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## A peaceful commemoration

I am a historian and author of the book *Atom Bombs: The Top Secret Story of Little Boy and Fat Man*. In June, I was invited by Phillip Mendiola-Long from the Tinian Mayor's Office to deliver a series of speeches during the 60th Anniversary Peaceful Commemoration of the atomic bombings of Japan. I hardly know where to begin. Except for the birth of my children, it was the most momentous week of my life. It was very humbling to be a part of these historic events and it is taking awhile for all of it to sink in. I still find it hard to believe I was actually there at Destination! As we all know, Tinian was the final assembly location in the Pacific for the atomic bombs and the jumping off point for both the *Enola Gay* and *Bockscar* on their historic missions to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While some of those 60th anniversary commemorations across the world were marred by protests and in some instances violent confrontations, the ones on Tinian were quiet and peaceful. Over 30 Hibakusha (Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors), 509th Composite Group veterans (the men who dropped the bombs), Project Alberta (Los Alamos scientists who built the bombs), Marines who invaded Tinian and nearby Saipan, POWS (both sides), Japanese Imperial Navy and Army veterans, and the people of Tinian all met together for the first time ever in a spirit of peace and reconciliation. Many of these veterans (on both sides) had been warned not to come, but instead chose to ignore that advice. I was informed that a poll taken on Saipan before this event indicated that almost 70 percent of the residents did not want this commemoration to happen! What actually occurred, however, was a quiet, thoughtful, calmer, and more personal commemoration. In retrospect, it was a tremendous success precisely for that reason. There were more one-on-one meetings and no one felt they had to save face. The Japanese were well received and there were absolutely no problems or confrontations of any kind. The overall feeling was one of mutual respect and dignity. These are all old men who certainly cannot forget what happened, but have since forgiven each other.

There were some very emotional meetings. I was told of one that occurred between Indianapolis survivor Mike Kuryla and one of the Japanese Imperial Navy veterans prior to an interview session. Each group held individual events with few overlaps so that nobody would be made to feel uncomfortable. Our second-to-last dinner was supposed to be held outside, but the always-unpredictable showers wound up putting both groups together in the same banquet room. All the veterans in both groups were introduced to warm applause. Many of us later wound up on stage dancing with the barefooted ceremonial Tinian dancers. I danced (that's a laugh) next to Hibakusha and the Japanese Imperial Navy veteran. There were lots of smiles, laughing, and picture taking during the evening!

During my first day on Tinian, fellow historian Professor Anderson Giles, 509th veterans Leon Smith and George Cohen, and I were out inspecting the atomic bomb loading pits. The Japanese had just held a memorial service at the pits and we purposely stayed away

during that service so as not to disrespect their ceremony. While Andy remained at pit #2 to interview both Leon and George, I walked back over to inspect the other pit. As I was standing there, a van drove up containing one of the Hiroshima survivors, Fumiaki Kajiya, accompanied by a Japanese TV news crew. They had returned to conduct some more on-site interviews with Fumiaki. This meeting was quite accidental and not supposed to have taken place, yet within a short period of time we all had gathered together and were soon sharing our honestly felt viewpoints on both the use, and even the very existence, of nuclear weapons. It wasn't long before new friendships had formed and once former enemies found common ground through mutual respect and a fervent, sincere desire for a peaceful future. Fumiaki even rode back to the hotel with us in our van. When I entered the lobby, I walked up to Phil Mendiola-Long and quickly explained what had just occurred. I pointed back over to Fumiaki, Leon, and George and said, "Look over there, Phil. Look at the smiles on their faces and the still animated discussion taking place as they're entering the hotel. That is what this entire event here this week is all about!" Phil just stood there beaming! Despite facing what must have seemed at times to be almost insurmountable challenges, he has a right to be justifiably proud of what he accomplished during that week!

A few days later, I ventured alone to the opposite end of Tinian and stood looking out over the intense blue of the Pacific from one of the many cliffs overlooking the ocean. Sea birds soared and noisily cried out as thundering waves crashed over and over on the rugged coral shoreline so far below me. This incredible vista was so calm and peaceful, yet tears welled up in my eyes because it was from this very spot 60 years ago where countless numbers of Japanese civilians and soldiers threw themselves over the precipice to join their ancestors in the great beyond rather than surrender to the Americans. It was a place of both immense beauty and unspeakable tragedy. The same scene was repeated when I was given a tour of Saipan. I couldn't help but think how many more millions of Japanese would have done the very same thing during an Allied invasion of Japan? Remnants of hundreds of crashed B-29s, tanks, cannons, machine guns, armored vehicles, trucks, sunken landing craft, unexploded ordnance, etc. are still buried in the ground, surf, and caves, the millions of pieces spread everywhere above and below the jungle vegetation. Indeed, the entire island is one gigantic, permanent collection of the shattered instruments of war. Thousands of caves used by the Japanese civilians and soldiers still remain undiscovered all over the island.

The day before I left, I visited one of the beachheads where the Marines came ashore during the invasion of Tinian. All around me were reminders of that savage battle. Hundreds of shell casings and spent bullets littered the coral. As I gazed out onto the ocean, I glanced down and was startled to see human bones sticking up out of the beach. Even after over 60 years, the constant typhoons and ocean currents continue to dredge up those sad remains. So many dead and forever missing young American and Japanese soldiers from so long ago. The Fat Man atomic bomb that was loaded into Bockscar and then dropped on Nagasaki was the second, and last, atomic bomb to be exploded in anger on this planet. Because those two fearsome weapons ended the war swiftly, the Allied invasion never took place, the Russian advance toward Japan was halted, and a partition similar to Korea was averted. America poured billions into re-constructing that war-ravaged country, installed a democratic form of government which, for the first time brought individual freedom to a country whose citizens had never enjoyed such freedom, and helped turn Japan into the economic powerhouse it is today as one of the so-called Asian Tigers.

As further evidenced by the peaceful commemorative events on Tinian, our two great countries have become good friends and strong allies. Today, members of Japans Self Defense forces even serve alongside our own soldiers in Iraq. None of this would have been possible without the events that happened 60 years ago on Tinian. I came away from my visit even more convinced than ever that, as horrible as those bombs were, they brought that terrible war to a swift conclusion so that even more millions Japanese and Americans did not die. Let us not forget their sacrifice and may it never happen again!

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