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D-Day's Forgotten Victims Speak Out by Ed Vulliamy and Pascal Vannier

Eighty years after D-Day, few know one of its darkest stories: the thousands of French civilians killed by a British and American carpet-bombing campaign of little military purpose.

June 20, 2024 issue

E.G. Malindine/Imperial War Museums

A French woman and a British soldier in liberated Caen, July 10, 1944

Reviewed:

L'Enfer du Havre, 1940–1944

by Julien Guillemard
Paris: Éditions Médicis (1948)

Le Havre 44: À feu et à sang

by Eddy Florentin
Paris: Presses de la Cité (1976)

Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy Under Allied Air Attack, 1940–1945

by Claudia Baldoli and Andrew Knapp
Continuum, 296 pp., $47.95 (paper)

Les Français sous les bombes alliées, 1940–1945

by Andrew Knapp

Les Civils dans la bataille de Normandie

by Françoise Passera and Jean Quellien

Le Calvados dans la guerre, 1939–1945

by Jean Quellien

Les Normands dans la guerre: Le temps des épreuves, 1939–1945

by Françoise Passera and Jean Quellien

Villes normandes sous les bombes (Juin 1944)

edited by Michel Boivin, Gérard Bourdin, and Jean Quellien

Bombardements 1944: Le Havre, Normandie, France, Europe

edited by John Barzman, Corinne Bouillot, and Andrew Knapp

At lunchtime in the small Normandy town of Évrecy, men gather in the tabac-café-bar to wager on the next harness race through the PMU betting network. With coffee or beer in hand, they focus on the screen; a young barmaid mops the floor. Up the road toward Caen, the tall, imposing church, dating from the thirteenth century but heavily damaged during World War II, has been rebuilt, apart from a vault and a turret extending from the north wall. Every other building in town is modern.
In the early morning of June 15, 1944, Évrecy—along with nearby Aunay-sur-Odon—was targeted by 223 Lancaster and 100 Halifax heavy bombers plus 14 Mosquito light bombers from Britain's Royal Air Force as part of the campaign to liberate France that began with the Allied invasion on June 6. At Évrecy the headquarters of the Wehrmacht's Twelfth Panzer Division was destroyed, and 130 out of 430 civilians were killed, the highest proportion in any community during the Battle of Normandy. At Aunay, where there was no military target, 200 civilians were killed—more than a tenth of the population.

"There were sixteen of us, in a farmer's barn," recalls Jaqueline de La Fuente, now ninety-two. They were in Évrecy as refugees from Caen, after a British bombing raid on June 6 destroyed their house and its surrounding neighborhood:

We spent some days sheltering in a cellar, then left in the exodus, hoping to find safety in the villages. The road was so frightening—planes above us. And when we got there: more bombing. On the night of June 15, more planes: at first distant, then closer, right above the barn. We ran across a field to foxholes and trenches that had been dug for shelter. But the planes were faster than us, low and loud—then the bombs fell. There was such noise and confusion that I still have nightmares and cannot believe it was real—a horror of explosions and pain.

She was wounded in the forehead and right leg by shrapnel, but her father and three of her four older sisters—Micheline, a nurse; Carmen, a hairdresser; and Marie-Thérèse, a seamstress—were killed. Separated from the rest of her family, she was taken back to ruined Caen for emergency surgery. Only later was she reconnected with her mother by the Red Cross.

This June 6 world leaders, thousands of tourists, and some families of liberating troops will gather for the eightieth anniversary of D-Day. It will be either the last major commemoration attended by veterans of the war or the first without any. But few will know the darkest part of D-Day's story: the slaughter of French civilians by a British and American carpet-bombing campaign considered by historians and even some of its commanders to have been of little or no military purpose.

During the three months that followed D-Day, nearly 18,000 French civilians were killed by British and American bombers—nearly two fifths of at least 51,380 killed by Allied bombing during the war. That is low compared with the 420,000 Germans estimated to have been killed by Allied bombs, but roughly equivalent to the 60,000 British civilians killed in the Blitz. (The same number of Italian civilians were also killed by Allied bombing, two thirds of them after the armistice was signed in September 1943.)

Yet while the Blitz is a cult in British historical memory, these French victims of Allied bombs were almost invisible for five decades after D-Day and have occupied a marginalized corner of the war's history in the years since. They are absent not only from official British and American accounts but from French ones, too—it was considered ungrateful to offend the liberators, and the Norman economy is significantly reliant on D-Day tourism. Visitors come to hear about victory, not a massacre of innocents by their own air forces.

One of the first books to recount the Allied bombing was Julien Guillemard's *L'Enfer du Havre, 1940–1944* (The Hell of Le Havre, 1940–1944; 1948), which concludes with a vivid account of the carpet-bombing of Le Havre in September 1944, after the rest of Normandy, and even Paris, had been liberated. Its final chapter is entitled "La Ville Assassinée" (The Murdered City). "What are they doing, these allies!" Guillemard fumes. In 1977 Eddy Florentin, who also survived the bombing, published another account, *Le*

Havre 44: À feu et à sang (Le Havre 44: Fire and Blood), the last line of which reads: "But what liberation of Le Havre?"

Yet the bewildered anger in these books vanished from view until the 1980s, when two initiatives converged. One was the construction of the Caen Memorial, which opened in 1988. The other came when survivors studying in a program for mature students at the Inter-Age University at Caen wanted their voices heard. The connection between the two was the historian Jean Quellien, who was asked by the Caen Memorial and Caen University to lead the Center for Quantitative Historical Research on the university campus. Quellien and his team of researchers counted and named the dead in five huge volumes published between 1994 and 1997: 4,158 in Upper Normandy and 13,632 in Lower Normandy, a confirmed total of 17,790, plus the missing, who went unnamed.

The bombing of French civilians accounted for a few pages of Antony Beevor's best seller *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (2009). Beevor encountered hostility for suggesting that bombing Caen was "very close to a war crime." By then another British historian, Andrew Knapp at the University of Reading, was working specifically on the Allied bombing of France. He and Claudia Baldoli wrote the first account in English of the Allied bombing of France and Italy, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy Under Allied Air Attack, 1940–1945* (2012), which Knapp followed up with a longer book in French, *Les Français sous les bombes alliées, 1940–1945* (France Under the Allied Bombs, 1940–1945; 2014).

But apart from Beevor's, these books did not reach a wide readership; they are missing from bookshops in Normandy and even from the Caen Memorial's shop. Of Quellien's many volumes, only one—*Les Civils dans la bataille de Normandie* (Civilians in the Battle of Normandy, 2014), written with Françoise Passera—was available there when we visited, alongside hundreds of other titles on Allied military victory, plus D-Day souvenirs and merchandise.

French presidential silence on the bombing was baffling, starting with that of Charles de Gaulle. "His memoirs give an idea of how damaged France was, but none that the British and Americans did it. To my knowledge, he never protested," says Knapp. "De Gaulle never came to the D-Day beaches or commemorations," says Stéphane Grimaldi, the director of the Caen Memorial, "or paid tribute to his compatriots killed by bombing."

Finally, in 2014, at Grimaldi's urging, President François Hollande referred to civilian casualties in his speech commemorating the seventieth anniversary of D-Day. President Emmanuel Macron is expected to pay tribute to the dead in a speech this year at Saint-Lô, though reportedly not at the beach commemorations. But when the rhetoric resounds this June 6, how many speakers will echo the words of Jean Quellien?

Hundreds of men, women and children never got to see the end of that historic day; which dawned in hope, and ended in consternation and tears. In total, raids by the US Air

Force left a thousand dead and very many wounded. Aerial photographs reported in Britain showed the destruction—but it was judged insufficient. They had to do it again!… The combined bombardments of the June 6 and night of June 6–7 cost the lives of about three thousand civilians.

No American or British leader has ever made reference, let alone paid homage, to the French dead on any public occasion.

The bombing of Norman cities, towns, and villages was initially part of the Allies' Transportation Plan to destroy German rail and road connections. Churchill had reservations about the strategy, as did even the head of RAF Bomber Command, Air Marshal Arthur Harris, infamous for his enthusiasm for carpet-bombing, and his American counterpart General Carl Spaatz. But President Franklin D. Roosevelt vetoed all objections. "However regrettable the attendant loss of civilian lives is," he directed on May 11, 1944, "I am not prepared to impose…any restriction on military action." From D-Day onward, says Knapp, "the politicians had washed their hands of whatever carnage, warranted or not, the military leaders were prepared to unleash."

The doctrine of "carpet" or "area" bombing was not new. Britain had bombed civilians in Afghanistan and what was then British India and in Iraq, where the keen young Harris had served in the RAF. The Italian military theorist General Giulio Douhet had foreseen during the 1920s that the winner of the next "frightful" war would be the combatant best able to bomb civilians from the air. By early 1944 the RAF had 863 Sterling, Halifax, and Lancaster heavy bombers at its disposal. The American Eighth Air Force was formidably equipped with a fleet of B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators. But area bombing was supposed to be directed against enemy populations, not civilians of allied nations yearning to be liberated.

The cathedral city of Rouen bore the opening salvo, beginning on April 19, 1944, when the outlying suburb of Sotteville-lès-Rouen was bombed and over 850 civilians were killed. Knapp found documents showing that Churchill wanted commanders to ensure that French civilian victims of the Transportation Plan not exceed 10,000 and asked Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder to keep him informed of "the score." On May 23 Tedder reported 6,062 dead, leaving what he called a "Credit Balance Remaining" of 3,938 civilians who could still permissibly be killed.

With D-Day, the main onslaught began. In *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939–1945* (2013), the historian Richard Overy writes that

the weight of attack that could now be employed by the bomber commands was out of all proportion to the nature of the ground threat and on balance did little to speed up the course of the campaign.

Quellien's *Le Calvados dans la guerre, 1939–1945* (Calvados During the War, 1939–1945; 2019) calls the bombing "the programmed destruction" of Norman communities: "The raids launched from the morning of June 6 were imprecise, and had no [military] impact." The British bombed low by night, the Americans from on high by day. In Le Havre 85 percent of buildings were destroyed, in Saint-Lô 77 percent, in Lisieux 75 percent, in Caen 73 percent, and in Rouen 42 percent. Destruction in many villages was even worse.

Quellien received us twice at his home in Feuguerolles-Bully, near Caen. "The justification was military," he reflected.

The Allies wanted, rightly, to destroy the German enemy. There was concern: "We don't want to bomb our friends," the British and Americans told one another. But reservations were put aside, and they did it anyway. The discussions only demonstrate that they knew exactly what they were doing.

However, Quellien said,

there was silence on the matter for forty years. We started work during an atmosphere of taboo, even hostility. There had been some immediate disbelief: "Why did you do this to us?" People could not believe what had happened. But then they did not talk about it openly, not even people who had suffered. The atmosphere was: "What are you saying? It was liberation, not bombardment." The important thing was D-Day, and that's all that mattered. The Germans were gone, and if you asked, "But who killed us?" no one would answer.

The hurt was always there, though, said Quellien. "In private, Normans pointed a finger at the British and Americans, but only within the home." The silence, he said, was partly due to "diplomatic difficulty" during the cold war:

"Do not offend our liberators, who are also our Atlantic allies." A difficulty arose between our true history and the interests of our politicians and international allies. So only much later did we do, shall we say, "the accounts," and when our work appeared, it was not well received.

Passera, who has worked closely with Quellien, explained that "what interests me is not military history but intimate history, the everyday experience of citizens during wartime." As their book *Les Normands dans la guerre: Le temps des épreuves, 1939–1945* (The Normans During the War: The Time of Trials, 1939–1945; 2021) shows, she is concerned with "everyday life in the ruins. Thousands of people trying to live in the

rubble of their destroyed houses, or other extreme conditions." A related, almost untold story is the exodus of people in flight from bombing. "Survivors fled their towns en masse, heading for surrounding villages," she told us. "We estimate one hundred thousand" after the first night of bombs, "welcomed by peasants and farmers." Passera and Quellien recount how "a certain social life" was forged, with newborn babies living "the first weeks of their lives in apple baskets and vegetable crates" beneath the bombers.

Yet all this was buried history. "When the D-Day industry began during the 1950s," said Passera,

no one talked about people killed by the Allies, or the lives of survivors…. The idea of D-Day commemoration was pilgrimage: at first families and veterans came, rightly, to visit their dead in the cemeteries. And after them came the tourist business. The local population was thus obliged to transfer its duty of memory to the fallen British and Americans, and thereby to the British and American people…. The survivors had a different history—a victim history that was not glorious, and that challenged the economic opportunities of victory…. Resentment built up. It became a conversation around the kitchen table. Until the early 1980s, when retired students at the Inter-Age University said: "Enough—we want the dead counted, and our story told."

At Allassac, in the Vézère valley of south-central France, Simonne Leterreux lives in a nursing home near her daughter Sophie Collet. Now ninety, Leterreux lost her mother in 1940 at the age of six in the Norman town of Lisieux, just as the war began. Lisieux was later destroyed, but by then Simonne and two of her elder sisters, Denise and Genviève, had been placed by their father at a convent boarding school in Caen run by "the good sisters" of St. Vincent-de-Paul, where Simonne stayed throughout the Nazi occupation. Then came the night of June 6, 1944, when

although we saw nothing, we heard the planes overhead, and the terrible noise around, of bombs falling. The noise was continuous; we were right underneath the planes. The good sisters told us to lean against the walls for protection.

The school was not hit, and the nuns arranged for the children to join the exodus from Caen to hide in a quarry at May-sur-Orne about nine miles away. "As we walked in line," remembered Leterreux,

we saw everything around us in ruins. A bomb had hit a butcher's store in the rue d'Auge, and the flesh of the victims was mixed in with the meat—it was impossible to distinguish which was which. Everything was bombed, everything destroyed, and we

walked through the rubble and corpses of those who had not survived—covering the ground, dead and some wounded.

The children hid for forty days in the quarry while the battle for Caen raged. When they went back to town after liberation, "and we told people we had been in the quarries all that time, they said it was not possible. I told them, 'If you were born stupid, you'll die stupid!'" Leterreux repeated that phrase many times, laughing. "*Si tu nais con, tu meurs con!*"

How did Leterreux feel about the liberators bombing them? "We didn't know who it was! We were bombed by the British, later the Americans, but the good sisters said nothing about that. We learned long afterward who did it. For months we knew nothing about who did this. It was liberation, but that is not the same thing as being bombed by your friends."

Some two thousand civilians were killed in the bombing of Caen, during a battle that lasted five weeks longer than the British general Bernard Montgomery had planned. Passera and Quellien, in *Les Civils dans la bataille de Normandie*, cite the account of Bernard Michel, who watched "the mass of planes flying toward Caen" with his friend Jean, from the village of Venoix.

To our stupefaction, we watched them unleash the bombs, in great clusters. I was stunned. It's not possible, we told ourselves. Jean knew I was an Anglophile, and said, "Now look what your friends are doing!"

Stéphane Grimaldi became director of the Caen Memorial in 2005. "We conducted a major survey," he said,

and found that one in three respondents had someone in their extended family who had been killed or wounded by bombing. For the vast majority, the Battle of Normandy was "extremely important"—this is our history.

But, he cautioned,

it's a question of how we structure memory of the battle. Official memory on one level, and domestic memory on another; public heroic memory versus victim memory behind closed curtains. Heroic memory became official memory; there were only heroes, and the full story was considered embarrassing because it was a tragic history, not a heroic one. But there comes a point when society has to question itself and people want to understand what really happened.

Two things occurred: First came an effort to secure official public mention, at least, of civilian victims. In 2014 Grimaldi was at the beachhead site of Arromanches, planning the seventieth-anniversary commemorations with the historian Jean-Pierre Azéma and advising President Hollande, to whom he said, “There’s no public acknowledgment of what happened to the civilians.” Grimaldi recalled that “Hollande reacted, and paid tribute to civilian victims in his speech. I hoped that this would begin to change the perception.” Second, also on Grimaldi’s initiative, was the opening in 2016 of a museum and memorial to civilian victims in the Norman town of Falaise. “But when I initially raised this,” Grimaldi said, “I was called a revisionist!—yes, the same word used for deniers of the Holocaust—by officials from the state and region.”

Falaise was bombed to rubble by the Allies, in part by incendiary phosphorous bombs; the “Falaise pocket” was held by the Germans until August 16. The museum is the definitive public record, in exhibits and videotaped testimony of how Norman civilians lived under both the German occupation and Allied bombing. The testimony is searing. Pierre Savary, then a student, recalls losing both parents, four brothers, and a sister to bombs falling on his home in Lisieux: “We were trapped under rubble. I remember the cries and moans of the people. I was amazed to be alive, but I lost everybody else.”

Pressure for the Falaise museum came, says its director, Emmanuel Thiébot,

from the public. Things changed because of the Inter-Age University, and then Quellien’s work. But the publications were scientific—it takes a long time for research to seep into the open, even though the witnesses were still alive.

This is why the museum

puts the civilians at the heart of the story. France was not an enemy, yet we were subjected to both strategic and psychological bombing. And this is our challenge here: to represent the French public as grateful to our liberators, but also as victims of countries that liberated us.

As a result, he says, “when foreigners do come, we’ve had Americans saying: ‘Did we do this?’ And we say, ‘Well, yes, you did.’ And they’re almost in tears sometimes—they have no idea.”

Much of the heaviest bombing by the US Army Air Forces was of the Manche département, whose capital, Saint-Lô, was described by Samuel Beckett in his essay “The Capital of the Ruins,” based on his experiences there as a volunteer for the Irish Red Cross. The senior researcher for Manche on Quellien’s original team was Michel Boivin. In their first collection of testimony, *Villes normandes sous les bombes (Juin 1944)* (Norman Cities Under the Bombs, June 1944), published in 1994, they quote Jean

Roger of Saint-Lô celebrating at first as American bombers flew overhead: “They’ve arrived! A sentiment of intense joy augmented by the long wait.” But then:

They’re bombing!… Are we dead? Are we alive? Is this the end?… I had the chance to cast an eye over the town: horrible. Everything in flames, an inferno…all ablaze, cries for help.

“It was difficult to gather the information we needed to establish the cost of liberation,” said Boivin, who received us at his home in Blainville-sur-Mer.

A lot of people had wanted to talk but felt they shouldn’t. Including…firemen who had hauled bodies from rubble, and medics treating the wounded. A nurse treated a woman with a baby in her arms: she was alive, but the child was dead. I saw many people break down in tears—it was as though we had opened up their trauma…. Officials said to us, “How dare you?” It was considered anti-American to talk about how many people were killed in Saint-Lô.

(According to the definitive count, 352.)

Normandy is the most pro-American and Anglophile corner of Europe. US and British flags fly everywhere, and cafés in Bayeux have window paintings of British Tommies offering afternoon tea. “Some seven million people, mostly English-speaking, visit D-Day sites each year,” said Grimaldi.

It’s essential to the regional economy. So you construct a memory that ignores the rest, a heroic story that saturates the public space for tourists to celebrate: thank you England and America, with some mention of Canadians, but almost none of the Poles, and others.

Thiébot uses the term “memory tourism”:

But like the commemorations, it is limited to D-Day, not the Battle of Normandy—a circuit of emblematic locations to do with landings and liberation, recounted as a successful military operation with extraordinary logistics, and sacrifice by men in uniform. Nothing to do with the civilian cost, no mention of bombing. Everyone knows, but don’t mention it in front of the tourists!

The British bombing of Le Havre between September 5 and 11, 1944, took the lives of some two thousand civilians, while one report by an RAF officer counted nine German

dead. “One cannot commemorate the liberation of Le Havre as one might the other towns,” said Mayor Antoine Rufenacht on its sixtieth anniversary.

In Knapp’s recounting of the battle, two men faced each other: Colonel Hermann-Eberhard Wildermuth, ordered by Hitler to defend Le Havre to the last, and Lieutenant General Sir John Crocker of British First Corps, under pressure from what Knapp calls “victory fever” to take it. Wildermuth had urged an evacuation of civilians on August 21, yet only 10,000 left, while 50,000 stayed.

For decades historians could not verify Guillemard’s assertion in 1948 that Crocker refused a further German proposal to evacuate civilians before the bombing; Guillemard reports citizens’ confusion at announcements that “the evacuation is suspended.” Florentin writes that “the conditions proposed by the German commander to let civilians leave on the 5th and 6th were rejected by Lt. Gen. Crocker.” In Crocker’s family papers, Knapp found a letter to his wife that contained conclusive evidence:

[Wildermuth] requested an armistice for two days to evacuate the (large number) of civilians in the place. It wasn’t an easy or a nice decision to make but I had to refuse as it was obviously to his advantage to get rid of them—he would gain time, have none to feed and would get rid of the French agents and active resisters.

Yet the ensuing devastation was not inflicted on Wildermuth’s defenses. Knapp cited Allied intelligence detailing where Germans troops were positioned, down to such particulars as a horse exercise ground. “If you want to go for German command and control, these are the addresses,” he said, showing us the original map. “The British had a reliable repertoire of tactical targets, each marked by a letter. It’s a pity they didn’t use it.” At a meeting on September 3,

Crocker gave the coordinates, and they weren’t the German targets. I don’t understand why, given the information he had, Crocker bombed the parts of town he did. German troops were already on the periphery, and Crocker hit the city center. It just doesn’t make sense.

In Le Havre on the night of September 5, 781 people were killed and 289 disappeared. The following night another 655 were killed, of whom 174 were buried and asphyxiated, trapped in the worksite of the future Jenner road tunnel; seven survived, “using their fingertips to try and clear the earth, a pitiful struggle for life,” writes Guillemard. By September 11, 9,790 tons of bombs had killed 1,397 identified dead and 139 unknown dead with 517 disappeared—a total of 2,053 killed in less than a week. Florentin describes

smoke, the smell of sulfur invades the cellar…We're suffocating… In the darkness we collide with each other…A head, with singed hair and wild eyes, sometimes appears in a crack, tortured voice imploring: "Help! I'm burning! Get me out of here!" But we can do nothing for this dying man, already perched on a pile of corpses, because the road is also hell, a chaos of smoking ruins between which we stumble, people seeking refuge, collapsing, one after the other.

On September 11 Crocker wrote to Harris, "Nobody could have been given a better start than we were by Bomber Command. All ranks unanimous in their praise of absolute accuracy of bombing and timing on every occasion." But even Harris, whose name is synonymous with mass slaughter of civilians from the air, had regrets: Knapp found a telephone message from Harris dated October 1944 in which he lamented that "many French civilians were killed, and much damage done which did not materially help our army to take the port." An RAF public relations officer, the future playwright and novelist R.F. Delderfield, wrote in a report for the First Canadian Army: "The bombing only killed about 8 Germans and did not fall on that quarter of the town where the Germans were assembled." Whatever the calculation, said Quellien, "the British knew perfectly well they were going to massacre Le Havre."

Le Havre was rebuilt so successfully, to a design by the celebrated architect Auguste Perret, that it is designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. But there was silence on the bombing until very recently.

At the Tourneville fort, high above the docks, some two hundred people turned out in March for a lecture organized by the Havre Center for Historical Research and given by an academic from the Université Le Havre Normandie, Thomas Vaisset, on the official management of corpses and body parts after the bombing. The detail was forensic, the audience enthralled. The fort, completed in 1860, was a headquarters for German occupying troops, then briefly the British. "When the English arrived," said Le Havre's municipal archivist, Sylvie Barot, in the audience, "they were pleased to find the German cellar: cognac, champagne, fine wine—and took full advantage!"

Also present was the local historian Claude Malon, who has written on Le Havre's economy during the occupation and the fortunes made, especially from building the Germans' defensive Atlantic Wall. Malon coined the unpopular description of Le Havre as "Vichy-sur-Seine" and posits what he calls a "memory screen," whereby the memory of the bombing conveniently hides that of collaboration.

Yet neither the conservative mayor Pierre Courant (one of the very few to govern a municipality both under the occupation and after it) nor the Communists who ran Le Havre from 1965 to 1995 officially commemorated the bombing. Le Havre, says Barot, "was urged to focus on reconstruction, present and future." An imposing solid granite memorial to its World War I dead (almost the only structure to survive the bombing of

the city center) rises in the rebuilt Place du Générale de Gaulle. Civilian victims of bombing are remembered by Perret's towering church of St. Joseph, completed in 1958 and conceived in their memory but not formally dedicated until a ceremony and the affixing of a small plaque in 2019.

After the war, "people either didn't know what happened to us or they didn't want to know," said La Fuente. When she was reunited with her mother,

there was silence between us; she cried all the time. Afterward she was unable to speak about any of this—if she had done so, she would have wept for the rest of her life. To lose your husband is much to bear, but to also lose three children is unbearable. She never forgave the English; she couldn't speak of England. But she said almost nothing.

Until her mother died in 1968, La Fuente said, "she avoided driving through Évrecy"—nine miles from Caen—"and I still do."

"They were our liberators, whatever," says Leterreux. "I rarely hear anyone talk about 'British bastards' or 'damned Americans,'" says Boivin. "In almost all places, infantrymen were greeted as liberators," says Knapp,

apart from the extreme case of Le Havre, where they were tolerated at best. People risked their lives to hide airmen who had been shot down, and helped them escape, even though moments beforehand, those same airmen were dropping bombs on those who rescued them.

Delderfield, in his report for the Canadian army, noted that "the people of Le Havre had previously been very pro-British," but now

some of them failed to respond to a greeting and I felt that if they had been certain I was RAF (I wore a raincoat all the time) there might have been some unpleasantness…. They were glad to be liberated but this was a terrible price to pay.

Even Guillemard concludes, "What predominated among us was our ferocious, implacable hatred of Hitler and his gang."

Throughout 2004 the Caen Memorial, in partnership with *Ouest France* newspaper, organized a remarkable series of public hearings called "The Vigils" across twenty-four bombed locations, at which survivors told their stories. Most, says Thiébot,

agreed that bombing was the price to pay for liberation; it wasn't a discourse of vengeance, but they wanted their voices heard, and they wanted an answer to the question: Why? You killed my family, you destroyed my town—but did you have to?

Knapp divides bombings of civilians into three categories.

One: militarily useful with minimal casualties. [He cites targeting an aerospace factory in Limoges.] Two: You can see the military justification, but did it have to be done with so much damage to people and buildings? Three: Why do that? Heavy civilian casualties for little or no military gain.

Le Havre, he says, definitely fits into category three, and after decades of research on Normandy, he cannot cite a single example in category one: "Too many civilian casualties, every time."

On the beachfront at Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer is a memorial to Canadian soldiers who died landing there and a panel with a picture of three young ladies, one of whom is Paulette Mériel, reportedly the first Norman to shake hands with a liberating soldier: a French-speaking Canadian from the North Shore Regiment. Mériel died on May 18, three months after we interviewed her, aged one hundred, at a care home in nearby Douvres-la-Déliverande.

After a gripping account of the occupation, with gossip about collaborators and black marketers and Germans threatening to shoot her for shrimping, Mériel's recollections reached D-Day:

We were young—we had heads full of fog, more curious than afraid—but we knew something special was happening. My grandmother was terrified—she thought the Canadians were going to shoot her! But our house was by the beach: we went down and met them, and they spoke to us in our language!

Then the bombs fell:

On the first day, our house was completely destroyed—luckily no one was there. A mix of sounds: planes, bombs, artillery. We hid in the dike, then the cellars—a dozen of us. We ventured out by night: the houses around us all destroyed. It was misery, but we got accustomed to it, sleeping on mattresses—and the Germans were gone at last.

Mériel's family was not so lucky:

My sister had a farm, and her husband and his brother were killed by the bombing just after D-Day. We were happy to be liberated, but what followed was not so happy. I'm not timid on the matter: they liberated us, but we didn't expect to have to pay that price.

"The Normans," she reflected,

lived many different D-Days. Different experiences in different places. There was a D-Day of liberation, and then there was the D-Day of losing our homes, and all those thousands of our people.