



The Third Atomic Bomb

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JAPAN

I visited Tinian Island in the western Pacific, the base from which the B-29 bomber Enola Gay took off to drop the uranium-fueled atomic bomb Little Boy on Hiroshima and the plutonium-type Fat Man on Nagasaki. The components of the atomic bombs were shipped to Tinian from the U.S. mainland on the USS Indianapolis and reassembled locally. A single palm tree stands in each of the two rectangular pits where the atom bombs were loaded.

"No matter how many times they plant palm trees, they die because of the aggregates in the soil. I heard they replace them with new ones each time," said a guide.

Invading U.S. forces landed on Chula Beach in northwestern Tinian in July 1944. Waves lap at the wreckage of a crankshaft of an amphibious vessel that landed that day.

Not far from the beach is the base of the 509th Composite Group, whose exclusive mission was to drop atomic bombs. The group was headed by Col. Paul Tibbets, captain of the Enola Gay.

Unlike other B-29 bombing units, the group dropped 10,000-pound mock atomic bombs called pumpkin bombs across Japan before unleashing the real ones. The pumpkin bombs were used in rehearsals to familiarize crews with flight routes and confirm targets. To maximize the power of the atomic bombs, planned targets were omitted from the conventional bombing list.

The mission of the 509th Composite Group did not end with the dropping of the two atomic bombs. On Aug. 14, 1945, the day before Japan's surrender, the group dropped seven pumpkin bombs on Aichi Prefecture as part of one of the so-called rehearsals.

After bombing Nagasaki, the United States stopped preparations for another nuclear attack to see if Japan would surrender. But since Japan showed no signs of surrendering even by Aug. 13, the United States resumed dropping mock bombs to prepare for a third nuclear attack.

Since the United States had revealed its method of attack to the Japanese side at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the U.S. military was looking at ways to stage a different attack in the event a third atomic bomb became necessary. At the time, the U.S. military planned a third bombing, according to "Beigun Shiryo: Genbaku Toka no Keii" (U.S. military documents: Details of atomic bombings) by Yoshishige Okuzumi and Yozo Kudo.

Stanford University professor Barton Bernstein, a prominent scholar in the history of atomic bombs, writes in an essay titled "Eclipsed by Hiroshima and Nagasaki": "Had the surrender not arrived at the 14th and if the war had dragged on into the next week, (Harry) Truman would undoubtedly have used at least one more A-bomb on a city and probably even more cities or other targets. If such nuclear pummeling did not soon produce the desired surrender, and if Truman did not retreat to offer softer surrender terms, Marshall's loose plan for tactical nuclear usage with the Kyushu invasion might have looked attractive to the White House."

The father of a former U.S. diplomat whom I know was later told he was scheduled to board a B-29 as a bomber in case the United States decided to drop a third atomic bomb. The man, now 76, belonged to the 314th Bomb Wing on Guam. He took part in 18 expeditions in which he dropped bombs on Yokohama, Mito, Omuta in Fukuoka Prefecture and other locations across Japan.

When I had lunch with them in San Francisco a while ago, the father recalled his experiences and said he could smell the burning bodies even at an altitude of 50,000 feet (about 15,000 meters).

He said he dropped bombs because he felt obliged to do so as an American serviceman; but he is not proud of what he did.

Regardless of whether they used nuclear or conventional weapons, the attacks were indiscriminate.

When we talked about the Enola Gay, the man asked, shaking his head in disbelief: "What made (Tibbets) come up with the name? What did his mother think?" Tibbets named the plane after his mother. He wrote her name on the left side of the plane's nose.

The third bomb was not dropped.

For nearly six decades since, humankind has barely managed to avoid a third atomic bombing. However, since the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the world has been seized by the fear that weapons of mass destruction may fall into the hands of terrorists. Now it appears the United States, more than anyone, is shuddering with fright.

Seneca, Roman philosopher and tutor of Nero, said: "Power over life and death-don't be proud of it. Whatever they fear from you, you'll be threatened with." Seneca died a tragic death.

Halfway between the two atomic bomb pits stands a giant banyan tree casting a shade all around. The place was completely deserted and quiet.

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The author is an Asahi Shimbun senior staff writer and foreign affairs columnist. This article appeared in the International Herald Tribune/Asahi Shinbun: August 5,2003.