

Present at the Devastation
A new eyewitness to history, circa August 1945.

BY MELANIE KIRKPATRICK

The atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki on the morning of Aug. 9, 1945. On Sept. 6, George Weller of the Chicago Daily News, fresh from covering the formal surrender of Japan aboard the USS Missouri, arrived in the city. He got there by impersonating an American colonel and forcing his way onto Japanese trains. He was the first Westerner to enter Nagasaki after the bomb.

By heading for Nagasaki, Weller was following his nose for news but also defying a ban imposed by Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who had declared Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu, where Nagasaki is located, off-limits to journalists. Weller reasoned that the war was over, the U.S. military's authority over journalists was now moot, and he ought to be free to travel wherever his story took him.

But MacArthur had the last word. Weller's dispatches, filed through U.S. censors in Tokyo, never reached Chicago. Weller always assumed that they landed in the general's circular file. It wasn't until after the reporter's death, in 2002, that his son, Anthony, discovered the carbon copies of his father's never-published stories, buried in a box of files that had followed the peripatetic correspondent around the globe. The result is "First Into Nagasaki," compiled by the younger Mr. Weller and edited by him into a powerful set of historical documents. His intelligent concluding essay provides the framework for his father's raw copy.

The most striking aspect of the Weller dispatches is their immediacy. "Walk in Nagasaki's streets and you walk in ruins" is how his first report begins, as he describes the sights and smells of the devastated city, where pyres are still burning with the remains of humans killed in the attack. Yet "Nagasaki cannot be described as a city of the dead. . . . Though the smashed streets are as barren of production or commerce as Pompeii's, yet a living stream of humanity pours along them, looking with alert, shoe-button eyes for today's main chance."

It is a month after the bomb, and Weller, hearing rumors about what we now know to be radiation sickness, heads to two local hospitals to see what he can find out. He interviews doctors perplexed by how to treat "Disease X," which is killing people who appeared to have survived the blast unhurt. He reports the conditions of the patients he sees there in a spare, descriptive style. "Men, women and children with no outward marks of injury are dying daily in hospitals," he writes on Sept. 8, "some after having walked around for three or four weeks thinking they have escaped. . . . The doctors [say] . . . the answer to the malady is beyond them. Their patients, though their skins are whole, are simply passing away under their eyes."

The aftereffects of the atomic bomb aren't the only story that Weller finds in Nagasaki. After a few days in the city, he heads to the nearby prisoner-of-war camps, where he has what can only be called the incredible experience of informing his fellow Americans, who did not know the war had ended, of the two atomic bombs, the Japanese surrender and the impending arrival of American occupation troops.

He writes a series of harrowing reports based on interviews with hundreds of American, British, Dutch and Australian soldiers interned there under appalling conditions. The younger Mr. Weller calls historians' lack of attention to the Japanese POW camps "one of the great omissions in World War II memory." After reading his father's shocking dispatches, one finds it hard not to agree. A third of Allied prisoners died in Japan's POW camps, the younger Mr. Weller says, compared with 4% in Germany's.

George Weller also writes about the "Death Cruise," one of the 200 or so "hellship voyages" that transported POWs from Southeast Asia to Japan between 1942 and 1945. Weller pieced together the lengthy account included here from stories told to him by the POWs he interviewed in Kyushu. A sanitized version was published in the Chicago Daily News, minus horrific details regarding Japanese brutalities and the cannibalism and vampirism that some prisoners resorted to in order to survive. Anthony Weller reports that of the roughly 50,000 prisoners who traveled by hellship during the war, some 21,000 died.

"First Into Nagasaki" is no "Hiroshima," John Hersey's famous 1946 account of atomic-bomb survivors that has been taken up by antinuclear activists. Weller doesn't flinch from describing the suffering of the Japanese victims of the bomb, but it is clear where his sympathies lie. In a 1967 essay for an anthology of reporters' memoirs, he relates his experiences in Nagasaki. "I felt pity," he writes, "but no remorse. The Japanese military had cured me of that."