Erwin Warkentin

Death by Moonlight: A Canadian Debate Over Guilt, Grief and Remembering the Hamburg Raids

The January of 1992 broadcast of the series The Valour and the Horror created great controversy within Canada that lasted more than a year. This paper is an analysis of the debate that followed. It outlines the positions taken by Canadian journalists, politicians, veterans and historians in regard to the series. The paper focuses on the Canadian Senate hearings and how they addressed the question of who has the right to control a nation’s history. It demonstrates that the debate was led by a political body and motivated by lobby groups that sought to ensure that only their version of history would be passed on to succeeding generations of Canadians. It concludes with an analysis of the testimony of veterans, who appeared as witnesses before the Senate and were at various stages of coming to terms with and explaining their complicity in the bombing of German civilians during the Second World War.

Noble Frankland perfectly encapsulates the debate over Canada’s role in Bomber Command when he says of strategic bombing: “most people have preferred to feel, rather than know”.1 When the Canadian Senate revealed that it would hold hearings regarding the airing of the three-part series entitled The Valour and the Horror, Canadians were given the opportunity to reexamine their role in World War II. However, the hearings elicited an emotional reaction that precluded a thoughtful treatment of the issues raised by the films. Veterans felt as though they were now, many years after the fact, being stabbed in the back by a nation that had forgotten their sacrifice. The new interpretation offered in “Death by Moonlight”, the second of the three films, did not square with the mythology that had grown up around the exploits of Canada’s bomber pilots. The debate devolved into one that focused on freedom of the press and who would control history. Moreover, it became a debate about whether the Canadian Senate was trying to censor the press. It allowed years of hatred and anger to bubble to the surface, not all of it directed towards the German ‘enemy.’ The debate brought out the worst aspects in humans who had been asked by their government to engage in inhuman acts and now found themselves having difficulty coming to grips with what they had done.

In this paper the media debate will be largely ignored. The conservative and liberal press in Canada took opposing views on whether the Senate should question the media’s right to reinterpret the official version of Canada’s war history. Moreover, the media was guilty of only bringing pertinent issues to

public attention, if they suited the purposes of the “freedom of the press” debate. The purpose of this paper is not to deal with the morality of the bomber offensive. Eric Markusen and David Kopf deal with this most eloquently and thoroughly in their comparative study of strategic bombing and the holocaust, in which they concluded that the two are indeed analogous. Though controversial, even opponents indicate that Markusen and Kopf’s study has been a stimulus of much fruitful debate. The focus here will rather be on the testimony and submissions made to the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs of the Canadian Senate’s Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology during their hearing of June 25 to 26 and November 2 to 6 of 1992.

The treatment of bomber aircrews in Canada has always been paradoxical. They have always been viewed with reverence when they were not being ignored. This may be one of the reasons that Canada has not had a frank discussion about what really happens when bombs are dropped on cities filled with people. Canadian wartime propaganda portrayed the bomber pilots as heroic warriors, who were, until the summer of 1944, the only means by which the war could be taken to Germany. The Canadian contribution to the air war took a place of prominence in newsreels and short films produced by the National Film Board shown in Canada’s movie theatres. In addition, bombers represented the pinnacle of technology in war at the time. They were seen as able to end the war without the huge death-tolls of World War I’s trench warfare. Little consideration was given to the fact that the killing was simply moved to the targets behind the lines in Germany. All of this contributed to a Canadian mythology, which reaches back to the Battle for Vimy Ridge in World War I, in which Canadians accomplished that which was seemingly impossible. Again Canadians were engaged in what was portrayed as a David and Goliath battle. The problem is, that to discuss Canada’s involvement in the strategic bombing campaign might require the dismantling of an icon central to Canadian mythology. It would certainly require a new way of looking at and understanding the past.

Canada prefers its heroes to be pure, unsullied and beyond tarnish. Canadians, usually mild mannered and thoughtful in responding to conflict, are not as a rule overtly patriotic. This is most often thought to be un-Canadian. However, when Terrance and Brian McKenna, together with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and National Film Board of Canada (NFB), showed the series