Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom

Ashamedly, this writer had never even heard about the bombing of Dresden prior to this assignment. The fact that 135,000 deaths were suffered, including numerous Allied POWs, had not been addressed to me thus far as an American was indeed appalling. Continually taught about glorious D-Day, the aerial strikes on London, even the damage inflicted on Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Tokyo; the firebombing of Dresden was omitted. However, on February 13th, 1945, this event took place. Kurt Vonnegut Jr. gave us a personal account, the only way he knew how, in Slaughterhouse Five. In the 186 pages of this book, Vonnegut only refers to the experience in twenty pages. The vast majority of these pages are found within the last quarter of the novel, including the last page. Vonnegut wanted his readers to remember, as they closed the book, the firebombing of Dresden. The rest of the book was his unique approach to tackle this horrifying subject. Never have I before used the term unique so meaningfully.

Vonnegut wrote of Dresden in five aspects. In the first chapter of his novel, he noted a prior history of the siege of Dresden by the Prussians. His war friend, O’Hare had left this book out for Vonnegut to read, so that he may better understand that war is indeed an ugly but inevitable part of the human race. It happened before the 1945 bombing. It may very well happen after. Endell’s history of this siege revealed Goethe’s statement of the Frauenkirche, a church whose dome was thought to be
bomb resistant. It was destroyed, however, in both bombings. The reconstruction of this famous piece of Dresden skyline is still underway today. The pictures reveal its ruin after the firebombing, and it current state today.

The second setting of Dresden discussion would be initiated by the words of Edger Derby to his wife in a letter. “Dear Margaret-We are leaving for Dresden today. Don’t worry. It will never be bombed.” He along with Billy, Kurt and ninety-seven other POWs entered the doomed metropolis. Vonnegut appeared in this moment to express his awe of the Dresden landscape. “Oz,” he stated, and continued to detail the beautiful and untouched German city. The city was alive and well. Public utilities and services were being provided. People were still employed at regular consumer businesses and factories. Vonnegut expresses further the real energy of the city in his description of the prisoner’s walk to the ironic shelter that would keep these POWs and their captors from being part of the immense slaughter. Thousands of civilians watched Billy, a “dead-man walking,” without any notion that it was their fate that was sealed.

The next account of Dresden was the experience of the actual bombing itself. I could only assume that this would be the worst part for Vonnegut to attempt to write. Notably, Billy doesn’t flash to this moment; instead, Vonnegut records that “He remembered it shimmeringly- as follows:”. I believe the absence of “fictional” time-travel to mean that this was Vonnegut writing as truthfully, factually, and therefore as historically as possible. Not much was stated, simply that the explosives above sounded a lot like loud footsteps. Vonnegut had stayed true to his words spoken in chapter one. This account would be short, “…because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.”
Billy, traveling to a time in the Tralfamadorian zoo with Montana Wildhack, decided to tell his abducted mate about the events following the bombing. The buildings around the shelter were all destroyed. The sun, clouded by all the smoke, gave little light or heat. Billy Pilgrim began to consistently describe Dresden as the moon. There was no sign of life, no sign of prior life, no expectation of future life. The POWs and their guards were forced to scale the rubble in search for lodging, food, and water. On their journey they saw no one alive.

Vonnegut takes a detour, as became expected, and fast-forwards to Billy Pilgrim in the hospital with Harvard history professor, official Air Force Historian, and senile sex novelist Bertram Copeland Rumfoord. Rumfoord was attempting to finish his book on the Air Force in World War II and needed more information on Dresden. Here, Vonnegut uses Rumfoord’s limited research to interject some opinions on the Dresden bombing. The first comment from a general tried to rationalize the bombing of Dresden with the old, “they did it to us first” argument. While the Nazis were indeed bombing innocent towns in England, General Eaker failed to understand that maybe it was not in the Allies best interests to imitate Nazi war decisions. The second statement, given by Air Marshal Saundby, seemed to be a bit more respectable explanation. He began by stating that this tragedy was due to an “unfortunate set of circumstances.” The most valuable part of his argument was that the people who called for the bombing were not necessarily cruel; they simply were too far away from the devastation to fully comprehend its horrifying destructive nature. Rumfoord then began arguing with Billy after he expressed to Rumfoord that he was present during the bombing. A narrow-minded Rumfoord and a resigned Pilgrim made for a poor debate. Referring to the massacre of Dresden as simply a part of war is a weak approach to the subject. However, I believe that Vonnegut wanted this notion expressed in such a character as Rumfoord, an arrogant millionaire.
Vonnegut’s last encounter with Dresden occurred in the four pages of the book, detailing more of the aftermath of the bombing. It was almost as if Vonnegut did not feel that he expressed the horror enough; there was more that had to be said. Billy and his fellow Americans were sent back to the ruins to dig for bodies. The dirt, mixed with solid rubble, was hard to work. Eventually Billy and his group found an opening filled with dead bodies. Vonnegut would refer to these as “corpse mines.” He painted quite a vivid picture, describing the rotted and liquefied bodies becoming unbearable to the senses. One worker died of throwing up over the whole mess. Eventually, the rest of the bodies were cremated with flamethrowers.

The narrator explained that the idea of Dresden was to “hasten the end of the war.” Nothing more on the why was ever expressed by the main characters, which seemed to signify that Vonnegut believed that the inevitability of war would create these situations. However, he believed it to be a massacre that should attempt to be told properly as a massacre and not just another war story. The alternate title, The Children’s Crusade is an obvious symbol of Vonnegut’s animosity toward modern war. He states that he had instructed his sons never to gain satisfaction in massacres and never to work for factories building ‘weapons of massacre destruction.’ I believe Vonnegut attained a proper wisdom about Dresden. He developed the serenity to accept that the bombing was unchangeable, and discovered the courage to change how Americans viewed the event in hopes of preserving the past and protecting the future.