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Claire Gorrara

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What the Liberator Saw: British War Photography, Picture Post and the Normandy Campaign

CLAIRE GORRARA 

Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

This article examines the photographs of British Army stills photographers who accompanied Allied infantry, tank, and airborne units on the Normandy campaign from June to September 1944. These photographs are rarely commented upon as aesthetic objects in their own right or interrogated as primary historical documents. This article aims to make visible this substantial body of work, held today in the Imperial War Museum, and to identify and analyse the multivalent narratives of the Normandy campaign such images represent. It will contend that such photographs and their captions are traversed by and constructed through British scripts of war that go beyond the photograph's role as visually marking actual historical events. Such photographs helped shape interpretations of not only the prosecution of war in Normandy but also of France as an ambivalent wartime ally — both victor and victim of the Second World War. They were an important vector for the cultural construction (and rehabilitation) of France in the summer of 1944 and played a vital role in establishing the coordinates of France's war story for British readers. By examining these and other front-line photographs published in the popular illustrated magazine *Picture Post*, this article will argue in favour of a contextual approach to British war photography and its representations of the Normandy campaign. It will analyse how, in this case, rather than representing the Norman population as the passive recipients of liberation, a view prevalent in Allied historical accounts of the period, *Picture Post* mobilized official British war photographs to depict the common humanity of French and British experiences of war. In so doing, *Picture Post*'s visual narrative promoted the value of intercultural understanding and tolerance at a critical juncture in Anglo–French relations.

KEYWORDS photography, Second World War, Normandy campaign, British Army, France, Britain, Imperial War Museum, *Picture Post*

The status of photographs as material sources for the writing of history has undergone critical reassessment as cultural historians have challenged the notion that a photograph can provide unmediated ‘eye access to the real world of years ago’ (Thomas, 2009: 156). Historical narratives and representations of the past are approached differently when photographs move from the periphery of analysis to centre-stage. Such a ‘visual turn’ in historical studies invites researchers to ask different questions of visual media and to explore their role in informing how we understand the events they depict and the historically specific forms of knowledge that they embody. This article will focus on photographs taken by British Army photographers who accompanied Allied infantry, tank, and airborne units on the Normandy campaign from June to September 1944. For photographic historian Dawn Sumner, these photographers are amongst the ‘forgotten heroes’ of the Second World War (Sumner, 2003: 22), with almost a quarter of such army cameramen and photographers killed in action. Their photographs are rarely commented upon as aesthetic objects or discussed as primary historical documents. They appear predominantly as illustrations in histories of the Second World War (Beevor, 2009; Footitt, 2004). This article aims to make visible this substantial body of work, held today in the archives of the Imperial War Museum, and to identify and analyse the multivalent narratives of the Normandy campaign it represents. My contention is that such photographs and their captions are traversed by and constructed through British scripts of war that go beyond the photograph’s role as visually marking actual historical events. Such photographs helped shape interpretations of not only the prosecution of war in Normandy but also of France as an ambivalent wartime ally — both victor and victim of the Second World War. They were important vectors for the cultural construction (and rehabilitation) of France in the summer of 1944 and played a vital role in establishing the coordinates of France’s war story for British readers. By examining these and other photographs from the front line published in the popular illustrated magazine *Picture Post*, I will argue in favour of a contextual approach to British war photography and its representations of the Normandy campaign. I will analyse how, in this case, rather than representing the Norman population as the passive recipients of liberation, a view prevalent in Allied historical accounts of the period (Roberts, 2014), *Picture Post* mobilized official British war photographs to depict the common humanity of French and British experiences of war. In so doing, *Picture Post*’s visual narrative promoted the value of intercultural understanding and tolerance at a critical juncture in Anglo–French relations.

Shooting from the front: cultures of war photography

With the beginning of the Second World War, photography had already been well established as an integral element of existing cultures of war representation. As Stuart Allen argues persuasively, photography as the pictorial evidence of war can

be traced back to the Mexican-American war of 1846–1848, although, as he posits, the construction of the figure of the war photographer — and the fluid continuum between amateur and professional — requires careful review in light of lost, unpublished, and non-archived material from these early days of photography and war reportage (Allen, 2011). It was with the Crimean War (1854–1856) that journalists and photographers were first able to use photographic technologies to set out a template for reporting war. By the time of the Boer War (1899–1902), soldiers and military personnel were able to take pictures in larger numbers, although the cost of cameras meant that photography remained largely the preserve of the officer class. By the end of the nineteenth century, Kodak had launched the first mass-produced roll-film folding pocket camera, marketed in its Vest Pocket model during the First World War as ‘The Soldier’s Kodak’ and sold with the tagline ‘It is as small as a diary and tells the story better’ (Allen, 2011: 55). Such candid marketing took place in the face of Official Press Bureau regulations on which pictures could be passed for publication and which were codified in the issuing of ‘D’ notices. However, there were still not sufficient images to satisfy public appetite for images from the front line. In response to the demands from the pictorial press, the War Office appointed its first official army photographers in Britain in 1916, with the remit to take pictures for press and propaganda purposes. According to Janina Struk, public interest was such that newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Sketch*, and the *Daily Mirror* appealed to enterprising soldiers for ‘snap shots’ so that both official and amateur images were published in the major newspapers of the day (Struk, 2011: 36).

This is not to say that a clear delineation of subject matter and treatment existed between official and amateur photographic images of war: one receptive to the atrocities of war and one shackled by institutional strictures. As John Taylor notes, each conflict and its photographic record operates at the ‘horizon of reportable war’ (Taylor, 1991: 8). While the official photographers may have avoided the gruesome slaughter of the First World War, amateur eye-witness photographers, soldiers, and others, also chose not to depict the British war dead or the graphic spectacle of mutilation and horrific injury. If dead bodies were displayed, they were subject to internalized hierarchies of representation so that the enemy or colonial dead were considered more palatable images. In a form of displacement, slaughtered animals came to stand as substitutes for the bodies of British troops. This human–animal elision would be evident in the later photographic practice of British Army photographers during the Normandy campaign.

Indeed, in other respects too, the First World War was a key military campaign for establishing a culture of official war photography. It would be the conflict in which the potentialities of photography were recognized. Photography could be expected to provide an objective record of events from the front line but this was not sufficient to bring the war alive for those back home. In 1917, in prescient terms, Ivor Nicholson, an official at the British Press Bureau, advised official photographers to prompt viewers to ask ‘what should I feel like if I were there?’ (Struk, 2011: 40), asking them

to seek out everyday details of life in the trenches and create a story or sets of photographs of the same man or unit. By highlighting the central role of personal interpretation in the practice of war photography, Nicholson was beginning to identify the coordinates and contradictions of later cultures of war photography: that photography needed not only to record events but also to offer a personal interpretation that spoke to contemporary beliefs and values.

Despite the lessons learnt from the First World War on the power of photographic imagery to mobilize popular opinion, on the eve of the Second World War, no official unit was in place to provide photographic combat material. This changed in October 1941 when the War Office approved the creation of the Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU). The major impetus in this decision had been the dearth of eyewitness material available to the press of the retreat from Dunkirk in 1941 (McGlade, 2010: 33). Placed under the auspices of the Directorate of Public Relations, the AFPU was able to recruit and train over one-hundred cameramen and photographers from army ranks, some with pre-war professional experience, the remainder as complete novices. These men were organized into units and attached to different theatres of war with British involvement. No. 5 AFPU was created to cover the Normandy Landings and the campaign in Europe. By 15 April 1944, it was complete with 9 officers and 72 from other ranks (www.iwm.org.uk/collections). These were attached to various military units and their remit was to provide a record of the D-Day Landings in Normandy onwards. As one senior commander noted: ‘We had the task of recording our personal impressions and at the same time giving a picture to the people back home in the newsreels and cinemas around Britain of what was happening to their relatives on the Normandy beaches’ (McGlade, 2010: 128). As Captain Derek Knight’s comments reveal, this mission was one informed by the pre-existing cultures of war photography — the joint impetus of objective recording and personal interpretation. It was also a mission that we can read today as framed by the national discourses associated with ‘the people back at home’. By scrutinizing the archive of over one thousand photographs gathered in the Imperial War Museum today in large albums, we can reflect on the war experiences and interpretative frames being applied by photographers in the field. Which scripts of war did such photographers construct from the front line, and how do these relate to broader representations and cultural histories of Anglo–French relations at the war’s end?

Photographing the Normandy campaign: the view from the Imperial War Museum (2016)

Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of occupied Europe, began on 6 June 1944 with combined Allied air, ground and sea assault on five beaches to the east and west of Normandy: according to their Allied denominations, these were Utah beach (near Saint-Mère-Eglise), Omaha beach (at the Pointe du Hoc), Sword beach (at Hermanville and Colleville), Juno beach (between Graye-sur-mer and Bernières-sur-mer),

and Gold beach (near Vers-sur-mer and Asnelles). The logistical ingenuity and scale of the endeavour was staggering, with 157 205 ground troops (132 715 on the beaches and 24 490 parachuted in), 11 500 planes and 3500 gliders and more than 6800 warships and transport ships, manned by over 195 000 marine personnel (Legout, 2014: 32). With American forces deployed on the beaches of Utah and Omaha, and British and Canadian forces on Gold, Juno, and Sword, initial intense fighting impeded rapid progress and the conditions of fighting a ‘hedgerow’ war in the narrow high-banked lanes of the Norman countryside favoured the defender and slowed the advance of armoured vehicles and tanks. However, by mid-June, the British-Canadian and American sectors had joined forces to the east of Bayeux and a combined Allied bridgehead was firmly established.

From mid-June to early July, American forces advanced with speed, capturing the strategic port of Cherbourg, essential for logistical support, on 26 June; but their progress was halted near St Lô. The advance upon and capture of Caen, one of the major strategic objectives of the British and Canadian forces on D-Day itself, proved challenging, with Allied units only entering the outskirts of Caen on 9 July, following significant resistance from entrenched German units, above all the 21st Panzer division. Mass Allied bombing raids were vital for securing such strategic arterial centres. The Allied break-out from the combined bridgehead then began in two waves. From mid-July, the British and Canadians mounted an assault east of Caen, which eventually fell on 24 July, then pushed on southwards; the Americans drove into Brittany, taking Rennes on 4 August and Nantes on 12 August. By mid-August, all armies had reached the Seine and the battle for Normandy was won.

It is the scale and success of the Normandy campaign that has marked the cultural imaginary of its participant nations. Yet as research on the multi-national cultures of war and liberation in France reveals, the Normandy campaign is remembered very differently by different national communities (Footitt, 2004). For the Normans, it was a time of suffering and loss of life as aerial bombings destroyed villages and towns. For the Allies, it was a campaign of military might on the move and a victory that was won at the cost of the lives of thousands of Allied troops and airmen. Recently, historians have begun to challenge the pre-eminence of a legendary Allied narrative and to explore other stories of the Normandy campaign. For Wieviorka (2008), these stories take in the national interests and manoeuvring of the major military and political figures, the violence of the invasion and the crimes and misdemeanours of the Allied troops once in situ, including looting, vandalism, rape, and economic exploitation. For Roberts (2014), the focus is on the widespread destruction of Norman villages and towns and the high numbers of civilian deaths, estimated at 19 890 for the summer of 1944, over half casualties of Allied bombing raids (Roberts, 2014: 4). In a similar vein, British historian Anthony Beevor underscores the importance of reconsidering the psychological state of the Allied troops. Like Wieviorka, Beevor highlights the impact of the Allied bombing raids on ‘martyred towns’, such as Caen, and the heavy casualties. In addition, he

highlights what the Allied troops understood as an ‘ugly carnival’ (Beevor, 2009: 449) of retribution at the end of war, above all against those accused of sexual collaboration. All three historians move away from triumphalist narratives to acknowledge ‘the unmistakable shades of tragedy’ (Wieviorka, 2008: 361) that affected Allied soldiers and French civilians alike.

British Army photographers were embedded in the first wave of assault troops onto the Normandy beaches and drop zones; Sergeant Laws was the first AFPU photographer to land on French soil at Sword beach in the British sector on 6 June at 7.35 am (McGlade, 2010: 123). Acting in small units with a cinematographer and accompanied by a driver, such photographers recorded and interpreted the Allied invasion from the perspective of the Allied combatant. Making use of standard Army issue folding Ikonta cameras, they wrote up their impressions on ‘dope sheets’ which accompanied their film rolls back to London and the Ministry of Information. This footage was then developed and either passed for distribution with proposed captions (often taken verbatim from the dope sheets); censored and not distributed; or held ‘for records only’, the latter largely for photographs depicting military installations.

It is important to stress the institutional context for viewing these photographs today. As cultural historians recognize, archives are not neutral repositories. They provide a particular framing of the past (Footitt, 2014). The organization of photographic display inducts us into ways of seeing and understanding past experiences. In this instance, the Imperial War Museum’s twenty albums of over one thousand photographs of the invasion of France and Belgium start on 6 June and continue until mid-October 1944, creating a chronological ordering of events. The Imperial War Museum’s collection is by no means complete and provides the black and white photographs, developed from the original negatives, with captions on the reverse. Organized temporally, no attempt is made to construct a narrative of the Normandy campaign via geographical location or the eye of a particular photographer. The only organizing principle is the theatre of war operations. What emerges, therefore, are photographic impressions of what Hilary Footitt terms ‘liberation on the move’ (2004: 3), war as movement forward in time, and the visual sensations of troops on the ground. My own position as a researcher and interpreter of these archival images is as a cultural historian, drawn to interrogate the multiple scripts of war which such images represent. In the readings which follow, I am attentive to representations of the military campaign in Normandy; the experiences of the British soldier; the depiction of French civilian experiences and the impact of invasion and Allied bombing on the landscape. My focus will be on the sequence and patterning of photographic images over the summer of 1944. I am sensitive to the importance of self-authored captions as a means to evaluate what the photographer saw and how he interpreted this. This authorial framing gives valuable insights into the tensions inherent in the complex relationship between individual experience and the scripts of war available to narrate it.

The visual record of the Normandy Landings in the albums of the Imperial War Museum begins on Sword Beach, at Hermanville and Lion-sur-mer with Captain Knight and Sergeant Mapham on 6 June in the first assault wave.¹ The earliest photographic sequences focus not on the battle on the beaches but on British troops passing through villages, devoid of inhabitants. The presence of First World War memorials is commented upon repeatedly in captions (Sgt Mapham: B5018: 6.6.44: 'British troops passing a last war memorial in a French village') and the images concentrate upon British Army units, above all tank crews, in the lull between actions. In these early June sequences, the most prominent other to the British Tommy is the German combatant, depicted as either a prisoner of war (Sgt Mapham: B5077: 6.6.44: 'These German prisoners look very disconsolate'), or as a cadaver, often graphically displayed in uniform with the markers of their military rank. In sharp contrast, British war dead are depicted partly in the frame (legs or torso but never the face) or full body covered to avoid any possibility of individual identification. The sacrifice of war and the tribute to the fallen comrade is attested to in the image of the wooden cross as British soldiers gather around a freshly dug grave (Sgt Morris: B5184: 6.6.44 'The Reverend Victor Leech, padre of the Calvary Regiment 13/18 Hussars, reads the burial service for a fallen tank man while his pals stand by in silent tribute').

Other images of the British troops in these early days of the campaign are heavily censored and not passed for distribution, as captions on the reverse of such photographs reveal. These are invariably images of British soldiers out of military role or in any context that denotes relaxation or off-duty activities. Images of drinking, betting (on Derby Day), playing music or singing, and fraternizing with local people are not passed by the Ministry of Information's censor. The one photographic image of a soldier sporting war memorabilia is censored, the looting of German war dead by Allied troops clearly suspected and signalled in the caption (Sgt Laing: B5683: 17.6.44: 'Capt Cotton wearing the Iron Cross he "found after action"').

Images of interaction with the French civilian population are present from 6 June itself, including the role French civilians play in supporting the Allied advances (Lt Handford: B5590: 15.6.44: 'Frenchwoman helps the cookhouse: Mme Raymonde Beitot helping to serve food to British troops. She is helping in the cookhouse of the unit'). There are early references to anti-German opposition, termed 'the underground', in photographs of public speeches to celebrate the liberation of Bayeux on 7 June (Sgt Laing: B5276: 9.6.44: 'Scenes in Bayeux') and to the sole French commando unit, led by Commander Kieffer, that accompanied British troops onto Sword beach. The caption and heroic pose in portraiture of an unnamed French commando offers a valorizing icon of French wartime agency (Sgt Parkinson: B5282: 9.6.44: 'French commando troops welcomed back to France: a typical

¹In this article, I will provide the photographer's name for each image referenced, as well as the date, the original caption and the Imperial War Museum's photographic catalogue number. This is in the spirit of the article which aims to make visible the identity and agency of the photographer.

French commando'). However, other images of the French civilian population begin to set in place the increasingly dominant visual narrative of French civilians as displaced people, labelled as 'refugees' (Capt Knight: B5293: 10.6.44: 'French refugees are fed by civil affairs'). The reasons for civilian displacement are rarely signalled and, where they are, captions appear to justify such destruction by reference to the strategic objectives of Allied bombing raids (Sgt Midgley: B5442: 13.6.44: 'The damaged village of Jerusalem which was bombed by our Air Force in order to clear enemy strong points'). Interesting here is the use of the passive tense, perhaps an unconscious rhetorical gesture to mask or cover Allied agency in such destruction.

As the chronological photographic sequences progress, narratives of liberation focus on British relief services. The nurturing role of the British forces is signalled in sequences that highlight nursing units and female auxiliaries (Sgt Johnson: B5679: 16.6.44: 'Members of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service have arrived on the Bridgehead'). Images of British troops receiving or writing letters home or reading newspapers connect home and war front, whilst British troops helping with the herding of cattle from the battle fields or harvesting on farms (Sgt Hardy: B6604: 8.7.44: 'Evacuation of cattle from the battle zone') give a sense of British solidarity and the domestication of the British troops' presence in such a rural environment.

As the offensive on Caen reaches its apotheosis in early July, the destruction of French villages, towns, and urban centres takes on greater prominence, although such damage is rarely directly attributed to the Allies. By early July, the British Army photographers expend more time — or indeed have greater inclination — to concentrate on French civilians in the war zones. The plight of the people of Caen is extensively covered: from the make-shift communities assembled within Caen Cathedral to the caves and underground shelters for hundreds of homeless people (Sgt Hardy: B9121: 13.8.44: 'Bombed out families from Caen live in caves'). The family unit is a repeated reference, with images of children — orphans above all — as a marker of loss and human tragedy (Sgt Hardy: B8055: 27.7.44: 'Bénouville maternity home: some of the orphans of the Bénouville maternity home and orphanage, playing in the grounds of the house, which can be seen in the background').

Yet, there is also the development of a counter-narrative of French activism and support for the military campaign, a visual narrative that can be interpreted as tacit support for the reassertion of French national autonomy. The first reference to the 'French resistance' comes on 17 August 1944 (Sgt Laing) and the first reference to the 'forces françaises de l'intérieur' on 4 August 1944 (Sgt Collins). The symbolic reoccupation of French public spaces is highlighted in a series of portraits of people gathered to celebrate Bastille Day (Sgt Hardy: B7129: 14.7.44: 'Bastille Day in Normandy: a series of photographs of types of French people of the little town of Courselles. The photographs show the expressions of the people at the Bastille Day celebrations held at the local war memorial, the first held in France since the German occupation in 1940'). As the military advance moves from Normandy

towards Paris, the focus of the camera lens shifts towards Franco–French interactions and questions of retribution. British Army photographers are now capturing images of another France, that of collaboration, in all instances gendered and marked as female, as in Nogent-Le-Rotron on 21 August 1944 (Sgt Hardy: B9562: ‘In the local town hall (that is now the HQ of the maquis) two women collaborators who have had their heads shaved are interviewed’).

In re-viewing this collection of photographic images today, it is striking how the photographers themselves — and indeed the original curators and archivists — abided by long-held conventions on what should and could be photographed in the war zone. There are no archived images of grievously wounded Allied soldiers or those suffering from what we would now term combat exhaustion. The only images permissible of the German other are those that depict his impotency, imprisonment, or death. The violence of war is absent from the Imperial War Museum’s albums, replaced with attacks and raids on invisible enemy others, above all snipers, who appear to generate no Allied losses. A focus on auxiliary and support services create a war script of Allied humanitarian care for both injured servicemen and displaced French civilians. There are no conserved images of fraternization or suggestions of sexual encounters between British troops and French women, thereby avoiding the ambiguity of aligning pleasure and war. Indeed, photographs of French interiors are absent, as if the French domestic sphere was firmly out of bounds. More evident are images of British soldiers lending a hand on local farms, domesticating the presence of the Allied troops.

However, the Imperial War Museum’s photographic collection represents a range of visual scripts of war that look beyond the experiences of Allied ground troops. Whilst again, there are no selected depictions of civilian casualties, the ruined streets, and obliterated homes of small villages and towns can be read as primers and metaphors for hidden civilian deaths, as can the images of dead animals and the carcasses of destroyed tanks and military hardware routinely on view. This is clear evidence of Allied bombing raids, with particular emphasis on Caen, although the agency of Allied pilots and Allied strategic command is not commented upon or represented directly. However, contrary to the expectations of a triumphalist Allied perspective on the campaign in Normandy, there are also photographic images and supportive captions of French civilian fortitude centred on the family and images of resistance. The multiple scripts of war depicted in these photographs can be attributed not only to pre-existing cultures of war photography and the lived experience of the British soldier in Normandy but also to the cultural politics of Anglo–French relations at the war’s end. It is via a case study reading of the photo-essays of the Normandy campaign in *Picture Post* that we can begin to understand more of the role that war photography played in the cultural rehabilitation of France and the visual strategies deployed to emphasize the similarities of experience between the British and French peoples and thereby their common humanity.

Photographing the Normandy Campaign: the view from *Picture Post*

As one of the ‘signal events’ (Rose, 2003: 1) of the Second World War, the Normandy campaign is embedded within a set of well-established cultural discourses about wartime Britain. As Sonja O. Rose notes, these converge on a portrayal of ‘the nation as composed of self-sacrificing, relentlessly cheerful and inherently tolerant people who had heroically withstood the Blitz and were stalwart as they coped with the material deprivations of a war economy’ (Rose, 2003: 2). Such national narratives are, for Rose, centred on three key tropes of Britishness: the common people, unified in their support for democratic values and freedom; the English countryside, the pastoral idyll that represented continuity with history and tradition, and the family as a microcosm of the nation ‘characterised by affective rather than instrumental bonds’ (Rose, 2003: 289) and represented in films, such as Noel Coward’s *This Happy Breed* (1944).

These dominant narratives of Britain at war were encapsulated visually in wartime images of an unspoilt pre-modern countryside and snapshots of family life that countered the many disintegrations of wartime — evacuation, conscription, and mobilization. Of the major illustrated news magazines, *Picture Post* contributed enthusiastically to the reproduction of such official war narratives. It was one of the most successful periodicals of the war period, selling over 1 700 000 copies of its bimonthly edition in 1939. Founded by the wealthy media tycoon Edward Hutton in 1938 and closed in 1957, it had been edited initially by Stefan Lorent, a German Jewish émigré who had fled to Britain to escape Nazi persecution. Formed by his experience of progressive magazine editing in interwar Germany, Lorent was committed to appealing to a wide reader demographic that encompassed ‘the common man, the workers and the intelligentsia’ (Hallett, 1994: 4). He set the tone and ethos for *Picture Post* as a magazine associated with a ‘radical humanist approach’ (Kee, 1989) and a responsible populism centred on capturing the lives and experiences of ordinary people. During the war years, the editorship was taken up by his deputy Tom Hopkinson who remained loyal to Lorent’s vision of *Picture Post* as a magazine that was, as Hopkinson later commented, ‘out to influence events in a particular direction — that of a more just and equal society’ (Kee, 1989).

Photography was at the heart of such a socially and politically committed view of popular journalism. As Stefan Lorent stated many years later: ‘the photograph should not be posed, rather the camera should be as the notebook of a trained reporter’. The photograph was an integral means of ‘unfolding’ the journalistic story and generative rather than illustrative of written text (Hallett, 1994: 8). For John Taylor in his discussion of Second World War photography in the British press, this *Picture Post* ethos was translated into a reputation for documentary-style photography ‘always printed up in rectangles and regular grids, eschewing all signs of interference’ enhancing *Picture Post*’s claim to objective reporting (Taylor, 1991: 55). Its

‘sobriety in design’ (Taylor, 1991: 55) meant that British readers expected a visual narrative that commented authoritatively on the British war effort, and the magazine made much of its privileged access to official war photographers and reporting from the front line.

With regard to the cultural politics of representing the campaign in Normandy, popular media publications were inevitably immersed in the debates surrounding the future of wartime France circulating in Britain in the summer of 1944. As Philip Bell asserts in his discussion of Anglo–French relations during the Second World War, whilst a good many British writers and intellectuals were sympathetic to France, popular press opinion was divided on France’s war record. In some quarters, the press was damning, diagnosing ‘rotteness’ at the heart of the French nation (Bell, 2000: 229). Political incompetency and corruption were supposed to have undermined French social cohesion and been instrumental in its defeat in 1940. In addition, France’s poor record of pre-war industrial capacity was seen to augur badly for the future. As a Chatham House report noted in 1945: ‘British feeling towards France is not, at the moment, universally cordial’ (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1945: 47).

Within these fraught debates, *Picture Post* took a position on the side of Anglo–French cooperation and a valorizing narrative of France. From 3 June 1944, editors and feature writers, including prominent writers and intellectuals, such as Cyril Connelly and Rebecca West, begin to construct a picture of France as the cradle of European civilization and of the French people as an ally and personal friend of Britain. The focus in the 3 June 1944 edition of *Picture Post* is on the French fighting spirit and the ‘plain clothes army of France’ (3 June 1944: 12), awaiting the opportunity to fight the German occupant. In a rousing narrative entitled ‘How the French fight on’, Hilary St George Saunders compares the sacrifices of France and Britain as two peoples united in their desire for action and in their hatred of the enemy. This is reinforced by two photographs: one, the graves of downed British airmen in France, with caption ‘the French people honour the graves of British airmen who fell fighting over France’ and a second pendent image: the morgue portraits of dead French resisters, with caption ‘this is an official Vichy police list of 32 unknown persons in one small town whom the public are asked to identify’ (3 June 1944: 16). Two days before D-Day, France is depicted as a country in waiting, ready to play its part in the coming military campaign.

On 24 June 1944, *Picture Post* begins to provide front-line photographic sequences of the Normandy campaign, a delay of two to three weeks that will characterize the general reproduction of warfront images. These photographs are a mix of US-sponsored images — Robert Capa’s now iconic Omaha beach scenes — and AFPU images, none accredited. Reading these photographs and captions as framed in British scripts of war, it is evident that initial priority is given to the infantry soldier’s perspective, with images captioned to give an idea of the sensory overload of the first hours of invasion and the atomized experience of the front-line combatant: ‘a hundred isolated pictures fill the mind of the man who is taking part in

the present assault. They have little sequence or connection. There is no grand comprehensive view. But each one is burned in his mind for ever' (24 June 1944: 9). The photographic images operate as fleeting visual bursts and, like the Imperial War Museum's collection, the focus is on the landscape and technologies of war, above all tank warfare, and representations of Germans as prisoners of war or war dead, graphically presented with faces visible to readers (24 June 1944: 9: caption: 'The German who believed in the Atlantic Wall'). The photographs selected and presented in the first phase of the Normandy campaign in *Picture Post* subscribe to a cultural construction of the Allied and British forces as heroes of a militarized campaign in contrast to an impotent German other.

As the Normandy campaign gathers momentum, the visual scripts of war begin to shift from these initial coordinates. For the Allied forces, dominant images of war emphasize the role of the nursing corps and accentuate a framing of the British and Allied forces as humanitarian carers. This is signalled in a six-page spread devoted to a female American nurse, tending to injured service personnel on their return flight to Britain from Normandy (8 July 1944: 7–12: 'A nurse flies home with wounded from Normandy'). Images are also present of Allied solidarity with injured German troops as they face imminent death (1 July 1944: 8: 'In this village school, a German is given his last cigarette in a room where death has taken possession'). The work of the civil affairs divisions is repeatedly evoked. These were American and British units trained pre-D-Day to help military and local authorities to provide aid to displaced local people. Although the units and officers themselves are never seen, they come to symbolize the omnipotence of the Allied forces, charged with the task of feeding large numbers of displaced people and restoring essential services.

To accompany this visual narrative of the military campaign as humanitarian aid is a focus on the technologies of war, above all tanks and aircraft. A photo-essay 'A tank crew prepare for battle in Normandy' (12 August 1944: 8–9), with non-credited photographs by AFPU photographer Sgt Bert Hardy, offers to answer the implied reader's questions: 'How does the crew live? How does it work? How does it service its vehicle and keep its guns in order? How does it go into action?' The photographic sequences of the crew of the Churchill tank highlight teamwork, comradeship, and the unity of effort. The care taken with the tank's equipment suggests the tank as a prosthetic extension of the unit of men. Use of aerial reconnaissance photographs of battlefields or military installations further reinforces this sense of war conducted from behind a protective shield or from a distance (15 July 1944: 10–11: 'what the capture of a port means in an invasion'). War is equally represented as a feat of engineering. Photographs of the deployment of Bailey bridges over the River Orne are accompanied by a narrative commenting that 'the clanking and thumping of bulldozers is as familiar as the sound of guns' (26 August 1944: 12–13: 'The crossing of the Orne'). By bringing together two very different types of war photography — the humanist and the scientific/technical

— *Picture Post* elides these different registers of war imagery, promoting the ‘truth value’ of a composite visual representation of war.

With regard to the French population, visual representation in *Picture Post* move away from the initial images of welcome (24 June 1944: 13: ‘The little French girl who has finished her life under German rule’) towards photographic images of displaced people, lost and disorientated by the moving battle front. It is this besieged civilian population — often pictured as dwarfed by the might of Allied military technology (watching tank convoys passing by) or sifting through the ruins of monumental destruction — that is represented graphically in photo-essays on the destruction of Caen. One of the strategic objectives of the British sector on D-Day itself, Caen was subjected to over 5000 tons of Allied bombs on 18 July 1944 alone, and over 2000 civilians died before German troops departed in late July (Baldoli and Knapp, 2012: 2). The work of AFPU photographers is in evidence here, although non-accredited, with sequences reproduced in *Picture Post* depicting the ‘Martyrdom of Caen’ (29 July 1944: 11–12: photographer Sgt Bert Hardy) and ‘Inside Caen Cathedral’ (photographer: Sgt Bert Hardy). These show families living within the cathedral itself. The captions for such photographs draw direct parallels with British experiences of living under German bombing raids: ‘Caen version of the familiar air raid shelter’; ‘Everything gone but her personal pride’; ‘Their only shelter the Cathedral’; ‘The pattern of civilized life slowly starts up again, making a new home and new world’ (12). The text that accompanies the photographs treats the people of Caen as privileged interlocutors for British readers who are positioned as understanding the sad necessity of such destruction: ‘they know that we, too, have suffered; are still suffering. And they accept the martyrdom of their city as part of the price that must be rendered for deliverance’ (29 July 1944: 11). This image of martyred Caen is mobilized to speak across cultures to familiar images of the Blitz for British readers, reinforced in *Picture Post* in its preceding issue devoted to ‘London under fire’ (22 July 1944).

Whilst the vast majority of the photographic images of French civilians depict a community struggling with the aftermath of military invasion, alternative scripts of war focus on the French population rising to the challenge. There are images of French resilience, drawing on the work of AFPU photographers, for example the short photo-essay, ‘A French family come back to their rural home’, photographed by Sgt Bert Hardy (19 August 1944: 12–13). These nine photographs show a family returning to their obliterated home to take stock; seeking temporary accommodation with a neighbour and beginning to rebuild their lives as a rural community. The Norman countryside is repeatedly represented and depicted as a point of connection between France and Britain and, in a sobering account of the ‘road to victory’ in the issue of 9 September 1944, *Picture Post* staff reporter MacDonald Hastings makes direct parallels between the landscapes of Normandy and Southern England in terms that evoke the violation of invasion and occupation: ‘But I pray that, deep down inside us, we remember the rape of Normandy because what

happened there is what, by a hair's breadth, this other Normandy was spared' (9 September 1944: 15).

With regard to French military activism, *Picture Post* provides a muted narrative, with the first reference to French resistance coming on the 2 September 1944 in a feature titled 'Five years later: France greets the Allies'. In the same article, collaboration is described, but not represented, gesturing towards the public humiliation of head shavings: 'In many towns, rough justice was carried out against collaborators and French traitors. That was as ugly as it was inevitable' (2 September 1944: 8). For it is Paris which ultimately incarnates the glorious uprising of the French people (23 September 1944: 'How Paris rose'). Caen remains its mirror image other in a British binary of French heroism and suffering.

Conclusion

What then can we learn from official war photography of the multiple scripts of war about France circulating in Britain in the summer of 1944? Certainly, we can see a convergence between the images of the British Army stills photographers collected in the Imperial War Museum and the narratives of war represented in *Picture Post* as a case study. Both the Imperial War Museum's collection and *Picture Post*'s photo-essays avoid the representation of Allied casualties; neutralize the threat or danger emanating from the enemy other; and cast the invasion as protection in the form of Allied aid and intervention. With respect to the representation of the French civilian experiences, both the Imperial War Museum's collection and *Picture Post* construct a visual narrative of besieged communities, symbolized by the city of Caen. This is, however, by no means a lone narrative of French victimhood. Resilience and survival are emphasized in both photographic contexts. Military resistance is imaged, if only fleetingly, and, in *Picture Post*, is expanded upon in the story of popular insurrection associated with Paris. Whilst the photographic images selected for *Picture Post* do not cast the Normans as 'agents in their own liberation' (Roberts, 2014: 5), they equally do not rely upon images of the Norman population as 'inert bystanders at their own liberation' (Roberts, 2014: 4), as Allied narratives are commonly assumed to do.

The reasons for such sympathetic visual representations of the Normandy campaign and French civilian experience in *Picture Post* lie, I would contend, in the very Britishness of the images. For, in *Picture Post*, what is retained from the available front-line photographic images is the commonality of French and British wartime experiences. The premium accorded the family as a rallying point for solidarity, the call to support 'ordinary people' who have experienced the trauma of aerial bombardment, and the recognition of the devastation of war on the Normandy countryside as a sobering mirror image of Southern England, all echo key tropes of wartime Britishness identified by cultural historians, such as Sonja O. Rose. As John Taylor notes, the 'special truth' of the photographic image has ever been one of the major pillars supporting official perspectives on

war in Britain. It is via potent human interest stories, focusing on individual triumphs and tragedies, that institutional elites have persuaded the reading public of the veracity of their war stories. Such photographic stories are ‘not simply a neutral window on a multifaceted and diverse world’ (Taylor, 1991: 4), they represent specific ways of seeing the world. In the case of *Picture Post*, this was a way of seeing that was shaped by prevailing ‘consensus narratives’ (Griffin, 1996: 129) in wartime Britain and the aspiration, on the part of a liberal progressive establishment, to build bridges between French and British peoples, encouraging readers to empathize with and accept France as a wartime ally and peacetime partner.

This is not to undermine the eye-witness value of the work of British Army stills photographers on the front line, but rather to recognize that their work sits within a specific historical context that requires ‘excavation’, to use the term of Julia Adeney Thomas. This involves uncovering ‘the network of connotations, practices and relations of power — in short the entire discursive system — through which [the photograph] emerged as an object’ (Thomas, 2009: 153). This discursive network is one that can be lost if we, as viewers, are not attentive to the multiple scripts of war within which these images were originally produced, edited, distributed, and read. For example, neither the photographers of the Imperial War Museum’s collection nor *Picture Post* chose to represent directly the civilian casualties of Allied bombing raids in France or to acknowledge Allied agency in such loss of life. Rather, this ‘jagged history of the Second World War’ (Baldoli and Knapp, 2012: 258) is present in displaced format in what is inferred but never stated — who or what is responsible for the orphaning of young French children in these images of the Normandy campaign? These ‘shadow’ narratives of war are rendered palatable in *Picture Post* via the ethos of humanist photography, putting the individual at the centre of the frame rather than the Allied military strategy that led to such high casualty numbers. By situating such photographs within the broader discursive systems of their day, we encourage the viewer to read the photograph as evidence of something beyond itself and to identify and challenge such elisions. In so doing, we mitigate the pressure to resort to reductive readings of photography as empirical ‘presence’, and we remain alive to the richly patterned and complex narratives of times past that such war photography can open up.

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ORCID

Claire Gorrara  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0732-7666>

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Notes on contributor

Correspondence to: Claire Gorrara, Cardiff University, UK. Email: gorrara@cardiff.ac.uk

Claire Gorrara is Professor of French Studies at Cardiff University. Her publications to date have centred on French cultural memory and the Second World War. These include *French Crime Fiction and the Second World War: Past Crimes, Present Memories* (2012). She is currently working on two projects: photographic representations of the Liberation of France (1944–45) and transnational memories of the Holocaust in the francophone graphic novel.