Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation
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Targeting Civilians

As the government prepared for an invasion of the main islands of Kyushu and Honshu, citizens of Oita City had every reason to fear a terrible death, for American tactics shifted and the ability of the Japanese Navy and Army to hold off the air attacks was nearly exhausted by the end of the battle for Okinawa. The Americans were now explicitly targeting civilians. The diary entry of B-29 airman Staff Sergeant Jim Swalwell makes clear the intention of his crew. “Monday, July 16, 1945. Our target tonight is the city of Oita, on the coast of Kyushu. We have bombed airfields there a couple of times and tonight we are going to try to eliminate the city. This is the first fire raid on any city in Kyushu. We’re carrying 180 of the little 100 pound fire bombs. There isn’t supposed to be very much opposition.” The people were, quite literally, sitting targets.

What transpired on the ground that day in Oita City shows just how successful the mission was, and how the American plan to “eliminate the city” was viewed more personally by Oita residents as a plan to eliminate the people by burning them to death.

Kenji Hanamoto recounts his experience in his memoir “As a Young Boy”:

That night, an incendiary bomb fell through our ceiling, landing in the entrance and starting a fire. It was a monster of a device, approximately one meter long. The walls, tatami, and ceilings were on fire. Even after the fire was put out, the bomb would continue to burn and shake. It was a small yellow flame. I kept pouring water on the fire, but it simply would not go out. I started to go crazy and kept saying to myself, “What the hell is this thing!?"

Eventually, I dragged the device, as it sputtered fire, to a water tank and dumped it in the water. In an instant, the water started to boil as the device was still bright yellow. It must have taken a long time for me to do this and to get out of my house. By now, the entire city was on fire, and there was not a trace of life. I thought I had been left behind. The thought scared me to death. Without thinking, I ran toward Bishamon River. On

the way, there was this little boy, must have been four or five years old, just standing in the middle of the street, crying.

There was no time to ask what happened and where his parents were, I grabbed him by the arm and dragged him along with me. On both sides of the streets, houses were engulfed in flames and caved in one by one. Two-story homes crumbled like straw houses. The heat was so intense, that it burned my eyes. I couldn't breathe; my head started spinning; and I doubled over in pain.

To this day, no matter how hard I try, I can't recall when I let go of that little boy. I knew I had brought him, but where was he? Was I hallucinating? But I wasn't dreaming. No, it wasn't an illusion. I turned back and searched for that boy, but I never saw him again.

I ran another 30 or 40 meters and saw a hospital. Someone had left a bucket of water. I took a sip and dumped it over my head. I finally made it to the Bishamon River and breathed easier.

It's been 28 years since that day, and I am now a father of two. I have told my children of that horrible night and the child I found and lost. I still pray for his safety, and if he died, that he rest in peace. I pray for his family.2

Takaura Teruaki, a military school student from Kumamoto, was visiting Oita at the time of the July 16 raid. He recalls:

From far away, the enemy planes shook the sky. B-29s. Tonight, I thought, Oita might get destroyed. So I knew I had to get to our shelter quickly. Well, it was really just a shallow hole in the ground. You couldn't really say the shelter protected much. So we went into the pumpkin field where we covered ourselves with a camouflage net, hoping we looked like a part of the pumpkin field. The sounds emanating from the sky indicated that many planes were on their way. Then the bombings started. There was a mysterious shuffling sound that I had never heard before.

I found out later that a long ribbon was affixed to each six pound incendiary bomb, which guided it to its target. The ribbon whistled in the wind as it traveled down to the ground. The loud explosions of bombs hurt your chest, but the chorus of many ribbons shuffling in the air was different. It sent fear through your entire being. I was fourteen at the time, a third-year middle school student training for the military. But that didn't make it any less scary.

All of a sudden, I realized “Shit!! I forgot my hat at home!!!” I was in trouble! Another student had been kicked out of the army because his military uniform was burned in a fire. It was not a time to be afraid, and I had to go home and retrieve my hat. My mom grabbed me tightly to make me stay in the shelter, but I struggled out of her grip and ran home. I found my hat where I left it, but just as I was about to leave, our house began to shake. Stepping out, I saw that the entire sky was stained red with fire. The bombings intensified. I strapped my hat to my head, took a bucket, and tried to put out the fires, but soon abandoned my attempt. I went out toward Oote-dori. Just ahead, Tenjincho-dori was on fire, flames raging on both sides of streets. I saw the silhouettes of people trying to escape. It was like a crematory.3

Oita’s Heroic Nurse

Fire bombs enveloped Oita, trapping people in their homes and office buildings. The bombing lasted an hour and a half, and then the planes went south toward Saiki. One young woman’s heroic actions during this bombing became legendary, with her exploits and picture appearing in the local newspaper. Her name is Nobuko Eto, the nursing student introduced earlier who was assigned to warn everyone in the hospital when bombing was imminent. She recalls that day:

I was working on the first floor office of the National Hospital in Oita City center. By that time, many of the doctors were taken away to serve the military, leaving only nurses, nursing students, and a few doctors who didn’t qualify to enlist due to health reasons. When the air raid warning came, I took the megaphone and ran around the hospital to warn everyone. I felt that the B-29s were headed directly toward me. They flew very low and made a sound that reminded me of a train. An incendiary bomb came through the roof of the hospital. The fire jumped toward the main building; some of us ran back and forth carrying buckets of water from the well to pour over the fire; others lined up as a human chain passing buckets of water between the well and the building. We drenched ourselves with water to fight off the heat. All I could think of was, “What if this fire spreads to the ward where patients sleep!” I started tearing out

3 Quoted in Hoashi, pp. 80-81.
parts of the roof and cut the support beams of the hallway. Somehow, in the end, we were able to prevent the fire from spreading further. I went outside and saw only red and blue flames in every direction. The whole city was a sea of fire. Inside the hospital, both the old and new nursing houses had gone up in flames. Beyond the hospital, we could see absolutely nothing, except black smoke where buildings once stood. A few days after the bombing, the burnt skin on my face began to peel away. By this time, the hospital was crowded with injured people who had no home to return to. People had no food, and children had lost their parents. I did what I could, making miso soup from water I got from the ocean.

The local newspaper recounted Nobuko's heroics with the headlines, “The Nurse Who Would Have Died to Protect the Hospital” and ended the story with, “Protecting the hospital with her life, she and the others thought, ‘We won!’ ‘We won together,’ they cried, looking around at what was left of the hospital. The evacuated patients heard of their efforts and thanked them endlessly when they were allowed to come back to the hospital.”

The massive bombing of July 16 left the people of Oita shattered and clinging to the barest essentials, as recounted by an Oita historian:

According to the prefecture reports, 2,488 houses were burned to the ground. 49 people died, 122 were severely injured, and 10,730 people lost their homes in this one single attack. The city center was burned to the ground in this unholy shower. The sun eventually rose after the long and painful night. Some buildings were still intact. Some buildings still stood on the surrounding hills, but everywhere you looked, there was devastation. What’s surprising is the small number of people killed and injured. This was because many people had already abandoned their homes to live in the countryside and because many people evacuated to higher ground. The mayor’s office issued rations of two meals of dry noodles (dried and hardened udon and somen) and a rice ball to each person. The injured and sick were taken to local schools for treatment and an emergency control room was established at the Ken Kyoiku Center. By noon the next day water was running again and by nightfall electricity came back on. People who lost their homes built shelters where their houses once stood. They lined up for their rations still reliving the hellish nightmare, but grateful and happy they survived.4

4 Hoashi, p. 82.
Too Many Bombs, Too few Targets

On July 25 the Americans raided Oita City yet again with 47 B-29s and several Grumman fighters. But bombing did not stop at Oita City. On that day, only three weeks before the end of the war, Hoeshima, a small island off the Bungo coastline, was attacked as the planes left their primary target. Orders allowed for discretionary targeting, and one pilot flew toward the island to unload his remaining bombs. He found an elementary school.

Hoeshima Elementary School housed 960 students. Around 9 o’clock in the morning, the students and teachers heard the sound of planes approaching. Soon, they could see the silver B-29s heading north. Thinking that an elementary school of all places would be safe, classes continued as usual. Just when all thought the planes were gone, someone shouted, “It’s a raid!!” All at once, an explosion ripped the ground under the children. A Grumman dropped four bombs and one hit directly on the school grounds. This is a perfect example of how the American’s conducted their genocide. When the raid was over, 124 students had died along with two teachers and one supervisor, and 69 children and six teachers were injured.5

After the attack in Oita City on July 16, bombers struck again on July 17 and 29, and August 9, 10, and 11. Damage from these attacks included multiple deaths, destroyed homes, and a number of shrines turned to rubble. August 11, just four days before the end of the war, proved to be the very last attack on Oita. Through the middle of August, the civilians of Oita had suffered much. Data compiled from between the first bombings in Oita Prefecture on March 18 through the last bombing on August 11 shows the following numbers:

Planes Attacking Oita Prefecture: 3,000
Number of Attacks: 85
Number of Traditional Bombs: 1,650
Number of Incendiary Bombs: 9,500
Number Dead: 485
Number Injured: 718
Houses Destroyed: 6,5046

5 Ibid., pp. 83-84.
6 Hoashi, p. 85.
As the war reached its last days, American pilots roamed the skies, but began to cut back on the severity of their bombing and strafing. While children were killed and maimed during the July 25 raid, other children found themselves playthings for the pilots. Some can never forget their experiences with these American pilots looking down on them from only a few hundred feet above the ground. Eiji Ono and Sadayoshi Yutani, neither one yet old enough to enter elementary school at the time, remember clearly their childhood encounters with the Grummans. Eiji Ono of Saiki recalls:

In the days just before the war ended, the Grummans would come in unopposed, so the pilots could shoot up whatever they wanted. Before people had been killed, but now, near my home they only shot up the roads, forests, and farmlands. But we never felt that they were targeting us, even when we were caught out in the open. They weren't trying to kill us, but just having fun. They also started dropping leaflets, written in Japanese, telling us that Japan could not win the war. I remember they read, “Surrender, surrender, and then you can be free.” “Peace will come soon.” We were told not to pick up the leaflets, but we did anyway, and I took them to show my mother and grandmother. My grandmother kept them, and then in school we told our teacher about the leaflets. The security police came to investigate and questioned my grandmother. She could have been in trouble, but she was known in the community for supporting the army and they just gave her a warning.

Toward the end of the war, Sadayoshi Yutani moved with his mother to her home village located in the middle of a mountain range. It was still not far enough away to escape American fighter planes.

My mother thought we’d be safe in the middle of the mountain, so I’d go out and play by myself. Sometimes I went out to the rice paddy, where there were lots of fish. I would catch some and take them home to my mother. One day, while I was fishing, an American fighter plane came and fired his machine gun at the forest, spraying the trees around me. I was terrified and started to run as fast as my little legs could carry me. Luckily, there was a shelter, and I collapsed into it. There was a man in the shelter hiding from the shooting, too. After the plane flew away, for the life of me I couldn't get up and walk. The man carried me on his back and took me home. Only much later when I thought back on that day, did I realize that, by this time of the war, the American pilots were just playing with us.