

# 'O The Myths of Operation

The story of the low-level precision attack on the prison at Amiens, France, has gone down in the annals of the RAF as one of daring heroism carried out to free a large number of Resistance workers from certain death. But the account of the raid is not all it seems, as [Simon Parry](#) reveals.

Historian Jean-Pierre Ducellier is a doctor in a village not far from Amiens, as had been his father before him. He also has a great interest in the air war over his part of France – the Somme. Some of his patients had been members of the various Resistance organisations in the region and he began to ask them about their experiences – in particular about the bombing of Amiens Prison on 18 February 1944. Dr Ducellier knew the story well; Mosquitos led by the daring Gp Capt Pickard racing to

break down the prison walls in order to free 120 resistance fighters, just hours before they were due to be executed by the Germans. But who were these 120 Resistance fighters? Who asked the RAF to free them? None of his patients could provide an answer. The bombing was, they told him, a tragedy for Amiens. Why, they asked him, did the RAF bomb their prison?

Intrigued by stories that cast doubt on the accepted version of events, Dr Ducellier set out to discover the real





# Jericho'

facts behind the raid – and why history had got the story so wrong. Here, in ten points, are the facts and arguments he sets out.

## 1: Operation Jericho' never existed!

The most remarkable misunderstanding of the attack on Amiens Prison is the oft-repeated use of 'Operation Jericho' as the codename for the attack. It wasn't. Jericho was never used during the Second

World War in relation to the Amiens attack and the codename never appears in any documents. The attack was simply 'Ramrod 564' – nothing more.

## 2: Where did 'Operation Jericho' come from?

'Operation Jericho' first appears in 1946 as the title of a French film directed by Henri Calef. The reference to Joshua leading the Israelites into Canaan, laying siege to Jericho and bringing the walls

down around 1400BC by a combination of trumpets and his people shouting may well have had some resonance, but it had nothing to do with the facts of the air attack on Amiens! The film, was, however, dedicated to Group Captain Pickard and the Royal Air Force.

'Jericho' is a work of fiction, and to describe the film as a 'dramatisation' would be to stretch a point. The plot of the film is set just prior to >>

### BELOW

Mark Postlethwaite's dramatic painting of Mosquitos roaring at low-level over Amiens Prison.





the Normandy landings when a German train loaded with petrol has stopped at a station. To deter French saboteurs blowing up the train the Germans take 50 hostages who will be executed should the train be attacked. The Resistance do blow up the train and the hostages are duly lined up before a platoon of German soldiers. At the eleventh hour, just as the Germans raise their rifles, Group Captain Pickard's Mosquitos roar in to attack the prison and release the prisoners who escape in lorries waiting nearby. The film ends with our hero's Mosquito crashing to the ground.

The main film set was constructed near the studios at Epinoy and 'resembled' the prison at Amiens. It reportedly cost two million Francs and was, of course, spectacularly blown up when the Mosquitos 'attacked' and huge breaches were created in its walls. The RAF gave their full cooperation, with Pickard played by the English actor Bruce Seaton who, apparently, bore a striking resemblance to him. It premiered at Palais de Chaillot in Paris. Among the many high-ranking officers and dignitaries in the audience was Sqn Ldr McRitchie, Wg Cdr Smith and other Mosquito crew members who had participated in the raid.

On 10 April 1946, the film was shown in Amiens, and the *Courrier Picard*

**RIGHT**

*Wing Commander I S 'Black' Smith DFC led the attack and not Pickard as so often reported.*



**BELOW**

*Air Vice Marshal Basil Embry, AOC No.2 Group, RAF.*

**BELOW RIGHT**

*Group Captain P C 'Pick' Pickard DSO & Two Bars, DFC.*

reviewed it. The reviewer was keen to point out that it had little to do with the 'tragic attack'.

*Whilst it is known that the idea of the Jericho film had as its starting point the bombardment of the prison of Amiens, and this is clearly one of the central points, the film has little to do with the actual event.*

*Aside the film set of the prison, which resembles that of Amiens, the film tells the heroic and tragic history of the resistance in an anonymous city.*

*The passage of time since the bombardment has been essential. One would have been in extremely bad taste had the most tragic attack that we have known served as a pretext for voyeuristic curiosity.*

*The director, H. Calef, has ignored many things likely to bring back the tragic day of 18 February 1944 and enabled us to appreciate*

*Jericho' more objectively.*

Nevertheless, the raid has become universally known as 'Operation Jericho' – a complete myth!

### 3: The Amiens Tragedy

The Amiens regional press reported the casualties during the three weeks that followed the raid, and although the press was under German control it was well informed.

The first articles about the attack on Amiens Prison appeared in the 'La progrès de la Somme' and in 'Le journal d'Amiens' on Sunday 20 and Monday 21 February 1944. The former ran with the headline: **The English Come As Liberators' - Bombing The Amiens Prison, 40 Dead And 90 Wounded.** The story was as follows:

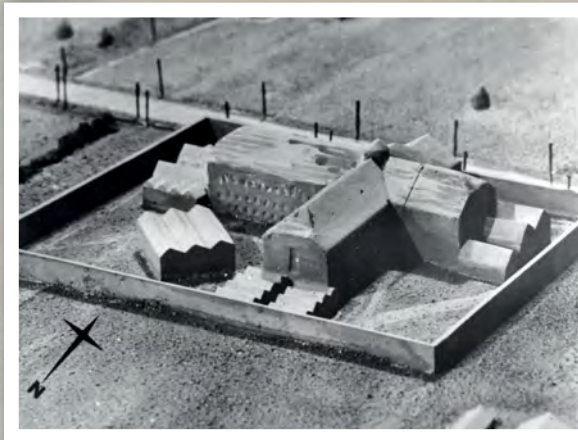




The death toll lengthens as the difficult work of clearing up continues. One loses oneself in conjecture about the significance of the bloody attack that English flyers carried out, in broad daylight, taking the route d'Albert Prison as their objective. It is no secret to anyone that, apart from the common criminals incarcerated at the Prison, there were also people whose actions had caused difficulties to the occupying authorities. Consequently one can ask oneself, since it is clearly and irrefutably established that the prison was the target assigned to the aviators, what hidden motive led to the order? If it were about a 'massive release' the many corpses that lie bloodied, torn and crushed under the debris, attest to the complete 'success' of the cynical enterprise.

Similarly, another daily Amiens newspaper, 'Le journal d'Amiens', featured a violent diatribe by its leader-writer J. Picavet against the Allies. This was printed on 21 February under the headline 'British aviators bomb Amiens Prison and an old peoples' home', and also gave some additional details about the raid:

The Liberators passed - The gangsters of the air, for the second time in less than a month, attacked Amiens on Friday. The prison was destroyed and several individual houses destroyed, with so many victims that it is not yet possible to quantify after 24 hours of clearing the debris, but it is not far from 200; such is the scale of this aggression. It is war, said some stubborn Anglophiles. War? With whom? Germany? Well, then! In what way can this destruction and these murders hasten the end of the war? We ask this of the men of



right spirit and balanced judgment. It is war, certainly, but war on the civilian population, war on our hearths, war on France, a cowardly war because France is disarmed, a wild and barbaric war. Why was the prison so clearly targeted? Was it to deliver the elements of disorder that are the best aids to England? It is possible. But then the goal was exceeded. They freed more than they wished, they were freed 'permanently'.

On Thursday 24 February 1944, Le Progrès de la Somme, printed an additional story regarding the raid:

Religious service - At the cathedral, 49 coffins were brought in and arranged in the nave. Mgr Martin, Bishop of Amiens, assisted by Mgr Fourcy and Canon Quentin, presided over the ceremony, while the organ played and the choir sang. Before giving absolution, Mgr Martin addressed a short speech to the dignitaries and the crowd said their prayers. Moved by those in sorrow, he assured them of the profound compassion of the church. Never had the cathedral seen gathered together so many victims of a cruel and mysterious bombing, said Mgr Martin, who finished by expressing the wish that all these deaths and all the suffering would be for France, the Peace and the Union of all its sons.

The final death toll rose to 96.

#### 4: No Executions Planned

If the people of Amiens could not understand why their prison had been bombed, the British seemed in no doubt.

The first occasion that a reason for the attack appears, it is given in order AO 214, dated 18 February, the day of the raid.

**INFORMATION. MOSQUITOS OF 140 AIRFIELD ARE TO ATTACK THE PRISON AT AMIENS IN AN ATTEMPT TO ASSIST 120 PRISONERS TO ESCAPE. THESE PRISONERS ARE FRENCH >>**

**TOP**

Group Captain Pickard prepares to board his Mosquito.

**ABOVE**

A crude model of the prison made so that aircrews could familiarise themselves with the prison and its layout.

**LEFT**

A photo-reconnaissance image of the prison, which is the dark rectangular building, bottom centre.





**PATRIOTS CONDEMNED TO DEATH FOR ASSISTING THE ALLIES.**

Prior to this message, there had been no reason or purpose for the attack provided to the aircrews.

Ducellier's first line of enquiry was to establish the identity of the '120' prisoners about to be executed – but he found there were none at all. In short, and very curiously, the British reason behind the attacks appears to be a total fabrication.

As with many similar penal institutions, executions did take place from time to time, but not at Amiens prison at this

time. In the past, executions had been carried out there, sometimes using a guillotine that had to be brought all the way from Paris. On 17 January 1944, Jean Roy of Nesle was executed in the Citadel at Amiens; André Dumont of Mers-Les-Bains was shot there on 5 February 1944. Earlier, on 2 August 1943, eleven members of the Resistance had also been shot at the Citadel.

If one excludes the summary executions that took place towards the end of summer 1944 in what was known as 'The Massacre of Gentelles', where 27 people

**ABOVE**

*Bombs are loaded onto the wing pylons of one of the Mosquitos.*

**RIGHT**

*The Mosquitos streak low over Amiens as the first bombs strike the prison, throwing up dust. They have not yet exploded as they were fitted with 11 second delay fuses.*



**LEFT**

*Technicians work on bombs before they are loaded into a Mosquito's internal bomb-bay.*



were killed, the execution of the eleven Resistance operatives shot on 2 August 1943, was the largest mass execution in this area.

Had there ever been the execution of 120 prisoners, then it would have been an unprecedented act for this part of France.

Detailed records of prison-related activities do survive, however, and on Thursday 17 February 1944, a request from the French Attorney General arrived at the offices of the National Gendarmerie of Amiens. Eight people (seven men and a woman) imprisoned in the prison at Amiens were to be brought to the Special Section of the Court of Appeal for judgement.

The raid took place the following day, and a period of general confusion naturally followed. On 26 February, the same Captain of the Gendarmerie advised the Attorney General that:

*'The eight people who were to appear before the Special Section have not been able to be located among the prisoners currently held in Amiens Prison, nor among the identified corpses recovered from the debris of the prison that was destroyed on 18 February. It is to be assumed that these individuals have escaped.'*





The records are very detailed – and yet there is never a mention of any planned ‘mass execution’.

### 5: The Secret Agent Theory

An alternative reason behind the raid on Amiens Prison was that a ‘Secret Agent’ who knew when and where the D-Day invasion would take place was imprisoned there. It has been suggested that it was vital to ‘silence’ him at all costs. An agent of the SOE (Special Operations Executive) was arrested at the end of 1943 and other associated arrests took place in the St Quentin sector, which at that time was included in the administrative region of Amiens.

Colonel Rémy wrote that two agents of the British Intelligence Service were imprisoned in Amiens on 12 February 1944. However, if any high-level agents were in the prison, then their identities have remained a closely guarded secret.

Considering the utmost security that surrounded the planning for D-Day, one must also ask: is it *really* credible that any person at such a high risk of capture and torture would be privy to such detailed and important knowledge?

### 6: The ‘Resistance’ did not request the raid

It is claimed that the raid was triggered by a call from the Resistance, pleading for help to release members who would be executed in the near future. But is there any evidence to support this?

After the war, one member of the Resistance, Dominique Ponchardier - head of the ‘Sosies’ Network, did make a claim that he had been involved in requesting the raid, but no evidence

can be found to substantiate his claim. Eventually, Ponchardier refused to make any further comment.

Whilst the lack of evidence of the much reported ‘call for help’ is unusual in itself, it should be considered that the RAF was not in the business of carrying out attacks on demand; particularly on an insignificant civilian prison.

### 7: The ‘Nazi’ Prison

The image of Amiens Prison in 1944 is one of a prison swarming with SS officers patrolling the grounds – yet this is very far from the truth.

The prison at Amiens had originally been built as a civilian penal facility. It usually housed both male and female prisoners who had committed crimes

such as petty theft, burglary, arson, and capital offences such as murder. However, the fact that France was occupied by the Germans brought along a whole host of new categories of offences under both military and civil law. The prison was only ever intended for short duration sentences and was not built to adequately house the numbers of inmates that came in later. Problems arising from this included overcrowding, prisoner neglect and poor administration; all aggravated by a very simple sanitary system.

Although under German administration, the prison itself had remained a French prison and having both French and German administrative and guard staff. The German team >>

**ABOVE**  
A photo-reconnaissance image showing damage to the prison and the breached wall.

**BELOW**  
French civilians recover the bodies of Gp Capt Pickard and Flt Lt Broadley.







on duty during the day of 17 September 1943, for example, consisted of six people; a French-speaking woman of Prussian extraction, who was the guard for the women interned by the German authorities, an Adjutant, an interpreter, a warrant officer, and two Austrians. Four German soldiers were seen cycling to the prison at 22.00 hours each evening. They were armed with submachine guns and one machine gun. They left the prison at 06.00 hours every morning.

**ABOVE, RIGHT & BELOW**

*The scenes of destruction at Amiens prison after the infamous raid.*

obliterate the prison himself. Flying at the rear of the formation would put him at greatest risk of being 'picked-off' by fighters. On the raid itself, the pilot of the Film Production Unit Mosquito, Flt Lt Tony Wickham, cancelled the third wave's attack.

**9: Pickard did not bomb the prison**

Gp Capt Pickard was flying at the rear of the six Mosquitos of the second

wave. The first wave was running three minutes late, after missing a turning point, and the second wave were too close behind to allow the first attack to be completed before making its own run. The bombs – fused for an 11 second delay – would explode as the second wave passed over the prison and risk bringing them down. So, to lose time, a 360-degree circuit was flown south of Route d'Albert, while the first wave bombed.

**8: Pickard did not 'lead' the raid**

The traditional belief is that Gp Capt Pickard, flying 'F-Freddie', headed the raid. This is completely wrong, and surviving RAF records confirm this.

Air Vice-Marshal Basil Embry had planned to lead the raid, but was 'grounded' by Air Marshal Trafford Leigh Mallory. Embry chose Group Captain Charles Pickard DSO (with 2 bars) and DFC to 'lead' the raid. However, a last minute change to the bombing instructions led Pickard to place himself at the back of the second attack wave – the 12<sup>th</sup> man. At the last minute, the instructions for the third attack wave were changed from backing up the first waves in breaking down the walls, to:

'In the event of failure (by previous waves) it was requested of the crews that the whole of the building be bombed.'

This effectively meant that any idea of releasing prisoners was abandoned and that the aim was now to totally destroy the prison. This would have meant a huge increase in loss of life. Not wishing to delegate such an important decision, Pickard wanted to be in the best position to observe the attacks of the first two waves - the last man over the prison - and make the decision whether or not





Mosquito 'F for Freddy', flown by Pickard, had dropped slightly behind the other five Mosquitos in the circuit. Some distance behind Pickard's Mosquito, a FW190 dropped below the cloud cover its pilot had been lurking in. When Feldwebel Wilhelm Mayer emerged from the cloud, he spotted a small group of Mosquitos flying at high speed along the route d'Albert. Naturally, he selected the last and nearest aircraft in the formation to 'pick-off'. At 12.04 hours his quarry made a sharp turn away from the prison towards Querrieu-Fréchencourt, closely followed by Mayer. The gap closed, but the Mosquito took no evasive manoeuvres and simply carried on flying straight and level. Having spotted the fighter behind, Pickard's only option was to jettison his bombs and open his throttles in an attempt to out-run his pursuer. To weave would have slowed him down and to present an easier target; to climb would have slowed him even further and would again have made him an easy target.

Jacques Bruaux, a farm labourer, looked up at the sound of aircraft engines. He saw an aircraft coming from the south pursued by another and heard the sound of gunfire. Jacques looked on in amazement as the aircraft in front lost its tail and disintegrated; the two sections tumbled and turned in the sky. The tail spiralled down and was later found crumpled on a shallow slope. The front section of the Mosquito reared up slightly then plummeted down at high-speed. On impact the spinning propeller blades thrashed the ground wildly, sending up flurries of snow and soil, before they smashed onto the frozen surface. The forward section, containing the bodies of Pickard and Broadley, disintegrated and caught fire.

The timing and circumstances of the combat show that Pickard never even reached the prison.

### 10: Why did the RAF bomb the prison?

The RAF 'Legend' of releasing 120 doomed Resistance fighters was created by the British Intelligence services and distributed by newspapers many months after the event – after D-Day. Having proved that the story has no basis in fact, one is left asking: 'Why go to all that trouble to bomb a prison?' It is Dr Ducellier's belief that the bombing was part of a deception plan to ensure the German XV Army stayed in the Pas de Calais, even after the Normandy landings took place. In the event, the XV Army were kept in the Pas de Calais region until mid July, still awaiting the expected second wave of Allied landings there.

In order to persuade German Intelligence that there would be a second invasion front, British Intelligence needed to convince the Germans that they had a credible source of information. This source had to pass on to them verifiable facts, and be totally convincing. From a British perspective, and three quarters of a century on, it is difficult to see how bombing the prison could help. But consider what might have happened had the tables been turned.

In the summer of 1940 – at the height of the German threat to invade Britain – 18 German bombers attack a British prison – let's say Wormwood Scrubs, London. 100 prisoners are killed, many others escape. British Intelligence Officers are at a loss to explain why such a deliberate precision attack took place and are seeking answers. A double agent



**ABOVE**  
The damage inside the prison.

**BELOW LEFT**  
An RAF airman and French civilian tend the graves of Gp Capt Pickard and Flt Lt Broadley at the war's end.

provides the answer, straight from Berlin; a German agent was in the prison with details of the invasion plan – he had to be silenced at all costs.

Do you believe your double agent – and what he subsequently tells you?

Whatever the truth of the matter, one thing is certain. And that is that the true reason for the raid was most certainly not as later presented. Frustratingly, and perhaps conveniently, no official files seem to exist to even partly explain the mystery of Ramrod 564. ☉

### READER OFFER

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