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The Great Hiroshima Cover-Up—And the Greatest Movie Never Made 大いなる広島隠蔽--そして作られることのなかった最大の映画

Greg Mitchell

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Summary

This article introduces and draws on Greg Mitchell's new book Atomic Cover-up. Two U.S. Soldiers, Hiroshima & Nagasaki, and The Greatest Movie Never Made. http://gregmitchellwriter.blogspot.com/ This is a detective story that weaves the profiles of two U.S. military officers, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the official suppression of the most important film footage of the human consequences of the bombing, created by the American military and a Japanese newsreel team.

In the northwestern corner of the Hiroshima Peace Park, amid a quiet grove of trees, the earth suddenly swells. It is not much of a mound — only about ten feet high and sixty feet across. Unlike most mounds, however, this one is hollow, and within it rests perhaps the greatest concentration of human residue in the world.

Grey clouds rising from sticks of incense hang in the air, spookily. Tourists do not dawdle here. Visitors searching for the Peace Bell, directly ahead, or the Children's Monument, down the path to the right, hurry past it without so much as a sideways glance. Still, it has a strange beauty: a lump of earth (not quite lush) topped by a small monument that resembles the tip of a pagoda. On one side of the Memorial Mound the gray wooden fence has a gate, and down five steps from the gate is a door. Visitors are usually not allowed through that door, but occasionally the city of Hiroshima honors a request from a foreign journalist.

The Memorial Mound, Hiroshima

Inside the Mound the ceiling is low, the light fluorescent. One has to stoop to stand. To the right and left, pine shelving lines the walls. Stacked neatly on the shelves, like cans of soup in a supermarket, are white porcelain canisters with Japanese lettering on the front. On the day I visited, there were more than a thousand cans in all, explained Ohara Masami, a city official. Each canister contained the ashes of one person killed by the atomic bomb.

Behind twin curtains on either side of an altar rest several dozen pine boxes, the size of caskets, stacked, unceremoniously, from floor to ceiling. They hold the ashes of about seventy thousand unidentified victims of the bomb. If, in an instant, all of the residents of Wilmington, Delaware, or Santa Fe, New Mexico, were reduced to ashes, and those ashes carried away to one repository, this is all the room the remains would require.

Most of those who died in Hiroshima were cremated quickly, partly to prevent an epidemic of disease. Others were efficiently turned to ash by the atomic bomb itself, death and cremation occurring in the same instant. Those reduced by human hands were cremated on makeshift altars at a temple that once stood at the present site of the Mound, one-half mile from the hypocenter of the atomic blast.

In 1946, an Army Air Force squad, ordered by Gen. Douglas MacArthur to film the results of the massive U.S. aerial bombardment of Japanese cities during World War II, filmed a solemn ceremony at the temple, capturing a young woman receiving a canister of ashes from a local official. Later that year, survivors of the atomic bombing began contributing funds to build a permanent vault at this site and, in 1955, the Memorial Mound was completed. For several years the collection of ashes grew because remains of victims were still being found. One especially poignant pile was discovered at an elementary school.

The white cans on the shelves have stood here for decades, unclaimed by family members or friends. (In many cases, all of the victims' relatives and friends were killed by the bomb.) Every year local newspapers publish the list of names written on the cans, and every year several canisters are finally claimed and transferred to family burial sites. Most of the unclaimed cans (a total of just over 800 as of 2010) will remain in the Mound in perpetuity, now that so many years have passed.

They are a chilling sight. The cans are bright white, like the flash in the sky over Hiroshima at 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945. From all corners of the city the ashes were collected: the remains of soldiers, physicians, housewives, infants. Unclaimed, they at least have the dignity of a private urn, an identity, a life (if one were able to look into it) before death.

But what of the seventy thousand behind the curtains? The pine crates are marked with names of sites where the human dust and bits of bone were found — a factory or a school, perhaps, or a neighborhood crematory. But beyond that, the ashes are anonymous. Thousands may still grieve for these victims but there is no dignity here. "They are all mixed together," said Ohara, "and will never be separated or identified." Under a mound, behind two curtains, inside a few pine boxes: This is what became of one-quarter of the city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

* * *

In the weeks following the atomic attacks on Japan 66 years ago, and then for decades afterward, the United States engaged in airtight suppression of all film shot in Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the bombings. This included footage shot by U.S. military crews and Japanese newsreel teams. In addition, for many years, all but a handful of newspaper photographs were seized or prohibited not only in the United States, but also in occupied Japan.

Meanwhile, the American public only got to see the same black and white images: a mushroom cloud, battered buildings, a devastated landscape. The true human costs –a full airing of the bomb's effects on people – were kept hidden. The writer Mary McCarthy declared that Hiroshima had already fallen into "a hole in history."

Hiroshima survivors

The public did not see any of the newsreel footage for 25 years, and the U.S. military film remained hidden for more than three decades. In fact, the Japanese footage might have disappeared forever if the newsreel team had not hidden one print from the Americans in a ceiling. The color U.S. military footage was not shown anywhere until the early 1980s, and has never been fully aired. It rests today at the National Archives in College Park, Md., in the form of 90,000 feet of raw footage labeled #342 USAF.

When that footage finally emerged, I spoke with and corresponded with the man at the center of this drama: Lt. Col. (Ret.) Daniel A. McGovern, who directed the U.S. military film-makers in 1945-1946, managed the Japanese footage, and then kept watch on all of the top-secret material for decades. McGovern observed that, "The main reason it was classified was...because of the horror, the devastation." I also met and interviewed one top member of his military crew, who had fought for years to get the footage aired widely in America, and interviewed some of the *hibakusha* who appear in the footage.

The Japanese Newsreel Footage

On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb over the center of Hiroshima, killing at least 70,000 civilians instantly and perhaps 70,000 more in the months to follow. Three days later, it exploded another atomic bomb over Nagasaki, killing 40,000 immediately and dooming tens of thousands of others. Within days, Japan had surrendered, and the U.S. readied plans to occupy the defeated country -- and documenting the first atomic catastrophe.

But the Japanese also wanted to study it. Within days of the second atomic attack, officials at the Tokyo-based newsreel company Nippon Eigasha discussed shooting film in the two stricken cities. In early September, just after the Japanese surrender, and as the American occupation began, director Ito Sueo set off for Nagasaki. There his crew filmed the utter destruction near ground zero and scenes in hospitals of the badly burned and those suffering from the lingering effects of radiation.

On Sept. 15, another crew headed for Hiroshima. When the first rushes came back to Tokyo, Iwasaki Akira, the chief producer (and well-known film writer), felt "every frame burned into my brain," he later said.

At this point, the American public knew little about human conditions and radiation effects in the atomic cities. Newspaper photographs of victims were non-existent, or censored. *Life* magazine would later observe that for years "the world...knew only the physical facts of atomic destruction."

On October 24, 1945, a Japanese cameraman in Nagasaki was ordered to stop shooting by an American military policeman. His film, and then the rest of the 26,000 feet of Nippon Eisasha footage, was confiscated by the U.S. General Headquarters (GHQ). An order soon arrived banning all further filming. At this point Lt. Daniel McGovern took charge.

Shooting the U.S. Military Footage

In early September, 1945, less than a month after the two bombs fell, Lt. McGovern -- who as a member of Hollywood's famed First Motion Picture Unit shot some of the footage for William Wyler's "Memphis Belle" -- had become one of the first Americans to arrive in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was a director with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, organized by the Army the previous November to study the effects of the air campaign against Germany, and now Japan.

As he made plans to shoot the official American record, McGovern learned about the seizure of the Japanese footage. He felt it would be a waste to not take advantage of the newsreel footage, noting in a letter to his superiors that "the conditions under which it was taken will not be duplicated, until another atomic bomb is released under combat conditions."

McGovern proposed hiring some of the Japanese crew to shoot more footage and edit and "caption" the material, so it would have "scientific value."

About the same time, McGovern was ordered by General Douglas MacArthur on January 1, 1946 to document the results of the U.S. air campaign in more than 20 Japanese cities. His crew would shoot exclusively in color film, Kodachrome and Technicolor, rarely used at the time even in Hollywood. McGovern assembled a crew of eleven. Third in command was a young lieutenant from New York named Herbert Sussan.

The unit left Tokyo in a specially outfitted train, and made it to Nagasaki. Their chief cameramen was Harry Mimura (Mimura Akira), a Japanese photographer who in 1943 had shot *Sanshiro Sugata*, the first feature film by a then-unknown Japanese director named Kurosawa Akira. (Mimura had spent several years in the U.S. before the war.)

The crew documented the physical effects of the bomb, including the ghostly shadows of vaporized civilians burned into walls; but, most chillingly, dozens of people in hospitals who had survived (at least momentarily) and were asked to display their burns, scars, and other lingering effects for the camera as a warning, in vivid color, to the world.

March and April 1946 color footage of Hiroshima by Harry Mimura: Link.

The Suppression Begins

While all this was going on, the Japanese newsreel team was completing its work of editing and labeling their black and white footage into a rough cut of just under three hours. At this point, several members of the Japanese team took the courageous step of ordering from the lab a duplicate of the footage they had shot before the Americans took over the project. Director Ito later said: "The four of us agreed to be ready for 10 years of hard labor in case of being discovered." One incomplete, silent print would reside in a ceiling until the Occupation ended in 1952.

The negative of the finished Japanese film, nearly 15,000 feet of footage on 19 reels, was sent off to the U.S. in early May 1946. The Japanese were also

U.S. military officers survey Hiroshima in the wake of the bombing

ordered to include in this shipment all photographs and related material. The footage would be labeled SECRET and not emerge from the shadows for more than 20 years. The following month, McGovern was abruptly ordered to return to the U.S. He hauled the 90,000 feet of his own color footage, on dozens of reels in huge footlockers, to the Pentagon and turned it over to General Orvil Anderson. Locked up and declared “Top Secret”, it did not see the light of day for more than 30 years.

McGovern would be charged with watching over it. Fearful that his film might get "buried," McGovern stayed on at the Pentagon as an aide to Gen. Anderson, who was fascinated by the footage and had no qualms about showing it to the American people. "He was that kind of man, he didn't give a damn what people thought," McGovern told me. "He just wanted the story told." Once they eyeballed the footage, however, most of the top brass didn't want it widely shown and the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was also opposed, according to McGovern. It did, however, commission four training films.

In a March 3, 1947 memo, Francis E. Rundell, a major in the Air Corps, explained that the film would be classified "secret." Particularly sensitive was the “footage taken at Hiroshima and Nagasaki”. After the training films were completed, the status would be raised to "Top Secret" pending final classification by the AEC. The color footage was shipped to the Wright-Patterson base in Ohio. After cataloging it, McGovern placed it in a vault in the top secret area. "Dan McGovern stayed with the film all the time," Sussan later told me. "He told me they could not release the film [because] what it showed was too horrible."

McGovern later explained it this way to me: The U.S. officials “wanted it buried…They were fearful because of the horror it contained. …because it showed effects on men, women and children…They didn’t want that material out because they were sorry for their sins—and because they were working on new nuclear weapons.”

The Japanese Footage Emerges

At the same time, McGovern was looking after the Japanese footage. Fearful that it might get lost forever in the military/government bureaucracy, he secretly made a 16 mm print and deposited it in the U.S. Air Force Central Film Depository at Wright-Patterson. There it remained out of sight, and generally out of mind. On Sept. 12, 1967, the Air Force transferred the Japanese footage to the National Archives Audio Visual Branch in Washington, with the film "not to be released without approval of DOD (Department of Defense)."

Then, one morning in the summer of 1968, Erik Barnouw, author of landmark histories of film and broadcasting, opened his mail to discover a clipping from a Tokyo newspaper sent by a friend. It indicated that the U.S. had finally shipped to Japan a copy of black and white newsreel footage shot in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese had negotiated with the State Department for its return. From the Pentagon, Barnouw learned that the original nitrate film had been quietly turned over to the National Archives and went to take a look. Soon Barnouw realized that, despite its marginal film quality, "enough of the footage was unforgettable in its implications, and historic in its importance, to warrant duplicating all of it," he later wrote.

Attempting to create a subtle, quiet, even poetic, black and white film, he and his associates cut it from 160 to 16 minutes, with a montage of human effects clustered near the end for impact. Barnouw arranged a screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and invited the press. A throng turned out and sat in respectful silence at its finish. "Hiroshima-Nagasaki 1945" proved to be a sketchy but quite moving document of the aftermath of the bombing, captured in grainy but often startling black and white images: shadows of objects or people burned into walls, ruins of schools, miles of razed landscape viewed from the roof of a building.

A clip from Hiroshima-Nagasaki 1945 archival footage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki victims

In the weeks ahead, however, none of the (then) three TV networks expressed interest in airing it. "Only NBC thought it might use the film," Barnouw later wrote, "if it could find a 'news hook.' We dared not speculate what kind of event this might call for." But then an article appeared in *Parade* magazine, and an editorial in the *Boston Globe* blasted the networks, saying that everyone in the country should see this film: "Television has brought the sight of war into America's sitting rooms from Vietnam. Surely it can find 16 minutes of prime time to show Americans what the first A-bombs, puny by today's weapons, did to people and property 25 years ago." This at last pushed public television into the void. What was then called National Educational Television (NET) agreed to show the documentary on August 3, 1970, to coincide with the 25th anniversary of dropping the bomb.

"I feel that classifying all of this filmed material was a misuse of the secrecy system since none of it had any military or national security aspect at all," Barnouw told me. "The reason must have been -- that if the public had seen it and Congressmen had seen it -- it would have been much harder to appropriate money for more bombs."

The American Footage Comes Out

In 1979, Japanese antinuclear activists, led by a Tokyo teacher named Iwakura Tsutomu (who I later interviewed), managed to track down hundreds of pictures of nuclear devastation in archives and private collections and published them in a popular book. In 1979 they mounted an exhibit at the United Nations in New York. There, by chance, Iwakura met Sussan, who told him about the U.S. military footage. Iwakura visited the National Archives where he found eighty reels of film, labeled #342 USA. About one-fifth of the footage covered the atomic cities. According to a shot list, reel #11010 included, for example: "School, deaf and dumb, blast effect; damaged Commercial school; demolished School, engineering; demolished.School; Shirayama elementary, demolished; blast effect Tenements, demolished."

The film had been quietly declassified a few years earlier, but no one in the outside world knew it. Eventually 200,000 Japanese citizens contributed half a million dollars enabling Iwakura to buy a copy of the film. He then traveled around Japan filming survivors who had posed for Sussan and McGovern in 1946. Iwakura quickly completed a documentary called *Prophecy* and in late spring 1982 arranged for a New York premiere. That fall a small part of the McGovern/Sussan footage turned up for the first time in an American film, one of the sensations of the New York Film Festival, called *Dark Circle*.

At the New York premiere at The Japan Society, which I attended, Herbert Sussan spoke. “I have waited so long for this moment,” he said softly. “For years, all of my own efforts to obtain this unique footage to show the American people have been frustrated. This film has been locked in vaults, declared classified and held away from the public. I am pleased that the world will finally see a small bit of what the true reality of the nuclear age really is.”

Sussan recalled entering Nagasaki from the north. The train the film crew was riding bisected miles of utter ruin. “On the hills to the right we saw the remains of an elementary school and a technical school, each pushed down by the detonation of the blast.” Then they passed a medical college and the remains of the largest Catholic cathedral in the Far East (the bomb had killed many of the parishioners). “Nothing and no one had prepared me for the devastation I met there,” he said. “I have never lost my memories of those days.” He was in the rare position of being able to do something about it, however. “I felt that if we did not capture this horror on film, no one would ever really understand the dimensions of what had happened. At that time most people back home had not seen anything but black and white pictures of blasted buildings or a mushroom cloud.”

His crew documented the physical effects, including the ghostly shadows of vaporized objects, flowers and humans burned into walls. They filmed survivors at Red Cross and military hospitals, many of them badly injured or slowly expiring from radiation disease. Two young American doctors, nicknamed Dr. Kildare and Dr. Gillespie, had saved hundreds of lives with burn therapy and massive doses of antibiotics. One of their patients was a boy kept in a bath of

liquid penicillin, his entire back aflame, he was the worst burn case the Americans had seen. "I shuddered when the lights were turned on to film him," Sussan said. "None of us expected him to live, but the doctors persisted." Indeed, the boy, Taniguchi Sumiteru, somehow survived (I've interviewed him three times) -- and today remains one of the leading *hibakusha* political activists in Japan.

Then the crew moved on to Hiroshima. Again he filmed the unimaginable physical and human wreckage. When he returned to Tokyo, he told writer John Hersey about a group of friars who had a sanctuary near the city. One of them, Reverend Tanimoto Kiyoshi, became the central figure in Hersey's epic *New Yorker* piece, and classic book *Hiroshima*, a few months later. Sussan's footage would never see the light of day, however, instead labeled top-secret and shut away for decades.

The black and white footage shot by a Japanese crew and seized and suppressed by the US government, and the color footage by the American team together provide the most powerful evidence of the human consequences of the atomic bombs that in important ways define our era. Now, if imperfectly, it is possible to gain access to, and reflect on, the destructive potential of nuclear weapons for our time.

Video trailer for Mitchell's "Atomic Cover-Up" book, including some of the suppressed footage

Greg Mitchell is the author of twelve books including several on nuclear weapons and nuclear war. The former editor of Editor and Publisher*, he currently blogs for The Nation on the media and politics, and, since April 2010, on WikiLeaks. From 2002 to 2009 he was the editor of* Editor & Publisher *(E&P), which covers the news and newspaper industry. His recent books include* Atomic Cover-Up: Two U.S. Soldiers, Hiroshim & Nagasaki, and the Greatest Movie Never Made *and* The Age of Wikileaks: From Collateral Murder to Cablegate (and Beyond)*. With Robert J. Lifton, he wrote* Hiroshima in America*.His blog, and information about ordering the paperback of* Atomic Coverup *is here.*

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