The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

There are dozens of brilliant war photographers, but there is only one Yoshito Matsushige.
For many years, Matsushige, 92, worked for a major metro daily called Chugoku Shimbun. He may not have been the greatest war photographer ever but he is unique: he took the only photographs in Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, the day the first atomic bomb was detonated over the city, killing 150,000 people.

Photos of war are very much with us today, with fierce debates over whether we are seeing too much of one kind (Americans getting mutilated or strung up on bridges) and not enough of another (civilians dying in Fallujah and other cities).

On Aug. 6, 1945, Matsushige wandered around Hiroshima for 10 hours, carrying one of the few cameras that survived the atomic bombing and two rolls of film with twenty-four possible exposures. This was no ordinary photo opportunity. He lined up one gripping shot after another but he could only push the shutter seven times.

When he was done he returned to his home and developed the pictures in the most primitive way, since every dark room in the city, including his own, had been destroyed. Under a star-filled sky, with the landscape around him littered with collapsed homes and the center of Hiroshima still smoldering in the distance, he washed his film in a radiated creek and hung it out to dry on the burned branch of a tree.
Five of the seven images came out, and they are all the world will ever know of what Hiroshima looked like on that day. Only Matsushige knows what the 17 photos he didn't take would have looked like.

Two of his pictures have been widely reprinted in magazines and books. In one, a ragged line of bomb victims sit along the side of Miyuki Bridge, two miles from ground zero, legs folded to their chests. It's hard to tell if it is torn clothing or skin that hangs from them in tatters. No one cries out. They simply stare at what lies across the bridge: a tornado of flame and smoke rushing toward the suburbs. The second picture is a tighter version of the first, focusing on a policeman and a few school girls standing in the center.

All of the figures in the two photos have their backs to the photographer and are staring at the approaching holocaust. Although many in these images no doubt died later, neither of these pictures shows a single corpse. Yet the two photos capture the horror of the atomic bombing better than any panoramic image of twisted buildings and rubble. Perhaps that is because the people in Matsushige's pictures are feeling more than the lingering effects of the blast -- they are still experiencing the bomb itself. "Little Boy" has not yet finished with them or their city.
The terror evident in the way the victims are standing or sitting (with their backs to the camera we cannot read their expressions) in these grainy black and white photographs says more about the human response to the monstrous unknown than any Hollywood recreation. And because the photographer has the same perspective as his victims, we see what they see. We are on that road to Hiroshima, three hours after the bomb fell, staring into the black whirlwind. The pictures are so affecting because ever since that day, all of us have, in a sense, been standing on that road to Hiroshima, alive but anxious, and peering into the distance at the smoke and firestorm approaching but not yet arrived.

When I interviewed Matsushige almost 20 years ago in a conference room at his old newspaper -- a small man, dapper in white shoes -- he explained that he could not take more photos that day because "it was so atrocious" and he was afraid burned and battered people "would be enraged if someone took their picture." He tried to capture more images but he could not "muster the courage" to press the trigger.
A few weeks after the bombing, the American military confiscated all of the post-bomb newspaper prints and Japanese newsreel footage, "but they didn't ask for the negatives," Matsushige said, grinning like a cat. These were the pictures that caused a stir worldwide when they appeared in Life magazine seven years later, breaking a press ban. No photographic images of Nagasaki taken on Aug. 9 are known to have survived.

Did he wish, then, that he had captured 17 additional images on Aug. 6 -- 17 further arguments for the abolition of nuclear weapons? "I'm often asked that," he replied, looking down at his skinny hands and rubbing his palms together. "Now we see so many nuclear weapons still in the world," he finally said, looking up. "Given that, you'd think I'd wish I'd taken more. They could be very useful. Sometimes I think I should have gathered my courage and taken more photos, but at other times I feel I did all I could do. I could not endure taking any more pictures that day. It was too heartbreaking."

With that, Matsushige bid farewell, packed up his belongings, bowed deeply to the interviewer and left the room, carrying in his arms a portfolio of pictures that are utterly unique, and must remain so.

Greg Mitchell wrote this tribute to Matsushige, who passed away at 92 earlier this year, for Editor and Publisher. Posted at Japan Focus May 16, 2005.

Greg Mitchell is the editor of Editor and Publisher and the author (with Robert Jay Lifton) of Hiroshima in America: A Half Century of Denial. He was the editor of Nuclear Times Magazine and chief consultant to the prize-winning