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On this day: An alternative Hiroshima reflection

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NCR Today

On this day in 1945, at Tinian, in the Mariana Islands, Colonel Paul Tibbets and the crew of the *Enola Gay* learned that "conditions were go, and the next day would be the day. At the last minute, it was decided to complete the final assembly of the bomb in flight, thus eliminating the risk of it exploding if *Enola Gay* crashed on take-off. Navy Captain Deak Parsons, who had earlier opposed this idea, now suggested it, and persuaded the team that he could perform the difficult assembly in the cramped bomb bay of the B-29.

"They loaded the bomb into the *Enola Gay* that afternoon. 'Little Boy' was 12 feet long and 28 inches in diameter - bigger than any bomb Tibbets had ever seen. Its explosive power equalled 20,000 tons of TNT; or roughly as much as two thousand Superfortresses could carry - all in a single bomb that weighed about 9,000 pounds. Deak Parsons practiced the delicate arming process. That night the crew was briefed, for the first time, on the nature of their weapon - an atomic bomb."

-- "Paul Tibbets and the *Enola Gay*," by Stephen Sherman.

The war the Japanese started was about to come to an end.

Just twenty days had gone by since the test explosion of the atom bomb in New Mexico.

Just ten days had gone by since President Harry S. Truman, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Chairman Chiang Kai-shek issued the Potsdam Declaration warning Japan of "prompt and utter destruction" if they failed to surrender.

Just six days had gone by since Japan responded to the ultimatum by sinking the *USS Indianapolis*. "She holds a place in history due to the circumstances of her sinking, which led to the greatest single loss of life

at sea in the history of the U.S. Navy. On 30 July 1945, shortly after delivering critical parts for the first atomic bomb to be used in combat to the United States air base at Tinian, the ship was torpedoed by the Imperial Japanese Navy submarine I-58, sinking in 12 minutes. Of 1,196 crewmen aboard, approximately 300 went down with the ship."

--Wikipedia.

The bombing of Hiroshima was not enough. The emperor and his warlords still refused to surrender. Only after the bombing of Nagasaki three days later did they consider surrendering. After another six days, during which he assured his family and his war council that the war would continue unless he was permitted to retain his sovereignty, Hirohito announced his capitulation.

Today, sixty-six years after the end of World War II, there are those who know little about it but nevertheless disparage the sacrifices of those who fought and died. They denounce our country and our Allies for defeating Germany and Japan. They think another year of fighting and another million casualties would have been preferable to bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hiroshima in History: The Myths of Revisionism, edited by Robert James Maddox, University of Missouri Press, 2007, is a good starting point for anyone confounded by the claims of those who defame our country.

"Rat Beach" is a short story by William Styron that was published in the New Yorker two years ago. I won't spoil it, but I hope you'll read the first few paragraphs and see if it draws you in.

Advertisement

If you watched *The Pacific* on HBO, you know who Eugene Sledge was. *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, Presidio Press, 1981, is his memoir. The Introduction to the 1990 Oxford University Press paperback edition is by Paul Fussell.

Fussell fought in Europe in World War II. His famous article, "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," was published in *The New Republic* thirty years ago this month. If you've never read it, I hope you will.

"I was a twenty-one-year old second lieutenant of infantry leading a rifle platoon. Although still officially fit for combat, in the German war I had already been wounded in the back and the leg badly enough to be adjudged, after the war, 40 percent disabled. But even if my leg buckled and I fell to the ground whenever I jumped out of the back of a truck, and even if the very idea of more combat made me breathe in gasps and shake all over, my condition was held to be adequate for the next act. When the atom bombs were dropped and news began to circulate that 'Operation Olympic' would not, after all, be necessary, when we learned to our astonishment that we would not be obliged in a few months to rush up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being machine-gunned, mortared, and shelled, for all the practiced phlegm of our tough facades we broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow to adulthood after all."

UPDATE, August 12. Thanks to all who commented here and to those who e-mailed me. A good article giving details on how thoroughly the revisionists have been discredited is "The Historiography of Hiroshima: The Rise and Fall of Revisionism," by Michael Kort, in *The New England Journal of History*,

Fall, 2007. Among the scholars Kort cites is Robert James Maddox, mentioned above.

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