

Peter Twinn DFC sent in this article from the February 2000 Issue of *The Wartime News*. His letter to the Editor of that publication is reproduced at the end of the article.

“THUNDERCLAP CLAIMS DRESDEN”

In what could only be described as a night of total devastation, the ancient town of Dresden became a raging inferno as around 770 aircraft of the RAF razed it to the ground.

On the night of 13/14 February 1945, Bomber Command made two attacks on the town, the first of which was carried out by 277 Lancasters shortly followed by a further 529 Lancasters supported by 9 Mosquitoes. Simultaneously, an additional 268 RAF aircraft attacked the synthetic oil plant at Bohlen, near Leipzig. The raid was said to be in support of the Russian advance less than 62 miles away, under the command of Marshal Koniev.

When the RAF turned away, hundreds of bombers from the American 8th Air Force returned hours later to inflict further suffering on the smouldering town. Revisionists later claimed that Dresden was not a military target and that the war was almost over anyway. However, Colonel H. E. Cook (USAAF Retired) later reported: **“On 13/14 February 1945, we POWs were shunted into the Dresden marshalling yards where, for nearly 12 hours, German troops and equipment rolled in and out of Dresden. I saw with my own eyes that Dresden was an armed camp — thousands of German troops, tanks & artillery and miles of freight cars....transporting German logistics towards the East to meet the Russians.”**

Jim Price, a journalist who had previously served in Normandy, wrote a compelling letter in January 1995, just before the 50th Anniversary of the raid that clearly identified the strategy behind the bombing: **“As an economic centre, Dresden was ranked sixth in importance in pre-war Germany. During the war, over 3,700 industrial plants of various sizes worked full-time in Dresden for the Nazi war machine. Among them were such giants as Zeiss Ikon AG. The Dresden Zeiss plant, alongside the main plant in Jena, was one of the principal centres for the production of field glasses for the German army and aiming sights for the Panzer tanks and the German artillery. They also made bombsights for the Luftwaffe and periscopes for the U-boats. Beside Zeiss, there were other internationally-known firms producing radio sets, teleprinters, photographic paper and other telecommunications equipment. In the weeks preceding the bombing of 13th February, the importance of Dresden as a war-production centre increased considerably in view of the loss to the advancing Russians in January 1945 of Upper Silesia (an industrial centre second only to the Ruhr). The destruction of the Dresden war production centre meant a significant reduction in the effectiveness of the German armed forces. In addition, Dresden was one of the key centres for the German postal and telegraph system and a crucial east-west transit point with its seven bridges and a huge railroad junction. This was particularly important at the time of the Russian offensive of January/February 1945.**

There were other reasons why Dresden became an important target in February 1945. One of them was that Hitler's strategy called for leaving 'fortresses' (festungen) behind his enemies' lines. These fortresses caused problems and Dresden was a potential fortress. The Elbe is over 300 feet wide at Dresden and the highest point in the town at that time was almost 1000 feet above sea-level, thus offering an excellent view of the surrounding countryside. There was also a political aspect of the raid on Dresden. Part of it was caused by the Germans themselves. The initial successes in the Ardennes in December 1944 humiliated the Western Allies and weakened their position vis-à-vis Stalin. The Western Allies had to do something to remedy this situation, which would also allay Stalin's suspicions that the Western Allies were thinking of a separate peace with Nazi Germany. **Contrary to revisionist claims, the war was not almost over in February that year. Germany still controlled extensive territories and actually produced surprises, after Dresden, in Hungary and Lower Silesia. The Western Allies had not crossed the Rhine at that time. The greatest threat, however, was that of the "war-winning weapons" and they had to take that very seriously. They knew that the V1 and V2 existed, but they did not know what the V3, V4 etc. would look like. They also knew that Germany was working on the atomic bomb.**

The war had to be brought to an end as quickly as possible with all available means. To achieve this, the Allies had no choice but to deliver a series of mortal blows to the morale of the German people, who, in spite of everything, continued to support Adolph Hitler. They even followed him after the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945 when its horrors were broadcast to the world and therefore also to Germany. They continued to follow Hitler even after they watched the many thousands of living cadavers from German concentration camps being herded westward in early 1945.

At the time of the raid on Dresden, there was still no evidence that the morale of the German people had weakened.

The fire-bombing of Dresden by RAF Bomber Command took place during the night of 13/14 February 1945, as part of *Operation Thunderclap*, designed to bring about Germany's downfall by helping to destroy its railway network - the raid resulted in a firestorm. Hundreds of fires combined into one huge roaring inferno. It consumed oxygen at a rate which caused hurricane-like winds, sucking in everything that could move, including people. Hours after the British bombers departed, hundreds of American bombers attacked Dresden on 14 February. The American bombers returned the following day on 15 February and attacked Dresden again. **The estimates of casualties in Dresden vary from a low of 25,000 to a high of 135,000. the higher figure is said to be close to the truth. But even this higher figure is small compared with the number of innocent people the Germans were still murdering in concentration camps at that very time. Dresden was not the first victim of fire-bombing...nor was Hamburg in 1943, the blueprint for the fire-bombing of Dresden was produced by the Germans themselves on 30 December 1940, when the Luftwaffe dropped an estimated 100,000 incendiary bombs on the London**

business district (known as 'the City'). Worse fire-bombings of London would have followed had Germany not turned east in 1941. Albert Speer, who later became Hitler's Armaments Minister, wrote in his memoirs, (*Inside the Third Reich*, page 370, that, during a dinner at the Chancellery in 1940, Hitler talked of the total destruction of London. He foresaw the phenomenon of the firestorm (yet unknown at that time). In Hitler's words, "Fires everywhere. Thousands of them. Then they will unite in one gigantic area of conflagration. Goering has the right idea....explosive bombs don't work, but it can be done with incendiary bombs." Little did Hitler know that the fate he had conceived for London in 1940 would become the fate of Dresden in 1945. One of the factors that made WWII possible was that in WWI, Germany had not suffered bombing and destruction. Had the German people had some nasty memories of Allied air attacks from WWI, perhaps they would not have goose-stepped in the 1930s, giving the Nazi salute and yelling their support of Nazism, thus encouraging Hitler all the way to WWII. **Whatever Hitler did was fine with the German people. Grabbing other countries like Austria and Czechoslovakia was, in the words of the correspondent in Germany, William Shirer, "terribly popular". there were other things the German people enjoyed...the 1939 German film, *Baptism Of Fire*, showed the merciless German bombing of the defenceless Polish population. Yes, the German audiences cheered, laughed and applauded. The German people went to war confident that, just as in WWI, only other countries would suffer.**

During the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Dresden, an old German held a sign which said, *Think of 13 February 1945, Your Majesty*. It is more important that this old German, and other Germans as well, think of 13 February 1945 and tell their children and grandchildren about it.

Perhaps that will make them think twice before following another Hitler to yet another war. **The better the German people remember the 1945 Dresden raid the better will the chances be for future peace. And this is why the wartime Allies must not feel guilty about the fire-bombing of Dresden.'**

EDITORIAL NOTE: Following the publication of the above article, Peter Twinn, DFC wrote the following letter to the Editor, which was subsequently published in a later edition of *Wartime News*. "Your leading article on Dresden, (February 2000), was very apt. I took part in that operation as a Lancaster rear-gunner with 149 Squadron. It was an 8 1/2-hour trip which, we were told, would assist the Russians in their advance. Thus the background detail in your article is a real eye-opener and deserves a national circulation.

I, and no doubt all those who took part in the operation, are sick to death of being castigated for our 'act of revenge and needless unwarranted brutality' and the constant national apology for this operation. It would be a good idea if you could give your article national coverage, and so explain to the public the reasons for the operation of which we, at the time, had no knowledge. It would thus go some way to remove the stigma on the RAF and all those who gave their lives at the time. Keep up the good work with

your magazine as it does our hearts good to remember those days and the wonderful comradeship which has lasted a lifetime.

Peter A. S. Twinn, DFC, JP.



Peter Twinn, DFC

Below is his obituary, taken from the *This Is Local London* collection of 40 online London newspapers, of 26th January 2010.

AN RAF gunner who became known the world over for his part in the bombings of Dresden, Nuremberg and Berlin during the Second World War has died aged 88.

Peter Twinn, of Dukes Avenue in Theydon Bois, appeared in countless TV documentaries, articles and books as one of the few participating survivors prepared to recount his experiences of the controversial raids.

Mr Twinn, who was awarded a DFC for bravery, spent the war providing covering fire cooped up in a bubble at the rear of a Lancaster Bomber.

His role as a 'Tail-end Charlie' was notoriously risky – only one in three survived the war.

While his crew were hailed as heroes at the time, revisionist historians subsequently criticised the bombing of Dresden as unjustified.

But Mr Twinn, who later became president of the Epping and District Royal British Legion, remained unfazed, and happily spoke out to give his views on the controversy.

He said the point is when they were actually bombing the place they didn't think of those that were being killed. You went out, did your job and tried to get home if you could, said his widow Marjorie, 80.

His attitude was why should we apologise when the Germans raised Coventry and London to the ground?

However Mr Twinn's war was about far more than Dresden.

He got into a few scrapes, said Marjorie. There was one occasion when his heated suit packed up. The panel on his bit of the plane had been removed to give him a better view but he was left freezing.

He was so cold by the end of it they had to lift him out of the plane.

Mr Twinn also kept meticulous records, and would collect newspaper coverage of his missions, correcting inaccuracies and propaganda in the margins.

The priceless collection is now being handed over to the Imperial War Museum.

Mr Twinn, who died after a battle with cancer, is survived by his wife Marjorie, two daughters from a previous marriage, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

A funeral service will be held at St Mary's Church in Theydon Bois at 1.30pm on Friday February 5.