Welcome to the May session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speaker is Professor Stephen Alan Bourque, Professor Emeritus from the School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College and author of Beyond the Beach: The Allied War Against France. He is speaking tonight on the toll the air campaign in support of the Normandy landings took on the French civilian population. He will be joined by D-Day veterans.

Most of World War II’s grand narrative themes are well covered and understood ever since the end of the war. In recent years, attention has shifted to the less well known themes and topics that are excluded from the overarching narratives. In some cases, this is due to new evidence and archives becoming available to scholars (such as from the Soviet Union/Russia), allowing previously obscure areas to be revealed. In other cases, topics have been avoided because they counter, often tragically, the “good war” myth. Thus, Americans historians are increasingly willing to examine less flattering aspects of wartime America, such as the Japanese internment camps, or the US armed force’s racial divisions.

Gen. Dwight Eisenhower purposely used the strategic bombers as long range artillery to prepare the landing zone and the surrounding access routes. The effects of the bombing campaigns on the French population were regarded as incidental “collateral damage” if they were regarded at all. Worse, in the invasions of France in 1944 (Operations OVERLORD and DRAGOON), whole communities were annihilated as a consequence of the ferocity of the Allied offensives. The story of France’s suffering from their Liberator is a “Missing Narrative” in the history of the European war.

The US 8th Air Force’s first bombing raid in August 1942 was made on the French rail yard at Sotteville near Rouen. It was considered a success by the British and Americans since no aircrew casualties were reported and half the bombs fell in the targeted area. Of course, French sources reported that 52 civilians were killed and 120 injured. Late in 1943, Allied strategic bombing forces devoted more effort to civilian targets – railroad marshaling yards, road junctions, bridges – critical to German efforts to move reinforcements into Normandy following the invasion. These air raids destroyed not only vital civic and industrial infrastructure but also homes, churches, and other non-military targets. French cities were bombed extensively, notably Flers, Saint-Lô, LeMans, Rennes, and Caen. The extent of destruction of France was staggering. Over sixty-thousand French lost their lives in the Allied bombings. Already subject to the nightmare of Nazi occupation policies, France found Liberation to be another national trauma.

Very little has been written in English about the high human costs the French paid during the Allied Air offensive. While this was understood within France, American histories have focused exclusively on the strategic, tactical, or technical aspects of Americans bomber attacks on enemy targets in France. The destruction and civilian casualties suffered by France under Allied air attack far exceeded what the country had suffered from the German conquest. The price of liberation was very high for the French civilian population.

Americans tend to think of D-Day, in terms of Omaha Beach and Saving Private Ryan, or Band of Brothers but the Normandy landings (OPERATION NEPTUNE) were much more than these portrayals. D-Day was one of the most thoroughly planned battles; one of the most complicated military operations; and perhaps the most studied twenty-four hour period in the military history of the world. The French people living in Normandy are barely seen in most portrayals of the troop movements in France. Saving Private Ryan shows one French family being “rescued” by the American platoon only to have an American soldier killed because of his kindness. The French town in the climactic scene had been “abandoned” by French civilians. The same is true of Band of Brothers: the soldiers move through towns with little interaction with the civilians unless it is a cheering crowd grateful for liberation. Most war movies ignore civilians and treat “collateral damage” as a non-issue.

The grand narratives depict heroic American pilots in their bomber jackets and rakishly crushed hats tilted “just so” on their heads, rather than the French father coming home from work in the rail yard only to discover his

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com
entire family dead. The French were well aware of the price they paid to be liberated from the Nazis. Their perception was that British and American strategists, focused on defeating Germany, were indifferent to French suffering. This contributed to a poisonous atmosphere after the war. The French were already resentful of the British, first, for their retreat from the continent at Dunkirk, and second, for their attack on the French fleet at Oran after France had left the war. British strategic necessity had resulted in the death of hundreds of French sailors. Similarly, the daily air raids on French civilian centers by the US 8th Air Force led to strained relations after 1945 and especially after Charles De Gaulle assumed the French Presidency.

Americans, proud over their defeat of the Nazis expected gratitude from the French people after liberation and especially with the Marshall Plan. However, many Americans, then and now, were blind to the damage and death that liberation cost France. Our appreciation of this neglected side of the war provides a deeper context for France’s post-war attitudes and policies which often seemed stubbornly counter to American ambitions.

**FURTHER READINGS:**


Announcements:

Vietnam War Roundtable - 20 May, 2019 - Minnesota Connections to Battle of Soulé Tre - mnvietnam.org - rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - 21 May 2019 - Kentucky Raider: Pvt Commodore Perry Snell - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 20 May, 2019 - St. Croix Valley Militia Soldiers - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net


Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mangmuseum.org

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomberg, Wednesdays at 1130 - https://www.8thmn.org, - Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

See our programs on YouTube at http://youtube.com/ww2hrt.