Hiroshima THE DAY THE BOMB DROPPED 'City of Ghosts' The Sunny Day When the Sky Fell on Japan ; James Kindall ; Newsday ; 07-23-1995 ;

Hiroshima THE DAY THE BOMB DROPPED
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The Sunny Day When the Sky Fell on Japan

By James Kindall. STAFF WRITER

On a clear August morning as he handed down tile from the roof of a home being demolished for a fire lane in Hiroshima, Takara Nishiyama glimpsed the birth of an angry god. It appeared as soundless lightning that flashed across the sky like a judgment. An instant later, a supersonic shock wave slapped him in the air and dropped him like a toy in a clearing far away. Then, the god roared.
A fireball hot enough to melt iron several times over spread across the land. People became shadows. Clothes combusted on lines. The blast was so powerful, it tore a hole in the air, reversing the wind. As the darkness spread, a black rain began to fall.
"It had been a sunny morning, but when I came to it was all black in front of me; all dark," says Nishiyama, an 84-year-old handyman with an age-creased face who looked skyward just as the world's first atomic bomb dropped from the belly of the Enola Gay on Aug. 6, 1945. In front of him stretched a strange vastness. Ordinarily, his view would have been blocked by a thriving Japanese city. Now, in one blinding instant, it had been turned into "genbaku sabaku," an "atomic desert."
"When I stood up, I saw some people running and I joined them. I came across some black figures. Some were dead on the ground and others were standing, crying out, 'Mother! Father!" Their heads were covered with a sticky blackness like they had been sprayed and there was dust on top of that so you couldn't tell if they were men or women."
Bodies floated in the city rivers like tea leaves.
"Some were still alive and struggling for help and others were sinking, almost dead," says Nishiyama. "The ones lying on the river bank were too weak to climb up the sides. On the way to the hospital, I saw people trapped in destroyed houses calling for help, but I could barely help myself."
The wrath of the new god descended upon a young woman named Aiko Aoki as she waited at a railroad station to buy a ticket to visit her parents in a nearby city. Fortunately, she was not among those standing near the station window cut to shreds by shattering glass.
Instead, the blast wind threw her across the room leaving her with only cuts and bruises. Picking herself up, she remembered her aunt who lived in the city center. While walking toward the house, she passed burning bodies in the street and blackened victims begging for water. Many knew they were dead already.
"Please, kill me," they screamed. "Kill me now."
By late afternoon, she reached her aunt's burning home. The woman
was inside, pinned by a support beam. The 4-year-old boy whom the aunt had been carrying on her back had stopped crying some time ago. Aoki could see he was dead. But the woman still held her 18-month-old daughter in her arms.

"I will not live," she told Aoki, "but please help my little one."

After a struggle, Aoki pulled the child loose, but the beam was impossible to move from her aunt's body. As the fire consumed the house, Aoki fled, yelling, "Please forgive me." Afterward, she returned to look through the remains.

"There were no ashes left of her," says Aoki, 79, frail but with alert eyes. "No bones. I stayed there for an hour."

No place on Earth had ever taken a more crushing blow than the former castle city of Hiroshima the day "Little Boy" nosed downward at 8:15 a.m. to explode a third of a mile in the air. The blow not only signaled the end of history's bloodiest war and a new geopolitical order, it documented the worst aspects of science's power.

The scenes witnessed by Nishiyama and Aoki, both known as hibakusha, or survivors, have haunted the world ever since. Seventy-one thousand people were killed instantly. Injuries and radiation doubled that months later. After five years, the toll had reached 200,000, nearly two-thirds the city's population.

Whole families were whirled away in the inferno. After the blast, relatives stuck boards scrawled with messages in the ground at the sites of former homes asking for information. Onward the destruction rolled.

When Aoki returned to her parents' home nearly 40 miles away in the countryside, she found her son playing with half-burnt yen notes from an exploded bank.

Only 2 percent of city buildings - the concrete ones built to withstand earthquakes - remained as gutted shells. Some were left partly intact by caprice. The blast ripped through the first floor of the Shimomura Clock factory so fast, the second floor fell in its place.

One reason the scene was so shocking to residents of Hiroshima, actually six islands connected by bridges, was that it had been mostly unscathed by war.

In fact, up to then, most of Hiroshima's damage had been self-inflicted. Japanese officials, nervous about U.S. bombers droning overhead daily on their way to other targets, decreed that fire lanes would be carved throughout the city, the demolition work to be done by schoolchildren and civilians. They hoped this would prevent the scene in Toyko where Allied gasoline bombs turned the city into a holocaust.

Aside from this, in addition to food shortages that led the population to scrounge for acorns and frequent air raid warnings that sent them scurrying to shelters, life was a tolerable wartime existence for the 350,000 inhabitants.

No one expected this eerie calm to last considering Hiroshima's strategic importance as a port city. This, in fact, was why it had been chosen as a castle site by a Japanese nobleman five centuries before.

During World War II, it was converted to a modern military and education center occupied by about 40,000 soldiers, many lodged with residents.

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These were among the reasons it was picked from four initial targets as a bomb site - the others were Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki - by
Curtis LeMay, the cigar-chomping general who had designed the B-29 raids against Japan. Hiroshima's war material factories and the fact that it was the home of Japan's Second Army were other considerations. LeMay mistakenly had been told it was the only potential target without an Allied POW camp in the vicinity. Actually, at least 23 American prisoners, mostly downed bomber crews, were held in Hiroshima castle, which was swept away in the blast.

Nighttime on Aug. 5 was particularly nerve-racking as air-raid warnings sounded sporadically. Meanwhile, at 2:45 a.m. the Enola Gay rose from Tinian Island accompanied by a plane to measure the bomb's power and another to photograph it.

At 7:31 in the target city, the day's last alert was canceled. Forty-four minutes later, the Enola Gay's crew donned polarized black goggles, and the B-29 jerked upward as a 9,000-pound object described by one crewman as a "trashcan with fins" dropped from the sky. Two divided uranium parts slammed together in the "gun-barrel-type" bomb and achieved critical mass. When it exploded near a bridge target at the city center, temperatures at the bomb center reached several million degrees Celsius.

A black mushroom cloud tinged with purple rose in the sky. On the ground, people melted like candles.

Half of the bomb's energy was released as a blast wind, a third as heat rays and the rest as radiation. In one grim way the city was lucky.

The world's first atomic bomb was shockingly crude. Only one kilogram of its 10-30 kilogram payload achieved fission, an explosion that released the equivalent of 15,000 to 20,000 tons of TNT. Had it worked properly, much of southern Japan would have become a giant moon crater.

The blast hurled people through the air, burning away their clothing and boiling their skin. Thousands were trapped in collapsed buildings as all the ruins of the fires melted together like lava.

Residents wandered the city, arms extended to keep strips of flesh from rubbing against their bodies. Victims staggered to rivers only to collapse dead in the water.

One 5-year-old girl described a victim in the book "Children of the Atomic Bomb":

"A man who was so badly burned that you couldn't tell whether he was a young man or an old man was lying in front of Grandpa's house. We put a blanket down for him and gave him a pillow; while we were looking at him he swelled up to about three times his size and his whole body turned the color of dirt and got soft. Flies came all over him and he was moaning in a faint voice and an awful smell was coming from him."

"Ashes of death," the Japanese term for fallout, drifted over the countryside. Those who "touched poison," receiving large doses of radiation, died in hours. Others took a month. Pictures of a soldier exposed to radiation in his barracks three miles from the center of the explosion documented the typical decline. His hair began falling out in mid-August. By the month's end, purple splotches appeared on his body and he began bleeding from his gums. Less than a month later, he was dead.

Tatsuo Sora, then a 17-year-old student on his way to wartime duties loading goods at the port, turned around to see a "giant fireball"
expanding all over."
"I was so astonished. I was blown several meters away. After that, I hid in an underground shelter. When I came out, I saw the fires. An atomic cloud was floating over the sky."
Later, he realized Hiroshima was "a city of ghosts."
"At the Miyuki bridge, victims were piled up... and the wounded were crying out, calling for their fathers and mothers and children. Their eyes were dead and the skin of their head and hands was hanging down. The severely burned people who wanted water jumped into the river and died. Their bodies stayed there for weeks and became swollen three times their size. When the tide was up, people would come to the bridge to see if any of the bodies were their relatives."
The dead and near-dead crowded hospitals. Doctors used vegetable and machine oil to treat burns. Amputations were performed without anesthetic.
Women discovered that dark patterns on their kimonos (light-colored clothing tended to deflect thermal rays) had been burned into their flesh. Cataracts appeared in the eyes of some as if the explosion cloud had been imprinted on their sight.
Allied occupiers after the war limited news reports of the devastation. Gen. Douglas MacArthur imposed a censorship on all media. When the film crew commissioned by the Japanese Ministry of Education to make a documentary about Hiroshima and Nagasaki began their work, they were arrested by American MPs.
One of the most hideous aftereffects of the bomb was keloids, painful scar tissue from healed burns. These rose on the body in the form of twisted flesh. Some victims, unable to face a mirror, committed suicide.
Another legacy was the youngsters sent to relocation camps in the countryside for the summer. Filing back to the city, they discovered they had no homes or parents left. In the years that followed, an estimated 2,000 to 6,500 "atomic orphans" wandered Hiroshima, looking in garbage cans for food, shining shoes on street corners.
To Seiko Ikeda, a schoolgirl hurled by the explosion through the burning air while working with classmates dismantling a home, the bomb sounded like "the earth breaking." She awoke in a melting pot of heat.
"Some of the men were entirely burnt and the skin of their backs was peeled all the way down to their belts," says Ikeda, a studied woman whose left cheek is marked with the outline of a hand-sized scar. "I saw a little child leaning over trying to suck the breast of its dead mother. Many of my friends' faces around me were hanging down like melted candles. I probably looked the same to others."
One day, after trying to drink soup and noticing it dribbled down her chin, Ikeda looked for a mirror (she discovered later her family had hidden them).
"I saw a gruesome face I had never seen before. There was no distinction between my neck and chin. The jawbone looked like black beef liver and the skin was about a centimeter thick and hard as a stone. I didn't want to live anymore."
One of Ikeda's classmates returned home uninjured. A month later, the deadly purple spots appeared. Her hair fell out and black blood ran
from her nose and mouth. Ikeda remembers her friend pleading with
doctors before she died to cure her because she had so many things left
to do in life.
The city's most elegant building, the green-domed Hiroshima
Prefectural Commercial Hall designed by a Czech architect, was turned
into a skeletal remain. Renamed the "A-Bomb Dome," the ruin has become
the centerpiece for Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park. Today, busloads of
excited schoolchildren file through the museum. Inside, they see photos
of pre-war Hiroshima and watch U.S. film footage of the atomic cloud
rising in the sky.
Other groups pay respects at a stone coffin in the park containing a
list of the victims, including Sadako Sasaki. A decade after the
12-year-old was exposed to radiation, she developed leukemia. She
believed that if she could fold a thousand paper cranes made from her
medicine wrappers she would live. After her death months later,
schoolchildren from around the world began bringing strings of origami
birds to the park in remembrance, a tradition that continues today.
A half-century hasn't dimmed the sounds of cracking explosions and
weeping victims for those who were there.
"It is too gruesome for me to remember," says Aoki, who, along with
Takara Nishiyama, lives at a special government-funded nursing home for
A-bomb survivors. She would have liked to at least have remains of her
aunt to place in an urn.
"I feel so regretful I couldn't get the bones of my relatives," she
says.
Sora, a retired teacher who has been responsible for distributing
material about the war throughout Japan, can't forget the sight of dead
passengers - who had been waiting to catch street cars - lining the
streets. "They were eventually burned by dousing them with heavy oil.
That odor remains in my head today."
Included in Hiroshima's museum is a display explaining that Japan's
army headquarters had been split into two sites in anticipation of the
mainland being divided by U.S. troops. Also mentioned is that in 1945,
the Imperial headquarters, foreseeing the invasion, called for "100
million deaths with honor."
But Ikeda, 67, who has had 16 plastic surgeries to remove keloids
that rose on her face and also suffered repeated miscarriages, remembers
her father's comments about the war. "He said we should not regret
anything. It was good we lost, he said. Father knew how gruesome war was
and so he was glad it ended."
Each year, residents of Hiroshima place candles inside rice-paper
containers on small wooden floats in city rivers. Each year, Takara
Nishiyama watches the glowing luminary slowly drift to sea.
"I strongly hope this will be an age without nuclear war," he says.
"I've been through wartime and now feel the greatness of peace. It is
very easy to say that, but nobody can really appreciate it as much as
those who saw such a tragedy. I want peace for the world in the
future."
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The Devastation
The effects of the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki:
Death Toll
People who died from bomb by end Total of 1945 population
Hiroshima: 140,000 327,457
Nagasaki: 70,000 286,702

% of people killed in relation to how close they were to the bomb's hypocenter (as of November, 1945)
Distance from hypocenter Hiroshima Nagasaki (Kilometers)
0-0.5 km 96.5 88.4
0.5-1.0 83.0 83.0
1.0-1.5 51.6 51.5
1.5-2.0 21.9 28.4
2.0-2.5 4.9 6.4
2.5-3.0 2.7 2.1
3.0-4.0 2.5 1.2
4.0-5.0 1.1 0.7

Damage: Building damage in Hiroshima was about three times greater than in Nagasaki. Because of the placement of the bomb and the surrounding hills that contained the explosion, the devastation was less widespread in Nagasaki:

Total Percent Percent Percent
buildings destroyed/ half-destroyed/ damaged burned burned
Hiroshima 76,000 62.9% 24% 91.9%
Nagasaki 51,000 22.7% 10.8% 36.1%


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