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DETECTIVE WORK UNCOVERS HIDDEN SECRETS IN MILITARY AERIAL PHOTO ARCHIVES

Never before published photographs of notable moments in British and world military history are being discovered in a vast collection of aerial reconnaissance imagery.

The findings include photographs of prisoners in the central courtyard of the notorious Colditz high security prison and POWs working in the shadow of the infamous bridge over the River Kwai, along with images taken during the post D-Day battle for Normandy and the Suez Crisis of 1956.

The imagery comes from The Aerial Reconnaissance Archives (TARA), a collection of tens of millions of aerial photographs taken by Allied aircraft and dating from the start of the Second World War. Held by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), the archives also cover key post-war events in world history up to the present day, including the Cold War, the Korean War, the Persian Crisis and the Falklands.

Some of the photographs have only recently been declassified.

The unpublished photographs were discovered as part of a painstaking process of cataloguing and digitising TARA imagery for a publicly-accessible new website dedicated to aerial photography.

Manager of the RCAHMS aerial photography archives, Allan Williams said:

“We are uncovering new images every day, but to locate photographs with such powerful links to major events is incredibly exciting. Without doubt, we’ll continue to make amazing discoveries. The amount of reconnaissance photography taken during and since the Second World War is astonishing, and its role in expanding our knowledge and understanding of twentieth century history is critical. It’s providing us quite literally with a new perspective on historical events – from the air.”

While TARA is made up of thousands of microfilm rolls containing millions of individual images, only a small percentage has so far been catalogued and digitised. Discovering exactly what the films contain is an ongoing task requiring in-depth detective work. Allan and his team draw on squadron records to link reconnaissance

flights to major events in time, and, by identifying geographic references in archive photography, they can then match historic imagery to locations in the modern landscape - some of which have changed beyond recognition since WWII.

The launch of the website is integral to RCAHMS' conservation plan for TARA, which includes further research and progressive digitisation for display online, as well as storing and preserving the original materials for public access.

Allan Williams said:

“We consider ourselves very privileged to be the custodians of this internationally significant archive. It has come to RCAHMS due to our expertise in preserving and cataloguing imagery archives and also because of the cutting-edge technology we've developed to make such materials accessible to the public.”

“These aerial images capture an almost perfectly objective view of history as it is happening, revealing incredible examples of both the huge scale and impact of war and also the tiny details. The immediacy they bring to historic moments is astonishing, from photographs taken during battle, to prisoners of war lining up for roll call in heavily guarded compounds. As the veterans of these conflicts grow older their first person experiences are being lost – which makes the evidence that remains even more important.”

Much of the collection owes its existence to academics who worked with the photography in Military Intelligence during the war: they won the argument to preserve the images during the post-war period and the collection went first to Keele University, where it stayed until 2008, before moving to RCAHMS in Scotland. Even now, images must be declassified before they can be made public.

The new website shows several thousand images - primarily Second World War photographs of France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and the Czech Republic - and plots their locations on mapping software like Google Maps and Google Earth. It also allows users to access detailed records of the complete archives held by RCAHMS.

The recently catalogued, never before published highlights, newly digitised by RCAHMS experts and available to view online are:

- The infamous bridge over the River Kwai, Thailand, taken on 2 January 1945. Built by POW and local conscript labour for the invading Japanese army, this was part of the Thai-Burma railway project that cost the lives of more than 300,000 men to build. The bridge was subjected to numerous attacks by Allied aircraft during the period December 1944 to June 1945 – as shown in the photograph by the many bomb craters.
- Colditz on 10 April 1945, just three days before US forces over-ran the area. After the outbreak of the Second World War, Colditz castle was converted into a high-security POW camp – known as Oflag IV-C.

Its location on a rocky outcrop above the Mulde river made it an ideal location for a high-security prison.

- Port Said, Egypt, taken on 17 November 1956 during the Suez Crisis. These images were taken by the French Air Force during Operation Musketeer – the Anglo-French-Israeli plan for the invasion of Egypt to control the Suez Canal during the Crisis. They capture a pivotal moment in British foreign policy - Britain's status as a world power - and the special relationship between Britain and the United States.
- A slave labour camp outside of Mainz, Germany on 2 June, 1945. This camp was quickly dismantled post-war and very few images of it remain. The camp contained inmates from throughout Nazi occupied Europe brought to the camp for their engineering skills. In one image a football match is evident.

The RCAHMS aerial archive can be accessed at aerial.rcahms.gov.uk. It is free to browse although in-depth viewing requires a subscription, currently £15 for two years. RCAHMS also offers search and image purchase services. A dedicated search room has also been set up at RCAHMS' Edinburgh headquarters for people wishing to carry out their own research.

As well as TARA, RCAHMS has an unmatched collection of over 1.6 million aerial photographs of Scotland dating from the 1920s to the present day, including extensive RAF aerial photography and imagery taken as part of 'Operation Revue', a major post-war land use assessment that informed the building of the Scottish 'New Towns'.

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Notes to Editors:

- 1) RCAHMS is the National Collection of materials on Scotland's built environment that connects people to places across time. It:
 - Is the first port of call for information about the built environment of Scotland, from prehistory to the present
 - employs expert staff and cutting edge technology to make its collections easy to access
 - makes accessible a wide range of resources from maps and manuscripts to photographs and drawings, for people interested in Scotland's culture and heritage
 - is Scotland's National Collection for information and materials on the built environment
 - records the changing landscape of Scotland and collects materials relating to it
 - involves people in discovering and investigating Scotland's built environment