



TERRA MOSANA

Deliverable N° DT 2.2.1 (D)

Storyline on theme 9: War & Peace

Title: “Deadly skies: air and war
destruction 1940-1945”

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Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Innovation,
Digitalisierung und Energie
des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen



provincie limburg



Terra Mosana

WP2

Storyline synopsis

Theme 9: War & Peace

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Storyline title:

**“Deadly skies: air and war
destruction 1940-1945”.**

Theme:	War & Peace (theme 9)
Storyline:	Deadly skies: air and war destructions 1940-1945.
Theme coordinator + storyline secretary:	Coordinator of the theme : Peter Schrijvers (Leopoldsburg) Main author of the text : Peter Schrijvers
Involved:	Peter Schrijvers
Version + date:	Version : January 2021

Proof of deliverable:

THEME 9

WAR AND PEACE

STORYLINE

Deadly Skies: Air War and Destruction, 1940-1945

1. INTRODUCTION

At the entrance of the community center of Beverlo, a hamlet on the border between Leopoldsburg and Beringen in Belgium, visitors can take in the rather surprising sight of a massive, gleaming Merlin Rolls Royce XX motor. Its 12 cylinders once were capable of producing up to 1.800 horsepower. Although the presence of this exceptional piece of military technology appears incongruous with the social and cultural functions of the local center, the motor serves the crucial function of commemorating a traumatic war experience that ravaged this small community in the balmy spring darkness of 1944.

In the night of 11-12 May 1944, an Allied air raid against the sprawling Belgian military barracks and training ground in nearby Leopoldsburg, since 1940 in use by the occupying forces of Nazi Germany, mistakenly released much of its destructive bomb load over the nearby village of Beverlo. Some eighty men, women, and children perished in a matter of minutes, leaving the small community decimated and psychologically scarred for decades. Of the 190 British Lancaster bombers in the skies over Leopoldsburg and Beverlo that night, the Germans downed five. One of them was an aircraft code-named LL792. It crashed not far from the present-day Beverlo community center, leaving all eight crew members dead. In 2002 a group of local volunteers identified the crash site and, pooling their own financial means, had heavy equipment come in to dig up from the sticky mud one of the Lancaster's four powerful motors. The volunteers spent a long time cleaning it up, then organized an official ceremony, placing the Merlin Rolls Royce XX at the entrance of the community center for inhabitants and visitors alike to see and contemplate in all its complex ramifications.

The LL792's powerful motor is an equally powerful icon of war. Not only for Beverlo and Leopoldsburg, but for the Euregion of Terra Mosana as a whole, where countless similar stories, graves, plaques, monuments, craters, and reconstructed built environments remind us of a fairly recent past when it appeared that the only threads connecting us were the destructive forces of war.

The story of Terra Mosana is, in effect, not only one of constructive ties of trade and culture. It is also one of organized violence, mass death, and wanton destruction. The Second World War was the most total war of all, and air war its most distinctive feature. The effects of air war in the Second

World War were devastating across Europe. And no less so in the Euregion of Terra Mosana, where the Meuse and Rhine rivers and the Westwall or Siegfried Line formed formidable military obstacles that gave rise to the use of devastating force on all sides. Yet from the resulting ashes and rubble also rose urban renewal immediately after the war, while the long-term memory of shared ruin(s) continues to serve as a warning today as well as a call for peace and cooperation across current state borders.

2. SUBJECT AND CONTEXT

Air war, barely developed during the First World War, became one of the distinguishing features of a Second World War characterized by rapid and sophisticated technological innovation.

On the one hand, fighter-bombers and medium bombers in combined arms operations began to serve tactical purposes, providing fire support for troops and destroying key infrastructure like roads, bridges, and railway stations likely to be used by enemy forces.

On the other hand, as early as the 1920s and 1930s, air power theorists like Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, Billy Mitchell and others in Europe and the United States were making the case for the strategic use of air power against the enemy. This use of air power as a 'third dimension' during the Second World War pushed both warring sides towards targeting not only industrial centers and key infrastructure, but gradually also urban centers more broadly, the latter with an eye to undermining a population's morale.

Both the tactical and the strategic use of air power between 1940 and 1945 contributed significantly to mass destruction, easily crossing state borders and simultaneously erasing the boundaries between soldiers and civilians in the total warfare that became a distinguishing feature of the Second World War. In 1944, the Allied bombing campaign's peak year, British aircraft dropped 525.000 tons of explosives in the strategic air offensive against Germany and American bombers another 389.000 tons.

The loss of life was exceedingly high, in the air and on the ground. More than half of the British RAF's heavy bomber crews perished, 56.000 men in all. The USAAF's overall losses were lower, but among 100.000 of its men who participated in the strategic offensive against Germany, some 26.000 died, and a further 20.000 were taken prisoner. Axis air losses mounted especially in the later stages of the war, with less than 10 percent of German airmen from 1943 onwards surviving until the end of the conflict.

Casualty rates on the ground were still more dramatic, particularly in Germany as the war progressed. Between 1940 and 1942, Allied bombing caused more than 11.000 German civilians to lose their lives. But Germany's civilian losses increased exponentially after that, with an estimated further 400.000 perishing by May 1945. Among the victims were also many tens of thousands of foreign prisoners of war and slave laborers.

Air war caused large numbers of deaths as well as much long-term physical and psychological suffering. It also had significant impacts on the individual feelings and perceptions, collective mentalities, social consciousness and "*Lebenswelten*" or lived-in worlds on both sides of war's divide that can be gauged by means of intelligence reports, diaries, propaganda leaflets and posters, civil defense publications, prayer messages, laws and regulations regarding air-raid shelters, and so on.

Moreover, with the dawn of the atomic age at the end of the Second World War and the emergence of a Cold War with a seemingly unstoppable nuclear arms race came a growing awareness that warfare was bound to erase the distinction between soldiers and civilians more than ever before. The acute sense of this existential threat, deeply embedded in collective memories of the mass destruction wreaked from the air in the Second World War, did much to spur on nuclear arms race protests and broader peace movements.

Meanwhile, the costly postwar rebuilding of destroyed homes and other structures, of neighborhoods and districts, and of entire towns and cities posed daunting challenges. At the same time, however, it offered also unique opportunities of urban renewal that embraced a more constructive and positive future.

3. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Between 1940 and 1945, in the Euregion of Terra Mosana, small villages and towns as well as mid-sized and larger cities suffered the devastating effects of total war's air power.

During the invasion of the Low Countries in May 1940, German air forces formed an important, cutting-edge part of a *Blitzkrieg* strategy that took defending forces by surprise. Lightning air strikes devastated, among others, key infrastructure, severely hampering the mobility of enemy troops. In Tongeren, for example, the train station was bombed on 10 and 11 May 1940, and with it several of the surrounding neighborhoods, including the medieval leprosy's chapel. The original station was never rebuilt. That same month Leopoldsburg too became a target of Germany's air weapon because of the presence in this small Belgian town of a vast military barracks and training camp.

In 1939-40 the RAF began its strategic bomber offensive against targets in Germany and German-occupied countries with piecemeal and halting daylight raids that caused relatively limited damage. That was not much comfort to communities at the receiving end of things. Late in the evening of 27 November 1941, for example, one or more British aircraft bombed the Mariaberg (Blauwdorp) area in Maastricht, taking the population completely by surprise, claiming some 25 dead, and leaving people guessing until this very day about the objective of the raid.

As time went on, the RAF's squadrons gradually switched to a nighttime offensive that only began to have significant material impact on Germany from 1943 onwards. This happened in combination with the formidable air forces of the USAAF that were being thrown into the battle from air bases in Great Britain in that same year. On 14 July 1943, for example, the RAF bombed Aachen a first time with significant force. Allied bombers returned to the city in an especially ferocious attack late in the evening of 11 April 1944. On this occasion, some 350 aircraft dropped more than 4.000 high-explosive bombs and more than 40.000 incendiaries on the German city that formed part of the Westwall. The raid killed more than 1.500 people, some 200 of them children.

In the spring of 1944, Allied bombers struck Leopoldsburg twice in a single month. The first British bombardment took place on the night of 11-12 May. Due to a number of circumstances, it failed to hit the German military camp, instead destroying large sections of nearby civilian neighborhoods, most notably in the hamlet of Beverlo.

British bombers returned to Leopoldsburg in even larger numbers during the night of 27-28 May, this time striking the intended German target with a vengeance, killing many hundreds of occupying troops inside the wrecked military barracks.

Both bombing raids formed part of the so-called 'Transportation Plan.' This Allied plan was developed to facilitate the D-Day landings in Normandy early in June 1944. It aimed to have air power destroy key infrastructure and other vital targets across Western Europe so as to prevent the German military from launching strong counterattacks that might drive the Allied forces back into the sea. The military barracks at Leopoldsborg formed a vital target because the Belgian resistance had passed on intelligence to London about the presence there of the newly formed and very powerful 12th SS Panzer Division. Ironically, by the time the Allied bombs struck Leopoldsborg and vicinity twice in May 1944, that Waffen SS division, unbeknownst to the Allied planners, had already left for Normandy several weeks earlier.

On 18 August 1944, the USAAF targeted the Maastricht railroad bridge over the Meuse River to avoid its use by rapidly retreating German troops. Much of the bomb load mistakenly devastated sections of the town, among others Kreijedörrep en Roed Dörrep, leaving some 100 people dead, 65 badly wounded, and 1.500 homeless.

The failure of Operation Market Garden in September 1944 caused the Allies to switch to a broad-front strategy of putting pressure on Nazi Germany all along the Westwall. As a result, Aachen, part of that heavily fortified line, early in October 1944 fell victim to fierce tactical air bombardments that preceded the first ground battle for a city on German soil.

Jülich was next. Already on 29 September 1944, the Allied bombing of Jülich had caused hundreds of Polish, Russian and Ukrainian forced laborers to lose their lives in the Iktebach camp compound. But it was in November 1944 that Jülich became a key target singled out for systematic aerial bombardment as part of the American-British Operation Queen, a large-scale offensive aimed at reaching the Ruhr River and capturing its strategic dams. The American-British strikes against Jülich (as well as Düren and the much smaller Heinsberg) on 16 November 1944 rank as one of the heaviest Allied tactical bombings of the Second World War, causing it to become one of Germany's most destroyed cities. 17 Mosquitos and a combination of 78 Lancaster and 413 Halifax heavy bombers with high explosives and incendiaries in a matter of hours wiped away an estimated 97 percent of Jülich's built environment.

Meanwhile, as Allied forces broke out of Normandy at the end of July 1944, unleashing a vigorous pursuit of German forces hastily retreating from France and Belgium, Hitler decided to retaliate with his much vaunted *Vergeltungswaffe* – the technologically very advanced jet-powered V1 and the V2 ballistic missile. It was all part of a last desperate attempt to turn the tide for Nazi Germany. At a site hidden away below the Cannerberg, a hill near Maastricht on the Dutch-Belgian border, German occupying forces were in the process of setting up the construction of V1s. But they had to abandon the project when Allied liberating forces began approaching the city towards mid-September 1944. In the early years of the new conflict brewing with the Soviet-Union, the Cannerberg site instead became a Cold War headquarters for NATO.

Together with Antwerp, a key port for the Allies in Western Europe after its liberation early in September 1944, Liège became one of the most targeted sites in Belgium in Hitler's V-weapons offensive in 1944-45. The large Walloon city on the Meuse River formed a major logistical hub for American forces. Between October 1944 and late January 1945, more than 1.600 V1s and V2s rained down on Liège, killing some 1.300 people, wounding another 2.000, and damaging 50 percent of the city's dwellings. During those long, fearful months, the battered city's inhabitants spent many days and nights in various subterranean spaces large and small.

The V-weapons' imprecision meant that many other cities, towns, and villages across Belgium also fell victim to the wanton destructive force of these new technologies. In December 1944, for example, they caused damage in and around Tongeren, among others in Nieuw-Tongeren and Broek.

4-5. PARTNER PERSPECTIVES AND COMMON EUREGIONAL EXPERIENCES

To withstand the ferocity of air war in 1940-45, the urban landscape of the Euregion Terra Mosana was hurriedly adapted, changed, and added to in myriad ways. In Maastricht, for example, at the start of the war, parts of the many kilometers of often ancient underground tunnels and quarries dug into the soft stone beneath the old town were transformed into underground air raid shelters for the city's civilian population. These shelters were soon providing safety for up to 25,000 people and contained seating, ventilation systems, and toilets. They were put to good use on several occasions during the war. Likewise, owners of some of the city's large factories put the spacious cellars of these large buildings at the disposal of inhabitants to keep them safe during air raids. The Philips family, for example, had people shelter in their tobacco factory's underground caverns, and after the war a plaque was installed in one of them thanking the owners for their kind Samaritan gesture.

In Aachen an ambitious program of feverish construction created numerous massive concrete air raid shelters that were built above the earth's surface, the so-called *Hochbunker* that stood in marked contrast to the underground *Tiefbunker*. Even today, fifteen of these massive constructions stand preserved across Aachen. Some of the *Hochbunker* sit derelict, others have plaques explaining their war history, still others have been transformed into trendy housing blocs or spaces where music bands can practice without bothering the neighbors.

Europe's deadly skies in the Second World War gave rise also to the formation of large civil protection programs, often made up of countless volunteers who, through their steadfastness and courage in Dantesque circumstances, earned the respect and admiration of large segments of the population.

In Maastricht, for example, intrepid members of the *Luchtbeschermingsdienst* (LBD) manned a watchtower on top of the nineteenth-century Fort Sint Pieter, built on a hill overlooking the city, from which they tirelessly scanned the skies for approaching aircraft during much of the war.

In Aachen, even today, a plaque commemorates the *Feuerlöschgruppe Dom*, also known as the *Domwache*, a group of young volunteers who on numerous occasions took great risks protecting the Aachen cathedral and parts of the old inner city against fire during the many Allied air raids threatening the key German city.

Meanwhile, as the Allied air offensive against Germany and German targets in the occupied countries grew in scale, the downing of Allied bombers became increasingly more commonplace. The massive death and destruction that bombers wreaked on Germany regularly caused downed Allied airmen to come in harm's way as enraged civilians used violence against them, in some cases even killing captured airmen.

Despite painfully mixed feelings about widespread collateral damage, in the occupied territories escape networks like the famous Comète line helped Allied airmen evade German capture

at the risk of their members' lives. Allied crash sites in the occupied territories often became commemorative shrines as soon as German soldiers stopped cordoning off the area. Even today in the Euregion of Terra Mosana, monuments large and small serve as reminders of crash sites, sometimes in the most remote fields and forests, while specialized websites carefully map both crash sites and the exploits of escape lines that spirited away airmen.

Postwar reconstruction in some parts of the Euregion took decades to be completed. The scale of the destruction was massive. In Belgium more than half a million buildings had suffered damage, some 23 percent of the prewar structures. In the Belgian state archives some 900.000 individual files document the war damage in a row of archives stretching eight kilometers long. They document the damage wreaked in, among others, Tongeren, Leopoldsburg and Beringen, but also and especially in a hard-hit city like Liège. Many of the architectural and urbanist choices made at the time remain starkly visible today in the once war-damaged sections.

In German parts of the Euregion of Terra Mosana, the task of reconstruction was at times particularly daunting. A town hall plaque in Aachen today reminds us of the crucial role that women played in the hard labor of cleaning up and rebuilding in a society where many young men were imprisoned, maimed or killed. Jülich was so utterly devastated that for some time immediately after the war there was talk of abandoning reconstruction altogether. But the people of Jülich found new hope and energy when the architect and city planner René von Schöfer in 1947 drew up elaborate plans for the reconstruction of the old part of the city.

Postwar reconstruction sometimes also created opportunities. An opportunity, for example, to rebuild some historical constructions closer to their original plans and without the additions made in later centuries. In Aachen, the Annakirche on the Annastrasse, for example, completely destroyed in the bombardments of 1943 and 1944, was rebuilt in its original form without nineteenth century modifications. Still in Aachen, the Aula Carolina, on the Pontstrasse, by 1980 was rebuilt according to its ancient form and shape. On the other side of the spectrum, some of the new postwar architecture taking the place of destroyed historical buildings, like Gerhard Gaubner's modernist building on the Katschhof, the inner courtyard of Charlemagne's palace in Aachen, has become very prominent in its own right and is now heritage-listed.

However, much of Germany's reconstruction resulted in cities filled with modernist buildings that did not age well, so that in the last decade a wave of new construction has been underway with a desire to reconstruct prewar historical buildings and sites.

6. WHERE TO VISIT

Aachen

- Examples of *Hochbunker* constructions on Goffartstrasse (one of the largest at 76 meters long) and Junkerstrasse (part of the project *Wege gegen das Vergessen*).
- The Waldfriedhof contains two plots with the victims of the air raids of 14 July 1943 and 11 April 1944.
- Mural painting depicting the deadly skies and resulting war damage – Aretzstrasse.

Beverlo

- Merlin Rolls Royce XX motor Lancaster bomber LL792 – Community center De Kardijk, Burgemeester Heymansplein.

Liège

- Bronze plaque city hall. Dedicated to the people of Liège and the Allied forces who stood shoulder to shoulder during the “aerial siege” of the autumn and winter of 1944-45.

Maastricht

- Monument ‘De Oorlogsramp’ British bombardment 27 November 1941. With inscription: *“Oorlog is een ramp der volkeren/Vrede is het heil der volkeren”* – Gildenweg.
- Monument American bombardement 18 augustus 1944 – Schildersplein.
- Plaque expressing thanks to owners of NV Tabaksindustrie. With inscription: *“Als blijk van erkentelijke dankbaarheid door de gezinnen waaraan in bange oorlogsdagen bij luchtgevaar in de kelders der fabriek spontaan een veilige schuilplaats werd aangeboden.”* – Tongerseweg.
- Entrance to underground air raid shelter – Minister Goeman Borgesiusplantsoen.
- Air raid tower – Fort Sint Pieter.
- Former V1 and NATO headquarters site (with guided tours) – Cannerberg.

7. STORYLINE PRODUCTS

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There are numerous opportunities for 3D reconstruction on the basis of preserved plans of buildings and entire sections of villages, towns, and cities that were destroyed during the Second World War and in some cases not, or not entirely, rebuilt in the postwar era.

At the same time, the many intensely dramatic personal stories of people involved in the Euregion’s air war as soldiers and civilians that have been preserved in writing and audiovisual interviews lend themselves well to audio and visual tours detailing the painful fates of bomber crews and those of the villages, towns, and cities nakedly vulnerable under the Euregion’s deadly skies.

8. LITERATURE AND OTHER INFORMATION

For a good example of a comprehensive examination across borders of air war during the Second World War, see The University of Exeter’s Centre for the Study of War, State and Society and its project: ‘Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe, 1940-45.’

<https://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/history/research/centres/warstateandsociety/projects/bombing/>

For a good example of a nationwide exhibition on the subject, see:

Algemeen Rijksarchief/Archives générales du Royaume: ‘La Belgique meurtrie: Destructures et dommages durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale.’ 27 October 2012 – 28 February 2013.

For a good example of a research project on postwar reconstruction, see:

RWTH Aachen University’s Faculty of Architecture: ‘Aachen? Wiederaufbau: Rekonstruktion durch Translozierung.’ 2013-16.

<https://arch.rwth-aachen.de/go/id/cnjd/file/170>

Some useful publications are:

Aachen

Bürgerstiftung Lebensraum Aachen. *70 Jahre Frieden und Freiheit in Aachen, 1944-2014*. Meyer & Meyer, 2014.

Jülich

Conrad Doose, Siegfried Peters and Helmut Scheuer. *Bilder einer Renaissancestadt Jülich vor und nach dem 16. November 1944*. Hahne & Schloemer Verlag, 2013.

Helmut Scheuer. *Wie war das damals? Jülich 1944-1948*. Verlag des Jülicher Geschichtsvereins, 1985.

Liège

Lambert Graillet. *Liège sous les V 1 et V 2. Un rajustement de l'importance réelle du drame*. Liège, 1996.

Maastricht

Jos Notermans and Paul Tieman. *Schuilen in Maastricht*. VVV Maastricht, 2002.

Tongeren

Mathieu Rutten. *Tongeren in beeld, 1940-45*. Agora/De Krijger, 2005.

Stefanie Sfingopoulos and Joost Vaesen. *Een cruciaal slagveld? Mythen, propaganda en wilde verhalen in de streek Maastricht- Eben-Emael – Tongeren, 1939-1940*. Erfgoedcel Tongeren, 2012.

Reconstruction

Jeffrey M. Diefendorf. *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities after World War II*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

V-weapons

Pieter Serrien. *Elke dag angst: De terreur van de V-bommen op België (1944-45)*. Horizon, 2017.

Some useful internet links are:

<https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/out-of-the-ashes-a-new-look-at-germany-s-postwar-reconstruction-a-702856.html>

<https://wwii-netherlands-escape-lines.com/links-to-other-escape-and-evasion-websites/links-allied-aircraft-crashes-in-the-netherlands-belgium-and-france/>

<https://www.airwar4045.nl>

<http://www.evasioncomete.org>

FURTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What was the nature and the scale of air defense measures set up in your town during the war, both active (anti-aircraft batteries, etc.) and passive (distribution of civilian-type gas masks, private and public underground air raid shelters, blackout measures, civil air defense organizations, etc.)?
2. What specific measures were taken to protect cultural heritage (historical buildings, archaeological sites, art collections, etc.)?
3. When and in what circumstances did your town come under air attack during the Second World War?
4. When, where and in what circumstances were aircraft downed during these attacks? Have the crash sites been mapped, possibly excavated?
5. What was the nature and the scale of the destruction that these air attacks caused in your town?
6. What other impacts did these air attacks have on the life in your town? Disruption of utilities, food shortages, breakdown of social order, disease outbreaks, refugee streams, etc.
7. What were the measures taken at the local, regional, and (trans)national levels to help rebuild and/or renew the destroyed urban areas? How long did this process take? What were the outcomes? In what manner did it change (parts of) your town?
8. Which archives best detail the air defense measures and/or the physical destruction and other impacts on your town of the air attacks and/or the reconstruction efforts?
9. Which studies detail both the air defense measures and/or the physical destruction and other impacts on your town of the air attacks and/or the reconstruction efforts?
10. Are there any (collections of) eyewitness testimonies that detail both the air defense measures and/or the physical destruction and other impacts on your town of the air attacks and/or the reconstruction efforts?
11. What are the plaques and/or monuments that commemorate the war dead and/or damage sites?



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