On the morning of August 6, 1945, the bombardier of the Enola Gay, one of three B-29 bombers on this mission, peered through his bombsight as the target came into view. At just the right moment, he released his cargo, then watched as a single ten-foot-long bomb began its descent to earth. It was a new weapon an atomic bomb.

Six miles below, the inhabitants of Hiroshima, Japan, a city of 350,000 people, were just beginning their day. Suddenly, 630 yards above the city, the bomb detonated: a small point of light, which flared into a huge fireball more brilliant than the sun. The explosion, equal to 13,500 tons of TNT, created a shock wave of compressed air that raced outward in all directions. All over the city, clocks stopped at the same moment: 8:16 A.M. Fifteen miles away, the B-29s were bounced around like toy airplanes.

On the ground directly beneath the fireball, the heat of the explosion melted granite and steel. Wooden buildings as far as two miles away burst into flames, which grew into a firestorm. The blast flung railroad cars off their tracks and demolished houses, schools, factories, and hospitals.

In the blink of an eye, tens of thousands of people were killed. For the survivors, the nightmare of Hiroshima had only begun.

Thousands of people were terribly burned by the bomb's heat flash, many dying that day or the next. One woman recalled, "All my clothes were torn away... My skin just peeled off and was hanging from my body. The heat was so intense that I jumped into a nearby river... all my friends were in the river."

People everywhere were strangely thirsty and cried out for water. They did not know that their thirst was the first sign of radiation sickness. In the days and weeks that followed, thousands of survivors lost their hair, grew weak, and died. Years afterward, many survivors still contracted fatal cases of leukemia (cancer of the white blood cells), known as the "atom bomb disease."

Sixteen hours after the bombing, a statement issued in the name of President Harry S. Truman informed the world that Hiroshima had been hit by an atomic bomb and warned Japan's leaders to surrender or face "a rain of ruin from the air, the likes of which has never been seen on this earth."

The Japanese government could not reach a decision. On August 8, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and sent its armies crashing through Japanese lines in northern China. Then on August 9, a
second deadly atomic bomb exploded over the Japanese port city of Nagasaki.

On August 15, Emperor Hirohito, anxious to end his people's suffering, made a historic radio broadcast announcing that Japan could not continue to fight. World War II had ended, and the era of nuclear weapons had begun.

PHOTO: On August 9, 1945, a mushroom cloud rises 60,000 feet into the air over the port city of Nagasaki after the second atomic bomb was dropped.

PHOTO: The explosions were so intense that even at a distance, the flash alone was absorbed into the dark patterns in people's clothing and caused extensive burns.

PHOTO: Battered religious figures stand among the rubble in Nagasaki in this photo taken nearly 2 months after the atomic blast.

PHOTOS (2): Below and left: On the other side of the world, the atmosphere was far different. Here a sailor in New York City's Times Square gives a woman a celebratory kiss in August 1945. Elsewhere in New York, elated crowds filled the streets.

PHOTO: One reason given for dropping the atomic bombs was to save U.S. servicemen from fighting in Japan. But the Hiroshima bomb directly killed between 70,000 and 80,000 people (and tens of thousands more as the years passed). Among the victims were 23 American fliers who were being held prisoners of war, as well as a large number of Japanese Americans who were living in Japan when the war broke out. At Nagasaki, the initial death toll was about 36,000 -to 45,000 people. Left: A coastguardsman stands by a fresh grove on a small atoll in the Pacific.

By Craig Gingold

EPILOGUE

The sudden ending of the war was a welcome relief to Americans, who feared the great loss of life that an invasion of Japan would have meant. Most Americans saw the atomic bomb as simply another, more powerful weapon and felt that its use was justified because of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

Since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, however, serious objections to the use of the atomic bomb have been raised. One argument is that the bombs were unnecessary because Japan was on the verge of collapse and would have surrendered in a matter of weeks, following the Soviet Union's entry into the war. Critics also point out that the weapon could have been demonstrated without destroying two heavily populated cities. The difficult choice fell on President Truman, who decided to use the brutal weapon to force an early end to the war instead of losing an estimated one million Americans in conventional war.

Questions about the atomic bomb have no easy answers. In Hiroshima's Peace Park, the inscription on the Atomic Bomb Memorial Monument reads simply, "Rest in peace, the mistake shall not be repeated."

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