



Beyond the Beach: The Allied War against France by Stephen A. Bourque.

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The Normandy invasion (6 June 1944) is one of the most familiar and well chronicled events in military history. The effectiveness of Allied fire support, especially by heavy bombers, has been a frequent issue in the literature of that invasion. Yet, while most accounts note that the bombers often missed their targets, few describe where those bombs actually landed—on the civilian population of Normandy. Studies of civilian bombing casualties have concentrated on German and Japanese victims and not the suffering endured in occupied countries.

This omission is one of the matters addressed in *Beyond the Beach* by historian Stephen Bourque (US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, emeritus). He contends that English-language narratives of the invasion are so preoccupied with the proper role of strategic bombers in the crusade against Germany that they overlook the experience of the French people, who, during four years of German occupation, lost at least sixty thousand civilians to Allied bombardment. No less than 45 percent of bomb tonnage dropped between January and August 1944 fell on France rather than Germany.

Using British, French, and American archives as well as victims' recollections, Bourque considers all aspects of this undeclared war on France, beginning in 1940 with the British bombing of bases Germany used to prepare for and launch the Battle of Britain. Once the invasion threat receded, France still contained legitimate bombing targets, ranging from German-controlled factories to hardened U-boat bases. In 1942-43, RAF Bomber Command and the 8th Army Air Force focused on these facilities because their proximity to Britain made it easier to hit them before their German defenders could react. Eighty-one percent of 8th Air Force's missions between June and December 1943 were aimed at France and the Low Countries rather than Germany. Unfortunately, this element of surprise made it harder for the French populace to take shelter in time.

The bombing of France intensified dramatically in 1944 with the advent of German V-weapons and the Allied invasion of the continent. In each case, the author details the nature of the targets and the political and military planning they entailed. Strategic bombing advocates, especially Air Marshal Arthur Harris of Bomber Command and Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz of the US Strategic Air Forces Europe, argued strenuously that strikes against industry and infrastructure were more effective than attacks supporting the approaching invasion, even though they knew their bombers were too inaccurate to be effective against point targets and posed a grave danger to nearby civilians. (Bourque suggests that airpower histories tend to omit attacks on France because they undercut the strategic bombing narrative.)

General Bernard Montgomery, as the ground component head, and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, as supreme Allied commander, insisted that all available aircraft be dedicated to the invasion. When Prime Minister Winston Churchill expressed concern about likely civilian casualties, President Franklin Roosevelt refused to second-guess Eisenhower. As a result, nearly thirteen thousand Allied aircraft were dedicated to the invasion, even though most of the aircrews lacked the training and technology needed to strike point targets accurately.

Much of the book concerns the types of targets and the effects of bombing on both intended targets and civilian populations. In addition to Operation Crossbow attacks against V-weapon sites, target lists included airfields, railyards, and bridges. Most unfortunate of all was the decision to destroy French villages and towns around Normandy in order to impede the movement of German mechanized counterattack forces. Not only were these direct attacks on civilians morally repugnant (as several air commanders protested), they were, Bourque concludes, at best only partially effective; they failed to block roads but turned buildings into heaps of rubble that German troops later used as defensive positions.

Bourque does describe a few accurate airstrikes. The RAF's 617 Squadron, famous for its precision "skip-bombing" of German dams, conducted several attacks before the invasion with minimal collateral damage. Low-level strikes by Mosquito and A-20 light bombers sometimes achieved an equal accuracy. But the overwhelming impression given by the author is of raids causing minor damage to intended targets but devastating French towns and people. The existing technology simply did not permit anything else. During one of a series of attacks on river bridges in the city of Rouen, for example,

One hundred fifty-four American medium bombers, dropping 253 2,000-pound bombs, had been able to hit the two bridges only a few times. Both bridges were damaged but not destroyed. Among other buildings, the attackers wiped out the Eden Cinema and the impressive sixteenth-century church, Saint Vincent, containing the finest stained-glass windows in Rouen. Authorities discovered more than fifty people dead in the shelter near the Catherine Graindor School. The customs house and most of the area near the bridges were in flames.... [The next day,] the twelfth-century Cathédrale Notre-Dame burst into flames. Most evidence indicates that the heat of nearby fires set off an unexploded bomb. (192)

Air planners were well aware of the limitations of their technology, but their attempted solutions sometimes backfired as well. To avoid inadvertently striking the invading troops on D-Day, the operators of primitive radar bombing sights were told to delay bomb release for several seconds after locating their targets. This delay caused many bombs to miss their targets and ensured that French civilians took the full brunt of the attack. Other efforts to avoid unintended casualties often failed. For instance, French Resistance reports show that B-17 bombers were scheduled to strike a major V-weapon site at 6:45 p.m., well after construction work should have ceased for the day. But the German managers decided to work overtime that day, so the bombers killed hundreds of slave laborers.

As a skilled staff officer and combat veteran, the author is well aware of the Clausewitzian friction that causes failure and unnecessary suffering in wartime. His critique of the Allied attacks on France does not, therefore, reflect unrealistic expectations about what the invaders might have achieved. Given the overwhelming need to ensure a successful invasion and neutralize the V-weapon threat, the Allies' choice of methodology is understandable, though Bourque faults them for not fully investigating potential unintended consequences. In *Beyond the Beach*, he has given Anglophone readers a superb corrective account of the vastly different perceptions of their French counterparts, who have erected many memorials to the forgotten suffering inflicted by Allied bombers.