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The Enola Gay In a Truly Terrifying Light

by Courtland Milloy

After attending opening day at the National Air and Space Museum annex in Northern Virginia on Monday, four visitors from Japan returned to the home of their hosts on Capitol Hill for rest and reflection.

"It was so big, huge," Tamiko Tomonaga, 74, said through a translator. "In the sky, the B-29s looked so small."

The Japanese visitors, three men and a woman, were survivors of the atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. And they had just seen the airplane that had dropped one of those bombs -- the B-29 Superfortress known as Enola Gay.

"Can you please explain why the pilot would put his mother's name on such a plane?" Minoru Nishino, 71, asked softly. "In Japan, mothers and sweethearts represent life and love, not war and death."

Two of the guests were from Hiroshima, which was destroyed by a bomb dropped by the Enola Gay on Aug. 6, 1945, and two were from Nagasaki, which was destroyed three days later by a bomb dropped by a B-29 called Bock's Car.

At the museum annex, the group took part in a peaceful protest of the Smithsonian Institution's decision to display the Enola Gay without mentioning the devastation caused by the first explosion of an atomic bomb over a civilian population.

However, when another group of protesters became disruptive and a bottle of red paint was tossed at the airplane, the survivors, called Hibakusha in Japan, moved away. They didn't come to refight World War II; they just don't want what happened to them to be forgotten.

"I was 13 when I saw this airplane crossing the sky, just before I was blown to the ground with my skin peeling off," Nishino recalled.

"I was angry and in pain. I saw my classmates on fire around me, and I wanted to cry out. But I couldn't cry out. I just thought, 'What is going on?' "

Asked how he felt, looking at the Enola Gay 58 years later, he said: "I wanted to cry out, just like before. But I couldn't. I just looked at it and thought, 'What is going on?' "

The group represented a confederation of atomic bomb survivors known as Nihon Hidankyo. A statement by Nihon read, in part: "Nuclear weapons cannot exist with humans. Nuclear weapons are not only weapons of mass destruction. They are weapons of mass extinction."

At least eight countries possess nuclear weapons, and as many as 40 are believed to have the ability to produce them, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The Hibakusha cause is much bigger than the protest against the Enola Gay. But as the visitors looked over the restored and polished warplane, nothing loomed larger than remembrances of its horrible payload.

Terumi Tanaka was 13 when the atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki. More than 70,000 people were killed -- 60 percent of them women, children and seniors.

"It was so sad. I felt the tears about to come down," Tanaka, 71, said of his visit to the museum. "Seeing all the fighter planes on display, I realized this was a war museum. What we need are more peace museums."

Hirotami Yamada, 72, was at school in Nagasaki when he heard the air raid sirens. He was 14. He recalled a flash, followed by a blast of heat and radiation -- the latter of which eventually killed everyone else in his family.

"I did not see or hear the plane, so I had no idea why everything was on fire," Yamada recalled. "Now, I've finally seen the plane, not the same plane, but still a B-29. I thought: 'Oh, so this is it. This is what dropped the bomb that destroyed my family.' "

Tomonaga was 16, living in Hiroshima and studying to become a nurse when the bomb fell. Her fear of B-29s persists, she said, but seeing the Enola Gay also strengthened her resolve to work for peace.

"There is a divide -- survivors and the dead," she said. "I believe I was allowed to live to let the voices of the others be heard, to give their testimony and help bring about a world without such weapons."

Nishino nodded. "So many died in a flash, never knowing what happened," he said. "When I die, I will cross the divide and tell them what happened. I will tell them that I saw the Enola Gay."

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