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Review of "Beyond the Beach: The Allied War Against France" by Stephen Alan Bourque

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Stephen Alan Bourque. *Beyond the Beach: The Allied War Against France*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018. Pp. 353.

The 6 June 1944 invasion of Normandy has been studied and chronicled exhaustively to the literary equivalent of six decimal places. Not only is it difficult to present new perspectives on Operation Overlord, but the event often assumes a gauzy, inchoate image in the minds of most of us not alive when the event occurred. Modern, shorthand references to "D-Day" tend to connote a mashup of the first twenty minutes of the film *Saving Private Ryan*, a few pages from the works of Stephen Ambrose, and annual commemorations on the scale of those otherwise reserved for the attack on 7 December 1941. The historiography of the various facets of Overlord could fill entire bookshelves if ever entirely accumulated in one place. The catalogue runs a gamut that ranges from macro-narratives which virtually deify the Allied participants and demonise the Nazi opponents, to various attempts to ascribe meaning to the fight that extend well beyond the confines of the physical battle space and the brief timeframe in which it was fought. Despite that aggregation, though, Stephen A. Bourque has contributed in an area otherwise underserved in related scholarship, that of the unintended effects resulting from the air war over France. While most of the reading audience will be aware of the positive results of the invasion, far fewer know the true costs. The author does not avoid this, noting on several occasions that more than 60,000 French civilians perished directly due to the bombing missions—a statistic not normally cited in the hagiographic library of Overlord histories.

Beyond the Beach: The Allied War Against France is centred specifically on the history of the air operations conducted in relation to Operation Neptune, the amphibious landing element of Overlord. The author is upfront in laying out the two themes of the book. The first focuses on the relationship between pre-invasion aerial bombardment and the attendant effects on the physical invasion, while the second examines the French casualties incurred during the invasion, well beyond the local Normandy battle space to include much of France. This is a first-in-its-field work, and is currently the most complete occupant in this intellectual space.

The very publication of this extensively-researched and well-argued book is an invaluable contribution to the larger historiography of the Second World War. The author provides a comprehensive reference

list, including a catalogue of articles and shorter academic works that touch on air operations over France, but this volume represents an entirely new addition to the collective body of scholarship. Bourque takes on various aspects of pre-invasion planning, stating the respective purpose, conduct, and attendant effects of each. The latter category, specifically, attempts to examine both military and civilian consequences, as well as the burdens placed on the French due to their proximity to enemy targets. Following the exploration of each of those aspects of the operation, the author concludes by describing the collateral casualties suffered by the French citizenry. Bourque personalises the statistics with anecdotal accounts of specific cases by village or community. Among the most notable strengths in the book are the appendices which lay out the specific air target lists for factories, rail centres, and bridges, concise background summaries for the particular elements of Operations Crossbow (the bombing of Nazi war-making infrastructure) and Neptune, along with summaries of American and British approaches to aerial bombardment. Again, this book offers a perspective not found in any other history of the days leading up to the D-Day landings.

Given the author's approach, however, there are some aspects of the book that might potentially detract from the overall reading experience. Bourque acknowledges that much of the bombing occurred in parts of France that were occupied by the Axis forces, primarily German, and gives a nodding acquiescence to the reality that pre-invasion bombing must have necessarily occurred in places co-occupied by French citizenry. The diction and tone of the casualty summaries, however, focus far more on the human costs paid, in terms of lives lost and injuries sustained, than on the tactical advantages gained from destruction of enemy capacity.

While he does not overtly attempt to apply conclusions from the school of thought that questions the efficacy of strategic or coercive bombing, since Bourque has presumably limited himself to the operational/tactical nature of bombing to support specific military operations, the author clearly implies that many of the air attacks were unnecessary. In a distracting conflation of purpose, Bourque describes V-2 rocket interdiction operations (Operation Crossbow), and the second-order casualties those missions inflicted on the French, despite his previously stated focus on Neptune preparations. Aggregating the body count from all of the bombs dropped in occupied France is useful for perspective, but is not entirely consistent with the author's

implicit contract with the reader. Aerial bombardment in support of Crossbow is more in line with strategic (e.g. the Combined Bomber Offensive) missions than with narrower, pre-invasion preparations.

The author does a credible job of trying to put the modern reader into a war-planning environment that existed before the advent of satellite positioning and smart bombs: "The intensity of the bombing efforts...is difficult to understand in the contemporary era of precision munitions" (p. 123). He is still quick, however, to indict the collateral damage resulting from the bombs that were dropped. The reader might legitimately reason that operational planners were compelled, in the imprecise world of the 1940s, to program a particular number of bombs and commensurate explosive tonnage in order to reliably achieve the basic mission objectives. Germany had established their infrastructure production in abandoned or captured French facilities, sites necessarily co-located with French civilians. While unarguably tragic, the fact that the enemy and neutrals were co-located in a time of imprecise weaponry left no viable alternative to Allied leaders and military planners.

The bottom line remains that, while the D-Day landings succeeded, there were collateral casualties. The author argues that a more focused and precise pre-operational preparation of the environment might have rendered excess deaths unnecessary. As with the best of military historical writing, however, he presents his entire log of information for the reader to review, and from which each may judge on their own. *Beyond the Beach: The Allied War Against France* fills a vital space in the military planner's intellectual kit. This book is highly recommended for scholars of the Second World War, and even more strongly for all who plan and integrate large-scale aerial bombing campaigns.

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