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“Bomber” Harris: A Dangerous Commander?

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the operational command of Sir Arthur Harris, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Bomber Command, British Royal Air Force, during World War II. As the AOC, Bomber Command, Harris focused on the area bombing and destruction of German cities, in lieu of military targets. Controversy still exists with regards to the morality of Harris' bombing campaign. The investigation and analysis of his command is done with an analysis tool recently developed by the Canadian team of Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann. The model proposed by the team provides a conceptual framework to describe various components of command and further suggests how the interrelationship of these components is relevant in the determination of commander capability. The results of the investigation of the command of Sir Arthur Harris show conclusively that misplaced responsibility caused his command to be inherently dangerous.

“Bomber” Harris: A Dangerous Commander?

by Colonel Carla Coulson

“I’m paid to kill people.”¹

Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris

“Bomber” Harris had just been stopped by a police officer for speeding, and been told that if he did not slow his automobile he would likely kill someone. In retort, he uttered the sentiment above. Indeed, the World War II (WW II) command of Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris, the Royal Air Force’s (RAF) Bomber Command, did kill people. An estimated 600,000 German men, women and children died as a result of the direct bombing of German cities during the war (1939-1945); many thousands more were wounded and mutilated. Millions more were left homeless.² In the prosecution of the bombing campaign the British Commonwealth lost 55,573 aircrew, 18% of which were Canadian,³ and only one man in three could be expected to survive his tour of duty, which equated to 30 missions, with Bomber Command.⁴ Much has been written about Sir Arthur Harris. Charles Messinger, author of *‘Bomber’ Harris and the Strategic Bomber Offensive, 1939-1945*, tells his readers that Harris’ gruffness, coldness, and penetrating stare, along with the nicknames of ‘Killer’, ‘Chopper’ and ‘Butch’ (short for ‘Butcher’) given to him by his airmen, seemed to indicate that he felt nothing about

¹ Ralph Barker, *The Thousand Plan* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965) 22.

² Breerton Greenhous et al., *The Crucible of War. 1939-1945: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force Volume III* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 866.

³ Max Hastings, *Bomber Command* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979) Foreward.

⁴ Sir Arthur Harris, *Bomber Offensive* (London: Collins, 1947) 267.

sending so many young men to their deaths. Messinger goes on to claim that this was not the case, that in fact these nicknames were used more in humor, and as a token of deep respect and admiration for Sir Arthur Harris.⁵

The literature is fraught with differences of opinion and ambiguities on the topic of the bombing campaign and on the subject of its leader. In particular, Harris' biographers, Dudley Saward, and Charles Messinger treat Harris sympathetically, while Max Hastings and Stephen Garrett provide harsher views.⁶ The area bombing that "Bomber" Harris favored as the means to win the war remains extremely controversial. In 1992, Germans were outraged when Britain paid tribute to Sir Arthur Harris by constructing a memorial to honor him and his aircrew in London. (Tami Biddle tells us that the statue has become a favorite target for abuse.⁷) On the other hand, the British press was filled with letters defending the bombing offensive as a military necessity.⁸ Editorials in world newspapers just prior to the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden exemplify the differences of opinion that still exist regarding the morality of the Allied bombing strategy. In 1995 Simon Jenkins wrote in an article entitled *Dresden: Time To Say We're Sorry*:

The Dresden raid was part of a final destructive frenzy by an insubordinate commander, unleashed by Churchill to bring a gift to Stalin at Yalta...Dresden cannot be excused as "balancing" Auschwitz or Coventry or German punitive massacres of villages in the Balkans.⁹

One of many responses to Mr. Jenkin's piece appeared a few days later. It read:

⁵ Charles Messinger, *'Bomber' Harris and the Strategic Bombing Offensive, 1939-1945* (London:Arms and Armour Press, 1984) 54.

⁶ Tami Davis Biddle, "Bombing by the Square Yard: Sir Arthur Harris at War, 1942-1945", *The International History Review*, XXI no. 3 (September 1999) 660.

⁷ Biddle, 626.

⁸ Stephen A. Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower in World War II: The British Bombing of German Cities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) xiii.

⁹ Simon Jenkins, "Dresden: Time to Say We're Sorry", *Wall Street Journal* 14 February 1995: A22.

In May 1940...the German Luftwaffe destroyed the city of my birth, Rotterdam. The firestorm was so fierce it blew cars down the streets. Holland was a neutral country. We did not bomb German cities (we did not even have an air force), and we did not threaten Germany...Yes, Mr. Jenkins, by all means, you apologize for Dresden. In Holland, nobody would even consider it.¹⁰

What can history tell us definitively about the command of Sir Arthur Harris?

Was he an effective commander? A powerful commander? Was he merely carrying out the orders of Sir Winston Churchill, or unscrupulously attacking what some considered to be Germany's strategic center of gravity, the will of the German people, without regards to the wishes of Britain's political or military leadership? The intent of this essay is to investigate the command of Sir Arthur Harris using an analysis tool recently developed by the Canadian team of Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann. The model the team proposes provides a conceptual framework to describe various components of command, and further suggests how the interrelationship of these components is relevant in the determination of a commander's capability.¹¹ The results of the investigation suggest that, although Sir Arthur Harris displayed many command competencies at levels commensurate with his position, misplaced responsibility, near the conclusion of the war, caused his command to be inherently dangerous as defined by the model.

To begin an analysis of the command of Sir Arthur Harris, it is first necessary to provide background information on the WW II Allied bombing campaign in the European Theater, as well as the Pigeau and McCann model.

¹⁰ Edward Lifmann, letter, *Wall Street Journal*, 3 March 1995: A11.

¹¹ Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann, "What is a Commander?", Paper presented at the Human in Command Workshop & Symposium 58, June 2000, Breda, The Netherlands, 4.

WW II ALLIED BOMBING CAMPAIGN

“I am deeply concerned about the stagnation of our bomber force...I consider the rapid expansion of the bomber force to be one of the greatest military objectives now before us...”¹²

Sir Winston Churchill to the Chief of Air Staff
December 1940

In 1940, when Britain stood alone in her attempts to constrain and defeat the German war machine, the new British Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, looked to a bomber offensive as a decisive contribution to the war effort.¹³ Indications are that he feared the outcome of a land campaign and looked, at least initially, to an intensive bombing campaign as a way to perhaps win the war outright without committing ground forces in Europe. And, the expectation of the leading role that Bomber Command might play in the defeat of Germany helped Churchill win the argument that Britain should remain in the war, and not choose to make peace.¹⁴ Through the war, Churchill’s attitude toward the bomber campaign elevated it to its “top dog” position in the British war effort.¹⁵

In the early years of WW II, the RAF was not properly manned, equipped or trained to carry out much of a bomber offensive. In 1940, the Prime Minister was just contemplating the wartime expansion of the RAF. In his book, *Bomber Command*, Max Hastings writes, “While the Prime Minister pressed the claims of the bomber offensive with remorseless energy, a kind of euphoria gripped the Royal Air Force, which never

¹² Hastings, 117.

¹³ Hastings, foreward.

¹⁴ Biddle, 631.

¹⁵ Hastings, 107.

entirely died for the rest of the war.”¹⁶ As the build-up of Bomber Command began in earnest, the airmen of the RAF gained unimagined notoriety.

The genesis of the promotion of area bombing, as the principal British bombing strategy, was first articulated by Major General Sir Hugh Trenchard, who commanded the Royal Flying Corps, later the Independent Force,¹⁷ and was Chief of the Air Staff, Royal Air Force, during the 1920’s.¹⁸ In his final World War 1 dispatch, Trenchard argued that the moral (morale) effect of bombing was twenty times the material effect.¹⁹ During the time between the wars, he “developed a bureaucratic interest in long-range bombing as the future centerpiece of British defence policy...he argued, air power offered a short cut to victory owing to its disproportionately disruptive ‘moral effect’ on vulnerable populations.”²⁰ There was much criticism of Trenchard’s doctrine by both the army and the navy on the grounds of immorality, as well as inefficiency.²¹ Indeed, the 30’s showed some concern regarding the Trenchard doctrine in the face of a significant air defense threat from the German Luftwaffe, as well as the introduction of new and untested equipment and aircraft.

The RAF’s failure in their 1939-1941 focus on the precision bombing of high value targets, such as German industrial and military facilities, resulted in the direction of bombing efforts to that of area bombing. Aircrew flying older generation bombers, like the Wellington and Blenheim, had few navigational or targeting tools and failed to hit much of anything of value from altitudes of 10,000 feet. In addition, more and more

¹⁶ Hastings, 117.

¹⁷ Biddle, 627.

¹⁸ Messinger, 15.

¹⁹ Biddle, 627.

²⁰ Biddle, 628.

²¹ Biddle, 630.

missions were being conducted in the darkness of night due to the very heavy daylight casualty rates that could be attributed to the ever-increasing efficiency of the German Luftwaffe. The contributions of Britain's human and industrial resources were not paying off, and the Prime Minister was losing his patience with the RAF. In 1940, Winston Churchill had written of the need for "devastating, exterminating attacks on the Nazi homeland."²² The British Air Staff translated his wishes into an area bombing campaign. By the middle of 1941, the British Air Staff was proposing a force of 4,000 first line heavy bombers. At that time, the daily availability of aircraft stood at about 500.²³ Winston Churchill wholeheartedly supported directing the industrial base of Britain to begin immediate production of the bombers to conduct the controversial strategy of bombing entire cities, their industrial base, and the workers' dwellings they contained.²⁴ Max Hastings tell us that in February of 1942, when Sir Arthur Harris became the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC) of Bomber Command, he was given a mandate to conduct a "full-blooded area campaign".²⁵ Commenting on the preliminary phase of his command, Sir Arthur Harris tells us, "I was unable to begin any real bomber offensive for a whole year after I took Command for lack of aircraft, proper equipment and trained crews..."²⁶ However, the year was notable for the incendiary raids on many German cities, and the 1000 bomber raids in May and June of 1942 on Cologne, Essen and Bremen.²⁷

²² Dunmore and Carter, 6.

²³ Hastings, 117.

²⁴ Spencer Dunmore and William Carter, Reap the Whirlwind (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1991) 6.

²⁵ Hastings, 49.

²⁶ Harris, 90.

²⁷ Dunmore and Carter, 7.

Sir Arthur Harris vigorously prosecuted a bombing offensive with area bombing as his top priority throughout the war. New four-engined bombers, improved navigational tools, establishment of a Path Finder Force (PFF) to mark targets, and better training of aircrew gave “Bomber” Harris what he needed to conduct the campaign. Although the production capability of Britain fell short of providing Bomber Command with the capability to strike Germany with a force of 4,000 aircraft, contributions of the United States Army Air Force late in the war were significant to the Allied bombing campaign.

Today there continues to be much controversy concerning the effectiveness and morality of the WW II Allied bombing campaign in Europe. Certainly damage was inflicted upon the enemy. However, did the wholesale attack and destruction of German cities contribute significantly to the fall of Nazi Germany? Albert Speer, Hitler’s Minister of Armaments, who ruthlessly mobilized the resources that kept Germany in the war, commented from his prison cell in Spandau that the Allied bombing campaign had been “ineffective in cracking Germany until the closing phase of the war.”²⁸ It is likely that Albert Speer was referring to the Allied return to precision bombing of high value targets that took place in the fall of 1944. The reassertion of efforts, from the destruction of German cities to the destruction of German military, industrial and economic systems, as previously prioritized in the Casablanca Directive of 1943, focused on oil production facilities and other transportation targets that might quickly lead to Germany’s collapse and the end of the war. Max Hastings tells his readers that the “two great achievements

²⁸ Hastings, 242.

of the Allied strategic air offensive must be conceded to the Americans: the defeat of the Luftwaffe by the Mustang escort-fighter, and the inception of the deadly oil offensive.”²⁹

While the American Air Force focussed on the destruction of oil and transportation facilities, Harris continued to target cities. It was in this final phase of the war that the AOC of Bomber Command is accused of ignoring the refocusing of efforts by stepping up the bombing of German population centers. Hastings points out that one fifth of the total tonnage of bombs used throughout the entire war were dropped in the first 4 months of 1945.³⁰ Attacks on Dresden in February 1945 marked the beginning of the distancing of Allied, but in particular British, politicians from the Allied bombing campaign. The outrage and inevitable fallout over the morality of the bombing campaign that occurred after the war was largely directed at the AOC himself. But, Sir Arthur Harris never backed away from the role he played in the execution of the campaign. Dudley Seward, who worked for “Bomber” Harris during the war, tells us in his memoirs that although Sir Arthur Harris was promoted in 1946 to the highest rank that an officer can attain, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, he was “otherwise ignored in the Victory Honours List.”³¹ Charles Messinger insists, however, that Churchill did not attempt to distance himself from Harris. He points to a letter of May 1945 from Churchill to Harris in which the tone is one of vast appreciation for the work of Harris and his command.³² However, Bomber Command received no campaign medal, was not mentioned in Churchill’s victory speech or in any significant way in Churchill’s voluminous history of

²⁹ Hastings, 350.

³⁰ Hastings, 336.

³¹ Dudley Seward, ‘Bomber Harris’ (London: Casell Ltd., 1984) 324.

³² Messinger, 197.

the war.³³ “Harris commented bitterly at the time, ‘only a Home Defence medal whilst every clerk, butcher, baker, and candlestick-maker, serving miles behind the fighting fronts on the Continent, in Egypt...were to get a campaign medal.’ ”³⁴

“Bomber” Harris was not and is not an enigma, as some may suggest. He did have somewhat of a mythical status among the citizens of Britain during the war, but the literature shows that he was straightforward and typically honest, though often overstated and exaggerated, in his prosecution of the Allied bombing campaign. As such, given the availability of a suitable model, an analysis of his command can be done with some degree of confidence.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF COMMAND

Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann have extensively studied the concept of command. They have concluded that command is “a uniquely human behaviour, one that is manifested through the processes of Control.”³⁵ They define *command* as, “the creative expression of human will necessary to accomplish a mission”,³⁶ and *control* as, “those structures and processes devised by Command to manage risk.”³⁷ They argue that the command position is one way to control the expression of command, to give the command stability, as well as fiduciary power. They go on to suggest that a “tension

³³ Biddle, 657.

³⁴ Seward, 325.

³⁵ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 4.

³⁶ Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann, “Clarifying the Concepts of Control and Command”, Paper presented at the 1999 Command and Control Research and Technology Symposium, 29 June-1 July 1999, U.S. Naval War College, 5.

³⁷ Pigeau and McCann, “Clarifying the Concepts of Control and Command” 4.

exists between the necessity for creative command and the necessity to control command creativity.”³⁸ Pigeau and McCann propose the use of a three dimensional model to further define command as the interrelationship between three qualities of command: *competency, authority and responsibility*.³⁹ The three axes create a volume of space that Pigeau and McCann define as command capability, and by extension commander capability.⁴⁰ The figure below identifies Command Capability Space.

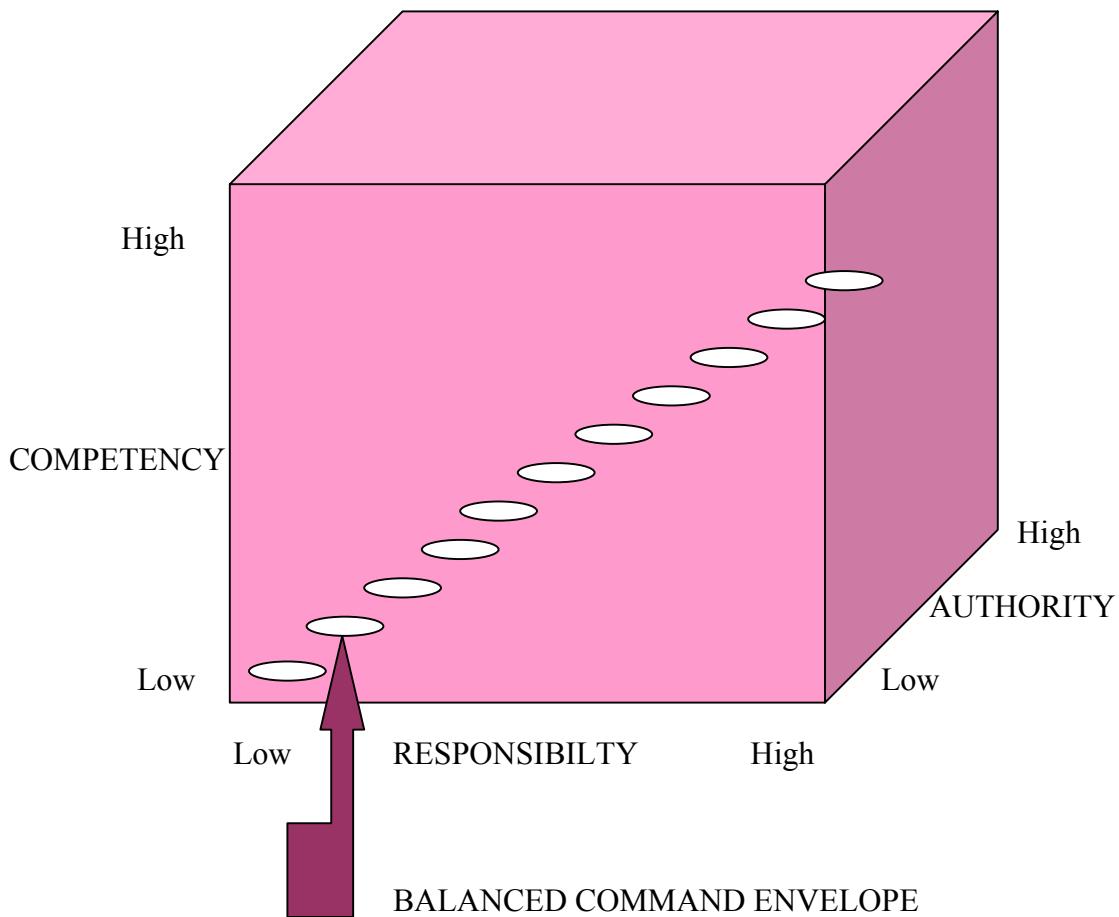


Figure 1. COMMAND CAPABILITY SPACE ⁴¹

³⁸ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 4.

³⁹ Pigeau and McCann, “Clarifying the Concepts of Command and Control” 7.

⁴⁰ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 4.

⁴¹ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 8.

One would expect to see an increasing level of capability in the three dimensions with increased rank, responsibility and level of command (tactical, operational or strategic). The diagonal that moves across the volume is termed the Balanced Command Envelope (BCE). Pigeau and McCann tell us that it “represents the ideal (or preferred) combination of competency, authority and responsibility,”⁴² and that it is the region where there is the most balance between these qualities. Those commanders lying outside of the BCE would be expected to create negative command conditions.

Before looking at the positioning of Sir Arthur Harris’ command within the Command Capability Space, it is necessary to briefly discuss the three dimensions.

Competency

Pigeau and McCann suggest four areas of competency that are necessary for one to command successfully. The competencies are physical, intellectual, interpersonal and emotional. The model suggests that it is optimal to acquire higher levels of these competencies as one continues to advance in rank and/or responsibility, thus allowing the individual (as commander) to stay within the BCE.

The skill sets associated with physical and intellectual competencies are typically well understood in a military setting. Everyone must be trained and physically able to carry out a mission. Whereas a private may need to be physically strong enough to load tank ammunition, a general will need to be able to physically withstand the stress associated with making decisions that will impact large numbers of people. A seaman will need to know how to fight fire on a ship, while an admiral might need to have the skills to decide how to resource an entire Navy. Well-developed interpersonal

⁴² Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 11.

competencies are essential to all commands. These competencies provide the foundation for trust, teamwork, camaraderie and effective communication up and down the Chain of Command. Lastly, a commander must be emotionally mature to carry out a military mission. Pigeau and McCann state, “Command requires a degree of emotional “toughness” to accept the potentially dire consequences of operational decisions.”⁴³

Authority

Pigeau and McCann define the dimension of authority as the degree to which a commander is empowered to carry out his will.⁴⁴ They divide the dimension into two distinct components, legal and personal. Legal authority is that authority expressed in statute, or other regulations. It is the authority given to a commander that provides him the tools to enforce discipline in his command and knowingly place members of the command in harm’s way, should the mission require it.⁴⁵ Personal authority, on the other hand, is the authority a commander earns over time from his subordinates and peers through trust, commitment, reputation and example. It results from the leadership of the commander.

Responsibility

The third dimension of the Pigeau and McCann model is that of responsibility. It is defined as, “the degree to which an individual accepts the legal and moral liability commensurate with Command.”⁴⁶ The dimension is divided into two components,

⁴³ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 5.

⁴⁴ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 6.

⁴⁵ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 6.

⁴⁶ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 6.

extrinsic and intrinsic responsibility. Extrinsic responsibility implies accountability up and down the chain of command, as well as a behavioral contract between the commander and his/her superiors.⁴⁷ This responsibility can manifest itself in the manner in which a commander follows the directives his superiors give him, and in the manner in which his followers hold him accountable. This quality is the measure of commitment on the behalf of the individual to command responsibly. It is a commander's willingness to take responsibility for the legal authorities bestowed him. Fundamental to command is intrinsic responsibility, the second component of this dimension. It is defined as the degree of obligation that one feels with regards to his military mission.⁴⁸ In a broader sense, it encompasses the concepts associated with the military ethos such as "duty, honor, country".

Command Capability Space

The Command Capability Space (figure 1) is comprised of these dimensions. To fit into the BCE, the command of Sir Arthur Harris would be expected to show high degrees of maturity and capabilities, within each dimension, commensurate with what might normally be expected at the operational level of command.

This essay focuses on what Pigeau and McCann define as "dangerous command." The potential for dangerous command is high when a commander has a great deal of authority, but little willingness to accept responsibility for the use of power associated with the authority. It can lead to an abuse of power by those in command.

⁴⁷ Pigeau and McCann, "What is a Commander?" 6.

⁴⁸ Pigeau and McCann, "What is a Commander?" 7.

Following is application of the Pigeau and McCann model to the command of Sir Arthur Harris.

SIR ARTHUR HARRIS IN COMMAND

One could argue that Sir Arthur Harris was a strong, decisive commander, or that he was a weak, manipulative commander. The literature provides ample ammunition for either position. Use of an analytical tool to build an argument adds objectivity to the process of analysis, and therefore a degree of legitimacy to the outcome. The approach taken in this essay is to use various references to evaluate the command of Sir Arthur Harris with respect to the three dimensions of the Pigeau and McCann model, beginning with the dimension of competency.

Competency

Physical Competency

“He disliked physical activity-he often said that after his experiences in South-West Africa in the First World War, he had made up his mind never to walk again unless he had to.”⁴⁹

Max Hastings on “Bomber” Harris

He didn’t like to walk, chain-smoked Camel cigarettes, suffered from ulcers and took off only two weekends during his tour of duty as the AOC, Bomber Command, from February of 1942 until the end of the war in 1945. Throughout his command, “Bomber” Harris insisted on being awakened nightly to be updated on the progress of bombing missions. The health of Harris was of considerable concern to his Staff, although it appears he withstood the daily stress and strain of being responsible for the operation of

⁴⁹ Hastings, 244.

Bomber Command. Ralph Barker writes, “...Harris was so over-burdened that a failure in health was always a possibility.”⁵⁰ Charles Messinger states in his work that Harris never had a day of serious illness despite his smoking, lack of exercise and incessant work.⁵¹ Harris died in 1986, well into his 90s. Every indication is that he was physically capable of performing his duties as AOC, Bomber Command.

Intellectual Competency

Although it was widely thought that Sir Arthur Harris was “not a first class mind in the academic sense”,⁵² there is every indication that he was adequately trained to lead Bomber Command. He was an innovative person who brought about changes in equipment and method.⁵³ As a Bomber Squadron Commander, he experimented with marking targets at night. Between the wars, as a Flight Commander in Iraq, he had converted troop carriers to bombers on his own initiative.⁵⁴ As a student of the father of airpower, General Guilo Douhet, “Bomber” Harris became a strong advocate of the notion that airpower alone could win wars. As a product of Trenchard’s RAF, Sir Arthur Harris worked on the development of bombing policy between the wars as a key air force planner.⁵⁵ As the head of Bomber Command, he secured massive increases in resourcing for aircraft production, and oversaw the introduction of improved electronics technologies that increased the efficiency of bombing and/or the survivability of his airmen.

⁵⁰ Barker, 27.

⁵¹ Messinger, 55.

⁵² Hastings, 245.

⁵³ Barker, 25.

⁵⁴ Hastings, 41.

⁵⁵ Biddle, 630.

There is evidence, however, that his stubbornness sometimes interfered with his application of sound judgement. He initially fought the idea of the fielding of a PFF that eventually led to a significant increase in bombing accuracy. His reluctance to support a target marking force was due, in part, to the fact that the idea was introduced by the Air Ministry, not by Harris, and the additional direction from the Ministry that the force was to be made up of only the best aircrew.⁵⁶ In addition, Harris displayed a lack of clarity of thought with regards to the confidence he had in the abilities of his force during the invasion of Europe. In 1944, during the time that he reported to General Eisenhower, as the Supreme Allied Commander, in the preparation and later execution of Operation Overlord, “Bomber” Harris was compelled to execute precision bombing missions. It appears that he was completely dumbfounded at Bomber Command’s success at execution of these missions. Tami Biddle states:

To Harris’ surprise...Bomber Command proved perfectly capable of hitting small targets...Between 17 April and 6 June, Harris’s seasoned crews, aided by the latest navigational aids and Pathfinder marking techniques, bombed railroads, coast defences, and airfields with increasing accuracy.⁵⁷

If there is one serious challenge to his intellect, it may be that his single-minded, narrow and frequently stubborn approach to the bombing campaign may have resulted in his inability to make the best decisions with respect to the Commonwealth’s bombing strategy. He was so intent upon the prosecution of area bombing as a means to an end that he disregarded arguments that use of his bombing assets in another manner might have ended the war more quickly. In September of 1944, with the German fuel supply reduced to just 10,000 tons, whereas about 160,000 tons were required monthly, Bomber

⁵⁶ Messinger, 207.

⁵⁷ Biddle, 645.

Command continued to focus on the bombing of German cities, even though it was clear that the command was capable of successfully hitting oil and transportation targets.⁵⁸

Tami Biddle tells us that if Sir Arthur Harris had adjusted his strategy such that Bomber Command hit only one or two additional oil targets per month in the fall of 1944, it might have made such a difference as to inhibit or preclude the Ardennes offensive of December 1944.⁵⁹ Literary evidence, therefore, suggests that Harris may have been below what Pigeau and McCann consider optimal with regards to this competency, but perhaps not too far from what might be expected by an operational level commander during WW II.

Interpersonal Competency

“The veterans of 6 Group (RCAF)...are, almost to a man, unanimous in their admiration of and respect for, the late Sir Arthur Harris, who drove them all so hard.”⁶⁰

Sentiment of 6 Group of the RCAF

Sir Arthur Harris never spent much time with his airmen; he was too busy directing the daily bombing missions from his Headquarters at High Wycombe. Max Hastings writes, “the stories of his rudeness and extravagance contributed immensely to his popularity with his overwhelmingly lower to middle class bombing crews...though they never saw him.”⁶¹ His Staff at High Wycombe saw him in a different light. Many were afraid of him, his drive, his tenacity and inflexibility. He “treated those who disagreed with him as mortal enemies.”⁶² The literature suggests that few ever

⁵⁸ Garrett, 19.

⁵⁹ Biddle, 653.

⁶⁰ Dunmore and Carter, 373.

⁶¹ Hastings, 137.

⁶² Hastings, 138.

challenged him. It is accurate to describe the environment at High Wycombe as one of subordination to Harris' will.

Sir Arthur Harris, for the most part, had a trustworthy relationship with his superiors and peers in the Air Ministry. His relationship with Sir Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff, was one of mutual respect, however it became exceedingly tense as the war drew to a close. This was a direct result of Harris' failure to prosecute precision bombing in the manner Portal desired.

The interpersonal relationship between Winston Churchill and Sir Arthur Harris is well documented. Dr. Allan English tells us in his book, *The Cream of the Crop*, that "Churchill's belief that the war could be won...through strategic bombing led him to favour...Harris...over any other military leaders."⁶³ Harris visited the home of Sir Winston Churchill, which was close to High Wycombe, often. No doubt the leaders had frequent, and private, discussions regarding the Allied bombing campaign. The relationship attracted some attention and led to the jealousy of other British military leaders who felt that resources were given to Bomber Command as a result of the association. Max Hastings reports that a member of Churchill's secret service claims that Winston Churchill found Harris to be a "bit of a boor (not bore) with little or any sort of fine thoughts..."⁶⁴ Regardless, Churchill enjoyed spending time with a man who was similarly single-minded and obsessed with the war.

It appears that Harris had honed his interpersonal skills such that young men gladly risked their lives daily for him. It is likely that an unwaiverable sense of duty and

⁶³ Allan D. English, *The Cream of the Crop* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996) 14.

⁶⁴ Hastings, 136.

honor, as well as the fear of being accused of “lacking moral fiber”, was what kept the crews of Bomber Command in the skies despite the odds against survival. But though his interpersonal skills may have been lacking in that he rarely spent time with his airmen, it appears they provided him the personal authority he needed to carry out his mission as the AOC of Bomber Command.

Emotional Competency

*“Harris was a nerveless commander of great forces, and the history of warfare shows that such men are rare. His very insensitivity rendered him proof against shocks and disappointments.”*⁶⁵

Hastings on “Bomber” Harris

There is no doubt that using the Pigeau and McCann description of emotional competency puts “Bomber” Harris at the very “top of his class”, as an operational level commander who was tough, resilient, hardy and willing to accept the circumstances and consequences of war. He is, however, so exaggerated in this particular component of the competency dimension that it is a plausible notion that “Bomber” Harris lacked the emotional maturity to successfully command. Once more, contradictory views may be found in the literature. Whereas some may believe that stubbornness and determination was what made him a “giant among contemporaries,”⁶⁶ others would suggest that “he was gravely lacking in balance and judgement.”⁶⁷

He was obsessed with area bombing and believed that with enough effort Allied air forces could knock Germany out of the war before Operation Overlord commenced. By his own admission, he felt that his independence in command would end once the

⁶⁵ Hastings, 138.

⁶⁶ Biddle, 661.

⁶⁷ Biddle, 662.

Allies' priority shifted to preparation for Overlord.⁶⁸ Prior to Operation Overlord, he convinced Winston Churchill to take on a lengthy bombing campaign against the German capital, Berlin (known as the Battle of Berlin). Though the raids did damage to the city, losses were high. John Terraine tells us:

the losses (1,047 aircraft missing and 1,682 damaged in the course of the battle) were bad enough, but worse still was a lack of result...huge areas of Berlin were laid to waste. But, in derision of these fearful scenes, the German war economy seemed to thrive.⁶⁹

Throughout the war, “Bomber” Harris stubbornly refused to see that area bombing was not having the impact on German morale that he predicted, and that it would not lead to any quick, decisive conclusion to the war.

In the Canadian Broadcast Corporation's series, *The Valour and the Horror*, a piece entitled *Death by Moonlight: Bomber Command*, features the tales of two Royal Canadian Air Force veterans of the Allied bombing campaign. In the film, they tell of “Bomber” Harris ordering the removal of armour, as well as other safety features and even the bunk used by the wounded, from the aircraft of Bomber Command so that more bombs could be carried.⁷⁰ Sir Arthur Harris would have paid any price for an Allied victory won from the air.

Taking a rather conservative approach to the untested Pigeau and McCann model this essay places Harris above the BCE for this particular component.

Application of the competency dimension of the Pigeau and McCann model to the command of “Bomber” Harris suggests that Harris, as an operational level commander,

⁶⁸ John Terraine, *The Right of the Line: The Royal Air Force in the European War 1939-1945* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985) 552.

⁶⁹ Terraine, 556.

⁷⁰ *The Valour and the Horror: Death by Moonlight: Bomber Command*, dir. Brian McKenna, prod. Galafim Inc. with Canadian Broadcast Corp. and National Film Board of Canada.

fits into the BCE for the components of physical and interpersonal competency, is below the BCE in the area of intellectual competency, and above the BCE in emotional competency. Let's move now to the dimension of authority.

Authority

*"I want to make it quite clear that I was never pressed by Mr. Churchill to do anything at his dictation, or anything with which I was not personally satisfied."*⁷¹

Harris on Authority

Sir Arthur Harris had the authority to prosecute the bombing campaign much in the manner he desired throughout the war. There is little doubt that prior to the Casablanca Directive of 1943, Harris carried out the bombing strategy passed on to him by his predecessor, and fully supported by the Prime Minister and the Air Staff. The Casablanca Conference produced the following guidance, for Harris and his American counterpart, General Ira Eaker, as to how the continued air offensive against Germany was to be carried out.

Your primary objective will be the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened.⁷²

Harris was quite creative in the analysis of this directive and believed that it gave him a very broad mandate to attack any German industrial city of 100,000 inhabitants or above.⁷³

During the period preceding and immediately following Operation Overlord, from

⁷¹ Harris, 106-107.

⁷² Garrett, 53.

⁷³ Garrett, 54.

April to September of 1944, Harris reported to General Eisenhower. His independence of command was somewhat curtailed as he was forced to support the Allied invasion.

Harris initially fought the reprioritization of his efforts, but “did not quarrel with the decision to put the bomber force at the disposal of the invading armies once the die had been cast.”⁷⁴ The bomber force did well during Operation Overlord. Their success in the prosecution of precision bombing, along with the collapse of Germany’s air defenses and the introduction of fighter escort capability, led to an Allied rethinking of how Bomber Command might best be used.

In September of 1944, the Combined Joint Chiefs’ directed the Allied strategic bombing effort to oil production and storage facilities as a first priority, and to transportation links and tank and vehicle production as a second priority.⁷⁵ It might appear that “Bomber” Harris’ authority to continue area bombing had been nullified, but he actually paid little heed to this directive and increased the intensity of area bombing. His superior and Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Charles Portal, first did some gentle nudging, suggesting to Harris that he follow the directive. When Harris disregarded his wishes, Portal pleaded with him, to no avail, to discontinue area bombing and focus on other targets. Stephen Garrett concludes that Harris “was carrying out a different strategy, despite his superior’s specific instructions to the contrary.”⁷⁶ Throughout this controversy, Harris never lost his authority (legal or personal) to use Bomber Command in any way other than how he saw fit.

Sir Arthur Harris was given his authority directly from the Prime Minister. In light of this, it might be deduced that he was actually operating at a theater strategic

⁷⁴ Harris, 192.

⁷⁵ Garrett, 54.

versus a theater operational level throughout most of the war. Within the hierarchy of levels of command this would place him quite high on Pigeau and McCann's scale for the dimension of authority.

Responsibility

“To suggest that we have bombed German cities ‘simply for the sake of increasing terror’... is an insult both to the policy of the Air Ministry and to the manner in which the that policy has been executed by Bomber Command. This sort of thing, if it deserves an answer, will certainly receive none from me after implementing three years of official policy. We have never gone in for terror bombing.”⁷⁷

Harris, in response to Churchill's memo to the Chief of the Air Staff in March 1945 in which the PM accused the Air Staff of bombing simply for the sake of increasing terror

It is no secret that Sir Arthur Harris continued on with his campaign of area bombing following the September 1944 directive that should have refocused his efforts to the precision bombing of high priority targets. In fact from October through December of 1944, 58% of Bomber Command's effort was directed against cities.⁷⁸ Again and again Harris attacked cities instead of oil targets, even though it appeared that the American efforts directed at the high priority targets of fuel and transportation were paying off. During this final phase of the war, Sir Charles Portal considered removing Sir Arthur Harris from his position of AOC, Bomber Command; however, he decided that the fallout from such a move outweighed the consequences of Harris' continued prosecution of area targets. And based upon his public popularity, Harris' removal from Bomber Command would have likely caused an uproar across the Commonwealth.⁷⁹ In

⁷⁶ Garrett, 56.

⁷⁷ Garrett, 58.

⁷⁸ Hastings 330.

⁷⁹ Biddle, 652.

addition, Portal did not believe that Winston Churchill would support such an action and felt that Harris remained extremely effective in execution of the missions he did take on. In the December 1944/January 1945 time period, Harris asked Portal to consider his removal if he thought it best for the prosecution of the war. Stephen Garrett points out in his book, *Ethics and Airpower in World War II*, that this was not the first time that Sir Arthur Harris had offered to resign, and that Portal never believed these offers to be sincere in nature.⁸⁰

Max Hastings writes, “By the end of January of 1945, Germany’s gas, power, water and rail systems were in chaos. Fuel of every kind was desperately short...yet the strategic bomber offensive continued for ten more weeks.”⁸¹ The effort became overwhelmingly an area attack because there were fewer and fewer high priority targets remaining. The Americans began an effort to distance themselves from the continued destruction of German cities. In January of 1945, the Commander of the 8th Air Force, General Ira Eaker declared, “We should never allow the history of this war to convict us of throwing the strategic bomber at the man in the street.”⁸² But, the 8th Air Force did take part in the February raids on the city of Dresden, an action that generated outrage and revulsion as the war came to its inevitable close.

It is of importance to note that the British government sanctioned the attacks on Dresden. The British War Cabinet in fact, directed the attacks.⁸³ Dresden had been targeted throughout the war, and it was on the recommendation of “Bomber” Harris that Churchill impulsively directed the attack on the eve of the final Allied conference in

⁸⁰ Garrett, 56.

⁸¹ Hastings, 339.

⁸² Hastings, 339.

⁸³ Garrett, 20.

Yalta, thinking he would provide Russia with evidence of western support.⁸⁴ Tami

Biddle describes how the decision to bomb Dresden was made:

Asked to aid the Soviet armies by hindering the German retreat westwards, Harris replied that destroying Chemnitz, Dresden, and Leipzig, in addition to Berlin, would be the most effective way. The answer suited Churchill who was preparing to meet Stalin at Yalta...⁸⁵

Estimates of casualties at Dresden range from 35,000 to a high of about 200,000.

Thousands of victims were cremated on 25-foot long grills in order to prevent the spread of disease.⁸⁶

Harris continued the bombing of German cities until April of 1945 when the RAF Air Staff issued a directive ending the strategic bombing campaign against Germany. During the final three months of 1944, Bomber Command directed 14% of its efforts toward the destruction of oil facilities, and 15% to the secondary transportation targets.⁸⁷ Over half of the targets prosecuted were German cities.⁸⁸ From September 1944 through the end of the war, and to a degree from the Casablanca Conference until April of 1944, Sir Arthur Harris was irresponsible in the execution of the mission assigned to him. The great amount of authority that he was handed made him a very powerful man. The misuse of that power made him a dangerous man. Sir Arthur Harris acted in a manner in which he felt little obligation to follow the directives of his superiors, and was never held accountable for not doing so.

SYNTHESIS - The Command Capability Space of “Bomber” Harris

Having completed an analysis of the command of “Bomber” Harris, it is now

⁸⁴ Hastings, 341.

⁸⁵ Biddle, 653.

⁸⁶ Garrett, 20.

⁸⁷ Garrett, 19.

⁸⁸ Garrett, 19.

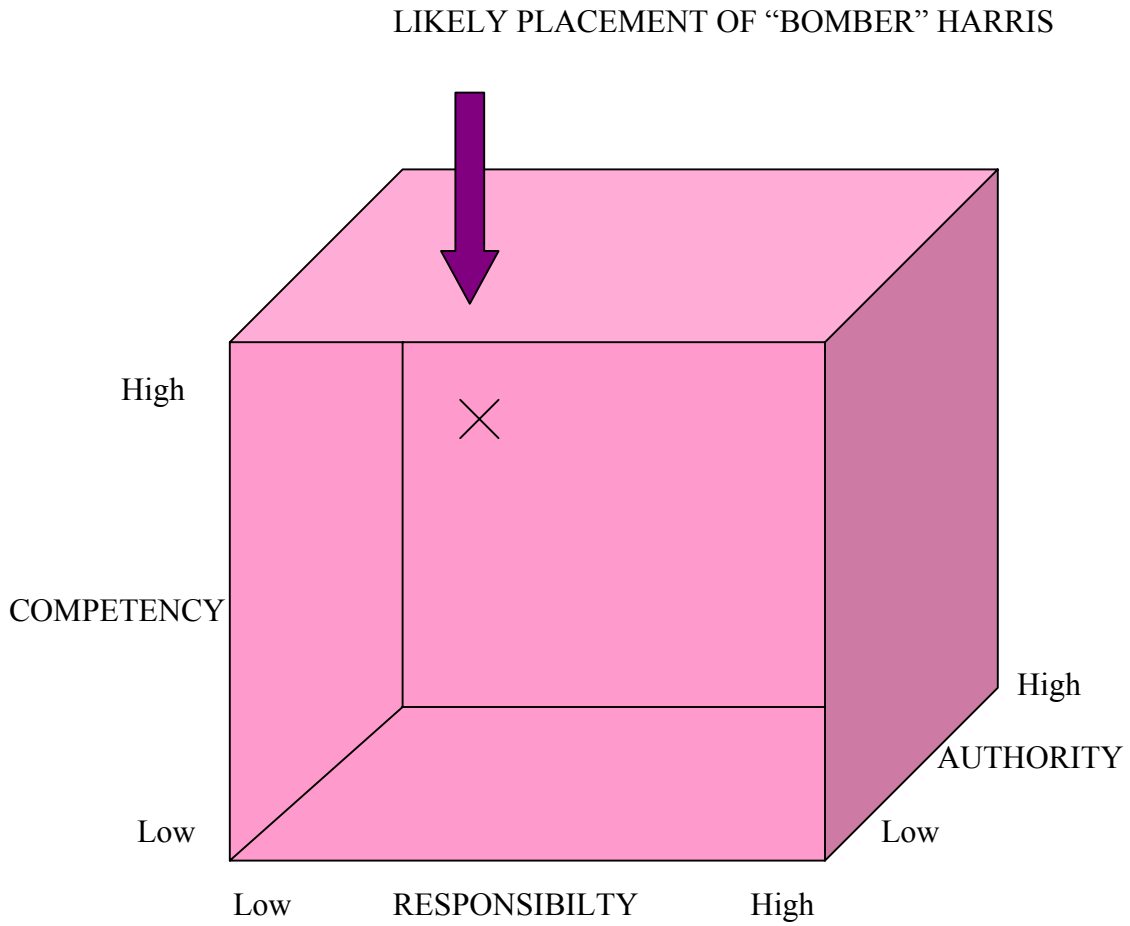
possible to situate him within the Command Capability Space shown in Figure 1. However, there remains some confusion as to how the model treats the dimension of extrinsic responsibility. In their most recent paper, Pigeau and McCann propose that “extrinsic responsibility taps a person’s willingness to be held accountable for resources”, and that “extrinsic responsibility is not synonymous with accountability.”⁸⁹ Using these descriptions alone would suggest that Sir Arthur Harris exhibited a high degree of extrinsic responsibility, for he was always willing to accept the consequences of his execution of command. However, some allowance must be made within the model for the evaluation of those who do not command responsibly, for those who do not follow objectively the directives there are given from higher headquarters. This essay proposes, therefore, that although Sir Arthur Harris was willing to be held accountable, he guessed correctly that he would be allowed to prosecute the bombing campaign on his own terms, and in doing so displayed a low degree of extrinsic responsibility. The argument that Harris was a dangerous commander is based on this premise.

In summary, the analysis shows that Harris would most likely fall very high in the dimension of authority, low in responsibility and at a competency level near what one would expect of a WW II operational level commander. Figure 2 (next page) indicates where the command of Sir Arthur Harris might be placed in the Command Capability Space. His command, and by extension Harris as a commander, fall outside of the BCE and into the area that Pigeau and McCann describe as dangerous command.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 6.

⁹⁰ Pigeau and McCann, “What is a Commander?” 9.

Figure 2. “BOMBER” HARRIS WITHIN THE COMMAND CAPABILITY SPACE



SYNTHESIS - Pigeau and McCann Three Dimensional Model

“But I feel that any person younger than 70 is unqualified to pass moral judgement on any Allied action in World War II. Sure, war is hell and we made mistakes, committed excesses and even atrocities. But unless allowance is made for the facts of life during 1939-45, passing judgement in a 1995 context...is really myopic...In a total war for survival, all constraints are loosened for the one objective--to survive.”⁹¹

World War II survivor, Herbert W. Robinson

Use of the Pigeau and McCann model as an analytical tool leads one to conclude that “Bomber” Harris was a dangerous commander. Perhaps “Bomber” Harris was but a stubborn, inflexible, short-sighted commander operating in a dangerous time. Sir Arthur Harris tried to win World War II, a total and unrestricted war, with strategic bombing that caused destruction the likes of which no one had ever seen before. He didn’t listen to his immediate superior, Sir Charles Portal, because the stakes were high and he thought without any reservation that the strategy he prosecuted would ensure an Allied victory. Throughout history we have seen great military leaders interpret orders and directives in ways that support individual, parochial and/or service agendas. And today, there remain those that feel wars can be won with the use of strategic airpower alone. Former United States Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, fired the United States Air Force Chief of Staff, General Michael Dugan, just prior to the Gulf War, when Dugan told the Washington Post that the war could and would be won from the air, negating the need for a bloody land battle. Nothing in this essay suggests that the command of “Bomber” Harris was not dangerous. It merely proposes that Harris was not evil, and that his

⁹¹ Herbert W. Robinson, letter, Wall Street Journal, 3 March 1995: A11.

behavior was not too far from what one might expect from a theater strategic level commander in an environment of total war.

The Pigeau and McCann model does not account for commander variances that might result from “the facts of life during 1939-45”. The observation to be made is that where a command (er) is positioned within the Command Capability Space, and the width of what is defined as the BCE, may vary from peacetime to wartime, from peacekeeping to limited conflict to total war. The model, in its current form, delineates between peacetime and wartime command, but fails to account for execution of command under varying degrees of conflict. This is a factor for possible future evaluation by the team.

In addition, use of the model suggests that small dimensional variances from the BCE may become larger variances, of greater importance, as one travels through the tactical level of command into operational or strategic levels. A simple example may be made in the quality of physical competency. A commander’s physical breakdown from the stress of wartime command at the tactical level will likely not be as significant to the success of mission accomplishment as would the physical incapacitation of an operational level commander. Furthermore, the physical incapacitation of a commander in peacetime certainly would not be of as much significance as it would be in wartime. In the later example, the command could stay well within the BCE in peacetime, but fall far outside of the BCE in times of war.

Another item for possible consideration by Pigeau and McCann is the effect of time and era on the model. For example, the interpersonal skills that labelled Sir Arthur Harris as an effective leader during World War II, would likely not serve him as well, and

perhaps be completely unacceptable, in this day and age. Certainly the youth of this decade would not have followed the transactional leadership of Harris with the same naivety and unquestioning innocence of the young men and women of Bomber Command, regardless of the type or intensity of conflict. Today's youth want dialogue with their leaders. They seek motivation, inspiration and intellectual stimulation in an environment characterized by transformational leadership.

Finally, the Pigeau and McCann model must deal with commanders who disregard orders and directives, yet are quite willing to be held accountable for their actions. This essay proposes that this is yet another example of low extrinsic responsibility, and coupled with high authority leads to the potential of abuse of power, and a dangerous command.

Where some may say that it is impossible to model command, successful command, or command (er) capabilities, the works of Pigeau and McCann are very worthy efforts that do bring structure and sense to the enigma. The tool is easy to apply; however human subjectivity is inherent in the process of evaluation of the various components of command, though some objectivity is possible.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the command of Sir Arthur Harris, using the command capability model recently developed by the Canadian duo of Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann, in conjunction with available historical references, shows conclusively that his command was dangerous in nature. The degree of authority Harris wielded allowed him to pursue the war in the manner he desired. 'Bomber' Harris commanded in a manner that was a

creative expression of human will directed toward mission accomplishment, however the controls normally associated with command, those that manage risk, were not always, or completely, in place. Harris' unwillingness to consider alternatives to an area bombing campaign, his disregard for the desires of his superiors, and his continued attack on German cities until the final days of the war are not easily explainable and difficult to defend.

The essay also concludes that results achieved from application of the Pigeau and McCann model may vary over a broad spectrum of conflict types and intensities, could be influenced by age and era, and could produce greater or lesser degrees of variance from the recommended norm (BCE) dependent on the level of command. There is also some clarification that is needed with respect to the characterization of extrinsic responsibility. These are areas the team may wish to evaluate in future work.

Forty percent of the total Canadian fatalities in WW II (17, 101) came from the Royal Canadian Air Force that flew so heroically for Bomber Command.⁹² Canada continued to provide aircrew to Bomber Command as losses mounted, and the effectiveness of the bombing campaign came into question. Whatever history concludes about the command of Sir Arthur Harris and the WW II Allied bombing campaign, the price paid by the talented youth of Allied nations to support the command was staggering and of consequence. According to Stephen Garrett, democracies are slow to anger, but when aroused tend to wage war viciously and without restraint. The underlying thought being that democracies depend on popular support for a given war effort and therefore attempt to arouse the more primitive instincts of the citizenry for the righteous defeat of

⁹² English, 5.

the belligerents.⁹³ That being the case, the command successes and failures of WW II should remain foremost in our minds.

⁹³ Garrett, 206.

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