On the Wings of Peace

NORTH BETHESDA MIDDLE SCHOOL

CLARION BOOKS • New York
World War II in the Pacific
by Greg Mitchell

Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima: the two names will be linked forever, signifying the beginning of World War II in the Pacific and its end. Many people today know little of the war in the Pacific beyond those two names. But that conflict did not actually begin with Pearl Harbor and, many believe, it did not require dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima for it to end.

The Pacific war had its roots in the 1920s, when militarists gained influence in Japan. The war did not begin, however, until September 18, 1931, when a Japanese general moved his army into Manchuria and installed a puppet leader. The League of Nations (the predecessor of the United Nations) condemned the action. Soon the militarists had assassinated the Japanese premier and seized power. They made plans to invade China, as a first step in gaining control of all East Asia and the Western Pacific—from India to the Philippines.

Japan was motivated by several factors. Colonial powers—particularly England, France, and the Netherlands—had long dominated most of the countries in the region. Now Japan announced its determination to free these colonies and form what it called the Greater Japanese East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. What the Japanese militarists were most interested in, however, was gaining access to badly needed oil and raw materials in the area.

With Manchuria and Korea already under its command, Japan inaugurated war with China in July 1937. In this campaign, Japan bombed Chinese cities and killed perhaps as many as 200,000 civilians in what became known as the Rape of Nanking.

The United States responded with strict trade sanctions against Japan. In July 1941, President Roosevelt issued an executive order freezing all Japanese financial assets, and England followed suit. Among other things, these moves would cut off Japan’s source of imports such as rubber, scrap iron, and fuel oil.

Japan suffered severely under the embargo, but refused to relinquish its con-
quests. Instead, it prepared for wider war. Those plans reached a climax on December 7, 1941, with the surprise aerial attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, which killed more than two thousand Americans and devastated the Pacific fleet.

President Roosevelt, calling it a “day that shall live in infamy,” asked Congress to declare war on Japan (and, a few days later, on Japan’s allies, Germany and Italy). Now the Pacific War, as Americans would come to know it, had begun.

At first the Japanese advanced quickly, overrunning opponents throughout East Asia and the Pacific islands. By late 1942, however, the United States had rebounded from Pearl Harbor. It threw much of its military and industrial might at the Japanese. One American-led triumph followed another: Midway, the Philippines, Iwo Jima, Okinawa.

By the summer of 1945, Japan was surrounded and near collapse. Its supplies of oil and raw materials were virtually halted by a submarine blockade. Its air defenses seemed powerless to prevent U.S. bombers from setting most of its cities aflame. On a single night, firebombings destroyed one-quarter of Tokyo, killing as many as 100,000 civilians.

It was at this point that the atomic bomb came into play.

American (along with British) scientists in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and several other sites had secretly attempted to build an atomic bomb for years. Originally, the scientists were told that they were in a race with Germany to create the weapon that could win the war. But as the date approached for testing the device—the summer of 1945—Germany surrendered. This left only Japan (which had never seriously attempted to build the bomb) yet to be defeated.

U.S. planners selected several Japanese cities as likely targets. Although each had some military value to the enemy, the prime purpose of the attack was to display the power of the bomb and “shock” the Japanese into surrender. Therefore, the bomb would be dropped over the center of a city which had not been damaged by earlier bombings, for maximum effect. The planners knew this would likely kill thousands of civilians.

Franklin Roosevelt died in April 1945. This left Harry S. Truman with the
responsibility to use—or decline to use—what the new President called “the most terrible thing ever discovered.”

The United States, meanwhile, made plans for a massive land invasion of Japan to begin on November 1, 1945—if the war was not over by then. In mid-July, however, the atomic bomb was tested successfully in New Mexico. Several days later, the Allies warned the Japanese that they faced certain ruin if they did not surrender immediately and “unconditionally.” However, they did not reveal the existence of the top-secret atomic bomb. The Japanese rejected the ultimatum.

Several days later, on August 6, 1945, an American B-29 bomber, piloted by Paul Tibbets, dropped a single atomic weapon (made with uranium) over Hiroshima, a city of 345,000. It destroyed 60 percent of the city and killed outright at least 100,000 of its residents.

Among the dead were at least a dozen American prisoners of war and several hundred Japanese-Americans who had been visiting the city at the outbreak of war in 1941 (and then were trapped there). The bomb also killed more than ten thousand Koreans who had been forced to work in Japan.

Japanese leaders met to discuss how to respond. There was another shocking development: the Soviet Union, a longtime and hated enemy, had finally declared war on Japan and was marching into Manchuria. Many of the Japanese leaders felt that was just as frightening as the atomic bomb.

While the militarists and the peace faction in the Japanese government debated whether to surrender, another U.S. plane dropped a second atomic bomb (this one made with plutonium) over Nagasaki. As expected, it exploded with even greater force than the Hiroshima bomb, but somewhat off target. The death toll was smaller, in the range of 75,000. As in Hiroshima, thousands more would die in the days and months ahead from effects of radiation disease.

There was no “decision,” as such, by President Truman to use the second bomb. Before Hiroshima, he had simply ordered that the first two bombs be used as quickly as possible.

Emperor Hirohito threw his support to the peace faction, and on August 14, 1945, announced that Japan would surrender. Truman accepted and called the
surrender "unconditional." But actually the United States did allow one major concession. The Emperor would not be jailed or tried as a war criminal (as most Americans demanded). Instead, he would remain on his throne. This was meant to unify the Japanese and allow the United States to demilitarize the country more completely.

Japan formally surrendered in September on board the U.S.S. Missouri in Tokyo Bay. The war was over, but the debate over the atomic bombings had just begun.

From the beginning, American officials described the use of the atomic bomb against Japan as inevitable. The bomb, in this view, was the only thing that could make the Japanese surrender and prevent the dreaded invasion.

At first, President Truman downplayed the death of Japanese civilians. He referred to Hiroshima as a "military base," and Nagasaki as a center of war industries. Then, when the civilian death toll could not be denied, he justified the bombing on moral grounds by suggesting that up to a million Americans—and many more Japanese—would have perished in an invasion. If this were true, the atomic bombs had saved more lives than they took. Others pointed out that the atomic bombings killed only a few more civilians than the firebombing of Tokyo. It was war that was bad, not the weapons of war.

Some writers and religious leaders condemned the atomic attacks on moral grounds. But, understandably, most Americans, overjoyed at the end of a long and bloody war, accepted them as necessary to produce that victory.

What they did not know—and what many today still do not know—was that by August 1945 victory was certain, even without use of the bomb, and President Truman knew it. The planned invasion almost certainly would not have been necessary to end the war.

This view, surprisingly, was held by many (perhaps most) of America's top military leaders. Years later, General Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote, referring to the atomic attacks on Japan: "It wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing." He explained that "Japan was already defeated" and "was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of 'face.'"

Indeed, we now know, with the release of secret U.S. documents, that the
Japanese were exploring surrender in the weeks before Hiroshima. In his private diary, Truman even referred on July 18, 1945, to a “telegram from the emperor asking for peace.”

No one will ever know for certain how serious the Japanese were and whether surrender could have been quickly achieved—because the United States chose to use the bomb rather than pursue negotiations.

It is, however, known that many American leaders believed that the only point Japan might have insisted on in such talks was the survival of their Emperor and the imperial throne. The United States rejected this idea because it meant that such a surrender would not be “unconditional.” Yet, after using the bomb, the United States accepted this very condition.

Adding to the likelihood of a rapid surrender was the Soviet Union's attack on the Japanese two days after Hiroshima. Most Americans believed the Soviets were merely trying to “get in on the spoils.” In fact, the United States had long urged the Russians to join the conflict. The Soviet entry had always been scheduled for August 1945.

President Truman recognized the significance of the Russian entry in advance. He wrote in his diary on July 17, 1945, that he expected the Soviet entry alone (quite apart from the bomb) to finish off the Japanese. This has led many scholars to suggest that one reason the United States was in such a hurry to use the bomb was because it wanted to hasten the end of the war before the Soviets could claim much Japanese territory.

Surely, critics of the bombing argue, the horror of using the bomb outweighed the risk of seeking a negotiated surrender. When Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed, the planned U.S. invasion of Japan was still nearly three months off.

Another view holds that, all other arguments aside, it was simply inhumane to use such a weapon against innocent civilians. Admiral William Leahy, top military adviser to President Truman in 1945, called the atomic bomb a “barbarous weapon”. … a poisonous thing. … My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages.”

Fifty years after the atomic bombings, controversy continues to swirl around
the subject. Much new information about the decision to use the bomb has emerged. Yet many Americans continue to feel that the bombings saved many more lives than they destroyed, and so were justified.

Therefore, the words of Admiral Leahy have as much relevance today as they ever did. "I was not taught to make war in that fashion," he wrote, referring to the atomic attacks, "and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."

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