

Letters from Nagasaki tell of horrors of atomic bomb

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 10, 2012)

This article written by Carolyn Krause features additional information about Carl Bretz. She introduced him to us two weeks ago, cited his career and how he came to be an Oak Ridger. The source Carolyn used is his soon to be published oral history.

How, let's continue with Carolyn's input to *Historically Speaking* as she provides more insight into Carl Bretz using his letters home from one of the cities destroyed by an atomic bomb to end World War II. His personal observations made during his early visit to that destroyed city made a life-long impression on him, as seeing either Hiroshima or Nagasaki must impress all who visit these two cities forever tied historically to the atomic bomb.

Carolyn continues her series on Carl Bretz:

Carl Bretz, a resident of Oak Ridge and retired Unitarian Universalist minister, wrote daily letters home to his parents from Nagasaki, Japan, shortly after it was devastated in August 1945 by the last atomic bomb ever dropped on a populated area.

As part of the U.S. military occupation of Japan after World War II, the Army Construction Engineer Battalion, for which Bretz worked as a clerk typist, had commandeered a school on a rainy day.

Bretz's Sept. 28, 1945, letter notes that the young, diminutive Japanese students carried off desks, chairs and books from their school. He describes narrow, crooked, dirt roads that were almost impassable to U.S. military trucks that carried cots and equipment to the new battalion barracks and office.

About one-third of the windows in the school had been blown out, the indoor latrines smelled bad and the slate roof was partly destroyed, so rain fell into the school. Bretz and others put up nets to keep out malarial mosquitos.

"The Japs are very friendly, especially the children; however, they were scared at first," he wrote. "When the soldiers landed Sunday, many of the people fled to the hills to join other timid souls who had fled when the atomic bomb was dropped. We saw large groups returning yesterday and more today; they expected us to kill them, I guess.

"About the bombing – They tell me that the whole business district of the city was leveled...the stench is terrible, the buzzards are there in great flocks, feeding on the carrion. They are still uncovering bodies.

"I did see, however, on our way in, that every installation of any value was either burned or blasted or wrecked completely...every large building was gutted or demolished...there were plenty of the 'patched contraptions' they call houses, hit too. But that goes in the horrors of war – perhaps both our nations have seen enough of it now that we can live in peace after this."

Sept. 29, 1945: "The natives really live in an awful way around here. Their houses are shacks mostly, but usually have tile roofs; they cultivate every available foot...the most common plants are sweet potatoes, pumpkins, and eggplant...the women carry enormous loads on their backs up and down these hills.

"I saw my first Jap horse today and as usual they were leading it, instead of driving it or riding it. It was a good-looking animal, but didn't have a load."

Oct. 6, 1945: "Today has been a day I won't forget for the rest of my life. I had my first pass and my first visit to Nagasaki proper. I didn't see anything beautiful or pleasant on the whole trip...I saw more destruction than I ever thought possible. I started walking through the area where the

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damage was getting heavy...nearly every building of any size has windows, roof, or something else damaged...by heavy, I mean gutted walls standing, black and ugly...

"One of the fellows I knew...stopped in his truck and offered to chauffeur me around...he told me he had been 7 miles farther down the road and the destruction was just as complete there...he showed me where C Company built the bridge, where A Company is building a landing strip for B29s...Since the bomb exploded before it hit the ground, it didn't leave a crater, and you can only tell about where it landed [based on where concrete was blown off buildings with steel frames and which ways the mangled steel fell]...Standing in the middle of that is something like being in the middle of a plowed field with here and there a few corn stalks sticking up in crazy angles.

"As you can imagine the loss of life must have been terrible. And you can really see that there is no love for us among those people there in town. I can't help but feel that there is a very intense but covered-up hatred for us. The people out here in the so-called country are much friendlier.

"The odors are terrible too – all the ordinary smells of a fishing town, plus the bodies buried in the debris [that] haven't been taken care of...I was glad to get back to the top of our peaceful hill, away from all the ruin of a devastated city. This is something you must see to believe, and get the full horror out of it...

"Somehow I can't help feel that perhaps it was a mistake to even develop such a thing of destruction. Perhaps it can repay some of this ruin, by being used in some humane way. We must do everything in our power to see that a thing like that never happens again."

Fortunately, neither an atomic bomb or hydrogen bomb has been dropped on a populated area since the 1945 detonations. Nine countries, however, possess nuclear weapons and two are seeking to have them.

The technology that made nuclear weapons possible has been adapted for use in life-saving nuclear medicine (disease diagnosis and treatment) and nuclear power, which provides 20% of the electricity in the U.S. That's definitely something to write home about.

Thanks to Carolyn for the research and details brought forth in her review of Carl Bretz's oral history. She is working on other similar articles from oral histories and other sources. I appreciate her contributions to *Historically Speaking* and hope you do as well.

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Carl Bretz is shown with artifacts of World War II that he has donated to the American Museum of Science and Energy