



First Into Nagasaki: The Censored Eyewitness Dispatches on Post-Atomic Japan and Its Prisoners of War

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George Weller was a Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter who covered World War II across Europe, Africa, and Asia. At the war’s end in September 1945, under General MacArthur’s media blackout, correspondents were forbidden to enter both Nagasaki and Hiroshima. But instead of obediently staying with the press corps in northern Japan, Weller broke away. The intrepid newspaperman reached Nagasaki just weeks after the atomic bomb hit the city. Boldly presenting himself as a U.S. colonel to the Japanese military, Weller set out to explore the devastation.

As Nagasaki’s first outside observer, long before any American medical aid arrived, Weller witnessed the bomb’s effects and wrote “the anatomy of radiated man.” He interviewed doctors trying to cure those dying mysteriously from “Disease X.” He typed far into every night, sending his forbidden dispatches back to MacArthur’s censors, assuming their importance would make them unstoppable. He was wrong: the U.S. government censored every word, and the dispatches vanished from history.

Weller also became the first to enter the nearby Allied POW camps. From hundreds of prisoners he gathered accounts of watching the atomic explosions bring an end to years of torture and merciless labor in Japanese mines. Their dramatic testimonies sum up one of the least-known chapters of the war—but those stories, too, were silenced.

It is a powerful experience, more than 60 years later, to walk with Weller through the smoldering ruins of Nagasaki, or hear the sagas of prisoners who have just learned that their torment is over, and watch one of the era’s most battle-experienced reporters trying to accurately and unsentimentally convey to the American people scenes unlike anything he—or anyone else—knew.

Weller died in 2002, believing it all lost forever. Months later, his son found a fragile copy in a crate of moldy papers. This historic body of work has never been published.

Along with reports from the brutal POW camps, a stirring saga of the worst of the Japanese “hellships” which carried U.S. prisoners into murder and even cannibalism, and a trove of Weller’s unseen photos, **First into Nagasaki** provides a moving, unparalleled look at the bomb that killed more than 70,000 people and ended WWII. Amid current disputes over the controlled embedding of journalists in war zones and a government’s right to keep secrets, it reminds us how such courageous rogue reporting is still essential to learning the truth.

First Into Nagasaki: The Censored Eyewitness Dispatches on Post-Atomic Japan and Its Prisoners of War Details

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Chris says

There is some phenomenal information in this book, but sometimes research materials should be left as research materials and this is one such time. I appreciate Anthony Weller's efforts to transcribe and edit his father's dispatches and notes, which absolutely provide a valuable look at the experiences of Nagasaki and POWs in Japan. However, rather than transcribe them and make them available in their original form, he edited them in ways that seem purposefully vague when he mentions it (while leaving in a lot of repetitive material), and repackages them with additional writing that turns an important part of 20th century history into an exercise in the hero worship of a father by his son (complete with tracking down former POWs for convenient quotes calling his father a saint and an angel), for profit. I enjoyed the account of Nagasaki, the POW materials were interesting if research material-y, the rest I could have done without.

Troy M. says

Having been an armchair student-historian of the European theater of WWII, I was anxious to read this volume about the two days that changed the course of the war in the Pacific. I've always maintained that every credible read possesses all three literary genres: Man vs Man (US POWs versus their Japanese captors), Man vs Nature (The People of Nagasaki vs The Bomb and its effects), and Man vs Himself (Author George Weller vs Inability to tell his story outright).

The fact that George's son, Anthony, was the one who resurrected his father's long lost transcripts- written from a typewriter late into the night under the most extreme conditions in the field- is a testament to one family's multi-generational ability to not only discover the truth of what really occurred in Nagasaki after the bomb was detonated- but convey that truth in it's raw and poignant form in George's first person account of what he saw and experienced.

For some, this book will be very hard to read. It should be. It gives a non-glossy account of the effects of war and it's many ravages on both military personnel and the general populace. Too, it paints a very clear picture of the incredible censorship program that took place under General MacArthur's leadership. If it were not for George Weller and his intrepid sense of adventure and the need for absolute truth in his journalistic reporting, we would all be ignorant of some of History's most incredible acts and the witness of personal heroism and sacrifice under the most egregious of circumstances and mankind's cruelest devices.

Laura Gurrin says

George Weller was the first Western journalist to go to Nagasaki, only a month after the atomic bomb was dropped and the war in the Pacific ended. This book is a collection of pieces he did based on that visit, and his time spent with American and British soldiers previously held in Japanese prison camps. Weller was a correspondent for an American paper, but though the war was over, news articles from Japan were still

censored; none of Weller's copy, sent faithfully back to Tokyo, was ever released in to the press.

My mental rating of this book went up and down while I was reading it, and as I went on, I had to attribute that to both my current place in history, and the structure of the book, rather than the contents.

This book is divided into four sections: Weller's observations of Nagasaki after the bomb, his conversations with POWs held in the Nagasaki area, the transcript of a diary kept by one of two American soldiers who hid on Wake Island in the first days of WWII and evaded Japanese capture for a time, and his piece on the Death Cruise, one of the last and worst transports of POWs transferred into Japan for captivity.

The first section of the book is Weller's description of post-bomb Nagasaki, and of the Disease X which killed people a week or a month after the bomb itself. At the time, this was a shocking story, and the primary source of the censorship of Weller - the US military was denying that there was any 'atomic' effect of the bomb, and the description of Disease X flew in the face of those assertions. For me, this was the section of the book which suffered both from my knowledge, and my ignorance. We now know the dangers of radiation sickness, and the impact of the bombing that Weller could not have seen at the time - he of course underplays it - and the fact that this information is scandalous for the time, seems naive now. On the other hand, Weller's discounting of the significance of the bomb, placing it in the context of the firebombing of Tokyo and other Japanese cities, which produced incredible death and devastation, makes him sound like an apologist. It wasn't that bad, not many people died - this tone was jarring to me because I did not really know the context, and it's difficult to read it without our 60 years of hindsight - however, it's firsthand testimony which is both well written, and of historical value.

The fourth section is the Death Cruise, and this is where the book hits its stride. The incredible brutality that the Japanese showed to their prisoners has largely been overshadowed in the West by the Nazi deathcamps, and unlike in Germany, where self-acknowledgement of the Nazi crimes has been enmeshed in the culture, Japan has only reluctantly and recently admitted responsibility for the atrocities committed by them during WWII. The Death Cruise was one of many 'hellship' transports, where soldiers captured in the early days of the war were brought from across the Pacific, back to Japan for internment. One thousand, six hundred men got on the transport ship; seven weeks later, three hundred survived to be imprisoned. Weller interviewed many of the survivors, and patched their stories together into a terrifying narrative of brutality, starvation, and deprivation. Among them are bright sparks - soldiers who worked to keep other calm, to keep up morale, to collect scraps and water for the weakest. However, most of this story is dark, and Weller doesn't shy from details. Men going mad in cramped ship holds; friends taking clothes from the dying; finally, the complete and utter lack of compassion shown by the survivors to the suffering. And through it all, beatings, torture, and humiliation from the Japanese captors, who seemed to see the weakness of their charges as the moral justification for treating them as things without worth. Weller captures this aspect of the War in the Pacific without flinching, and it's a revelation for the reader unfamiliar with this portion of history.

The middle two sections of the book consist of snippets of POW observations of the Nagasaki bombing, the brutal treatment by the Japanese of the POW workers in the mines of Nagasaki, and the Wake Island survivors. In part, Weller covers this as a reporter wanting to send bulk material home which can be parted out and reprinted in papers around the country - snippets from a 'local boy' for regional use. As such they are often repetitive stories of Japanese abuse - interesting, but not really meant to be read as a piece. The Wake Island section is interesting historically, but mainly for the increasing desperation of these two, hiding from the Japanese in the first few weeks of the war, as they wait for Uncle Sam to come rescue them. Not knowing of the crushing attack on the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, these two waited in vain for a rescue which did not come.

Overall, this book is a fascinating picture of the American experience on the Pacific. It's less about Nagasaki, than how the Americans and Japanese viewed, treated and justified that treatment of each other, both in the opening days of the war, and the closing.

Amy says

It would be hard to say I liked this book based on its subject matter. I found it depressing and disheartening. My complaint being people will never learn, never stop being horrible to one another, and are terribly deceitful.

The book provides a good first hand account of WWII Japan. Not an easy read by any stretch. I also struggled a bit with the way the book is edited. Somehow, the material needed a better editor.

Tom says

I don't use the term 'important' often to describe a book but I would consider this an important book. If only for the vivid descriptions of the seldom-described post-Nagasaki Japan and the POW mining camps in Japan. The ghost ships have been written about a fair amount lately, sometimes as a corollary to Bataan or Cabanatuan, but I suspect you'd have a hard time finding a more detailed description of the Japanese POW camps than in this work.

It's emotionally troubling. I'd read Nicholson Baker's, "Human Smoke" a few months ago and put it down feeling like it might have made me think of WWII less like a great, worthy war and more a necessary evil to combat evil. This book is a wonderful companion to that book and takes you places emotionally where you can easily find yourself agreeing with the soldiers who felt the bomb didn't kill half enough. Soldiers were dying of starvation, dehydration, suffocation, freezing, malaria, dysentery, resorting to cannibalism, all while food, medicine, and water was sometimes a few yards away but withheld out of cruelty. To say nothing of those beat to death for no reason or for not working hard enough in the dangerous (unsupported) mines.

The book is, unfortunately, sort of awkward. It could've used a better editor as you have these powerful threads of history somewhat lacking in cohesion. It's basically a section on Weller getting into Nagasaki, a section on the mines/POW camps, a section on the ghost ships, and a few other pieces on Nagasaki. They're all powerful on their own, sure, but I think it maybe could've been a stronger book (and got out to more people to let them know about these terrors) had it been constructed a bit better.

Bruce says

The book presents the literary version of the "if a tree falls in a forest..." conundrum. Specifically, what is the literary value of news dispatches published 60 years late? In September of 1945, one week from the Japanese surrender and a bit less than a month out from the detonation of "Fat Man," Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent George Weller impersonates a colonel and sneaks into Nagasaki in defiance of Douglas MacArthur's general ban. Yet Weller nonetheless sends his daily dispatches through MacArthur's censors in Tokyo, who use 99% of them for wastebasket-ball practice. So why does son/editor Anthony Weller believe

the carbons are worth publishing now that they've ceased to be news (aside from belatedly realizing his father's lifelong crusade to escape the cloak of MacArthur's arrogance)? "In our era of the controlled, hygienic 'embedding' of journalists in war zones, amid current disputes over a government's right to keep secrets, the Weller dispatches represent a kind of rogue reporting that many militaries may have snuffed out, but which is still essential to learning the truth." (p. 245) There is no question that this book succeeds and derives its significance as an immediate, first-hand record of both the plutonium bomb's effects in Nagasaki and the wretched treatment that Allied prisoners of war received at the bayonets of the Japanese.

On the other hand, the narrative value of war dispatches leaves something to be desired as a contemporary read. From a literary standpoint, the book suffers from insufficient editing, notwithstanding that the editor claims to have excised 20 percent of the content to "avoid highly redundant material." George Weller, good journalist that he was, sought to capitalize on his exclusive by sending dispatches to newspapers in Australia and the U.K. in addition to the Chicago Daily News. Many of these "stories" were fodder for local writers, chock-full of one-liners from thirty or more interviewees identified by name and hometown. One or two are more than sufficient to get the flavor of 1940s-era reportage. Thirty-plus pages of them are tedious.

The most fascinating parts of the book are the full-fledged stories: Weller's recollection (written in the 1960s) of how he managed to get into the roped-off city and obtain local cooperation, the diary of an American civilian who managed to evade capture on Wake Island for nearly three months, the harrowing details of the prisoners of war on the "Death cruise" (the Japanese transfer of 1600+ POWs from the Philippines to Japan -- a journey which barely 300 survived; Iris Chang's work on Nanking would have succeeded far better had she illustrated the visceral impact of Japanese brutality the way Weller does), the investigation of how the bomb worked as opposed to how its impact had been imagined and the biological effect we call radiation sickness. Here's the irony, though: nearly all of this (save the bomb info) was published at the time. While *First Into Nagasaki* collects these stories in one convenient place and restores some of the gorier details that censors and editors had removed, it doesn't really bring the heart of these stories to light for the first time. Further, since the book contains only Weller's accounts, readers aren't treated to any follow-up that would tell us, say, what happened to the Wake Island survivors after capture.

Richard Rhodes has already published definitive works on the history of Oppenheimer's legacy with *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* and *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb*. At this point, the destruction of red cells, white cells, and platelets caused by radiation exposure is also fairly well understood (though it was not at Weller's time). Less publicized has been the actual impact of the bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For example, raised on *The Day After* and *Threads* as I was, I imagined buildings dissolved in a hurricane of fire and people vaporized in the street. It was therefore surprising for me to read Weller's account of exposed American POWs surviving the bomb blast simply by lying lower than the protective walls of an open-air ditch, or of fire emerging not from any fission reaction, but from the simple result of collapsing wooden structures onto lunchtime coals. From Weller's perception, "Stand beside a wall; have any masonry between you and the bomb [in 1945]; and you are as safe as underground" (p. 282).

Imagine my disappointment to learn that Weller's words were not a unique source of revelation today **or even 60 years ago**. Weller did succeed in publishing his findings in 1946, but beyond that had himself been scooped by an Australian reporter named Wilfred Burchett who got into Hiroshima before Weller found Nagasaki and managed to get a factual story about radiation sickness entitled, "The Atomic Plague" published by *The London Daily Express* **on September 5, 1945**. Not only that, but Anthony Weller considers his father would probably have managed to get more of his dispatches published sooner had he been willing to hand off his carbons to the Air Force press junket that visited Nagasaki briefly a mere **three days** after Weller's illicit arrival.

"For me [Anthony Weller] it is a small triumph that these words, the deaths and lives that were written about, and the deep determination behind them to get at the truth, were not lost forever" (p. 312). Well, it's safe to say that I might not have been attracted to this book had it not been for my erroneous belief in the truth of that statement. So if it turns out that Anthony Weller has in fact added only a small piece to scholarship by preserving his father's storytelling as originally reported before any editing took place, there's consolation in the fact that at least half of it is worth reading.

Matthew says

A notable and remarkable book. George Weller was the first correspondent into Nagasaki after the bomb was dropped. The book includes first-hand reports brutal POW camps, a saga of the worst of the Japanese "hellships" which carried U.S. prisoners. Weller provides a moving, unparalleled look at the bomb that killed more than 70,000 people and ended WWII. Recommended.

Meggen says

This book was very interesting. It dealt with many aspects of WWII I was not very familiar with. The beginning relates the author's first-hand account of interviews with post-atomic Nagasaki residents and doctors. However, the majority of the book deals with first-hand accounts from soldiers incarcerated in Japanese POW camps. Those accounts; heart breaking, horrifying, and captivating; opened my eyes and caused me to appreciate the war in the Pacific more than I ever would have otherwise. The things those men went through are almost unbelievable, as was the huge effort to censor accounts about it from General MacArthur on down.

I have 2 grandfathers who served in WWII, both in the Pacific conflicts. Although neither of them ever had to endure the atrocities of a Japanese POW camp, I now appreciate how big a blessing that truly is. I would not have recognized that had I not read this book.

I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys history or who wants to gain a greater appreciation for the immense and untold sacrifices of those who willingly and heroically gave their all to maintain the freedoms we continue to enjoy in this great country, the United States of America.

cameron says

This book was a complete surprise to me. I thought it would be the straight facts I already knew and fairly dry as written by a reporter as opposed to what we call a "journalist".

I was wrong. Not only fascinating and horrific but the political manipulation of public relations and the press and data and information was chilling. So much was kept from the public to cast a more favorable light on our decisions and to make sure we looked moral and to play down the horror of the bomb.. One wonders today if anything is reported truthfully. Brilliant insights and I agree, a must read for WW2 readers.

I happen to agree with the decision to drop the bomb but I still didn't know about our true "Wag the Dog" mentality in this case.

Bill FromPA says

The journalism of George Weller included in this volume is written with an awareness of being the "first draft of history", but remains tied to its purpose of conveying immediate impressions to its intended audience of Anglophone, primarily American readers.

The title is a bit misleading; while it does include Weller's impressions of Nagasaki a month after the atomic bomb was dropped, most of the reporting here deals with the experiences of American POWs in the hands of Japanese captors. Those experiences were horrifying and are little mentioned in subsequent accounts of the war. The best piece in the book is an extended account of a "Death Cruise" from Manila to Japan during which 1,600 prisoners suffered unthinkable privation and cruelty, as well as attacks by American bombers, the combination of which resulted in the deaths of about 3/4 of the prisoners.

An extensive afterword by Weller's son Anthony is valuable in giving context to the reports.

It is interesting that, even in the immediate aftermath of the war, while the exact nature of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still largely unknown and classified, some Japanese who spoke to Weller attempted to claim the moral high ground as victims of the unjustifiable use of a weapon that in itself amounted to a crime against humanity. Weller, at least, was having none of it, maintaining through the years that, "The worst crime of any war is to begin it."

Chris Dietzel says

This was incredible to read. I love history but all too often in history classes or shows you learn about key dates and events rather than the in-depth detail on a subject. Going into this book, I knew nothing about what the first experiences were like going into Nagasaki after the bomb was dropped or about MacArthur's complete media lockdown. There is nothing enjoyable about this book and the stories it relates, and yet the amount of history you learn about various subjects that have gone 'forgotten' by history (largely because they were censored for so long that many falsities are more well-known than actual facts) makes this a must read for anyone interested in war history, US history, or the history of journalism.

Charlie says

I really didn't understand how the bomb worked and how its effect worked afterwards on the victims. But this reporting goes further than that, though censored almost entirely by MacArthur even after his authority to do so had expired. Weller covers the slave labor of POWs in Bataan, the horrifying hellship journeys, the refusal of American authorities to allow reports of what was really going on to reach the American public. In the immediate aftermath of the war it seemed everyone just wanted to forget its horrors as fast as possible. Weller explains how excellent propaganda almost had Americans feeling sorry for winning the war.

It was a long read because Weller also listed brief reports and comments of POWs while their memory was still fresh about the atrocities they endured for many many pages. MacArthur wouldn't allow reporters in for 6 weeks after the bombings but by hook and crook, Weller got there within days illicitly.

The original notes and reports, were all destroyed by MacArthur's people, but the carbons were saved of course by Weller to be recovered 60 years later by his son who edited, commented, and published here. I think it an important book to read as so much was covered up about Japanese atrocities and so much has been told about the Nazis.

Charlie says

This book is a MUST read for WW11 interested readers. George Weller, the author and a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter, puts together an outstanding report as a 'first person' into ravaged Japan right after the bombardment of Nagasaki and the savage treatment of the POWs.

The more I got into this book the more I like the reportings George Weller was able to put together- especially since he wasn't suppose to be cleared to get into Nagasaki. He wormed his way in and got first hand information from the POWs on the treatment they endured by the Japanese. You just may be surprised on what took place.

A must read.

Irina says

The story of the book itself is captivating enough so the little known and even less talked about historical events that the book covers are most certainly worth experiencing through the eyes of this singular reporter dedicated to his craft. The downsides of the book - inaccuracy of the title and repetitiveness of the narrative or insufficient editing - are certainly something to keep in mind but not worth passing up the book over unless you are already very well versed in the events immediately following capitulation of Japan.

Rpaustenbaugh says

A bit of a disjointed account, but still very interesting. The conditions that allied POW's had to survive were horrific. While I have not made a detailed reading of German camp life, I have read a few books- the Japanese come across as far more sadistic and heartless. Contains a detailed and harrowing account of a Japanese prison ship crossing, as well as the somewhat amusing account of two US civilian contractors who hid out on Wake Island for almost 90 days after its capture.
