

Reflections from Above: An American Pilot's Perspective on the Mission Which Dropped the Atomic Bomb on Nagasaki

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On August 9, 1995 – at precisely 11:02 a.m. – wailing sirens will resonate throughout the Urakami Valley until their cries break up in the distance and precipitate a moment of silence on the part of the people of Nagasaki. Those old enough to remember the death and destruction visited on the city fifty years ago by a single atomic bomb, will once again relate their tales of survival and mourn the loss of their friends and loved ones who perished that sultry August morning. Those too young to have witnessed the horror of the occasion will pause from their busy schedules and offer a collective silent prayer that the tragedy never be repeated.

For the residents of Nagasaki the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of an atomic bomb on the city is a simple, solemn occasion marked by testimony, mourning and prayer. For much of the rest of the world, however, the commemoration evokes a complicated series of memories. While August 6th and Hiroshima are associated with the beginning of the atomic age, and August 15th and VJ Day with the war's end, August 9th and Nagasaki fall schizophrenically in between. It is difficult for most people outside of Japan to conceptualize the atomic bombing of Nagasaki without envisioning overlapping images of the war's conclusion and the beginning of the nuclear age. For many, the term "Nagasaki" elicits the kind of mixed reaction that World War II commemorations are presently evoking around the world.

This is not an article that attempts to examine the larger political and moral issues surrounding the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, but rather one that explores the personal story of a young American who helped pilot the B-29 that delivered the bomb which killed tens of thousands in the city fifty years ago. Fred Olivi hopes that mankind will never again use atomic weapons, but he has also long ago come to terms with his role in the dropping of the atomic bomb. He has lived his life in relative anonymity, retiring nine years ago as Manager of Bridge Operations and Maintenance with the City of Chicago. While finally getting around to putting his thoughts down in a self-published book, Olivi has somehow managed to avoid the media – both American and Japanese. His thoughts on various aspects related to the bombing thus prove to be honest and unrehearsed.

On August 9, 1945 Lt. Fred Olivi, the 23-year-old Chicago-born son of Italian immigrants, flew over Nagasaki as third pilot in the aircraft Bockscar. At 11:02 local time, the plane dropped a 10,000 pound plutonium bomb known as the "Fat Man" over the city, killing more than 70,000 people in what, at this point in time, is the last instance of man using atomic weapons against his fellow human beings. This was the only time that Olivi has ever been to Nagasaki, and even then he saw almost nothing of the bustling seaport town below because of cloud cover – both natural and bomb-induced. While his view may have been obscured, his memory and subsequent perspective of the day's events remain quite clear.

Frederick J. Olivi was born January 16, 1922 in the Pullman section of Chicago. When war with Japan broke out, he did not immediately join the service, because he was the sole male provider of his mother and sister. But ten months later in October 1942, the 19-year-old enlisted in the Air Corps against his mother's wishes; four months later he was called to duty. Olivi then underwent officer's training, in hopes of becoming a pilot. In August 1944 he was commissioned as a Second

Lieutenant.

By the fall of 1944, over 1500 military specialists from bases around the world had been brought together at Wendover Field in the Utah desert and divided into squadrons to prepare in secret for what would eventually become the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “On December 17, the five squadrons at Wendover became formally unified under [Colonel Paul] Tibbets as the 509th Composite Group....” Within the 509th, the 393rd Bomb Squadron was entrusted with delivering the bombs.

One of the first people brought in by Tibbets to train crews for the 393rd was Major Charles Sweeney, who at the time was training B-29 pilots at Grand Island, Nebraska. Sweeney was assigned to train Crew C15, piloted by Captain Don Albury. Crew C15 eventually consisted of four officers (Albury, Kermit Beahan, James Van Pelt and Olivi) and five enlisted men (Ed Buckley, John Kuharek, Ray Gallagher, Albert “Pappy” Dehart and Abe Spitzer). It trained at Wendover until January 1945, when it was sent on a two-month training mission to Batista Field outside of Havana to practice long-range flying over water. Co-pilot Olivi, who was the final member added to the crew by Tibbets, arrived at Wendover in January after the others had already left for Cuba. He joined them upon their return to the Utah base.

Once back at Wendover, Crew C15 continued its training and came to be acknowledged by most as the best crew in the 509th. In May some personnel of the 509th began to depart the Utah base for their new home – North Field on Tinian Island within the Marianas. The members of Crew C15 remained at Wendover until June 20, however, when Sweeney (now commander of the 393rd) flew them to Hamilton Field in Marin County, California in a new B-29 Superfortress with fuel injection and reverse propellers. This would be the first stage of their three-day flight to the South Pacific. In California the plane was blessed by a Catholic priest (Sweeney being an Irish Catholic), before proceeding to Rogers field at Honolulu. Another brief stop was made at Kwajalein before reaching Tinian on June 23.

While on Tinian, Crew C15 had little to do as it awaited orders for its highly secretive mission. What the crew did not understand was that it was waiting for the successful explosion of an experimental plutonium bomb (which occurred July 16 in the New Mexico desert) and delivery of plutonium to its island base. Olivi, a young Catholic lad who neither smoked nor drank when he arrived at Tinian, was talked into drinking one night by his companions and, as a result, experienced his one and only hangover.

The members of Crew C15 decided to christen their B-29 the Great Artiste, after the nickname of their highly skilled bombardier, Kermit Beahan. The plane participated in a few short-range runs and a successful long-range practice exercise over Kobe in late July to prepare for its upcoming mission. Both the plane and the crew appeared ready to perform the task at hand.

On August 6, 1945, in what was described in military terms as a perfect mission, Col. Paul Tibbets and the crew of the *Enola Gay* dropped the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, destroying most of the city and killing approximately 90,000 people. Accompanying the *Enola Gay* as the instrument carrying aircraft was the Great Artiste piloted by Major Sweeney. In addition to the crew, three scientists were on board. To make room for the scientists, one member of the crew was asked to remain behind on Tinian; the person selected was co-pilot Fred Olivi. Olivi had become expendable when Sweeney took over as pilot of the aircraft. This bumped the Great Artiste’s regular pilot,

Captain Don Albury, down to second pilot and eliminated the necessity of Olivi, normally the plane's co-pilot.

Three days later, Crew C15 prepared to drop a second, much larger, plutonium bomb on Japan. This mission (known as Special Mission No. 16) had difficulties from the start, leading Olivi to entitle his recent account *Decision at Nagasaki: The Mission that Almost Failed*. The Great Artiste had originally been scheduled for the mission, but since it had been fitted as an instrument plane for the Hiroshima run there was not time to reconfigure the bomb bay for the "Fat Man." Instead, Fred Bock's airplane, Bockscar, was substituted, with Sweeney as pilot, Albury as co-pilot, and Olivi as third pilot.

On the morning of August 9, it was discovered that there was a fuel transfer problem from the auxiliary tank to the main tank, thus limiting the amount of fuel available for the flight. The decision was made to go ahead immediately, however, since it was important to convince the Japanese that the United States had multiple atomic bombs and because bad weather was moving in over Japan. The plane would simply refuel at Okinawa before returning to Tinian.

At a little before 2:00 a.m. Japan time (4:00 Tinian time) Sweeney managed to lift the heavy bomb-laden Bockscar off the end of the runway at North Field. He was followed soon after by Capt. Fred Bock piloting the Great Artiste as the instrument plane and Major James Hopkins who flew the Victor 90, which carried movie cameras and scientific observers from England. Victor 90 left minus one of the observers when Hopkins forced Dr. Robert Serber to get out of the aircraft after it had already taxied on to the runway, because the scientist had forgotten his parachute. This presented a problem, since Serber was the only one who knew how to operate the high-speed camera. Officials on the ground were forced to break radio silence in order to instruct Hopkins on its use.

In addition to the regular members of Crew C15 aboard Bockscar, the flight included three outside personnel: Naval officers Commander Fred Ashworth and Lt. Philip Barnes, as well as the electronics specialist Lt. Jacob Beser. Ashworth was a weapons specialist who had helped to field test the bomb at Wendover and Barnes was his assistant. Beser's job was to ensure that the Japanese "did not jam the bomb's fuse frequencies and prematurely detonate the Fat Man."

Once in the air, Sweeney, Albury and Olivi took turns flying while rotating brief rest periods. Lt. Barnes was put to work alarmingly early when a red warning light on the black box monitoring the armed bomb began to flicker. For ten minutes an incredible tension gripped the two weapons specialists until Barnes corrected two switches which had been reversed. Ashworth informed Sweeney of the incident, and all three men breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Olivi's thoughts concerning the impending bombing mission, as summarized almost twenty-five years after the fact by Frank Chinnock, were similar to the views expressed by the other crew members:

"[The members of Crew C15] had been chosen for this vital mission and it was up to them to carry it off to the best of their ability. [Olivi] was convinced that if the enemy had the bomb, they would not hesitate to use it. All he and the others could do was to accomplish their mission and hope it would finish things quickly."

The primary target for the mission was to be Kokura, an industrial city in northern Kyushu, with Nagasaki as the secondary site. The three planes were to rendezvous above the island of Yakushima

off the southern coast of Kyushu. Sweeney arrived first a little before 8:00 a.m., and while waiting for the others monitored a message from the weather plane of Charles McKnight at Nagasaki which reported: "Hazy, clearing rapidly, two-tenths cloud coverage, wind 250 degrees at 50 knots. "An earlier weather report from Kokura had also noted good weather there.

Around 8:10 Bock and the Great Artiste joined Sweeney at the rendezvous site, but Hopkins did not show. They waited forty minutes, but finally decided to leave for Kokura since they were running low on fuel.

Based on earlier weather reports, the crew of *Bockscar* flew to Kokura fully expecting to drop its bomb on the city and return quickly to Okinawa. Upon arrival, however, the military arsenal at Kokura was obscured by industrial haze and smoke from a nearby fire. The bombardier had specific orders not to drop the bomb unless he could see the target. Three times Sweeney passed overhead, but without success. With the fuel supply now an even greater concern and enemy flak becoming a problem, Sweeney took *Bockscar* on the most direct route to Nagasaki.

Conditions at Nagasaki were even worse than they had been at Kokura, with cloud cover now as great as nine-tenths. With no possibility of reaching Okinawa with its heavy bomb aboard, a decision had to be made. Ashworth decided that rather than "waste" the multi-million dollar bomb by dumping it into the ocean, the "Fat Man" should be dropped by radar over the Nagasaki target. Less than thirty seconds before the bomb was due to be dropped by radar, an opening appeared in the clouds and Beahan shouted that he could make a visual drop. He spotted the Mitsubishi Sports Stadium below and used it as his reference point. This was a couple miles north of the original target near Mitsubishi Shipyards and the center of the city, but still not too far from the Mitsubishi ordinance and steel factories along the Urakami River. The bomb detonated about 1500 feet above ground, killing (by the end of 1945) approximately 74,000 people and injuring a similar number. In addition, 1,650 acres were leveled and 120,000 residents left homeless.

The explosion occurred over Urakami Valley, the heart of Catholicism in Japan, and the home of Christian believers who had kept their faith alive in spite of hundreds of years of government persecution. Urakami Cathedral was less than 2500 feet away from Ground Zero, and everyone praying there that morning died instantly. Also in the area and hard hit were Nagasaki University Medical Hospital, a prison, and various elementary schools.

Because of the local topography, much of the center of the historical city was spared the ravages of the atomic bomb. Fires did cause considerable damage to some parts of the downtown area, but a protective ring of low mountains helped to contain the destruction. Certainly, if there had not been cloud cover and the plane had not been low on fuel, the city of Nagasaki would have suffered significantly more damage and thousands more would have perished.

Olivi's recollection of the bombing from high above was that a very bright light with a bluish cast, cloud cover, and debris from the explosion made it almost impossible to see any of the city below. In spite of the fact that *Bockscar* was low on fuel, Sweeney decided to take a second pass over Nagasaki, hoping for better visibility; the results of the second fly over were as disappointing as the first. Olivi remembers three shock waves – the first being the worst –, a hard right banking of the plane, and a barely successful effort to outrun the radioactive cloud headed toward the plane.

Soon after leaving Nagasaki, Ashworth ordered Spitzer to transmit the following message to Tinian:

”Bombed Nagasaki 090158Z visually with no fighter opposition and no flak. Results ‘technically successful’ but other factors involved make conference necessary before taking further steps. Visible effects about equal to Hiroshima. Trouble in airplane following delivery requires us to proceed to Okinawa. Fuel only to get to Okinawa.”

This brief statement would be the only official transmission to Tinian until Bockscar touched down safely on Okinawa.

Around the same time, Crew C15 finally heard from Hopkins and his missing Victor 90. Hopkins had been about one hundred miles east of Nagasaki when he saw the explosion and decided to give Sweeney a call. With Bockscar desperately short on fuel, Sweeney did not wait around for a rendezvous, but instead continued directly for Yontan Field on Okinawa. Victor 90 flew on to Nagasaki, where its crew filmed the damage.

Practically flying on fumes, Sweeney did not have time to wait for traffic to clear at Yontan Field as he approached the runway. When planes refused to move to allow him to land, he ordered Olivi to fire the flares on board to get everyone’s attention. This finally achieved the desired results, and with the assistance of the plane’s new reverse propellers acting as an extra set of brakes, Sweeney was able to land the Bockscar safely, in what one crew member referred to as a “controlled crash.” Reflecting back upon the landing years later, Beser commented that “You can’t come any closer to disaster than we had, and live to tell about it.”

Once safely on the ground, Sweeney and Ashworth reported the results of their mission to General Jimmy Doolittle, the commander of the Eighth Air Force. Crew C15 stayed only about two hours on Okinawa, before it headed back up in the Bockscar for the return flight to Tinian, joined by the Great Artiste and the tardy Victor 90.

About five hours later all three planes landed safely at North Field, ending the harrowing mission of almost twenty hours in length. It was almost 10:30 at night Tinian time when they arrived, and as Beser notes,, “There were no crowds to greet these crews, no medal pinning ceremony, only those who would be concerned with our interrogation were there.” After having their picture taken in front of the Bockscar, the crew members were debriefed, ate a late dinner, and shared a few drinks. They had completed their mission, glitches and all, and now waited to see the response of the Japanese government.

The answer was not long in coming, as on August 15 the Emperor made a radio address to the nation announcing the unconditional surrender of Japan and acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Declaration. For Crew C15 this meant that its mission had been a success and that no more American lives would have to be sacrificed in the name of bringing World War II to a close. For the residents of Nagasaki, on the other hand, the pain and suffering was just beginning.

The end of the war meant that there was no longer a need for Crew C15, or the 509th Composite for that matter, to remain on Tinian. Most were flown or shipped back to the United States soon thereafter to avoid security leaks concerning their up-to-then highly secretive work. The members of Crew C15 were flown to Roswell, New Mexico in November. The vast majority chose immediate discharge from the service, but Olivi decided to sign on as a reservist at Roswell for another two years.

When Olivi finally left the service in 1947, he tried to find employment as a civilian airline pilot,

but discovered that those who had gotten out earlier had taken these jobs. The 23-year-old was even low on the waiting list, since he had logged considerably fewer flying hours than most of the returning veterans.

In 1950 Olivi landed work as an engineering draftsman with the City of Chicago in its Bridge Division. Over the years, he worked his way up the ladder, and from 1973 until his retirement in 1986 he was in charge of supervising bridges in Chicago.

Fred Olivi remained in the Air Force Reserves until his retirement at age fifty in 1972; by then he had achieved the rank of Lt. Colonel. During his last fourteen years in the Reserves, he served as a Liaison Officer for the Air Force Academy in the Chicago area, describing the Academy and its various programs to local high school students.

In October 1965, Olivi married Carole McVey, a woman he had known since high school. According to the Olivis, when one was ready for marriage, the other was not, and they wound up postponing the inevitable nuptials until they were both in their early forties. Today, they live happily together in south Chicago.

Although it has been twenty-three years since Olivi retired from the Reserves and nine since he left the City of Chicago, he remains an active individual. He has been especially busy over the course of the past year participating in events commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. His activities include traveling to schools, colleges, air shows and civic groups to make presentations on the Nagasaki bombing mission.

Olivi and the surviving members of Crew C15 still meet on a regular basis for reunions. The gatherings began in Chicago in 1962; initially at five year intervals and later two. They met last year, but with 1995 marking the fiftieth anniversary, they have decided to gather once again at Albuquerque, New Mexico, near the Los Alamos Testing Center, between August 5th and 10th.

Six members of the *Bockscar* mission to Nagasaki have since passed away: Abe Spitzer, the radio operator from New York City, died more than a decade ago in a traffic accident near his home; Sgt. Ed Buckley, the radar operator, died of throat cancer in 1981; Sgt. Albert "Pappy" Dehart, the tailgunner (who did not talk of his role in the mission or attend reunions), died in Texas; Kermit Beahan died in 1990 of a heart attack; two years ago Lt. Jacob Beser, an outside electronics specialist who was the only member to fly on both the Enola Gay and the Bockscar missions, died of cancer; and in December 1994 Dr. James Van Pelt, the navigator and radar operator originally from West Virginia, died of a heart attack while recovering from an automobile accident near his home in Corona, California where he was a physician.

Of the seven surviving members of the Nagasaki mission, two – Vice-Admiral (at the time Navy Commander) Fred Ashworth and Lt. Philip Barnes – were outside Navy weapons specialists and not ordinarily part of Crew C15. Neither Ashworth nor Barnes have stayed in touch with the Nagasaki crew or attended the reunions. Besides Olivi, those who still gather for the reunions include: General (then Major) Charles Sweeney, the feisty Irish-American from Boston who piloted the plane; Captain Don Albury, the regular pilot and mission co-pilot from Miami who for thirty-five years flew for Eastern Airlines; Master Sgt. John Kuharek, an engineer with the regular Army who now resides in Florida; and Sgt. Raymond Gallagher, the gunner and assistant engineer from Chicago. Also joining them at times for the reunions are Col. Paul Tibbets, the pilot of the Enola

Gay, and Frederick Bock, the original pilot of Bockscar.

While Olivi has chosen not to return to Nagasaki for fear of harassment by the Japanese media, others have not been as reluctant. As a matter of fact, Sweeney, Albury and Beahan went back to Nagasaki within weeks of the bombing, joining the first American medical team to the city in September 1945. Albury returned in 1977 incognito with his wife and brother-in-law, managing to slip in and out of town without media attention. In 1990 Albury also went with Sweeney and Bock on a BBC-sponsored trip to Hiroshima. Sweeney and Bock continued on to Nagasaki without him. Jacob Beser made a much-celebrated return visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1985, in conjunction with the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the dropping of atomic bombs on the two cities. The PBS-supported journey drew heavy media attention and also produced a book by Beser.

In an interview with Fred Olivi in November 1994, the author was accompanied by his wife, Fumiko, a native of Nagasaki. While Olivi made it known that he had only been carrying out orders and that he was glad that the bomb had helped shorten the war, he was clearly uncomfortable when discussing the fact that tens of thousands of civilians had been killed in the bombing. Meeting someone born in post-war Nagasaki for the first time on a face-to-face basis was visibly difficult for him. By the end of the conversation a great weight seemed to have been lifted from his shoulders. It was as if he had undergone a catharsis with the realization that not everyone in Nagasaki held him personally accountable for the bombing. He offered a genuinely warm invitation to join him and his wife for dinner whenever we came to Chicago again. Like Beser on his return trip to Japan, Olivi discovered that most Japanese today are not looking to affix personal blame for actions performed by young men within the context of a war fought fifty years ago.

Unlike others of his generation in the United States, Fred Olivi does not still view the Japanese as his enemy, and he does not want to be perceived as such by them. When I first met Olivi, it was at a presentation he was giving on the Bockscar mission at the Experimental Aircraft Association in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. During the course of conversation after his talk, a local veteran proclaimed that he still did not consider the Japanese to be human beings; they were in his mind just insects. Upon hearing of the comment, Olivi showed clear disgust that people on either side should still feel that way about one another a half century after the cessation of hostilities.

In a later conversation, Olivi related another xenophobic example of misguided American patriotism. A few years ago, he read in a Chicago newspaper that local families had dropped out of a program to host visiting French school children, because the French government had not allowed American war planes to use its airfields in attacks on Libya. The Olivis immediately volunteered to host one of the students, and to this day they look back on it as one of their fondest memories.

On August 9, 1945 a young Italian-American co-pilot named Fred Olivi participated in a military action in which more than 70,000 (mostly civilian) residents of Nagasaki were killed. To this day, he feels that the bombing was necessary and that it helped shorten the war. Reinforcing this view have been the actions of literally thousands of American veterans who over the years have thanked him for saving their lives. Joining in the chorus of appreciation are the wives, children and grandchildren of these veterans.

This does not, however, mean that Fred Olivi is pleased that fifty years ago he helped kill and injure so many citizens of Nagasaki. He wishes that it had never had to happen in the first place. To him, it was not an act of racism or an act of revenge, but simply the last act of a long and brutal war. At

this point in his life, the 73-year-old retiree asks only that the record of the mission be set straight, and that nuclear weapons never again be used. He is proud of the fifty-year friendship of Japan and America, and prays for continued good relations between the countries.

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