

## **HORROR OF HIROSHIMA REMEMBERED**

**The day the world suddenly stopped for a million people**

**by Adrian Waller**

**staff writer**

I was 9 years old when the atomic bomb exploded above Hiroshima at 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945. Akihiro Takahashi was just approaching his 14th birthday. I first heard about the attack when my mother ran into the garden of our house in Kent, England, crying, "Something terrible has happened to the Japanese!" Takahashi knew about it because when the explosion occurred, he and 60 schoolmates were sitting on benches in the yard at Hiroshima Junior Middle School No. 1, waiting to greet their teachers.

A few minutes earlier, Takahashi and one of his friends actually spotted the U.S. Air Force B-29 (nickname: Enola Gay) from which the bomb was dropped. The boys had no time to share their reactions of sighting the plane. In the second or two it took them to realize exactly what they were seeing against the blue sky, the world stopped.

"At least," says Takahashi, "that's the way it seemed."

First, darkness descended. Then the explosion, 1,914 feet above the city center, was followed by an implosion so intense that it sucked out Takahashi's breath, and his finger nails. Then, a fraction of a second later, blinding white heat that for a moment reached between 5,432 and 7,232 degrees Fahrenheit, seared off his ears and turned his flesh to liquid.

"What would you expect?" he recalls. "My school was only four-fifths of a mile from the hypocenter."

Had Takahashi been a few blocks closer, he would have been reduced to ashes or even vaporized, next to the melted roofs, tiles and stones lining the banks of the city's seven rivers.

So vast was the devastation that killed an estimated 140,000 people--half of them instantly--that I decided one day I would see Hiroshima for myself. I would hear what happened from the survivors themselves, and learn how they have resiliently rebuilt both a razed city and their broken lives.

Akihiro Takahashi had a dream, too.

By showing his wounds, sharing his memories and using his own words to relive them, Takahashi would tell us all how war is most cruel to those who never wanted it...

Etsuko Kanemitsu, a resilient, birdlike woman of 60 who spent much of her teens recovering from intense burns, remembered how hard it was as a victim to find work. "Too many people thought that all those who lived through the explosion were in some way permanently contaminated with nuclear radiation," she says. "Most firms refused to employ us because they thought we would be weak people who would constantly be asking for time off. Some were sure we would create other problems for them--by dying on the job."

Kanemitsu never did find a job.

"I eventually gave up," she says. But Kanemitsu did this in a remarkably philosophical way. "My mother suggested that I stay at home and sew kimono," she recalls. "That way, I'd at least be skilled at something..."

At the first flash of light, Takahashi, temporarily blinded, fell unconscious and estimates that he did not come to for about 10 minutes. When he did, Takahashi recalls that he had been thrown about 50 feet, his school had been reduced to rubble, the air had filled with black smoke and that the place where he lay was strewn with the charred and broken bodies of his schoolmates. The remains of many, however, were never found.

Whenever there was an air raid, Takahashi had been told to head for the nearest river, which would provide natural protection against fire. This occasion was no exception. "When I found the strength to stand up," he says, "I remembered that instruction." Soon he was running to the Tenma River. On the way he saw a procession of people whose skin had been liquefied just like his own, and was peeling from their arms and hands. One such victim was a boy about his own age who was lying helpless on the charred ground crying for his mother.

"Get up!" Takahashi cried, tugging furiously at him. "We've got to get to the river. You've got to come with me--now!" The boy did, and was later treated and saved. It is widely considered that by giving him the inspiration to move away from the swirling smoke and suffocating heat, Takahashi saved his life.

It took Takahashi many years to recover from his injuries. His bent hand, the nerve pain from his burns and the bouts of chronic hepatitis he began to suffer shortly after the explosion have remained with him since the explosion. Nonetheless, Takahashi eventually found work as a clerk in the city records department and married. The severe effects of radiation, he believes, probably prevented him from being able to father children.

Understandably, for most of his life Takahashi has been bitter, especially when he remembers that only 11 of his 60 friends who were gathered in the school yard that day survived. "I always believed," he says, "that the war could have ended without the use of a bomb. That bomb, remember, only killed and maimed innocent civilians."

Over many years, Takahashi learned how to use his right hand again and to refocus his daily life by bravely circumventing his ailments. He also began to feel differently about the accident. In 1979, Takahashi became the director of the city's Peace Memorial Museum and in 1983, he was appointed to direct the enterprise division of the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation, one of several groups that aids victims of the disaster and keeps the memory of it alive in the minds of people across the globe...

He also remembers having met many Americans he liked because they were people of "good conscience."

"We Japanese have made an effort to overcome the hatred for Americans that was stirred by the A-bomb," he says, "and I would like to think that Americans have overcome what hatred they may have had for us." Later, Takahashi conceded in an interview with a news agency, "In the past, Japan too has committed the sin of war. It is an extremely painful regret for me that Japan caused such great suffering and deep pain in Asia." Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu and Hiroshima's Mayor Takashi Hiraoka have apologized for Japan's wartime aggression that began with Pearl Harbor and ended with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki...

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### Reading Questions:

1. What happened to Takahashi when the bomb was dropped?
2. Etsuko Kanemitsu talks about the discrimination some victims of the bomb experienced in the years after the bomb. What was her experience?
3. What medical problems did Takahashi, like many other survivors, experience both immediately after and in the long term as a result of the bomb?