

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Because of certain media coverage marking the 65th anniversary of the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I would like to make some observations that I was personally involved with during my time on active duty, which covered the years 1952-1956, and for the first two, which was during the Korean War, my overseas home port was Sasebo, Japan. Sasebo is the port for Nagasaki, which was on the eastern side of a low hill that separated the two cities, located at the southwest corner of Kyushu Island. The hilly terrain here helped in containing the damage caused by the atomic blast, thus allowed Sasebo to avoid the devastation that happened to Nagasaki.

My observations are: of the many Japanese citizens that I spoke to in those days soon after the end of WWII, I never once encountered one single instance whereby someone showed anger or bitterness toward the United States for dropping the atomic bombs. At the time, I made an effort to speak with the actual survivors, if possible. It wasn't too difficult in many cases, as they had noticeable skin blemishes, and two in particular had the patterns of the clothing they had been wearing that fateful morning tattooed on their arms by the heat and radiation. All that I spoke with viewed the bombs as being part of warfare, and most likely would have been used by the Japanese forces on the United States if the tables had been turned.

They also were unanimous in hoping that what happened to those two Japanese cities should forever be held up as the main argument against ever again using atomic weapons in warfare, and indeed against warfare itself.

Now that the 65th anniversary of those bombings has been observed, the media has been interviewing young Japanese, and they seem to have an undertone of resentment against the United States. Whether this reflects biased reporting on our part or biased teaching of history to the youth of Japan by the Japanese, I don't know. What I do know is that to those who were personally involved, and although surviving for the short term, most likely have by now paid the ultimate price for being victims of the atomic bomb, did not feel that way, and I believe that their thoughts on the matter should be the ones that become the legacy on the subject between our two peoples, not those of persons who were not born at the end of the war.

I kept diaries during my three tours of duty to the Far East, and perhaps it will be helpful if I reproduce some of the observations that are in these pages. I was barely 21 at the time, and now in later life I find some of my impressions were different from those that I would make today. For example, I had never seen real poverty, nor had I been in an environment where the economy was in the earliest stages of recovery from total devastation; it was really overwhelming to anyone with the slightest amount of compassion for fellow human beings. For someone in the service, especially an enlisted man on a warship, there is really nothing that he can personally do to make the situation any better with one exception; you can mingle with the people and show kindness. This can be done primarily by being friendly with their children. Bring chewing gum to hand out, take their pictures, smile with the parents, who inevitably will

be in the immediate vicinity, show them pictures of your family. It may sound ineffectual, but believe me, it is not.

15 February, 1954 There is a sharp dividing line between the city limits of Sasebo and the countryside beyond, as the city is built on the slopes of hills facing the ocean, and from the crest of the ridge into the valley beyond is something like stepping into rural Vermont or New Hampshire, except of course, for the style of the houses.

Even though it is winter here, the countryside is green and rather pretty. The view from the ridge is really breathtaking. A vast valley lies below you, subdivided into several smaller valleys. The higher peaks register with you first; they are, for the most part, covered with rice paddies. The paddies are a light green hue set off by the duller shade of green of the retaining terraces. The valley floor and the smaller hills are liberally sprinkles with trees and shrubs. Here and there is a small house. None of their houses have lawns or any kind of landscaping. If anything, there will be a rice paddy. Also, there is a noticeable lack of barns. Once in a while you will see a low shed, but nothing more. The houses appear to be quite old and in poor upkeep. The people are pitifully poor, and what money they get must go for the bare necessities of life, with little if anything left over for such things as paint for the buildings.

I went through a village consisting of one street with a few pseudo roads leading off into the surrounding countryside. Through the village ran a small stream about the size of Indian Meadow Brook. All the town's sewage and garbage (what little there was to be thrown away) goes into it. The stream was thick with refuse and filth. The street was filled with small, ragged urchins, all smiling and calling in the only English they knew: "Hello, hello" and "Gum Joe". I carry packs of Chiclets gum, primarily because there are 10 in a pack, whereas the conventional pack of gum consists of 5 rather large sticks. It is nice to see that the children in the villages don't beg, as so many do in the cities. There is nothing more degrading for a people, I believe, than to see their little ones out begging for "ten yen". The rural Japanese have nothing, but they do have honor and are a proud people.

The Japanese love to have you take their picture. Why this should be remains a mystery, as there is no possibility of them ever seeing the end product. I use 35mm film, and there are only two locations in the entire Pacific where it can be developed – Honolulu and Manila; consequently I send my undeveloped rolls directly to my parents, and I won't see them until I get home, which might be more than a year. This is one of the main reasons for keeping a detailed diary, as there is a good chance I will have forgotten what a particular scene might be. Nevertheless, I have a sizeable photo collection of Japanese, both adults and children, and in every instance, they are smiling and pleased to be the center of attention at the moment.

All of this took place within a very few miles of Nagasaki, and everyone would have seen the blast and the rising mushroom cloud, even though they escaped the direct radiation.

It is for these reasons that I believe the lasting legacy between our two peoples should reflect the feelings and attitudes of the survivors, not the interviews conducted decades later by either reporters or educators who, for one reason or another, have a personal or political agenda.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg

