

# Museums as conflict zones: the Canadian War Museum and Bomber Command

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## Abstract

This paper examines a recent controversy at the new Canadian War Museum over its exhibition on the Allied Bomber Offensive campaign in the Second World War. Although recent surveys of the public's attitudes towards museums suggest that the public both trusts museums to get the story right and thinks museums are good places to deal with controversial topics, in this case the Museum found itself under attack. In the end, despite generally positive reviews from historians called in to review the display, the Museum was forced to make changes after a Parliamentary sub-committee demanded it do so. The paper argues that the Museum's inability to withstand such intense pressure can be attributed to a number of factors, including its ambiguous nature as a war memorial museum.

**Key words:** museums, controversy, contestation, exhibitions, war

## Introduction

James Clifford has taught us to think of museums as contact zones, spaces in which different cultural perspectives and experiences can be brought out into the open to be shared, negotiated, and perhaps even transformed. Museums can become places of healing and reconciliation, at least of understanding, much more than simply an exhibition space or a storehouse of artefacts. Occasionally, however, the stories being told ignite such controversy that museum exhibitions become contested spaces, lines are drawn and differences cannot be reconciled. In such circumstances the museum becomes a conflict zone, the focus of special interest lobbying, journalistic intervention and even political interference (Clifford 1997). Such has been the recent experience of the new Canadian War Museum (CWM) where a display in the Second World War gallery was the subject of a campaign by veterans' groups, a campaign that culminated in hearings before a Parliamentary sub-committee whose rulings forced the Museum to make changes to the display.<sup>1</sup>

The Museum invited visitors to consider the experience of the Combined Bomber Offensive or Bomber Command, the Allied campaign in which some 10,000 Canadian airmen died. Veterans had been consulted in the making of the display and significant alterations had been made to meet their concerns. Nevertheless, many remained dissatisfied and their requests for further changes met resistance from Museum staff, resistance that was strengthened after the Museum received largely positive reviews of the display by four prominent historians. In broadening their campaign to the general public, the veterans received much support from the media and some politicians who chose to portray the dispute as one about the ownership of history. Who had the 'real' knowledge of this event – the veterans who lived it or the professional museum curators who researched it? While some publicly supported the Museum, to judge from letters to newspapers and calls to radio talk shows, public support of the veterans' position was overwhelming.

Margaret Macmillan, an internationally renowned historian who had evaluated the display for the Museum, has described the dispute as a Canadian episode in the 'history wars'. In her recent wide-ranging exploration of 'uses and abuses' in history she argues that the controversy ended with the veterans being allowed to re-write history; political interference and a well-orchestrated public campaign had silenced a museum which had simply sought to raise

questions about 'the efficacy and the morality of the ... massive bombing of Germany's industrial and civilian targets' (Macmillan 2008b: 136). I would add that in opening up the Allied bombing campaign for discussion and reflection, the Museum was doing precisely what several recent international surveys have suggested the public wants, and trusts, museums to do: deal with controversial topics.

Why, then, did this museum face a chorus of criticism and why was it ultimately forced to make changes it had resisted? While I agree that the dispute was in part about the ownership of history, I will be arguing that it also centred on the use of historical evidence and different ideas as to how the public interprets museum displays. Drawing upon a detailed examination of the reports commissioned by the Museum and the hearings held before the Parliamentary sub-committee, as well as media accounts of the dispute and reflections by some of the participants, I argue that that the dispute was inevitable given the nature of the Museum itself and that it has left a damaging legacy for the future of public history in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

### Controversy in context

Controversies are not new in Canada's museums or elsewhere. An exhibition at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum, *Into the Heart of Africa*, provoked an outcry and boycott from black organizations when it opened in 1989. While the Museum intended to raise questions about imperialism and racism through artefacts collected by missionaries, it was accused of perpetuating racism by displaying the objects with insufficient interpretative intervention and inadequate consultation with the black community (Butler 2008; Gillam 2001; Cannizzo 1989). A few years later the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) was criticized for focusing the 32,000 square feet of its Canada Hall on the economic, social, and cultural experience of post-contact immigrants rather than the constitutional, political and military achievements that shaped the nation. The desire to impose a politically traditional narrative on the Canada Hall bears comparison with the controversy that broke out in Canberra where historians were called into the new National Museum of Australia soon after it opened in 2001 to interrogate the text of panels accused of being too negative about the effects of white settlement (Dean and Rider 2005).

Most famous perhaps is the outcry over the American Smithsonian Museum's proposed *Crossroads* exhibition on the atomic bomb and the cold war in the mid-1990s. The exhibition, which was to feature the newly restored *Enola Gay* (the B-29 that dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima) drew attention to the controversial decision to use the bomb; nor did it shy away from the horrific consequences of that decision. It provoked an outcry from veterans' groups, a media frenzy and political intervention in which Museum officials and scholars were accused of seeking to revise history. In the end, what had been intended as a thoughtful and thought-provoking exhibition was effectively cancelled (Linenthal and Englehardt 1996; Wallace 1996; Zolberg 1996; Gieryn 1997; Dubin 1999). Richard H. Kohn, a contributor to the fullest account of the dispute, argued that in cancelling the original exhibition, the Smithsonian 'surrendered its scholarly independence and a significant amount of its authority in American intellectual life to accommodate to a political perspective' (Linenthal and Englehardt 1996: 140). It was this controversy that undoubtedly weighed heavily in the minds of the staff of the new Canadian war museum as they faced criticism over their bomber command display.<sup>3</sup>

The opening of a new \$120,000,000 museum on the Ottawa River with 45,000 square feet of exhibition space dedicated to the history of Canadians at war is itself a remarkable story and one which is an essential context to the dispute. Its predecessor, founded in 1880, was at the end of the twentieth century housed in a somewhat decrepit old archives building on Sussex Drive, a street where other national institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Royal Canadian Mint and the residences of both the Prime Minister and the Governor General are located. It was this museum that was the focus of much debate in 1997-98 when veterans lobbied against a proposed new gallery dedicated to the Holocaust which was to be an extension of the Second World War galleries but became something much larger, a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. This, veterans argued, was outwith the Museum's mandate because the Holocaust was not part of the history of Canadians at war. Their campaign was successful. It had two important consequences for the later dispute over bomber command. First, it convinced Museum staff that fuller consultation with veterans about changes to the CWM was

absolutely essential. Adrienne Clarkson, then chairwoman of the corporation with governance over both the CMC and the CWM (and later governor general) stated in her annual report: 'we should have undertaken a more extensive and formally structured consultative process.... We will not make the same mistake again' (Canadian Museum of Civilization 1997-1998). Secondly, it helped focus attention on the state of the War Museum and encouraged veterans in their long-standing desire for a new museum, one which would tell the story that the Canada Hall in the CMC failed to tell, how war, and especially the experience of twentieth-century wars, shaped the nation.

The veterans' campaign for a new war museum, appropriately called 'Passing the Torch', tapped into public anxiety over the rapidly diminishing numbers of veterans from the two world wars, particularly at a time of intense national celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the second of those wars. In the end veterans raised over \$16,500,000 towards the cost of the new museum and they featured in the parade that was a highlight of the Museum's opening, timed to coincide with the sixtieth anniversary of the ending of the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> Visitors came in droves – one million in the first twenty-one months – and what they saw was a museum whose very fabric and design focused on the theme of 'Regeneration'. Chosen by the architect, Raymond Moriyama, one of 22,000 Japanese-Canadians interned during the war, the theme spoke also of reconciliation. His design was finalized after a process of public consultation unprecedented for a Canadian national museum. The theme comes through both in the sustainability of the Museum's construction and key features of its design, notably the 'view corridor' to Parliament Hill, where the windows of its sloping tower spell out 'Lest We Forget' in Morse code (Moriyama 2006).

There were, inevitably, controversies from the start over the location and design, the absence of space dedicated to the Holocaust or to human rights and the emphasis on war rather than peace. Even the wisdom of building a new war museum was questioned given the poor state of the National Library and Archive, the needs of other national museums and desires for a National History Centre and National Portrait Gallery. The most significant for this discussion was the threatened boycott of the opening by the National Council of Veterans Associations who insisted that the Museum should remove two paintings it had commissioned referencing the torture and murder of a Somali teenager by members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment. The Museum overcame that difficulty, its director Joe Geurts offering what turned out to be a rather prophetic remark to a CBC reporter that the Canadian War Museum was not going to back away from taking 'a frank look at Canada's war experience – at horror and human frailty as well as heroics and glory'.<sup>5</sup>

The Museum's success in overcoming objections to the paintings was due, in part, to the fact that veterans' groups were not in agreement. In the same CBC article the head of the Royal Canadian Legion was reported to say 'I think we don't need to gloss over anything... It's important to portray the realities and the history that in fact made Canadians who they are today'. Veterans' groups – but not all veterans - were agreed that the Museum's Bomber Command exhibition remained unsatisfactory.

At the time when various veterans' groups launched a public campaign against the display, visitors to this part of the Second World War gallery first encountered a panel entitled *Bombing to Win*, describing the aims and strategies of the campaign. It introduced the issue of civilian casualties and noted its effects: 'Attacks on industrial centres, military installations and cities devastated vast areas and killed hundreds of thousands. They also diverted German resources from other fronts and damaged essential elements of the German war effort.'<sup>6</sup> Beside the panel a large video screen showed archive footage of bombing raids and the response of German anti-aircraft fire. Walking on, the visitor encountered a display on the airmen who flew the missions and a life size German anti-aircraft installation. On the wall beside this installation was a display referencing the controversial decision to launch bomber offensive on Germany. It consisted of a central text panel accompanied by quotations to the visitor's right and three photographs to the left. The text panel was entitled *An Enduring Controversy* and it reflected on the effectiveness and the morality of the bombing campaign.<sup>7</sup> This was the last display in the exhibition space devoted to the Combined Bomber Offensive before the visitor moved onto displays covering the RCAF and women's roles and then onto the next exhibition in the gallery.

### The focus of controversy

An *Enduring Controversy* was the display that generated much criticism from veterans. The text panel read:

The value and morality of the strategic bomber offensive against Germany remains bitterly contested. Bomber Command's aim was to crush civilian morale and force Germany to surrender by destroying its cities and industrial installations. Although Bomber Command and American attacks left 600,000 Germans dead, and more than five million homeless, the raids resulted in only small reductions in German war production until late in the war.

(Original Wording, Gallery 3, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa)<sup>8</sup>

Framed top and bottom by aerial photographs of a devastated Germany, the three photographs showed the effects of the bombing. In one the visitor saw corpses of men, women and children; the others revealed the destruction of the industrial-urban sites in Münster and Cologne.

The quotations to the right of the text panel were among the many changes the Museum had made in response to veterans' complaints, changes which included adding text explaining what strategic bombing was and describing the positive effects the campaign had on Allied morale in the earlier *Bombing to Win* panel.<sup>9</sup> The quotations were intended to contextualize the debate over the bombing campaign. One came from Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris and it insisted upon the vital contribution of the campaign to bringing the war to an end. Another, from John Kenneth Galbraith, stated that while the bombing campaign did not win the war, it helped the ground troops who did. A third quotation belonged to Canadian airman Flight Lieutenant W.E. Vaughan who reflected on the consequences of his actions: 'more than once I wondered "how many people will those bombs kill?" However, you couldn't dwell on it. That's the way war is.'<sup>10</sup>

Despite such attempts to better contextualize the controversy, veterans remained dissatisfied and continued to argue that the location, text and accompanying photographs gave visitors the lasting impression that at best the campaign was ineffective and immoral and at worst that they were war criminals. The *Legion Magazine* called for a boycott of the Museum. Paul Manson, a former Chief of the Defence Staff who had chaired the Passing the Torch campaign, wrote an article syndicated across Canada in early January 2007. In it he insisted that the Museum had failed to put forward 'the irrefutable fact' that the bombing campaign 'was instrumental in bringing the war to a quick end' and that the display demanded more than 'a few token changes' (Manson, 2008). It was one of many articles and editorials that provoked a flurry of letters to editors and the controversy became the focus of numerous radio and television programmes.<sup>11</sup>

In response the Museum commissioned four prominent historians to write reports on the display. David Bercuson, Director of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, a well-known campaigner for deepening federal funding of the armed forces, commended the 'balanced' exhibition and supported the Museum's decision to raise the issue of how the bombing offensive was controversial, both at the time and since: 'such controversy is simply part of the necessary debate – the examination and re-examination – that must go on in a mature democracy about its past and the meaning of that past' (Bercuson 2007: 3). However, Bercuson thought the wording of the contentious panel somewhat contradicted the earlier *Bombing to Win* panel and criticized it for introducing a negative editorial voice, reinforced by its minimizing the campaign's effects in slowing the German war effort, its choice of quotations and photographs.<sup>12</sup> Serge Bernier, Director of History and Heritage at the Department of National Defence, also found the overall exhibit achieved 'a fairly balanced image' but, like Bercuson, thought the final panel 'appears to side with one point of view in the debate' (Bernier 2007:2).<sup>13</sup> He especially took issue with the photographs, one of which (presumably that showing corpses) he thought 'probably originated from the German propaganda machine' and he concluded that the Bomber Command display could be removed without losing the integrity of the exhibit (Bernier 2007).

Neither Bercuson nor Bernier directly addressed the motivations of those opposed to the Museum's display, points which particularly concerned Margaret MacMillan, Professor of

History at the University of Toronto and Desmond Morton, Hiram Mills Emeritus Professor at McGill. Macmillan took immediate issue with complaints from veterans' groups and in particular Paul Manson: 'General Manson and those who share his views are wrong to say that the exhibit asserts categorically that area bombing was immoral and/or ineffective. It does not.' (Macmillan 2007: 2). Macmillan commended the Museum for making the public aware of the debate over the effectiveness and morality of the bombing offensive. She insisted that while the Museum should listen to criticism, it 'cannot allow its programmes and exhibits to be dictated by outside groups'; as professionals they would be doing 'a disservice to their publics' if they deprived them of exposure to disagreements and controversies: 'As we seek to understand ourselves, we must take our own behaviour and our past as a whole, not pick out only the pieces which make us feel good about ourselves' (Macmillan 2007: 6).<sup>14</sup>

Morton put it even more forcefully: if the Museum were to give in to the criticism it would be surrendering to those who wanted to censor history and to re-write the past, a humiliation that would force the Museum's professional historians to resign and a 'gratuitous insult' to 'mature Canadians who visit'. He added: 'If the Canadian War Museum is designed in the spirit of Josef Goebbels, our glorious dead in the Second World War may have died in vain' (Morton 2007: 5).

While there were significant criticisms of the *An Enduring Controversy* display from both Bercuson and Bernier, there were none from Macmillan and Morton. Moreover, all four historians agreed that the overall exhibition was commendable. It was not surprising, then, that the Museum concluded that no further changes were necessary. The veterans were, in effect, told that the time of compromise was over and they should accept the panel as it stood. There is not space to outline the details of the very successful public campaign waged by the Canadian Legion and the Air Force Association of Canada which filled newspapers and talk shows and ensured that Museum staff received thousands of complaints. The issue was brought up in Parliament and eventually became the focus of a series of televised hearings before the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence which heard from veterans, historians, Museum staff and other individuals in May before releasing its final report in June 2007 (Senate of Canada 2007a).<sup>15</sup>

Veterans and their representatives, including General Manson, spoke passionately about those whose memories they thought were being sullied by the display and argued that the Museum had got its facts wrong. The Museum's director, Joe Guerts, proposed that the display was 'indisputable in its presentation and in its broader historical context' while Dean Oliver, Director of Research and Exhibitions, insisted that nothing in the exhibit 'says or implies that there was any criminality or legal wrongdoing by Allied air personnel in the conduct of the air war.' Historians testifying before the sub-committee were divided, some giving strong support to the Museum, others agreeing with the veterans' reading of the display. One suspects the opposition between veterans and the Museum was a particularly painful one for Jack Granatstein, one of Canada's foremost military historians and a strong advocate for both veterans and the new museum. Serving as chair of the Board of Trustees, Granatstein shared the views expressed by Macmillan and Morton in their reports: to make changes would acknowledge one interest group's right to revise history and that would set a very dangerous precedent (Senate of Canada 2007a, 2 May).

The deliberations reveal that senators were hoping for compromise from the Museum, not because they had got it wrong but because veterans had taken offence and their sensibilities should be taken into account. The sub-committee's report urged the Museum 'to consider alternative ways of presenting an equally historically accurate version of its material, in a manner that eliminates the sense of insult felt by aircrew veterans and removes potential for further misinterpretation by the public.' It insisted that they, like the veterans, were not asking for history to be re-written; it was the 'sense of insult' and the 'potential for further misinterpretation' that was at issue (Senate of Canada 2007b).

What possible further misinterpretations the senators had in mind was not explained, nor, indeed, is it clear that they thought the veterans had misinterpreted the display. The sub-committee's recommendations reveal their inability or unwillingness to grasp the implications of what they were hearing for historical interpretation. Senator Kenny, for example, persisted in believing that the Museum had chosen to tell only one side of the story and that all that was

needed was for them 'to reflect the historical truth with a whole lot of different words in a whole lot of different ways... the obligation rests with the museum to see if they can come up with other ways that do not profoundly upset a group of people which is important to us. I do not think that is inconsistent with your integrity' (Senate of Canada 2007a, 2 May).

Of course, the Museum considered that it had presented differing views on the efficacy, importance and morality of the bombing campaign fairly and accurately and the sub-committee's report effectively confirmed this. What was at issue then was not simply competing truths – veterans versus curators - but whose truth was being presented with the greatest strength and which truth did the Museum and those demanding revision thought the public would most be influenced by. In other words, while the ownership of history might have been at stake, at its heart were competing understandings of the objects being displayed, in particular the photographs. The most powerful of these was that showing dead civilians, some of whose bodies were clearly denuded and mangled. Its caption - 'Images like this one fuelled the post-war debate about the bomber offensive' - was certainly neutral; for veterans the image most certainly was not. In the case of the photograph of a destroyed rail yard in Münster, the caption referred to 'collateral damage' as an inevitable consequence of bombing while that pertaining to Cologne read 'To hit only "strategic targets" such as factories and railway yards, was nearly impossible.' For visitors, the image of a destroyed rail station might convey either an attack on a military-industrial site or be seen as an example of 'collateral damage'; critics undoubtedly thought that the caption, which referenced the number of bombers, the acreage destroyed and the number of evacuees, encouraged the latter. At issue, then, was not simply who could best tell the story of the strategic bombing campaign, but how the story was being told.



*Fig. 1. Bombing to Win display, Second World War Gallery, Canadian War Museum, (photo: author)*

Although the sub-committee heard an account of general exhibition process and practice from Terry Quinlan, a Professor of Conservation and co-coordinator of an applied museums studies programme, it failed to acknowledge that visitors' understandings are shaped by museums through exhibition design.<sup>16</sup> I would argue that had it done so it might have reached different conclusions for it would have understood that the Museum deliberately structured the gallery to ensure that visitors reached the controversial display having understood the perils faced by Canadian airmen and the broader context for the decision to launch the bombing offensive. They did this in two ways.

First, the organization of this part of the gallery ensured that visitors first encountered words, images and artefacts justifying the campaign and highlighting the heroism of the air



Fig. 2. The Bombing Campaign display, Second World War gallery, Canadian War Museum (photo: author)

crews. Even if they had avoided the text of the *Bombing to Win* panel, the wall on which it sits was dominated by a vivid video that highlighted the fierceness of German anti-aircraft fire (fig 1) and visitors then faced a very humanized display offering them information on survival techniques relied on by airmen who had been shot down. Visitors then had to move around the anti-aircraft installation in order to close in on *An Enduring Controversy*, a somewhat awkward placing in the gallery and one that could in no way be described as a featured display (fig. 2), but with the new *The Bombing Campaign* panel in place. Secondly, the Museum shaped visitors' understanding of the bombing campaign from the very start of the Second World War gallery. At its entrance visitors encountered one of the Museum's most famous artefacts, Hitler's armoured Mercedes, above which a video screen showed footage of the Nuremberg rallies (fig. 3). To their right was a prominent panel, *The Outbreak of War*. It featured a photograph of a German bomber below which was another photograph of a young Polish girl weeping over her dead brother (fig. 4). The bombing of innocent civilians by the Luftwaffe sets the scene for visitors' interpretation of the war and certainly provided an important framework for understanding the moral issues raised by the bomber offensive.

Museum staff could be justified in thinking they had done their best to offer the public a chance to engage with this controversial issue. Although they differed on the soundness of the particular display, all four historians consulted thought the overall exhibition was fair and only one seems to have thought the issue of controversy to be one best avoided. Notwithstanding, the Senate sub-committee's ruling forced the Museum to make changes and two weeks after its report was released Joe Guerts resigned.<sup>17</sup> While the overall exhibition (and the gallery's entrance) remains the same, the offending panel has been changed. It is now three times longer than the original. Although questions about the effectiveness and the morality of the campaign remain, they are now imbedded in a text heavy with facts about public support for the campaign, the targeting of industrial and military sites and the terrible losses suffered by Allied bombing



Fig 3. Entrance Second World War gallery, Canadian War Museum (photo: author)

crews (see appendix one below). The text panel is no longer accompanied by the quotations from Harris, Galbraith and Vaughan, although the photographs remained unchanged. The revisions met with the approval of the Royal Canadian Legion and other veterans' organizations.

### Evaluating the consequences

What are we to make of this 'victory' or 'resolution'? If the subcommittee failed to embrace issues of museology and exhibition design, it also ignored the suggestion it heard from one historian, the University of Toronto's Randall Hansen, who asserted that the panel 'states widely known facts; and by

emphasizing the accepted controversy... encourages visitors to make up their own mind. That is exactly what one would hope a museum would do – inform, educate and provoke thought and debate' (Senate of Canada 2007a, 9 May). His understanding of the purpose of museums is supported by many recent surveys about museums and about their place in the world of public history.

We know, thanks to the Australian based international survey, *Contested Sites*, that the public believes museums should cover controversial topics. 60% of Australians responding over the telephone and 82% polled on leaving a museum thought so, the same percentage as those leaving Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology, and 73% of visitors to both the Australian War Memorial and the Canadian War Museum. The authors, who acknowledged that respondents tended to be relatively well educated and youthful, concluded that the public thinks that museums are appropriate places in which to deal with controversial topics. Museum staff (89% in focus groups held in five countries) agreed, but they were worried about the consequences: loss of funding, self-censorship, how to deal with emotive and violent responses (Cameron and Witcomb 2006, Cameron 2006, Ferguson 2006). The case of the Bomber Command display suggests that their concerns are justified.

One reason why the public feels that museums should handle controversial topics is that the public also trusts museums. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's 1998 survey of American attitudes towards the past revealed that with the exception of native American Sioux, Americans thought museums to be the most trustworthy of the various ways in which they experienced the past. On a scale of one to ten, with one being least trustworthy and ten being most trustworthy, museums earned a score of 8.4 in contrast, for example, to college professors (7.3) and non-fiction books (6.4) (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998: 91, 235ff). In 2003 Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton found in their *Australians and their Pasts* survey that museums were not only an important way in connecting to the past (46% felt 'very connected' with the past when visiting historic sites and museums, another 26% 'extremely connected') but also very trustworthy: 56% of respondents found them most trustworthy and another 36% very trustworthy (7% quite, 1% slightly, 0% very untrustworthy), an exception being Aboriginal respondents (Hamilton and Ashton 2003, Ashton and Hamilton 2003: 14-17). Preliminary findings in another survey, *Canadians and their Pasts*, show that the Canadian public trusts their museums: while 60% found historic sites very trustworthy, almost 70% said the same thing about museums, higher once again than any other category.<sup>18</sup>

What are we to make of these results? Rosenzweig and Thelen concluded that because the scores for museums were very close to those that respondents gave for histories told by

relatives (8.0) and by eyewitnesses (7.8), the answer lay in what the two experiences shared: interactions with primary sources, sharing with others (especially family members), and the space for personal involvement (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998: 105-8). Yet in one of their follow up interviews, a respondent suggested another reason for the trustworthiness of museums, namely the collaborative nature of museums: 'They all discuss things and arrive at one version that they wish to promote to the public' (Rosenzweig and Thelen: 108). If one considers further the institutional nature of museums, the checks and balances, compromises and discussions from the point of conception through to the exhibitionary process, it is not surprising that the public trusts museums. Ashton and Hamilton concluded similarly, commenting on 'the perceived institutional authority of the museum as a cultural institution in contemporary society' as well as the role of objects 'as a trustworthy means of relating the past' (Ashton and Hamilton 2003: 17). It seems then that there are several explanatory layers here: the role of the object as trusted revealer of the past (objects as eyewitnesses), the collaborative nature of museum work, the institutional authority of the museum and the resonances with the value the public finds in eyewitness accounts.

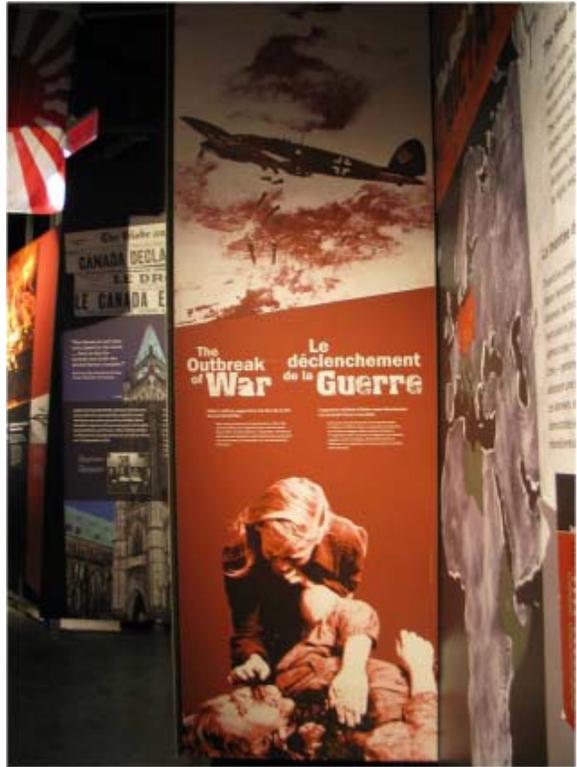


Fig 4. The Outbreak of War panel, Second World War gallery, Canadian War Museum (photo: author)

Yet, in the case of the controversy over *An Enduring Controversy*, the dispute was easily, if, as I have argued, somewhat narrowly, characterized as being one between the eyewitness accounts of veterans on the one hand and the scholarly, institutional and object/artefact authority of the museum. Why were the living eyewitnesses given more credence than eyewitness accounts which took the form of quotations and objects (photographs) selected by Museum staff? If the public believes that museums should cover controversial topics and if the public find museums to be the most trustworthy of the many ways in which they engage with the past, why did the Museum find such little support from the public and certainly the senate sub-committee over this issue?

One explanation is that the public was predisposed in the veterans' favour. In 1992 veterans groups had sued film-makers Terence and Brian McKenna over their documentary *The Valour and the Horror* funded by the National Film Board of Canada and aired on the CBC. The second part of the film, *Bombing by Moonlight*, used archive footage, staged re-enactments and personal stories to make the case that the bombing campaign was ineffective and immoral, a point made movingly in a scene where two Canadian airmen listen to the harrowing memories of two German women who survived the bombing. Veterans lost the law suit, but they commissioned a documentary questioning the film's accuracy, secured an apology from the CBC when a report commissioned by its ombudsman criticized the film (one of the report's authors was David Bercuson) and a favourable report from a Senate sub-committee. In a very real sense, as many participants noticed, *An Enduring Controversy* was *The Valour and the Horror* revisited (Bercuson and Wise 1994, Carr 2005, Cook, 2006: 228).

A second explanation is that the Museum faced an extraordinarily difficult situation in trying to get its views heard and its exhibition properly assessed, because the controversy occurred at a time of intense commemoration. 2005 was the 60th anniversary of the end of World War Two. 2007 was the 90th anniversary of Vimy Ridge, 'a defining event' considered by many to be 'the moment when Canada left Britain's shadow and became a country in its own right' (to quote from a display in the Museum). The Vimy Memorial was rededicated, witnessed by thousands of Canadian school children brought over for the occasion. Opposing the veterans – and this is certainly how the Museum was often portrayed in the press – seemed ungrateful at best, even unpatriotic. Nor should we forget the context of the current war in Afghanistan; celebrating veterans resonates with demands to 'support our troops' (as the bumper stickers say) in the current war against terror. Veterans have become an essential part of the narrative that shapes Canadian identity, celebrated through the re-naming of highways, new and rededicated memorials, coins and stamps. They have become imbedded in a powerful narrative of sacrifice, honour and nationhood.

One of the reasons why veterans are so valued in the national narrative is because their lived experience gives them unassailable authority, at least in the eyes of the public. As Steven C. Dubin points out in his incisive examination of power and memory in museums: 'The certainty of lived experience is a powerful credential to invoke and it is virtually impossible for someone else to rebut without seeming arrogant or insensitive' (Dubin 1999: 5). While Museum officials had certainly learned from the *Enola Gay* affair and had engaged in a lengthy consultative process, making changes to the exhibit to meet criticisms from veterans, once it was determined that the consultative process was over, they had no real answer when faced with the veterans' public campaign. The Museum may have convinced the Senate sub-committee that it had historical veracity on its side, but its exhibition fell to the committee's insistence that the Museum had to eliminate 'the sense of insult' felt by veterans. For public history in Canada this may well have a lasting legacy for museum practice for it suggests that consultation with the wider community and those whose experiences are represented and constructed is no longer enough; museums must conduct themselves in a way that will minimize and eliminate offence.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

How this will affect exhibition process and practice will only be seen in the years to come, but the dispute over Bomber Command suggests that while international surveys might be right – that in theory the public both trusts and expects its museums to deal with controversial topics – in practice there are serious limits to this, especially if the museum can be shown to be challenging even a small part of a powerful and highly-charged national narrative. Museums may have become democratized in recent years, becoming as Edward T. Linenthal commented in his account of the *Enola Gay* controversy, more like forums than temples, but as he also notes, it is not difficult to anticipate problems 'between a reverently held story and its later reappraisal' (Linenthal and Englehardt 1996: 10, 21-3). Bomber Command was one such story.

The importance of the twentieth-century world wars and the veterans who fought them in the national imaginary is at its most visible in the new Canadian War Museum which functions both as forum and temple. Like no other museum in Canada this is both a history museum and a palace of memory; indeed, for some it is a secular sacred space. Besides the galleries representing Canada at war from the pre-contact period to the present, the Museum contains the Royal Canadian Legion Hall of Honour, exhibiting the many ways the wars in which Canadians have fought have been remembered. It features a model of the War Memorial, the cenotaph that dominates central Ottawa. Then there is Regeneration Hall, whose sharply angled walls resonate with the neo-Gothic shapes of the Parliament Buildings. Here the visitor enjoys a brief glimpse of the Peace Tower (Canada's Big Ben) before passing an art-work entitled *Sacrifice*, descending a staircase which brings a monument to Hope into full view before entering a lower hall displaying models for the Vimy Memorial. Above 'Lest We Forget' is etched out in morse code in both official languages.

These two Halls are within the gallery complex, accessible through the doors behind the ticket booth once one has paid admission. There is another memorial space which lies off the main foyer and is freely open to all. A narrow passageway leads the visitor to Memorial Hall, a

mesmerizing space dominated by the grave of the Unknown Soldier, stone walls cut to resemble the thousands of tombstones marking the graves of the Canadian fallen in Europe and a quiet reflecting pool. This is the most tranquil space in the Museum, the sounds of visitors echo eerily around one and, most dramatically, at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day in the eleventh month a shaft of light from the sun rising above Parliament Hill illuminates the tombstone.

This is a museum, then, that not only seeks to educate and excite its visitors with the role of war in Canadian history and the role of Canadians, particularly the Canadian armed forces, in war, but it is also a sacred site, a site of memory, of contemplation, a site that insists upon the need to remember sacrifice and be thankful for hope and for peace. It urges an understanding that war protects the enjoyment of peace and democracy. Its curators were, in my view, not served well by a Senate sub-committee that effectively forced them to change what many agreed was an academically sound panel, the product of much collaboration and consultation, a panel that did what all good museums should do, opened up the issue for debate. Yet given past controversies, commemorative contexts, the Museum's history and its function as both a history museum and a site of memory, perhaps a display on the Allied bombing offensive that sought to do just that was always going to provoke controversy. This is a museum that combines the functions of a war memorial museum well, in its architecture, its design, and in the galleries where curator and veteran volunteers collaborate on a daily basis, but when differences did emerge it was perhaps inevitable that the museum as sacred site won over the museum as a trusted teacher.

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## **Appendix: New Wording, Gallery 3, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa**

### **The Bombing Campaign**

The strategic bombing campaign against Germany, an important part of the Allied effort that achieved victory, remains a source of controversy today. Strategic bombing enjoyed wide public and political support as a symbol of Allied resolve and a response to German aggression. In its first years, the air offensive achieved few of its objectives and suffered heavy losses. Advances in technology and tactics, combined with Allied successes on other fronts, led to improved results. By war's end, Allied bombers had razed portions of every major city in Germany and damaged many other targets, including oil facilities and transportation networks. The attacks blunted Germany's economic and military potential, and drew scarce resources into air defence, damage repair, and the protection of critical industries. Allied aircrew conducted this grueling offensive with great courage against heavy odds. It required vast material and industrial efforts and claimed over 80,000 Allied lives, including more than 10,000 Canadians. While the campaign contributed greatly to enemy war weariness, German society did not collapse despite 600,000 dead and more than five million left homeless. Industrial output fell substantially, but not until late in the war. The effectiveness and the morality of bombing heavily-populated areas in war continue to be debated.

### **Notes**

- 1 This paper is a version of a presentation in the panel on 'Public History in Canada' at the Public History Conference held in Liverpool, April 2008. I would like to thank the organizers of the conference, my fellow panelists and the audience for a lively discussion. I would also like to acknowledge my debt to several colleagues in the Canadian museum community and to the anonymous reviewers of this article for many useful suggestions. Finally, thanks to the staff of the Canadian War Museum library for their assistance.
- 2 The controversy has already generated two conference presentations by museum officials, reflections by historians involved in the dispute and a commentary by a curator historian: Dean Oliver, 'Strategic Bombing and the Canadian War Museum', National Council of Public History Conference, April 2008 (session 20) and Victor Rabinovitch, 'The Bomber

Command Controversy and the Canadian War Museum: Perspectives of a Museum Administrator', Canadian Historical Association 87th Annual Conference, June 2008 (session 49); Bothwell *et al.* (2008); Macmillan (2008a, 2008b); Gallagher (2008). A recent postgraduate research essay uses interviews with participants to illuminate public perceptions of the dispute, Salah (2007).

<sup>3</sup> There is a growing body of literature on controversial topics in museum and other environments. See, for example, Simon (2000), Edkins (2003), Newbury (2005), Pedretti (2007).

<sup>4</sup> <[http://www.passingthetorch.ca/intro\\_e.html](http://www.passingthetorch.ca/intro_e.html)> (accessed 26 June 2008).

<sup>5</sup> 'War museum's paintings anger veterans group', CBC News, 4 May 2005, <<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2005/05/03/war-museum050503.html>> (accessed 26 June 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Bombing to Win, Gallery 3, Second World War Gallery, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

<sup>7</sup> The display can be seen at <<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/story/2007/06/13/museum-070613.html>> (accessed 15 July 2008)

<sup>8</sup> The panel was quoted widely in the press; it can be found in an appendix to Morton (2007).

<sup>9</sup> See the account given to the Senate sub-committee by Dean Oliver, 2 May 2007 (Senate of Canada (2007a)).

<sup>10</sup> The quotations are cited in an appendix to Morton (2007). For a nuanced account of Harris's life, his role in bomber command and the subsequent controversy see R. J. Overy, 'Harris, Sir Arthur Travers, first baronet (1892–1984)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/31203>, accessed 12 March 2009].

<sup>11</sup> `See, for example, TV Ontario's highbrow The Agenda, 10 April 2007 available at: <[http://www.tvo.org/cfmx/tvoorg/theagenda/index.cfm?page\\_id=7&bpn=379045&ts=2007-04-10%2020:00:00.0](http://www.tvo.org/cfmx/tvoorg/theagenda/index.cfm?page_id=7&bpn=379045&ts=2007-04-10%2020:00:00.0)> (accessed 14 July 2008).

<sup>12</sup> `Bercuson noted that Galbraith's words came from a report commissioned by the post-war United States Strategic Bombing Survey whose agenda was to belittle the importance of the bomber offensive and he suggested that adding photographs showing disabled German aircraft or fuel plants would introduce a valuable and different dimension to the display.

<sup>13</sup> On an insightful engagement with the issue of 'balance' in exhibitions see Gieryn (1998).

<sup>14</sup> A position restated in Macmillan (2008a), an extract from Macmillan (2008b, 136-9).

<sup>15</sup> The sub-committee was chaired by Senator Joseph Day with Senators Atkins, Kenny and Downe.

<sup>16</sup> A good starting point for the issue of politics and display is the collection edited by Macdonald (1998)

<sup>17</sup> On the ambiguities of his decision see 'Canadian War Museum CEO leaves', CBC News, 25 June 2007, <<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/story/2007/06/25/war-museum-ceo-070625.html>> (accessed 26 June 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Results will be available at <<http://www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca/CANADScriptorAdmin/>

scripto.asp?resultat=970654>. I would like to thank Professor Del Muise, Carleton University, for permission to quote these figures.

- <sup>19</sup> On the issue of museums and communities, see the formative collections edited by Ivan Karp and others (1991, 1992). It may be no coincidence that in February 2009 the Canadian War Museum hosted a conference for museum professionals on the issue of controversial and challenging exhibitions.

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