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The night hell fell from the sky (Korean translation available)

by David McNeill

March 10 is the 60th anniversary of one of the great forgotten atrocities of World War 2: the fire-bombing of Tokyo which killed over 100,000 people

Saotome Katsumoto was 12 when he heard the familiar rumble of B-29 bombers.

"It was a midnight air raid, but unlike anything we had experienced before. The planes flew in very low, so low you could see the fires reflected in their undercarriages, and they dropped mostly incendiaries. The fires started everywhere and we tried to fight them, but there was a strong, northerly wind fanning the flames. All around me people were on fire, writhing in agony."

U.S. B-29s fly over Tokyo

Sixty years ago today, on March 10 1945, the US abandoned the last rules of warfare against civilians when 334 B-29's dropped close to half a million incendiary bombs on sleeping Tokyo.

The aim was to cause maximum carnage in an overcrowded city of flimsy wooden buildings; an estimated 100,000 people were 'scorched, boiled and baked to death,' in the words of the attack's architect, General Curtis LeMay. It was then the single largest mass killing of World War II, dwarfing even the destruction of the German city of Dresden on Feb. 13, 1945.

Central Tokyo in ruins after the March 10 firebombing

B-29 pilot Chester Marshall flew above the destruction, but not far enough: "At 5,000 feet you could smell the flesh burning," he later told Australian broadcaster ABC. "I couldn't eat anything for two or three days. You know it was nauseating, really. We just said 'What is that I smell?' And it's a kind of a sweet smell, and somebody said, 'Well that's flesh burning, had to be.'"

Even the city's rivers were no escape from the firestorm: the jellied petroleum that filled the bombs, a prototype of the napalm that laid waste to much of Vietnam two decades later, stuck to everything and turned water into fire. "Canals boiled, metal melted, and buildings and human beings burst spontaneously into flames," wrote John Dower in War Without Mercy. People who dived into rivers and canals for relief were boiled to death in the intense heat.

The next day, Suzuki Ikuko, then a 19-year-old student, went looking for survivors. "We tried to find our teacher who lived downtown, but there was nothing left, just ruins and charred trees. You couldn't tell east from west because everything was gone, so we gave up. Afterwards we heard that our teacher was found in a pile of bodies in Omotesando" [Today a fashionable district of central Tokyo].

The bombing incinerated over 15 kilometers of central Tokyo, left over a million homeless and opened the curtain on an orgy of destruction in the final months of the Pacific War that included dozens of similar raids on Japanese cities and culminated in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August. When the droning of bombers finally stopped on August 15, 1945, nearly 70 cities had been reduced to rubble and well over half a million people, mostly civilians, were dead. LeMay reportedly said: "If we had lost the war, we would have been tried as war criminals."

Some thought that Imperial Japan, like Nazi Germany, deserved what it got for the brutal, relentless bombing of Shanghai and Chongqing, the Rape of Nanjing and other war atrocities across Asia. Gregory Clark, former Australian diplomat and now vice-president of Akita university, says: "You have to put it in context. All I remember as a kid was cheering when we heard that Japan was bombed." Revenge was mixed with the fear of Allied casualties in the event of a land invasion of the Japanese archipelago, where millions of civilians had been mobilized to defend the homeland.

But others asked where had the moral high ground of the Allies gone since Franklin D. Roosevelt described the 1940 Nazi blitzkrieg of British cities as "inhuman barbarism"? "No one seemed conscious of the irony," wrote US historian Howard Zinn. "One of the reasons for the general indignation against the Fascist powers was their history of indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations."

The Tokyo fire bombing was the apprenticeship for a generation of future Cold War warriors. LeMay, the inspiration for the demented General Jack D. Ripper in Stanley Kubrick's antiwar satire Dr. Strangelove who once said "You've got to kill people, and when you've killed enough they stop fighting," later became US Air Force chief of staff (1961-65). He is now remembered mainly for his attempt to goad the USSR into World War III.

From Nosaka Akiyuki animated film Grave of the Fireflies

In a moment of political surrealism rivaled by the award of the 1973 Nobel Peace Price to Henry Kissinger, Le May was awarded the First Order of Merit by the Japanese government in 1964, for helping to reconstruct Japan's Self Defense Forces after the war.

Robert McNamara, a former statistician who helped plan the Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki raids, went on to become US Defense Secretary (1960-68) during the war against Vietnam, where he authorized carpet bombing of vast swathes of the country with incendiaries and Agent Orange. In last year's documentary The Fog of War, McNamara ponders the morality of victor's justice, saying: "Was there a rule then to say that you shouldn't bomb, shouldn't kill, shouldn't burn to death one hundred thousand civilians in a single night?"

The legacy of the March 10 raid though is what it bequeathed to the rest of the century: the trumping of political and moral arguments against mass civilian slaughter by military technicians and rationalists. As historian Mark Selden wrote: "Elimination of the distinction between combatant and non-combatant would shape all subsequent wars from Korea to Vietnam to the Gulf War and the ethnic conflicts of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, to mention but a few." It's a legacy we still live with.

Today, the gleaming plantation of concrete and glass spires in downtown Tokyo, built over the carbonized remains of the victims of the 1945 firebombing, is testimony to Japan's remarkable talent for reinvention, and for forgetting. "My mother never told me about the firebombing," says Shinozaki Hatae, who is too young to remember it. "She says the past is the past." Few want to talk about what happened, least of all the Japanese government, which has sheltered under the US defense umbrella since the 1950s and buried the sins of the past beneath the rhetoric of the trans-Pacific alliance.

In a bid to reverse this historical amnesia, survivor Saotome Katsumoto, now 72 and a historian and novelist, collected $800,000 and built a museum dedicated to the firebombing two years ago. Harrowing photographs and testimonies, and twisted and melted household artifacts are among the small number of items left over from the firestorm. "Japanese people haven't fully learned from the past," he says. "I think that is the government's intention. In my opinion, they think if people learn about this miserable past then Japan will not be able to go to war in the future."

Saotome says his greatest fear as an old man is forgetting. "All the people who experienced Dresden, Auschwitz and Tokyo are getting older. Today is a turning point in history and the following generations will have to depend on the accounts that the past generation left. Young people are not being taught about what happened and that its dangerous. Countries that learn from the past don't repeat it. That's why Germany and France didn't take the same course as the US in Iraq I think."

"Youngsters do not understand the horror of war," agrees Mrs. Suzuki Ikuko. "When the Iraq War started I couldn't watch it on TV. It was too painful. But my grandson said he though it was cool. He said it was like a videogame."

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