



By the time RAF rear gunner Peter Twinn's Lancaster got to the target, the area below was already a mass of fires. "But it didn't stand out as something special" he recalled. "It was just another target and one town on fire is very much the same as another – only the acreage was greater."

Peter was a veteran of many [World War Two](#) Bomber Command raids and his target that night, February 13, 1945, was the city of Dresden, a name that has become synonymous with the controversy.

When I spoke to him at his Essex home 12 years ago, he told me: "I realised the enormity of it all after we got out of the target area. Looking back, seeing the entirety, you realised just how bad it must have been down there."

Seventy years on, the controversy shows no signs of diminishing.

Was [the RAF](#) bombing of Dresden really a war crime as many historians have suggested? Should Britain now apologise?

My answer to this is a resounding "No".

In fact it's time to attack the many myths [about Dresden](#).

Getty

Destruction: People getting on trams in the midst of the ruins left by an Allied air raid on Dresden

There is no dispute about the awful slaughter and destruction wrought on a city of rare beauty with many elegant palaces and churches.

It had been attacked twice by American bombers in 1944, but that was no preparation for the savagery of February 13 and 14. Instructions to the crews leave no doubt that "shock and awe" was the intention.

One RAF man said: "The whole city was ablaze from end to end. It was a sea of liquid flames, inspiring in its intensity. It was so bright at bombing height that we could easily have read a newspaper."

On the ground, death and chaos reigned. Those who found room in the inadequate public shelters or their own cellars covered under the onslaught. When the drone of the bombers had gone, one man ventured upstairs and looked out on a scene from hell.

“Everywhere we turned, buildings were on fire. The spark-filled air was suffocating. Chunks of red-hot matter were flying at us,” he said.

But this was only the opening salvo and the death and destruction would continue for many hours.

Arguments over how many perished that awful night continue today.

Daily Mirror



Duty: Peter Twinn, who flew a Lancaster bomber over Dresden

Disposal of the dead began immediately. SS men from the Treblinka concentration camps used their expertise at disposing of bodies. A month later an official German report said the known death toll was 18,375 and estimated the final figure at around 25,000.

Among the many wild totals quoted later, it remains the only one that has any official authority to it.

It is undoubtedly a minimum figure.

Most responsible histories add between 10,000 and 15,000 more for the unknown number of refugees who died, bringing the toll to somewhere between 25,000 and 40,000.

It was a terrible calamity, but after the war the figure became an urban myth, inflated to as much as 320,000. It has suited critics to exaggerate the truth to demonise the attackers.

The argument that Dresden was an “innocent city” and hence the victim of a war crime began to take hold.

Yet the city boasted it was “one of the foremost industrial locations in the Reich” and 127 factories had secretly been switched to war work, making bomb-aiming apparatus, searchlights and parts for V-1 flying bombs to name but a few.

Daily Mirror



At war: Peter Twinn was a pilot for Bomber Command

Dresden was also about to take a more active role in the fighting. The German High Command had designated it as a defensive military strongpoint against the Russian advance from the east.

It was also a vital link in the German rail network – 28 military transports a day came through Dresden with troops and tanks. The city was a war factory, a fortress and a transport hub.

This made it a legitimate target for the bombers.

Another favoured argument is that “the war was nearly over”. These critics are using a wonderful weapon called ‘hindsight’.

The harsh reality of the time was that only total war would bring Hitler’s Germany to its knees.

The end was far from apparent early in 1945. There had been mass casualties at the Battle of the Bulge and Arnhem, the first Germans jet fighters were airborne, and V-1 and V-2 rockets were killing thousands of civilians in southern Britain.

One wonders what the hindsight experts would be saying today if the RAF had stopped the bombing early and the war had gone on for months, perhaps even years.

This controversy deeply hurt the men of Bomber Command.

Rear-gunner Peter Twinn sadly died in January 2010, three years before the magnificent Bomber Command Memorial was unveiled in London to commemorate the sacrifice he and his colleagues made.

He had told me: “People sit in judgement of us but they haven’t got a clue what it was all about and it is very wrong that people criticise what we did – they dishonour the memory of our comrades who died. Because without Bomber Command at that time, I think the country would have been overrun.”

Another person who might agree is Elka Schrijver from Holland. At the time of the raids she was one of 4,000 political prisoners in a jail near Dresden where male inmates were digging a huge hole in the ground.

“After our liberation,” she said, “documents found by the Red Cross showed that this was meant to be a mass grave and that orders from Dresden had been received to shoot all of us.





Weapon of choice: The Lancaster bomber

"Subsequent to the Dresden raids, nobody had the courage to execute these orders. Those of us who were political prisoners in Saxony at the time directly owe our lives to those air raids."

Perhaps the final word should go to RAF pilot Freddie Hulance, who died a few years after I interviewed him. His Lancaster bomber was one of the first over the target.

"I once heard someone describe the bombing of Dresden as a holocaust", he said. "That was a word I had never heard until the end of the war when we were shown what the Germans had done to the Jews.

"Knowing the real meaning of holocaust I am even more proud of what I did. I helped to shorten that war, a war that we simply had to win."