

WORLD OF MUSEUMS / LE MONDE DES MUSÉES

THE BOMBER COMMAND CONTROVERSY — A PROMISING NEW METHOD OF HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

The point of this brief article is to propose a better interpretative method on the subject of the bomber command controversy at the Canadian War Museum (CWM). My own interest was piqued mainly by a score of emails on the British Columbia Museums Association "listserve" late this summer, wherein many of our region's museologists hotly debated both the morality of such warfare and a museum's proper position in the face of heavy outside pressure to remove or revise offending displays. Additionally, I flew in such aircraft as a RCAF navigator during the 1950s and 1960s before embarking upon another career as a museum history curator, so I feel pulled several ways in an issue that has become deep-felt for me: what is more important to portray, the authentic voices of aircrew veterans or scholarly historical perspectives? Plainly, each has its place, and taken overall, even the newly revised CWM exhibits, when seen, give more weight to the former. The museum took a huge shortcut in portraying a dynamite subject.

Strategic aerial bombing originated in World War One when key transportation centres or military installations well behind enemy lines were targeted and attacked by long range aircraft as a means of crippling whole or part armies in the field. During the 1930s in China, Ethiopia, and Spain, civilian populations were affected by terror bombing, the method of creating large scale urban chaos to impede the enemy's mobility or defences. By the middle of World War Two, strategic bomber doctrine was split: hit core industrial or infrastructure targets by daylight "pinpoint attacks" (USAAF), or attack major cities to destroy civilian morale and war enthusiasm through nighttime "carpet bombing" (RAF/RCAF). Later, the American long range bombing of Japan was also aimed at cities, first with massive incendiary bomb raids followed by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If these horrors were not enough, the Cold War offered virtually complete annihilation by either long range jet bomber fleets, submarine launched ballistic missiles, or ultimately, ICBMs dropping from sub-orbital trajectories — and all carrying thermonuclear (hydrogen bomb) weapons.

The source of the CWM's failure to properly communicate with visitors on the full nature and scope of strategic bombing (far beyond Canada's involvement alone) is a twofold flaw, one part systemic, the other structural. In the first instance, start-up budgeting is the primary fault; in the second, the curators' work towards a comprehensive portrait of Canada's military past compounds the problem. Specifically, here's what went wrong from the outset:

- Treasury Boards systematically expect modern government-funded museums to use their start-up funds to construct and fill the buildings. In the instances of history institutions, that automatically means creating permanent exhibits because a process of changing displays costs so much to again and again prepare and install. Such is definitely the case of the CWM. Of its seven main galleries, only one is reserved for "special" or temporary displays, the other six are very long-term capital intensive exhibitions. And today they are completely filled with displays.
- The CWM's theme structure is largely chronological, episodic, and nationalistic. In the permanent exhibits galleries visitors move ahead through sections of time from pre-contact aboriginal warfare to modern day international interventions. In each of these main sections, the storyline identifies key battles or geopolitical events that, by and large, are either claimed or implied by the curators to generally have advanced Canadian nation-building in their times. And these are huge historical episodes that are given summary rather than comprehensive treatment. Because all the initial capital was invested in permanent exhibits that literally filled the War Museum's galleries, there is not anywhere enough display space or money in reserve to do more — at least in the conventional way.

No exhibit wall is large enough to carry the number of words needed to describe even Canada's role in strategic bombing, nor is there sufficient gallery volume anywhere to portray the images, artifacts, documents, or artworks required to authenticate such an episode. Instead, the CWM must look to other forms of expression to tell this story. (Indeed, this equally applies to many of the major episodes it chooses to portray).

First, the CWM needs to install a series of small studios or ateliers adjacent to the main traffic path. In these new spaces there should be a host of study materials easily accessible to visitors who want to both probe into a topic and reach a satisfactory conclusion on their own. In short, these new spaces are to be like mini-libraries that contain sufficient information to properly cover a historical subject such as "strategic bombing", and not just from a Canadian point-of-view. Books, articles, VHS, CD ROMs, Internet — this is how the CWM can economically condense all the data needed

to properly present controversial topics, as long as it creates the physical spaces visitors require to search and study.

Second, the CWM should hire a staff of assistant curators with history degrees to staff these spaces. Their roles would be twofold: develop the databases and guide visitors in their use, including an ability to converse one-on-one on subjects like strategic bombing.

These two new means of expression (databases and their experts onhand) could truly be a “specialty of the house” at the CWM. It would also be a labour rather than capital intensive solution and an infinitely more flexible way to describe and interpret extremely complex or highly controversial historical events. Displays of artifacts, documents, and images backed by written text or even firsthand audio-visual accounts cannot always be relied upon to instruct visitors on

what transpired, nor convince them of the morality involved. Often the historical and moral issues require extensive probing and reflection of one’s own findings. Such issues merit exhibits, an exhibit layout, and even discussion with knowledgeable interpreters in order to create a museum experience that can engage visitors more deeply in their understanding of the past.

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NEW PRIZE ANNOUNCEMENT
Neil Sutherland Prize for the Best Scholarly Article
published in the History of Children and Youth

The CHA-SHC- affiliated History of Children and Youth Group wishes to announce a new article prize. This award honours the pioneering work of Professor Neil Sutherland in the field of history of children and youth by recognizing outstanding contributions to the field. Articles illuminating the history of children and youth published in scholarly journals and books are eligible, in French or English, with no restriction on time period or geographic context. The award of \$200.00 will accompany the prize which will be given out on a biennial basis beginning in 2008. The inaugural prize will be

awarded in conjunction with the 2008 meetings of the Canadian Historical Association at the University of British Columbia in June. For further information, please visit our website: <http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/HCYG/>

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