43 A Little Boy

The face of Nagasaki, Japan, 24 hours after the bomb drops. This little boy is holding his emergency ration—a ball of boiled rice.

Almost no structures could withstand the two atomic bombs dropped on Japanese cities, except the shells of a few western-style buildings (made of concrete and brick). But in Nagasaki, this *torii,* the wooden gateway to a Shinto shrine, somehow survived both the blast and the firestorm that followed it.

The U.S.S. ***Indianapolis*** **brings key components of Little Boy to Tinian. Three days later, the ship is torpedoed and sunk in the Indian Ocean.**

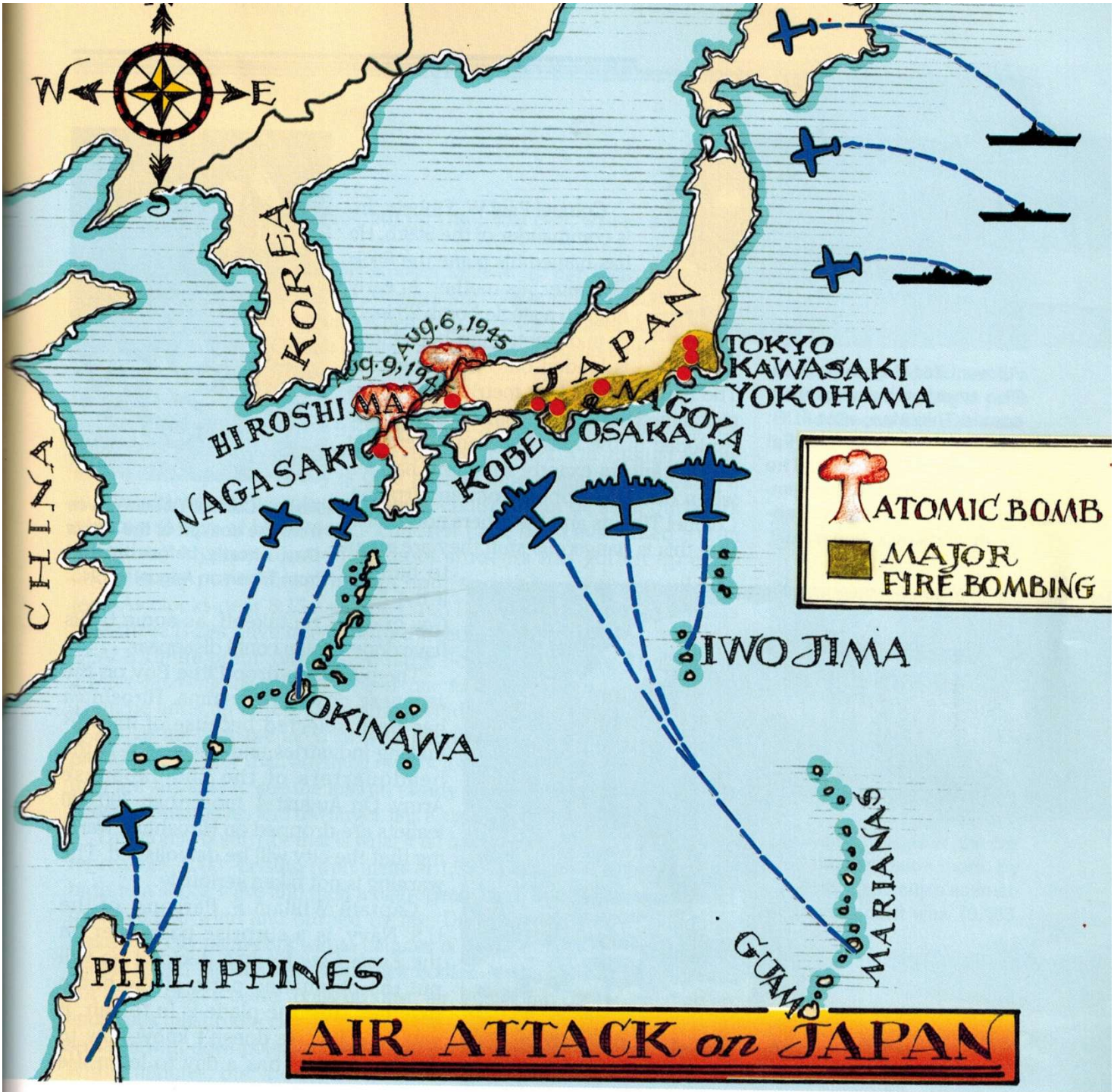
The men of the 509th Composite Group of the 313th Wing of the 21st Bombing Command of the 20th Air Force have been carefully chosen from a group of ace pilots. All have volunteered for a special mission. No one tells them what the mission will be. But whatever it is, they know they will be flying B-29s, the big workhorse bombers that are known as superfortresses.

Right away, there is something strange about the training they get at an airfield in Utah. Instead of flying planes loaded with huge bombs, they train with a single bomb of moderate size. And they are trained to worry about storms, especially electrical storms. Then, when they are sent to the Pacific, to the island of Tinian in the Marianas group of islands, they just sit around. It is frustrating. From Tinian it is an easy flight to Japan. The other airmen on the island are flying B-29s and dropping big bomb loads on Japan's cities. The 509th is sent on training flights—over and over again. Sometimes they are allowed to drop one bomb. It isn't long before the other pilots on Tinian begin making fun of the 509th. Someone even writes a poem about them. Its last lines are:

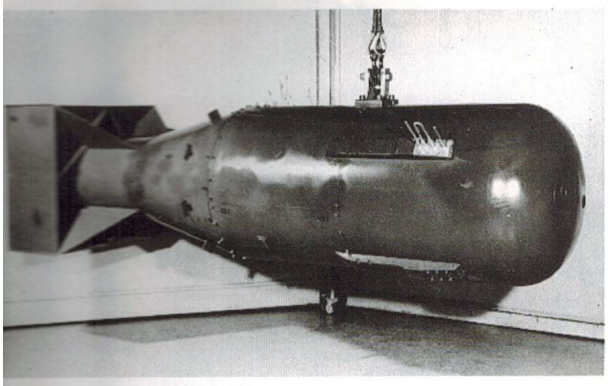
Take it from one who knows the score,
The 509th is winning the war.

That is cruel. Everyone knows the 509th isn't winning the war; it isn't doing anything.

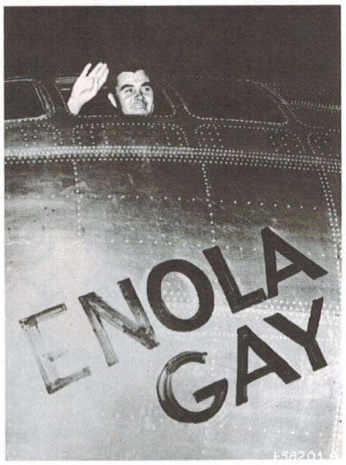
Meanwhile, in Washington, President Truman has come to a decision. He has called on two teams of experts: a team of scientists and a team of civilians and soldiers. They are to help him decide about



the new superweapon. Will it be used? Can anything be used in its place? Both teams agree: the weapon should be used. They believe it will bring the war to an end. Without it, the war could continue for 10 or more years. Military chiefs, who don't know about the secret weapon, are pressing Truman to let them invade Japan. If that happens, America can expect a million casualties; Japan might have 10 times that number.

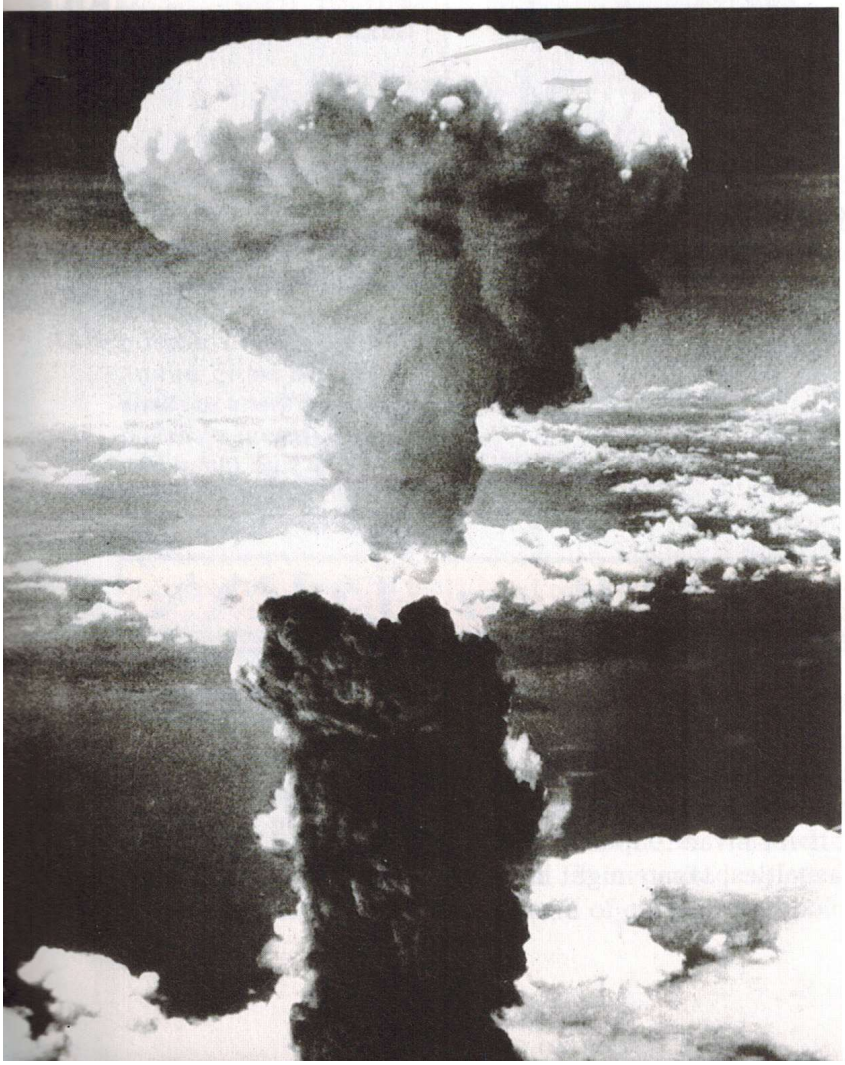


Above: **Little Boy in person. The bomb was originally named Thin Man, after FDR; the Nagasaki bomb was Fat Man, after Churchill. The crew just called it "the gimmick."** ***Below:*** **the mushroom cloud over Nagasaki.**



Above: **Colonel Tibbets waves from the cockpit of the *Enola Gay*, shortly before takeoff from Tinian on August 6, 1945.**

Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, Jr., is commander of the 509th. He has named his plane the *Enola Gay,* after his mother. In early August, a single bomb 28 inches in diameter and 10 feet long is loaded onto the *Enola Gay*. The bomb weighs four metric tons, and is nicknamed Little Boy. A similar device was exploded in the New Mexican desert, but no one knows exactly what will happen when one is dropped from an airplane. Colonel Tibbets and the others now realize that this is dangerous stuff they are about to handle. If the *Enola Gay* crashes on takeoff, as some B-29s have done, Tinian could disappear.



The plan is to drop Little Boy on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Hiroshima has been selected because of its war-making industries and because it is the headquarters of the 2nd Japanese Army. On August 4, more than 700,000 leaflets are dropped on Hiroshima warning that the city will be demolished. The warning is not taken seriously.

Captain William S. Parsons, of the U.S. Navy, is a surprise passenger on the *Enola Gay*. He has decided he will put the detonating parts of the bomb together after the plane is in the air. It will be safer. He doesn't know how to do that, but he has a day to learn. He learns.

At 1:45 A.M. on August 6, 1945, three B-29s take off for Japan. They will check on weather and on aircraft in the target area. The *Enola Gay* and two other B-29s follow an hour later. The night is perfect, with shining stars and a picture-book moon. As they fly,

Captain Robert A. Lewis, co-pilot on the *Enola Gay,* writes a letter to his mother and father.

I think everyone will feel relieved when we have left our bomb, he writes. Later, he adds: *It is 5:52 and we are only a few miles from Iwo Jima. We are beginning to climb to a new altitude.* When they are over Honshu, Japan's central island, he writes, *Captain Parsons has put the final touches on this assembly job. We are now loaded. The bomb is alive. It is a funny feeling knowing it is right in back of you.*

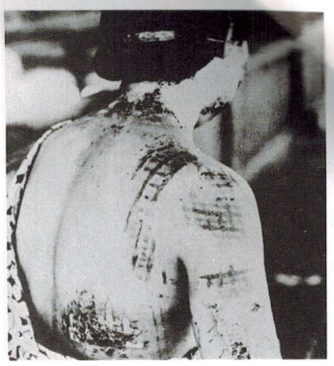
For most people in Hiroshima the workday begins at 8 A.M. By 8:10, factories and shops are beginning to buzz. On August 6, the entire 2nd Japanese Army is on a parade field doing calisthenics. It is a bright, sunny morning and some children can be seen outdoors playing. (Many of Hiroshima's children have been evacuated to the suburbs.) A group of middle-school students has gotten up early and already put in more than an hour's work on a fire-control project. As clocks near 8:15 A.M., the Chuo Broadcasting Station reports that three B-29s have been spotted heading for Hiroshima.

At 8:15 the bomb bay opens; Little Boy is on his way. *There will be a short intermission while we bomb our target,* Captain Lewis writes. Then he adds, in letters that scrawl wildly on the page, *My God!*

He has not been prepared for what happens. The size and fury of the explosion are greater than anything ever before created by humans. The airmen are still able to see the inferno clearly when they have put 270 miles between themselves and the target. It is a sight they will never forget.

The atomic bomb (for that is what it is) has created a fireball whose center reaches 4,000° Celsius. (Iron melts at 1,550° Celsius.) The fireball gives birth to a shock wave and then a high-speed wind. Buildings are smashed by wave and wind and burned by fire. Dust from destroyed buildings makes the city night-dark within minutes of the bombing. The wind tosses people about. Thermal rays burn their bodies. As the fireball fades, a vacuum at the blast's center pulls up dust, air, and bomb debris, creating an enormous mushroom cloud that rises into the atmosphere. Liquid rain alternates with downpours of sparks and fire. The rain is ink-black and oily. Within minutes, the 2nd Japanese Army no longer exists. Seventy-eight thousand people are dead. One hundred thousand are injured.

The atomic age has begun.



This woman's skin burned in a pattern corresponding to parts of the kimono she was wearing when the bomb went off.

Survivors in Nagasaki, the day after the explosion there. By December, the city's estimated death count was 70,000.

The destruction at Hiroshima. "It seemed impossible," said one eyewitness, "that such a scene could have been created by human means."