

4-30-2012

Confidential Report on the Recent Bombing of Le Havre

R.F. Delderfield

Recommended Citation

Delderfield, R.F. (2011) "Confidential Report on the Recent Bombing of Le Havre," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 20: Iss. 4, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol20/iss4/7>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Confidential Report on the Recent Bombing of Le Havre

Flight Lieutenant R.F Delderfield

On September 15th I was briefed to make my way to the town of Le Havre for the purpose of gathering material for a feature on R.A.F. bombing, in co-operation with the assault of the 1st Canadian Army. I reached Le Havre on the afternoon of Sunday, September 17th and remained in the town until evening on the 18th, when I returned via Rouen and Amiens.

The story arose out of a congratulatory message sent by the GOC 1st Canadian Army to Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris. The message stressed the accuracy of the bombing and stated that "the targets were hit just as the Army wanted it."

Soon after arrival I learned that the actual assault was carried out by British troops under Canadian command, the 51st Highland Division and the 49th Infantry Division entering the town simultaneously from two sides.

There had been a tremendous amount of preliminary bombing.

The first official I met was a Major J.D. Fraser, in the Town Major's office, which was situated in a building housing the Civil Administration Centre. Fraser was a Royal Engineer. In command of the town was Colonel Leslie, whom I did not see. He had only very recently taken over from Brigadier Leicester, now at Dunkirk.

Abstract: Flight Lieutenant R.F. Delderfield was a RAF public relations officer in 1944 when he was ordered to the continent to cover the capture of Le Havre. Arriving about a week after the city was liberated, Delderfield spent two days examining the town and interviewing soldiers and civilians about their impressions of the RAF bombing of the city. The report is noteworthy for the attention it pays to the impact of the bombing of the local population. The RAF subsequently modified its plans for the bombing of Boulogne so that only defensive works around the perimeter of the city were attacked and a Royal Air Force officer was in direct communication with the aircraft during the attacks to ensure that accuracy was maintained.

Later I met a Lieutenant-Colonel Rea, RA, who proved extremely helpful. He was attached to Colonel Leslie as second-in-command.

Major Fraser's View

Immediately I made known the purpose of my visit and that of Flight Lieutenant Devon, the accompanying photographer, Major Fraser stated bluntly that during the more recent R.A.F. attacks an entire residential area of the town had been razed to the ground and an official estimate put the civilian casualty total at 5,000. The whole town, he said, had been stunned and only now, some

six days later, was life returning to something like normal. As far as he was aware the bombing only killed about 8 Germans and did not fall on that quarter of the town where the Germans were assembled.

In view of this, and the effect it had upon my mission, I felt it my duty to make certain enquiries and visit certain areas, together with the photographer.

Major Fraser extended every courtesy to me and personally conducted me to an overlooking section of the town just above a fortified sector facing seaward. This was known as "The Fort" but is not to be confused with "The Fort" I later visited in company with the guide from the 51st Highlanders.

From the good viewpoint it was clear that a residential section of the town had been very severely pounded, presumably in the raid of the Tuesday evening preceding the surrender, (the 5th). It was, of course, very difficult to differentiate between the damage done on various occasions but I later ascertained that the main damage to the residential area was done on the Tuesday evening. Other residential areas were hit on the following Wednesday and following Sunday.

I then inspected the fortifications below. These formed part of the



Above: Aerial photos of the first wave of the 5 September 1944 RAF daylight attack on the port area of Le Havre. The image on the left shows target indicators (T.I.) falling at 1808 hours while the photo at left shows the concentrated bombing at 1848 hours.

Below: Aerial photos of the second wave of the RAF attack on 5 September. The devastation from the first attack is clearly visible at 1900 hours (left) prior to the bombing concentration of the second attack 20 minutes later.



Atlantic Wall and, as far as I could see, were practically intact.

Fires were still burning in the area described and I was told that many bodies were still under the ruins. I attached a map showing the shaded area concerned; the shading was not done by me.

Interpreter's Account:

On my return to the Town Major's office I spoke to a civilian who was working there. He was an interpreter and I asked him if I could see the Major. He said he would fix an appointment for the following morning. Without any request from

me he volunteered information on the recent bombings and said that the people of Le Havre had previously been very pro-British; he himself, he stated, had sent in intelligence reports of where the German troops were housed. He suggested we did not get his last message. His account more or less bore out the Major's original statement. This man's name was M.A.O Choah, Chief Engineer of Le Havre. His address is Lycee, Rue Auelot. I called back at the office twice after this but on neither occasion did I see the Major; I asked to see the Military Commander but did not do so although later I had a

long conversation with his second-in-command. I sent a copy of Bomber Command Bulletin No.15612 into the Commander. When returning it he confirmed the fact that the recent bombings had cost the town some 5,000 civilian casualties. Major Fraser added that the reason for the town's surrender appeared to be the injuries caused the German Commander, who was badly wounded and unable to continue the fight.

French Civilian Attitude

The attitude of the French civilians confirmed, for the most part, the statements I heard at the

Civilian Affairs Depot. Some of them failed to respond to a greeting and I felt that if they had been certain I was R.A.F. (I wore a raincoat all the time) there might have been some unpleasantness. In fairness, however, I must state that there was no show of hostility. On Sunday night we were introduced into a hotel reserved for billeting. It was the "Brasserie des Six Billiards," No. 156 Cours de la Republique. The proprietor, M. Roger Loiseau, said he was English by birth but had resided in France a great number of years. He spoke fluent English. On entering he returned to the veranda outside and locked the door. He stated that he didn't want any of the French hanging around. When he saw my uniform

he began a detailed description of all that had happened. In the course of his conversation he got up and let a French resident into the bar and this inhabitant immediately began a valuable conversation, most of which was translated for my benefit. I thought it wise to make shorthand notes of these conversations and the gist is quoted below:-

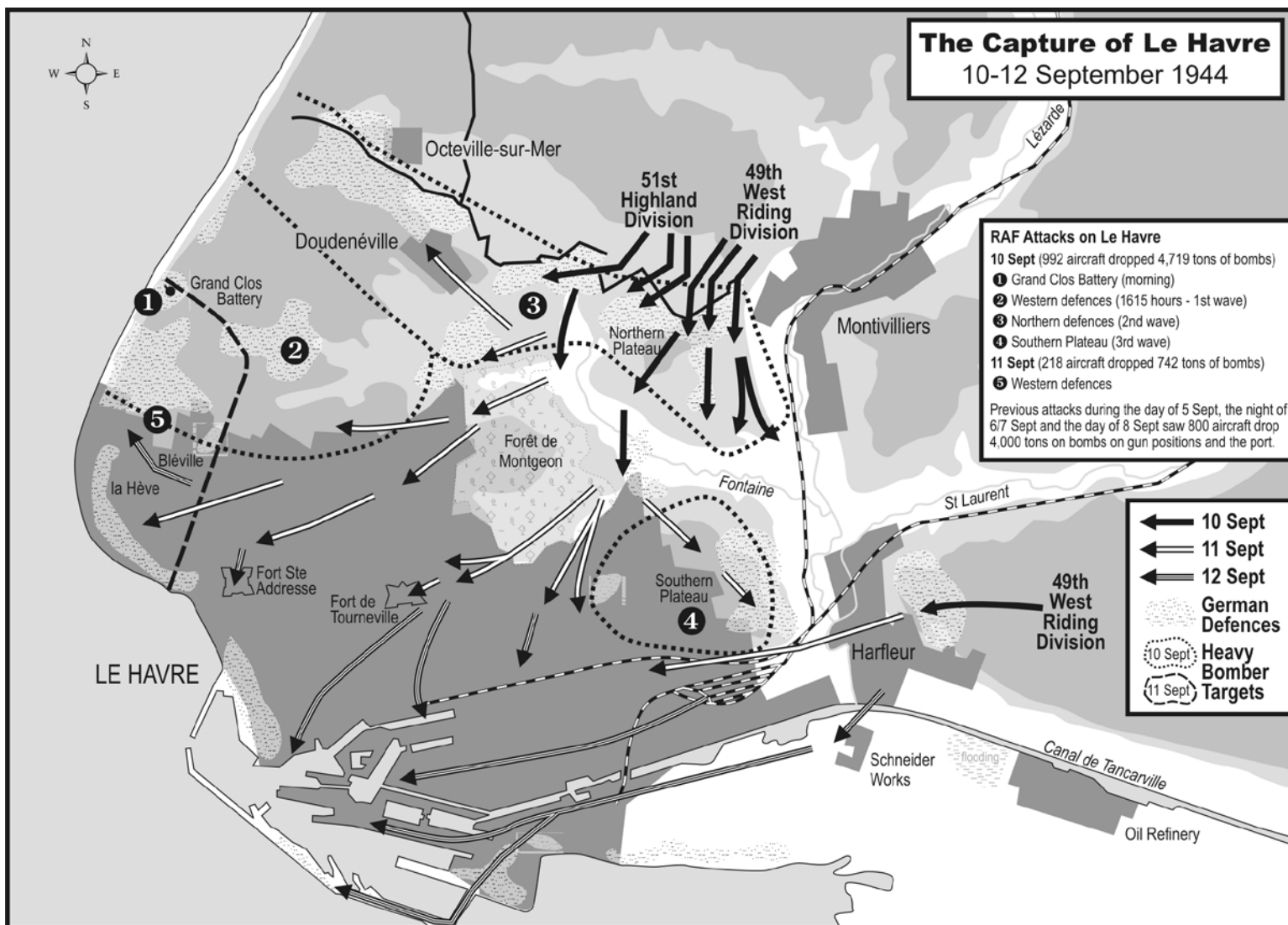
M. Loiseau

"On the 5th and 6th (Tues. and Wed) there were very heavy raids by the R.A.F. On the following Sunday there was another but on this occasion by far the most military damage was done – the greatest, perhaps, with the exception of the attack on June 14th. On this occasion (June 14th)

the bombs killed 3,200 Germans and sunk 41 U-Boats and E-Boats in the pens. 800 Germans were shot by their officers because they mutinied. Most of these men were sailors. I found all this out by going down to the Locks. I had a pass because I could speak German and I was sometimes employed as an interpreter among the civilian workers there.

"On the 5th the bombing started about 6pm and lasted until about 8pm. It was concentrated in the Town hall area. 139 civilians were killed in one shelter. Altogether I estimated 2,000 civilians were killed.

"Previously – I believe it was 31st of August – the German Commander asked the townspeople to leave and the order was given in the



Map drawn by Mike Bechtold ©2012



Bombs fall on the area of the Grand Clos Battery north of Le Havre. The information on the air photo shows that it was taken at 1050 hours on 10 September 1944 and indicates that the attacking aircraft was piloted by Squadron Leader Edwards and carried a load of 11 x 1000 lbs bombs and 4 x 500 lbs bombs.

newspapers. The Maquis, however, posted up counter-notice urging them to stay. 9pm on the 5th was the time-limit given for leaving and some people did go. He believed part of the defences were unmined to let them pass. The reason given by the Maquis to stay was that the Germans wished to pillage.

"Subsequently the Germans used this bombing as propaganda

and posted up notices all over the town saying the English – as always – did not care what happened to the civilian population.

"On Wednesday, 6th, the R.A.F. bombed the areas of Applemont – Sanvic and Graville – possible 1,500 civilians were killed, more than 100 in a tunnel shelter."

The French civilian, whose name I did not get but who is a close friend

of the landlord and an employer of 50 men, said that 3 of his workmen had been killed. He had been to a funeral that day. The population could not understand the necessity for bombing them. They were glad to be liberated but this was a terrible price to pay. Before he left, however, he asked M. Loiseau to stress the fact that, despite the losses, Le Havre was thankful to be free again. He earnestly hoped

that these incidents would not lead to bad feeling between the French and English.

I emphasized that I was in the town solely as a Public Relations officer to write an account of the bombing in support of our troops and that none of these conversations

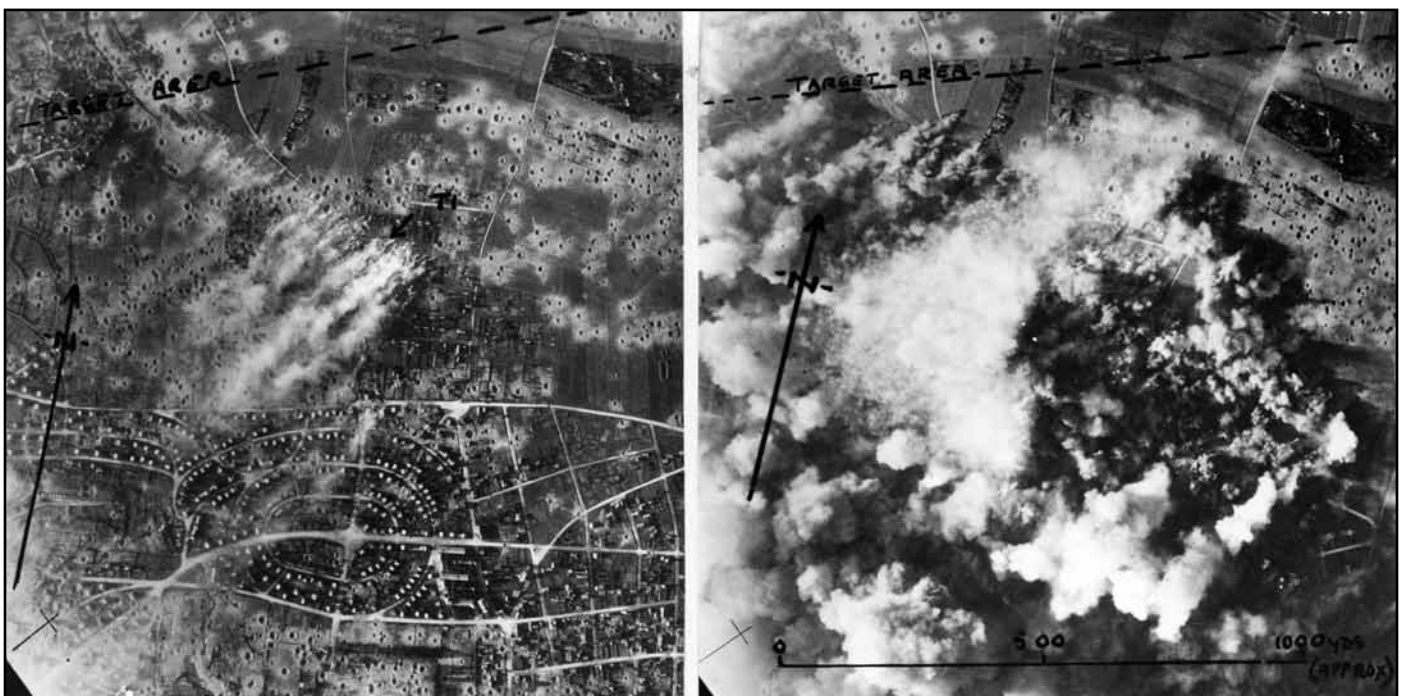
were officially inspired – I was merely gathering facts. I stressed these points in conversation with all three civilians with whom I conversed. The question of compensation was mentioned once but I ignored the matter. Had the Town Major and other officers at the Civil Headquarters not made the

statements they did make I should not have discussed the matter any further; in the circumstances I felt, before returning, that it would be as well to make some enquires of my own. It was as well I did. Subsequently I gathered an entirely different viewpoint.



Above: Daylight attack on the area north of Le Havre on 10 September 1944. The anti-tank ditch is visible crossing at the top. The image on the left shows the target indicators (T.I.) while the image on the right shows the later bombing concentration.

Below: Before and after aerial photos of the attack on the Southern plateau east of Le Havre on the afternoon on 10 September.



View of the Troops

I spent the morning in company with the photographer viewing the docks and observed the complete havoc caused by our attacks and, possibly, German demolitions. Bombing of the E-boat pens was remarkably effective, huge concrete shelters having been penetrated. A number of photographs were taken despite pouring rain. We had to walk nearly all the time but got occasional lifts in jeeps. The Town Major's car was sent back after our arrival.

On returning to the Depot I was stopped by Lieutenant-Colonel Rea, RA, who said he would like to speak to me about the bombing.

He then said that, in his opinion, I would be leaving with a biased view. As a military man, he considered our bombing to have been most effective and to have been the means of saving a great number of casualties among the troops. I explained that this was directly negative to the views I had heard expressed. He said his view would be supported by the officers of the 154th Brigade of Highland Div. This Brigade was still in the town. I told Lieutenant-Colonel Rea I would greatly appreciate interviews. He then invited me to the Mess and convoyed me there by car. The CO, Brigadier Oliver, was very pleased to see me and confirmed the Lieutenant-Colonel's view. The R.A.F. bombing of the outskirts, he said, was remarkably, effective and

accurate. The army was most grateful. There had been bombing in the town but he considered the official figure of the casualties to be exaggerated. The total was not more than 2,000. He had heard that 5,000 would be dug out of the ruins; actually only 1,000 bodies were found.

I asked the Brigadier if he would conduct me to the two important keypoints of the enemy's fortifications for the purpose of inspecting the damage. He said he would be delighted to do so and gave me a First Lieutenant as guide and a captured German vehicle. During the afternoon we visited the district of Fontaine la Mallet, some 1 ½ miles outside of the town and "The Fort" – a wooded district not far away. Here there was very definite evidence of heavy bombing, particularly at the latter, where German barracks had received direct hits.

The guide explained how important these bombings had been to advancing troops. Other officers in the Mess confirmed this view. One of the officers said the Germans were so demoralized that "they only have to be collected." The R.A.F. also bombed ammunition dumps in the woods. Officers referred to the bombing areas as "Alvis" (exterior wire and anti-personnel), "Cadillac" (harbor installations – H.E), "Bentley" (H.E) and "Buick" (barracks, fort, etc).

A full description of the effect of our bombs on the outskirts and docks

appears in the draft of an article I wrote on my return.

This is the gist of the visit and the conversations. It represents an accurate summary of my notes and impressions. Doubtless Flight Lieutenant Devon, who was with me during the greater part of the time, can confirm.

Signed,

R.F. Delderfield

Flight Lieutenant, PR3

Note: The editors of CMH have not been able to track down a copy of the article about Le Havre that Delderfield wrote for public release in 1944.

R.F. Delderfield (1912-1972) was a journalist and playwright who enlisted in the Royal Air Force in 1940. Commissioned in 1943, Delderfield was posted to the Air Ministry in London as a public relations officer. Starting in the Fall of 1944 he was sent to the continent with a six-man reconnaissance team to report on the effects of Allied bombing on 56 targets in France and Belgium. Following the war he resumed his literary career and has been described by his biographer as "one of the most widely read British novelists of the twentieth century." (*R.F. Delderfield* by Sanford Sternlicht, 1988) His works include *The Swann Family Saga* and his autobiography *Bird's Eye View* and television adaptations of such works as *To Serve Them All My Days*, *Diana*, and *A Horseman Riding By* have received worldwide distribution.