Leslie Weaver a Lancaster bomber pilot
Article No 45

Leslie, now one of the few remaining Lancaster pilots, was in a wheelchair and suffering from leukaemia but was still able to discuss his wartime experiences as a Lancaster bomber pilot. He made twenty successful operations including the notorious Dresden raid in February 1945. The German’s surrendered a few weeks later on the 8th May 1945.

The official history of the Dresden raid reads as follows:
“The Bombing of Dresden was a military bombing by both the British Royal Air Force and the United States Army Air Force as part of the Allied forces operation between the 13th February and 15th February 1945. In four raids 1,300 heavy bombers dropped more than 3,900 tons of high-explosive bombs and incendiary devices on the city. The resulting firestorm destroyed 15 square miles of the city centre.

A 1953 United States Air Force report written by Joseph W. Angell defended the operation as the justified bombing of a military and industrial target and as a major rail transportation and communication centre, housing 110 factories and 50,000 workers in support of the Nazi war effort. Others argued that Dresden was a cultural landmark of little or no military significance and the attacks were indiscriminate area bombing and not proportionate to the commensurate military gains.

In March 1945, the Nazi regime ordered its press to publish a death toll of 200,000 for the Dresden raids. Death toll estimates as high as 500,000 have subsequently been given, however an independent investigation commissioned by the city council in 2010 reported a maximum of 25,000 victims. It has also been argued that the raid was unnecessary as the Germans were about to surrender.”

From notes that I had made following my discussion with Leslie Weaver and the Dresden raid I have been able to form a totally different picture to that currently depicted by most modern historians and copy an extract from an e-mail sent to Cedric Verdon, nephew of Alliott Verdon Roe (Avro) manufacturer of the Lancaster.

I met Cedrick at a Biggin Hill Garden Party and he expressed interest in my wartime experiences, especially my meeting with a pilot who had taken place on the Dresden raid. From my notes I sent him an e-mail which I now copy:

“I was fortunate to have recently met one of the few surviving Lancaster pilots, Leslie
Weaver, who was involved in the notorious Dresden raid of the 14th February 1945, I asked him what he could remember of the briefing for this raid; he replied by saying that it was a normal briefing and remembered being told to concentrate on the centre of the town because it was suspected to contain important factories for the German war effort.

The crews were all war weary and had no idea that Germany was about to surrender, also they were not told that the weather conditions were likely to cause a fire storm. Like most night raids the journey was long, very cold and hazardous with plenty of anti aircraft gun fire and night fighters to avoid. As usual he saw many of his colleagues who were not going to make it home, in fact there was nothing particularly unusual about this raid.

Leslie was bitter about the way Bomber Command had subsequently been treated by our politicians and historians, following this particular raid, even calling them murderers! In fact they were trained to carry out orders approved by the highest authority, our Prime Minister Winston Churchill, for whom the head of Bomber Command Sir Arthur Harris worked.

When they took off at night it was with the certain knowledge that one in four would not be returning. If it was felt that the raids were unnecessary who was the real murderer in sending these aircrews to an almost certain death?

Despite being awarded a number of Victoria Crosses Leslie could not understand why they were denied the recognition of a campaign medal, or its chief Arthur Harris recognised for the contribution his leadership had made to the eventual successful outcome of the war. So what are the facts?

A German historian has written: “The city was not simply a cultural centre, there were factories there manufacturing weapons and equipment for the Nazi war effort. To produce an atom bomb a supply of heavy water is needed. Their main source had already been destroyed in Norway and there is sufficient evidence that the Germans were producing heavy water in the centre of Dresden, under the impression that because of the large civilian population it would not be bombed. Dresden was also an important rail base for the Germans to send troops to the war front”

I have recently read that Hitler had probably postponed his April 30th suicide hoping that he would have an atom bomb ready, however the raid on Dresden helped to convinced him this was not going to happen. We will never know if this was true, but if it was suspected that Dresden contained such an important war target then it was right to be attacked. Only historians can now argue that with Germany’s surrender only weeks away we should not have bombed the city, they forget we were still at war!

Leslie’s most recent memory is being called a war monger and being spat upon by some British youngsters whilst attending an eventual memorial to Sir Arthur Harris. Andrew Hosken of the BBC’s Today programme wrote: “More than 55,000 aircrew lost their lives in the war but no campaign medal was struck for Bomber Command. Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Harris did not receive the peerage awarded to others of similar military rank after the war and it was not until 1992 that a statue of Bomber Harris was erected outside the RAF church, St Clement Dane’s, on the Strand”.

Leslie recalled that flying at night in the freezing cold for anything up to twelve hours whilst being continually shot at and seeing your colleagues going down on fire was not very pleasant. They were told what to do and tried to do it to the best of their ability. He could only hope that one day their efforts would be appreciated,

Like Leslie I too can only hope that one day the considerable efforts of Bomber Command will be recognised in helping to shorten the war, suffering an extremely high casualty rate of 55,573 killed out of a total of 125,000 aircrew (a 44.4% death rate), with a further 8,403 wounded and 9,838 becoming prisoners of war”.

Since writing the above e-mail I am pleased to learn that at long last a memorial is being devoted to Bomber Command, in response to a long campaign for justice.
Lord Tebbit, one of Britain’s most outspoken conservative commentators and politicians and a former pilot in the RAF said: “The men of Bomber Command deserve their memorial and it is nonsense to suggest otherwise. Despite being awarded 19 Victoria Crosses the air crews have never been recognised with a campaign medal. Of course there has been debate over the tactic of heavy bombing of German cities, but that was not a tactic initiated by Bomber Command, nor Air Marshal Harris, nor Churchill. It was initiated by Hitler”.

There will always be arguments over whether Bomber Command was effective; however there can be no doubt that the bombing of the German troop barges and docks during the Battle of Britain played a significant part in Hitler’s decision regarding an attempt at an invasion by sea. The bombing of the V weapon sites saved us from far greater casualties from rockets and flying bombs. Regarding the effect of industrial bombing, the last word on that should go to Hitler’s armaments minister, Albert Speer. He described the bombing offensive as “the greatest lost battle on the German side, a second front pinning down thousands of soldiers and requiring defensive guns and ammunition which could not be used elsewhere”.

A Memorial in London’s Green Park to honour the 55,573 men of Bomber Command who lost their lives in World War II is now under construction and is to be dedicated in June 2012

Alan Mann
August 2011

P.S.
This Christmas I was delighted to learn that Leslie Weaver was still alive having received the following card signed “Leslie and Norma Weaver, from one of the few remaining Lancaster pilots”

[Editor’s Note: Image removed due to copy right restrictions]

Disturbing the Peace from an original painting by Robin Smith
The card was published by the Lincolnshire’s Lancaster Association

I can only hope that Leslie will be well enough to attend the dedication ceremony in June 2012, and that by then our British youth will realise their previous ignorance and accept Leslie as an example of the forgotten aircrew whose devotion to duty played a very significant part in winning the war.

July 3rd 2012 spoke with Leslie, he confirmed that he did go to the memorial but was unable to be interviewed because he did not feel well enough. He had difficulty talking with me and said he was now completely wheelchair bound. His wife Norma was out but he said he would ask her to contact me with any news.

Alan Mann
December 2011