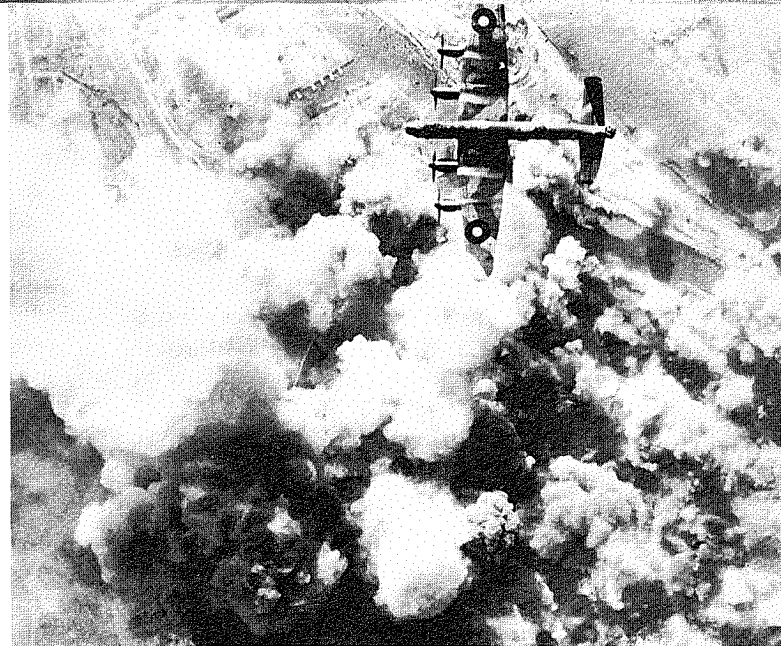


aerial warfare. First, the intentional bombardment of a civilian population was forbidden. Second, air forces were to attack military targets only, and third, airmen were to take reasonable care to avoid bombing any adjacent concentrations of civilians.¹⁰

These principles were, in fact, already part of the public record. The Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, promulgated them in the House of Commons on 21 June 1938, and from that date they governed the policy by which the RAF went to war in 1939.¹¹ Both satisfied and grateful to Kingsley Wood for setting the record straight, the Archbishop of Canterbury saw no need for the Church to become involved in telling the government how, or how not, to wage war. So long as the rules of war were observed the Church would (and did) stand by the government.¹²

Unfortunately it was with "the rules" that the controversy over strategic bombing began. Prior to the Second World War and its course of events, internationally agreed rules governing air warfare did not exist.¹³ The 1923 Hague Draft Rules of Aerial Warfare was the first authoritative attempt to clarify and formulate a comprehensive code of conduct, but they were never adopted in legally binding terms.¹⁴ Growing awareness of the military potential of aircraft throughout the 1920s and 1930s ultimately proved too serious an obstacle to reaching an agreement.

One of the main stumbling blocks was the inability to establish an acceptable definition of



a legitimate military target under the new conditions of total war between industrialised states. Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby summed up this conundrum nicely when he wrote:

It is generally agreed, for example, that the man who loads or fires a field-gun is a military target. So is the gun itself, and the ammunition dump which supplies it. So is the truck-driver who transports ammunition from the base to the dump. So – in the last two World Wars – was the man who transported weapons, ammunition, raw materials, etc., by sea. But are the weapons and war-like stores on their way from the factories to the bases, and the men who transport them, not also military targets? And what about weapons under construction in the factories, and

the men who make them? Are they not also military targets? And if they are not, where do you draw the line? If they are military targets, are not the industrial areas and the services -- gas, electricity -- that keep industry going, also military targets? Or is it permissible to starve these civilian workers by blockade, or shell them if you can get at them, but not to bomb them from the air? This is surely a *'reductio ad absurdum'*.¹⁵

Factories making armaments and the transport bringing them to the battlefronts naturally were included in the category of legitimate targets once the means of attacking them were available. Consequently those civilians in them or dangerously close to them might just have to be equated with civilians in legitimately attacked places. Moreover, precedent was on the side of the air planners. Naval bombardment of ports and towns was an accepted act of war. It was even codified in Article 2 of the Convention on Naval Bombardment, signed at The Hague in 1907. Article 2 stipulated that a naval commander who used his ships' guns to destroy military objectives in an undefended port or town "incur[red] no responsibility for any unavoidable damage which may be caused by a bombardment under such circumstances."¹⁶ The advent of air power merely increased the opportunity of reaching and destroying such targets.

International law did not protect civilians from bombardment from the sea, the ground, or the air. Even so, indiscriminate bombing of the civilian population was not widely embraced as a principal object for attack by air forces. By the early 1930s the Royal Air Force had already rejected indiscriminate bombing as a possible "short cut" to victory. Moral objections to the bombing of thickly populated areas without warning, did influence official policy,¹⁷ but of greater importance was the Air Staff's own appraisal that bombing civilians, as a primary target of war, was uneconomical. Their preference was to employ Britain's small bomber force, with maximum emphasis on accurate bombing, against objectives most likely to damage the enemy's war effort. Two targets singled out for such air attack were war-related industry and rail transportation.¹⁸

On 2 September 1939, on the very eve of Britain and France's entry into the second major

European war this century, the two governments declared that only "strictly military objectives in the narrowest sense of the word" would be bombed by their respective air forces. The Allies made this declaration in part because they were anxious to avoid a strategic bombing exchange with Germany's superior Luftwaffe, a contest they believed they would lose. Unexpectedly, and somewhat surprisingly, the German government pledged similar restraint, although the course of events quickly demonstrated its hollow ring. Mass air attacks by the Luftwaffe on Warsaw, between 20-25 September, inflicted heavy casualties on the civilian population.¹⁹ The die had been cast. Speaking to a large audience in Manchester, Winston Churchill, the soon-to-be British Prime Minister and war leader, condemned German military decisions made without thought to humanitarian concerns. "We know from what they did in Poland," Churchill told his anxious listeners, "that there is no brutality or bestial massacre of civilians by air bombing which they would not readily commit if they thought it was for their advantage."²⁰

Ruthlessness is unpleasant to say the least, but it is not necessarily illegal. In other words, one can be both ruthless and operate within the law. Indeed, there is a powerful argument that the Germans were operating within the existing tolerances, as they were, for air attacks on city centres and civilians.²¹

Churchill's assessment that questions of ethical or humanitarian concerns had no place in the German style of aggressive warfare was accurate, although it was based more on emotional sentiment than on any accepted legal definition. Nonetheless, if the indiscriminate bombing of Warsaw was not enough to validate his message to the British people, the Luftwaffe's concentrated attack on Rotterdam on 13 May 1940 removed any remaining doubts concerning German intentions and practice. Without regard to civilian casualties, the Luftwaffe was used to break the last enemy resistance. The southern part of the city was transformed into rubble. According to notes left by General von Waldau, chief of the Luftwaffe command staff responsible for planning the attack, "this radical method was the only one possible." His chilling conclusion, noting that, "The complete surrender of Holland followed only two hours later,"²² reflected the only justification the Germans required for the action

taken. For the first time in history, strategic air forces were the decisive influence in bringing about an end to a military campaign.

Meanwhile, in Britain, pressure continued to mount for retaliatory strikes against German cities and towns.²³ Leading letters in many British newspapers regularly asked why the air force was not being used against Germany. Up until May 1940, RAF raids were confined to attacks on German naval units at sea, or at anchor, and no serious attempts were made to drop bombs on the German mainland. The Luftwaffe's ruthless bombing of Rotterdam, and Germany's inexorable land offensive against France precipitated a change in the RAF's policy of restraint. On 15 May the War Cabinet gave Bomber Command permission to bomb the Ruhr. Initial targets included oil refineries and the railway network, two target systems that were to feature prominently throughout the remaining years of the war. Bomber crews were given specific aiming points, and they were instructed to return home to their bases with their bombs, if they could not locate the target, rather than drop them indiscriminately on innocent civilians. Even during the midst of the Luftwaffe's night blitz on British cities, when the Cabinet considered switching some of the weight of the RAF's counterattack over to German civilians, the Air Staff argued that "nothing would be gained by promiscuous bombing."²⁴ Only when it was realised that the bombers lacked the technical sophistication necessary to hit precise targets did entire industrial cities become their objective.²⁵

On 14 February 1942, a new Directive marked a substantial change in British air policy. Bomber Command was instructed to shift the primary emphasis of its attacks on to specific "industrial areas." Essen, the heart of the Ruhr's industrial complex, with its heavy industry including the Krupps armament works, was singled out as the most important target for attack. The stated as well as intended aim of the new policy was the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military and economic system. A corollary objective was the undermining of the morale of the German people, and in particular, that of the industrial workers, to a point where their capacity for resistance was fatally weakened. Civilians *per se* were not the

object of attack, but the days had long since past when moral objections protected them even from indirect bombardment.²⁶

Area bombing was the main policy for 1942, and it more or less remained as such until the spring of 1945.²⁷ It was around the same time that the RAF adopted an area bombing strategy that the Reverend John Collins was posted to RAF Station Yatesbury in Wiltshire. Collins joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) as an Anglican Chaplain in 1940. Before that he had enjoyed a distinguished career, both in academia and the Church.²⁸ His posting to Yatesbury marked the start of what was to become a deep personal transformation that would have a profound influence on the rest of his life, including that of founding the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.²⁹

RAF Yatesbury in 1940 was a large bustling training centre for air gunners and wireless operators as well as wireless and radar operators in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). There were in excess of five Air Wings training on the station throughout most of the war. The camp had its own sports facilities, hospital, cinema and theatre. It also had six resident chaplains of various denominations,³⁰ each with their own chapels. Church attendance was not high but the chaplains were kept very busy caring for those who found the demands of their course and the war too stressful. Collins lent an additional hand at the hospital when he was not overburdened with normal counselling duties.³¹


After a few months at Yatesbury, Collins noted with distress that many of the young men and women passing through the camp had actively turned away from the Church of England. He put it down to dislocation and deprivation, not to mention the horror and revulsion, brought on by the recent war. A similar decline in faith had occurred towards the end, and during the years immediately after, the Great War 1914-1918. Nevertheless it was a worrying trend that Collins aimed to reverse. Beginning in the spring of 1942 he inaugurated a series of Tuesday evening discussions that were designed to enhance Christian fellowship on the station. By July a formal membership had developed and "The Fellowship of the Transfiguration of Our Lord" was born.³²

The bomb bay of a Lancaster X prior to a raid on the Ruhr. The relatively short distance to the target allowed a full load of bombs to be carried – 20 x 500 lb high explosive, general purpose bombs for a total of 10,000 lbs.

(CFPU PL 40683)

The first members of the Fellowship came from the staff and the discharged patients of the camp hospital, where Collins, through his volunteer work, had developed a considerable reputation as a devout Christian and a compassionate man. Throughout the year the membership widened and grew.³⁴ "Padre John," as he was affectionately known at Yatesbury, had found a willing audience. The "Tuesday talks" retained their place of predominance, with Collins speaking on aspects of Christianity, international brotherhood, the war, and, amongst other things, the RAF's bombing policy. Collins was not against the war for he honestly believed that Hitler and the Nazis were an evil force that had to be overthrown if God's peace on earth was to be achieved. What disturbed Collins, and what he believed was unacceptable, was the spiralling escalation of indiscriminate violence and wanton destruction (which he perceived as being peculiar to this ghastly war) and was epitomised in part by the aerial bombardment of cities and towns.³⁵

Collins, like Bedale before him in 1939, and a number of other English clerics³⁶ during the war, objected to the proportionate increase in violence and destruction aerial bombardment brought to the waging of war. Moreover, they lamented its propensity to kill large numbers of civilians. For them, strategic bombing was an immoral act of war because of the crude and inaccurate techniques inherent in its method. Unlike Shakespeare's tragic character Macbeth, who confessed grimly, "I have supped full with horrors: Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, Cannot once start me,"³⁷ Collins and other like-minded critics rejected the natural consequences of war. In particular, they denied the physical reality of war when waged with the most recent weapons produced by modern technology. It was as if they were saying war could become more decent and more tolerable once bombing was banned.



Members of this new Christian society pledged themselves to the service of God and their fellow human beings. A short list of rules entitled "The Fellowship Rules of Life" was drawn up to guide them in their efforts. Personal responsibilities included making a strong commitment to Christian practices, regular church attendance, taking Holy Communion, daily prayers, and bible reading. Collins, as founder, president and spiritual leader, encouraged an active, aggressive Christianity. He wanted the Fellowship to be a public display of faith in defiance of the terrible times in which they lived, and in the face of religious scepticism. The Fellowship's main objective, as set out in rule number nine, was "To try to make the social, economic and political implications of the gospel effective in local and national affairs." Collins believed this was possible through individual choice and public example.³³

Few would argue that the objections to area bombing raised by Collins and his supporters were not heartfelt and sincere, even though many of those making them were better known for their unctuousness than lucid argument.³⁸ Collectively, they also betrayed a naive understanding of the dialectic between morality and war. After all, it is not so much a case of this or that means of waging war that is immoral or inhumane. War itself is immoral. Once full-scale war has broken out the means for limiting its barbarities, excesses and horrors are virtually non-existent. The moral question then is whether or not it is imperative to fight the war at all? If the answer is yes, then the proper course, indeed the moral obligation implicitly undertaken by going to war, is to win as quickly and as cheaply as possible. A degree of restraint may be self-imposed by the potential victor's desire to win a decent peace, but for the nation facing defeat, similar concern for the future may not apply.³⁹

Legal and moral principles against which the supposed "acceptable" strategies of war are tested, are themselves tested against reality. They are not an absolute. In the British case, the RAF went out of its way to avoid bombing civilians in the early stages of the war. After nearly three years of at best disappointing results, the Air Staff accepted the fact that they could not prosecute the war successfully with their existing technology so long as the self-imposed restrictions designed to limit collateral damage were maintained. Their bombing policy, therefore, was adjusted to fit the conditions and the circumstances deemed necessary to win the war. The efficacy of the area bombing policy, as practised from 1942 to 1945, is yet another fiercely disputed and equally contentious subject.⁴⁰ But with regard to its morality, it really becomes a question of how many of one's own people is one prepared to sacrifice on the altar of ethics?

Most of Britain's churchmen supported the bomber offensive in its various stages of development throughout the war. "Often in life there is no clear choice between absolute right and wrong; frequently the choice had to be made of the lesser of two evils," wrote Dr. Cyril Garbett, the Archbishop of York, "and it is a lesser evil to bomb a war-loving Germany than to sacrifice the lives of thousands of our own fellow-

countrymen...and to delay delivering millions now held in slavery." Having established his point of principle, Garbett went one step further and presented a compelling argument in favour of the Allies using their air superiority to bring the war to a swift and successful conclusion. His views were published in *The Times* on 25 June 1943, with the unequivocal approval of Lambeth Palace.

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, just like Cosmo Lang before him, said much the same as Garbett about the bomber offensive. Reluctantly, yet with unwavering conviction, the Archbishop accepted it as a necessary evil in a far from perfect human world. One of the many letters Temple wrote in reply to critics, who assailed him for not demanding an immediate end to the bombing of large cities, is worth quoting in detail. In December 1942, he responded in fairly typical fashion to a letter from Ashley Sampson, the representative of a group of eminent Christian clergy and laity, including C.S. Lewis, who were publishing a "Manifesto" against bombing:

What your Manifesto really requires is that we should not attempt to destroy munitions factories which supply the enemy or the power stations and the like which enable those factories to work. Attack upon such objectives from the air must involve great risk to the people living round with the practical certainty that many of them will be killed. The same will happen if harbours are attacked which the Manifesto includes as legitimate objects.

The Archbishop concluded his letter to Sampson with a general consideration of the war and the place of bombing in it, writing:

In my mind we have no business to be at war at all unless by fighting we can, or believe we can, serve the purpose of God. If believing that we enter upon war it becomes a primary duty to fight effectively. Indeed, this consideration then takes precedence of nearly all others. The worst of all things is to fight and do it ineffectively. Therefore while I agree with you that the strategic consideration cannot stand alone it becomes very nearly decisive for our conduct.⁴¹

Sampson wrote back two days later, expressing his deep regret that the Archbishop would not sponsor the Manifesto.

Cosmo Lang, William Temple, Geoffrey Fisher⁴² and Cyril Carbett were not dutiful sycophants to a government that had appointed them to the highest ecclesiastical offices in the land. Even a cursory reading of their private correspondence and papers will reveal four

deeply sensitive men who abhorred war: but also men who recognised that a far greater crime would be inflicted upon humanity if the war against Nazi Germany was lost. Their views were not shared by all members of the Anglican Church, and as the bomber offensive intensified during the last three years of the war so did the disapprobation. George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, was perhaps the most persistent and most celebrated critic. From 1940 onwards he waged a highly public campaign against strategic bombing in the national papers and in Parliament.⁴³ Collins too continued with his own protest, but his took a more surreptitious route through the Fellowship of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

During 1943 and 1944 Collins invited numerous individuals of high rank and public acclaim to Yatesbury to speak to the members of his Fellowship. Left-wing and "progressive" speakers were preferred because they were more likely to provide an alternative view to the war.

Above and Below -

Left: A British bomber releases a load of bombs (including a 4,000 lb "cookie" and many smaller incendiary bombs) over a cloud covered target in Germany.

(CFPU PL 144267)

Below: The smashed city of Cologne, the target of over 22 attacks by RAF Bomber Command alone.

(CFPU PL 42538)



Through the unconventional opinions of his chosen guests, Collins aimed to challenge the membership. He hoped they would see the events taking place around them in a different light to that of the official sources they were more commonly exposed. Collins particularly liked to invite well-known Labour members of Parliament who openly opposed the so-called "yes" policy of most national politicians. Some of the speakers included Sir Stafford Cripps, Clement Attlee, Aneurin Bevan, Herbert Morrison, C.S. Lewis, and the Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maisky. Government representatives from China, Poland, Belgium and Czechoslovakia were also invited to speak to the Fellowship, and even the King of Greece made an "unofficial" visit to Yatesbury.⁴⁴

Collins strongly believed that every member of society, according to individual opportunity and ability, had an important part to play in attempting to make Christian values apply in national and international affairs. In fact, in his view, committed Christians had an obligation to get actively involved in public life and to press government leaders for a policy more and more in line with the teachings of the Gospel. Only in this way, Collins maintained, could the world's past and present failures be avoided in the future. The celebrity lectures were an important part of this awakening process for members of the Fellowship, and they served to rally the faithful to Collins' vision of a better world. They were not part of any official or ordinary education programme at Yatesbury, nor were they viewed with equanimity by the camp commandant and the Air Staff. Nonetheless the "Yatesbury lectures" were allowed to proceed as organised, and all were well attended with the numbers ranging from the low eighties to just over two hundred.⁴⁵

In the summer of 1944, Collins was posted from RAF Yatesbury to Bomber Command Headquarters, High Wycombe. Bomber Command was in need of a new chaplain and Harris himself selected Collins to fill the vacancy. Harris' choice was not as odd as it may first appear. Collins married Diana Elliot, a cousin of the AOC-in-C, in 1939, and was therefore a member of Harris' extended family.⁴⁶ Collins was sad to leave Yatesbury,⁴⁷ and the Fellowship that he had created, but he quickly settled into his new surroundings and immediately set to the task of organising another Christian Fellowship

group and a celebrity lecture series. Invited speakers included Sir Stafford Cripps, Herbert Morrison, Ellen Wilkinson from the Ministry of Home Security (Home Office), Anthony Eden and Sir Richard Acland. Sir Stafford Cripps, the then Minister of Aircraft Production and a Christian moralist, gave the first lecture on 8 December, taking as his theme "The Necessity for Pacifism."⁴⁸

After a convivial dinner in the senior staff mess, Cripps addressed a mixed group of slightly less than 100 officers, NCOs and air crew, in the largest assembly hall on the station, the Air Staff Conference Room. He began by saying he would try to answer a rather disturbing question – "Is God My Co-Pilot?" – which had been put to him by an operational pilot stationed in the north of England. "Wherever you were God was looking over your shoulder," Cripps told an increasingly unsettled audience. Continuing on this theme at some length, in a religious vein more applicable to a church sermon than a sociable lecture, he said that God was present at all times even when an act of wickedness was being committed. A pilot then could consider God as his co-pilot "only if he was convinced that the job he was doing was essential for the good of humanity." Cripps then pointed at the officers in the auditorium and said, "it was, therefore, very important for those responsible to be sure that no pilot is sent to undertake any bombing operation which is not absolutely essential for military purposes." The question period that followed was acrimonious and slightly hostile, but the evening concluded without incident.⁴⁹ Collins, for his part, had accomplished what he had set out to do. He had spread a seed of doubt – at Bomber Command Headquarters of all places – that bombing was wrong and that each and every participant had to reflect upon their own individual responsibility for its continuation against the test of Christian principles.

Not surprisingly, the lecture was not well received by the staff officers, and even less so by Sir Arthur Harris when he heard about it the following morning. Harris did not attend the now infamous lecture having sent Air Marshal Saundby to receive their guest and chair the meeting. In fact, Harris never had any use for Sir Stafford Cripps; he only agreed to his coming to give a lecture because he thought it was impolitic to refuse. In its aftermath, Harris was

aghast that the man who was personally in charge of the Ministry overseeing the production of heavy bombers, and who was straining every sinew of British industry to increase output, would publicly condemn Bomber Command's methods and the Government policy that directed them, both of which the very minister in question was directly responsible for making. In an effort to counter the argument presented by Cripps – a sort of damage control exercise – Harris called a compulsory meeting for officers and all other ranks available, to which he invited his Personal Assistant, Wing Commander T.D. Weldon,⁵⁰ a tutor in Moral Philosophy at Magdalen College Oxford, to speak on the subject of bombing.⁵¹

Weldon had been at High Wycombe since 1942. Upon his arrival he quickly became a great admirer of Harris, and he was instrumental in helping to establish a special guest room at Springfield, Harris' official residence, where papers and photographs outlining the workings and achievements of Bomber Command were displayed. Known as the "Conversion Chamber," its purpose was to demonstrate to disbelievers that bombing really was destroying German industrial areas. Using his intimate knowledge of this material, Weldon was able to give an exhaustive discourse on the bomber offensive to a somewhat captive audience.⁵²

Weldon began his lecture by praising the work carried out by Bomber Command. During the long dark period following the British Army's evacuation from Dunkirk, Bomber Command and later the Anglo-American strategic bomber forces, were alone in taking the offensive against Nazi Germany. For three years, between June 1941 and June 1944, the bombing of Germany was the only direct military assistance given by the Western Allies to the Russians. Area bombing attacks upon the vital centres of German war production, Weldon pointed out, materially reduced the enemy's war potential. They also forced the Germans to employ in defence, repair and rehabilitation measures, huge resources of materiel and manpower which would otherwise have been used in strengthening the offensive power of their armed forces. By the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic systems, the strategic bomber forces paved the way for the Allied armies, re-entry into Europe, and later

supported their advance by undermining the enemy's ability to present cohesive resistance. Finally, with regard to the question of morality, Weldon categorically denied that Bomber Command had ever gone in for acts of terrorism. The air attacks on German cities, he concluded, were strategically justified because they aimed to shorten the war and thereby reduce to a minimum the loss of human life.⁵³

Harris was satisfied with Weldon's effort. Nevertheless, neither Collins nor Weldon could take much credit for changing the individual opinions held on bombing by the officers and men at Bomber Command Headquarters. The unintended and indirect confrontation between Collins and Weldon over the ethics of bombing, or as Collins called it "the Bombing of Ethics," did, however, ask and attempt to answer three seminal questions in this controversy: Was the bomber offensive immoral and a crime against humanity? Was it a legitimate act of war? Was it effective? Worlds of perception separated the protagonists then as now. Today, some 50 years on, little has changed in this distinctly polarised debate.

While acknowledging that there are plenty of valid criticisms that can be levelled at the way the Anglo-American bomber campaign was conducted, it is equally clear that bombing steadily eroded Germany's capacity to make war. Albert Speer, perhaps Hitler's favourite confidant and his Minister of Armaments and Munitions, is but one of many former enemies who called the bomber offensive "the greatest lost battle on the German side."⁵⁴ The diaries of Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda, contain numerous references to the devastating effect Allied bombing had on the German economy, people and armed forces.⁵⁵ Similar testimonials are to be found in the biographies, diaries and memoirs of a host of German commanders, including Kesselring, Rommel, von Rundstedt, von Manteuffel and von Mallenthin, to name but a few of the more prominent ones.⁵⁶ Britain's official historians reached the same general conclusion that strategic bombing made "a contribution to victory which was decisive."⁵⁷

More recent scholarly research confirms the immediate post-war analysis. Richard Overy, a distinguished historian at King's College, London, examined Germany's war economy in

detail and concluded that "bombing had obvious effects in reducing worker morale and destroying facilities."⁵⁸ His research demonstrates that bombing placed a ceiling on German war production and – despite an increase in production in 1943 and 1944 – reduced the output of tanks by 35 per cent and aircraft by 31 per cent.⁵⁹ Professor Sir Michael Howard, who fought in the Second World War and who has studied, lectured and published on the subject for more than half a century, is perhaps the most eminent historian to speak out in support of the strategic air offensives results. He recently told a distinguished audience of historians at the RAF Club, Piccadilly, that the strategic air offensive in Europe, "made an absolutely essential contribution to the victory that was achieved by the armed forces of the Allies fighting in three elements."⁶⁰ Present and future critics would do well to bear in mind a further admonition from the official historians, who, some 30 years ago wrote, "those who claim that the Bomber Command contribution to the war was less than this are factually in error."⁶¹

What then is the importance of the debate between Collins and Weldon? Through a combination of unconnected circumstances both men ended up at Bomber Command Headquarters where they were forced to search the very depths of their inner-most beliefs in an attempt to reconcile unreconcilable questions. Their struggle demonstrates the range of inquiry that is possible in a democratic society, even during the stresses of war. Their differing perspectives also add much to our understanding of both the bomber offensive and the deep and often tortuous emotions it conjured up, both during the war, and in its aftermath. In short, they inject a useful and much needed degree of balance back into a debate which recently has succumbed to a series of woefully superficial studies plagued as too many of them are by emotive hyperbole weakly disguised as empirical fact. Debate and disagreement are possible without distorting either the facts or the truth. If journalists and others are going to deal with history they have a responsibility to their audiences to delve more deeply into their topic and not sacrifice the complexities in a facile overview. It is for this reason that in the wider history of strategic bombing the small part played by a conscientious cleric and a secular scholar merit our attention and our study.

Notes

1. Published material on the bomber offensive, and the Royal Air Force's participation in it, is so exhaustive that to list even the most important titles would go beyond the scope of any bibliography. Some published works of lasting significance include: Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany*, 4 vols. (London, 1961); J.M. Spaight, *Bombing Vindicated* (London, 1944); Sir Arthur Harris, *Bomber Offensive* (London, 1947) and *Despatch on War Operations* with an introduction by Sebastian Cox and a German view by Horst Boog (London, 1996); Lord Tedder, *Air Power in War* (London, 1948); Sir Robert Saundby, *Air Bombardment* (London, 1961); Martin Middlebrook, *The Nuremberg Raid* (London, 1973); Barrie Paskins and Michael Dockrill, "Area Bombing," in *The Ethics of War* (London, 1979); Richard Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945* (London, 1980); Charles Messenger, *Bomber Harris and the Strategic Air Offensive* (London, 1984); John Terraine, *The Right of the Line* (London, 1985); Malcolm Smith, "The Allied Air Offensive," *Journal of Strategic Studies* v.13, no.1 (March 1990); Horst Boog (ed.), *The Conduct of the Air War in the Second World War* (Oxford, 1991); RAF Historical Society (ed.), *Reaping the Whirlwind* Bracknell Paper No.4, A Symposium on the Strategic Bomber Offensive 1939-45 (26 March 1993); and Sir Michael Howard, "Ethics, Deterrence and Strategic Bombing," *The Journal of the RAF Historical Society* No.14 (1995).
2. For example: "Bomber Harris," British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), first televised September 1989; "Death by Moonlight," second episode of *The Valour and the Horror*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and National Film Board war series (CBC/NFB), first aired in Canada in February 1992, and in the UK on Channel 4 in August 1994; and "The Bombing of Dresden," BBC 2 (Time Watch), April 1993. Max Hastings, now the editor of *The Daily Mail*, made many of the same exaggerated criticisms of the Air Staff and the senior officers at Bomber Command in his book, *Bomber Command* (London, 1979). Two recent though equally controversial accounts include: Brereton Greenhous, Stephen Harris, William Johnston, and William Rawling, *The Crucible of War 1939-1945*, The Official History of the RCAF v.III (Toronto, 1994); and Merrily Weisbord and Marilyn Simonds Mohr, "Night Flights: The Boys of Bomber Command" in *The Valour and the Horror* (Toronto, 1991) pp.61-117.
3. Many historians have labelled "Death by Moonlight" "a substandard work," "seriously flawed," and "a gross distortion of [a] very complex subject." Detailed criticisms, with attribution, can be read in an official report published by the Canadian Senate, *The Valour and Horror: Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology* (Ottawa, 1993) pp.10:910:34, and 10:48. In addition, see Channel 4 (UK) "Right to Reply," August 1994; David J. Bercuson and S.F. Wise (eds.) *The Valour and the Horror Revisited* (Montreal, 1994); and The Bomber Harris Trust's own publication, *A Battle for Truth*.
4. "The Bombing of Dresden," BBC 2 Time Watch, April 1993.

5. Discussion with Sebastian Cox, Head, Air Historical Branch (RAF), on 22 March 1997, at the Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston, Ontario.
6. Martin Jacques, "From here to eternity," *The Sunday Times*, 9 May 1993, Section 9, pp.24-25.
7. Collins receives significantly more attention throughout this essay for two main reasons: he participated in the public debate on strategic bombing much earlier than did Weldon, and the documentary evidence covering his wartime activities is far richer.
8. Letter from Father Stephen Bedale to Cosmo Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury, 23 May 1939. Lambeth Palace Library, C. Lang Papers v.80 [hereafter cited as LPL, manuscript collection and volume number] Bedale also sent copies of this letter to the Archbishop of York and the Bishop of Southwell.
9. Bedale to Archbishop of Canterbury, 23 May 1939. LPL, C. Lang Papers v.80.
10. Letters exchanged between Rev. A.C. Don and Sir Kingsley Wood, 2-12 June 1939. LPL, C. Lang Papers v.80.
11. Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945* volumes 1-4 (London, 1961) v.4, pp.71-83. Hereafter cited as SAOG and volume number. See also Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff (eds.), *Documents on the Laws of War*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1989) p. 122.
12. LPL, C. Lang Papers v.80, "Allied Bombing of Germany, 1939-1941." See also W. Temple Papers v.57 "Defence of British Bombing Policy, 1942-1944" and G. Fisher Papers v.5 "War 1939-1945."
13. Unlike either land or sea warfare, a formally binding agreement which deals with air warfare exclusively still does not exist. See Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff (eds.), *Documents on the Laws of War*, p.122.
14. For a short history of the first attempts to codify rules for air warfare, beginning in 1899 and through the 62 Articles of the 1923 Hague Rules of Aerial Warfare to the present day, see Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff (eds.), *Documents on the Laws of War* pp.121-135.
15. Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, "The Ethics of Bombing," *RAF Quarterly* (Summer 1967) p.97.
16. The full text of the 1907 Hague Conventions can be read in A.P. Higgins, *The Hague Peace Conference and Other International Conferences Concerning the Laws and Usages of War: Texts and Conventions With Commentaries* (Cambridge, 1909).
17. Public Records Office [PRO] AIR 69/13 "Employment of Air Forces in War," Staff Paper by Air Commodore P.B. Joubert, 31 October 1931, p.19.
18. PRO AIR 69/14 "Notes on Air Strategy" by Air Vice-Marshal Wilfrid R. Freeman for a lecture given at the Staff College, Camberley, 7 December 1935, p.3; and AIR 2/675 "War Aim of the RAF, 1933-1939," Commandant's Lecture Notes - 1933, RAF Staff College, Andover, pp.12-13.
19. Militargeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Freiburg im Breisgau, Deutschland, *Germany and the Second World War* v.II, Translated by D. McMurry and E. Osers (Oxford, 1991), pp.121-122. Hereafter cited as *Germany and the Second World War* and volume number.
20. Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, Speech given by Winston Churchill at Manchester on 27 January 1940, Hereafter cited as IWM, document title and accession number.
21. For German views on the legality of the Luftwaffe's strategic bombing operations up to 1942 see the four essays in Chapter V "Air Warfare and Humanity" in Horst Boog (ed.), *The Conduct of the Air War in the Second World War*, pp.298-404.
22. General von Waldau in *Germany and the Second World War*, v.II, pp.337-338.
23. See *The Sunday Times* (14 January 1940) for the most detailed argument in favour of bombing Germany. See also Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* v.I, (London, 1970), pp.176-177.
24. J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy* v.II (London, 1957) p.411. For the Air Staff's position against bombing the civilian population, see PRO AIR 19/186 "Bombing Policy," Draft Paper by CAS, Air Marshal Sir Charles Portal, for the Secretary of State for Air, 30 October 1940.
25. In August 1941 a statistical examination of Bomber Command aiming photographs was undertaken. It revealed that only one fifth of the aircraft despatched bombed within a five mile radius of the target. For details of this study see the Butt Report, reproduced in its entirety in SAOG v.IV, pp.205-213.
26. SAOG v.IV, pp.143-148. As a matter of additional interest, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris did not take over as AOC-in-C Bomber Command until 23 February 1942, at which time the policy of area bombing had already been established.
27. A comprehensive selection of the bombing Directives issued to Bomber Command, outlining the various stages and progression of the strategic air campaign from 1940 to 1945, can be found in SAOG v.IV, Section III, pp.107-184.
28. Educated at Sidney Sussex College and Westcott House, Cambridge, Collins went on to become a Minor Canon at St. Paul's Cathedral. From 1931-1935 he served as a Priest-in-Ordinary to H.M. the King. In 1934 he returned to Westcott House as Vice-Principal, and in 1938 he was appointed Dean of Oriel College, Oxford.
29. Immediately after the war Collins founded Christian Action (Oxford, 1946), an Organisation dedicated to getting Christian principles applied to public questions and government policies both in national and international affairs. He also played a leading role in the establishment the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), serving as its chairman from 1958-1964. See: LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3287 "Miscellaneous Paper."
30. RAF Yatesbury normally had in residence two Church of England, one Roman Catholic, one Rabbi and two "Ordinary Protestant" chaplains.
31. LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3287, "Miscellaneous Papers: R.A.F. Chaplain, 1940-1945."
32. LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3287.
33. LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3287, "Background Notes to the Fellowship of the Transfiguration of Our Lord," written by Collins in January 1948; and W. Temple Papers v.14, "Correspondence with John Collins," 1-5 March 1943.
34. There were 142 members (86 men and 56 women) in the Fellowship one year after its establishment. By March 1945, membership had increased to just over 200. Collins introduced a "Pastoral Letter" in 1943, which was designed to keep those members who were posted away from Yatesbury in touch with the "Mother Church." These letters were sent out roughly three times a year (see endnote 35 below). After the war, the Fellowship continued in a somewhat smaller form, and as late as 1982 there were 83 members still actively involved.
35. See "Pastoral Letters" of the Fellowship, numbers 1-11, covering the period 1942-1945 for Collins, personal views

- on a "Christian's approach to the war," and his exhortations to the members of the Fellowship. LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3287. See also John Collins, *Faith Under Fire* (London, 1966).
36. Archdeacon Hartill (Chairman) and Vicar T.B. Scrutton, (Vice-Chairman) along with the members of the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, many of them fellow clergy, are included in this group. See LPL, C. Lang Papers v.80 and W. Temple Papers v.57.
 37. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act V, Scene V.
 38. Cosmo Lang took the position that the Church was not disposed to accept views about the conduct of the war from those who objected to it in any shape or form. William Temple often described his correspondence with those of "the kid-glove" school of warfare as being his most tiresome duty of the war. See LPL, C. Lang Papers v.80 and W. Temple Papers v.57. Also see F.A. Tremonger, *William Temple: Archbishop of Canterbury: His Life and Letters* (Oxford, 1948) pp.540-544.
 39. For a thoroughly engaging and erudite discussion on factors which influence the causes and conduct of war, see Ian Clark, *Waging War: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford, 1988); and Geoffrey Best, *Humanity and Warfare* (London, 1980) pp. 1-9, and chapter IV for Best's critical views on aerial bombardment.
 40. It is clear that there was embarrassment immediately after the war about the way the bombing campaign had been conducted. In August 1947 the Air Ministry, acting on direct instructions from the new Labour Government, initiated a comprehensive study of the strategic air offensives direction and development. Code named Exercise THUNDERBOLT, its specific purpose was "to highlight [the bomber campaign's] numerous failings." Surprisingly, given the political interests behind the inquiry, the results were inconclusive. See IWM, Air Commodore W. F. Lagdon Papers, DOCS 78/33/1, for a complete copy of the final report and the various papers which outlined the objectives of this exercise.
 41. Correspondence between Ashley Sampson and William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, 5-10 December 1942, LPL, W. Temple Papers v.57.
 42. Geoffrey Francis Fisher succeeded Temple as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1945. For the former's views on bombing and the position he took towards it see LPL, G. Fisher Papers v.5.
 43. A lively correspondence on bombing between Bell and both his supporters and detractors can be read in LPL, G. Bell Papers v.70. See also Ronald C.D. Jasper, *George Bell Bishop of Chichester* (Oxford, 1967) pp.256-287.
 44. LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3288, "Correspondence with distinguished speakers invited to address The Fellowship of the Transformation of Our Lord."
 45. LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3288.
 46. MRAF Sir Arthur Travers Harris File, Air Historical Branch (RAF), Ministry of Defence, Whitehall.
 47. Letter from Collins to William Temple, 15 May 1944. LPL, W. Temple Papers v.14; and 8th Pastoral Letter, 24 August 1944, in L. John Collins Papers MS 3287.
 48. LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3288.
 49. Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby and Squadron Leader W.H. Thompson, "Recollections of Sir Stafford Cripp's visit to Bomber Command HQ" in LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3300. See also David Irving, *The Destruction of Dresden* (London, 1963) pp.51-52.
 50. Thomas Dewar Weldon, better known as Harry Weldon, lived the life of a classic Oxford Don except for two interruptions brought on by the World Wars. He was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, staying on first as a Fellow, then Philosophy Tutor, and later Dean. His specialty was the work of Immanuel Kant and in 1945 he published Kant's "*Critique of Pure Reason*." Later works included *States and Morals* (1946) and *The Vocabulary of Politics* (1953). Never married, he died in 1958.
 51. LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3300.
 52. Dudley Saward, *Bomber Harris* (London, 1984) passim.
 53. The material used to piece together the text of Weldon's lecture comes from a number of sources. See LPL, L. John Collins Papers MS 3300; MRAF Sir Arthur Travers Harris File, Air Historical Branch (RAF) MoD Whitehall; Sir Arthur Harris Papers H9 "General Correspondence 1945" and H68 "Official Letters signed by C-in-C in 1944," RAF Museum, Hendon; and Dudley Saward, *Bomber Harris* (London, 1984) passim. The BBC made liberal reference to a diary kept by Weldon during the war in its 1989 documentary film on Sir Arthur Harris. Unfortunately all attempts to track down this diary have failed. If such a diary ever existed, and there is considerable doubt that it did, neither the BBC nor Magdalen College, Oxford, have any knowledge of its present whereabouts.
 54. Albert Speer, *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* (New York, 1976) p.340. See also Scot Robertson, "In the Shadow of Death by Moonlight" in David J. Bercuson and S.F. Wise (eds.) *The Valour and the Horror Revisited* pp.178-9 (note 59).
 55. Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-1943* translated by Louis Lochner (New York, 1948) pp.386, 404-5, 532; and *The Diaries of Joseph Goebbels - Final Entries 1945* translated by Richard Barry (New York, 1978) passim.
 56. See Field Marshal Albrecht Kesselring, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal Kesselring* (London, 1953); General Sir David Fraser, *Knight's Cross: A Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel* (London, 1993); B.H. Liddell Hart (ed.) *The Rommel Papers* (London, 1953); Charles Messenger, *The Last Prussian: A Biography of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt 1875-1953* (London, 1991); PRO WO 232/93 General Hasso von Manteuffel, "Grossdeutschland" Report (1944); and General F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles* (London, 1955).
 57. SAOG v.III, p.310.
 58. Richard J. Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 1994) p.373.
 59. *Ibid.*, pp.373-4.
 60. Sir Michael Howard, "Ethics, Deterrence and Strategic Bombing, *The Journal of the RAF Historical Society* no.14 (1995) p.18.
 61. SAOG v.III, p.310. See also the introduction by Sebastian Cox and the German view by Horst Boog in Sir Arthur Harris, *Despatch on War Operations* (London, 1996).

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