Book review: "Nagasaki" documents horror, shame of atomic war

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER | Posted: Sunday, October 25, 2015 12:00 am

At 11:02 a.m. on Aug. 9, 1945, as 16-year-old Taniguchi Sumiteru was delivering mail in the northwestern section of Nagasaki, an American B-29 dropped a five-ton plutonium bomb on the city.

The bombing brought World War II to an end. It also killed 73,884 people and injured 74,909 others, including Taniguchi, who remained in the hospital for three years and seven months — and was filled “with sorrow and hatred toward war” for the rest of his life.

In “Nagasaki,” Susan Southard, a journalist and the artistic director of Essential Theater (an ensemble in Tempe, Arizona, that presents interactive performances for marginalized communities) draws on interviews with five survivors of the Nagasaki bombing and the reflections of hibakusha (bomb-affected people) to provide a powerful and poignant account of the impact of nuclear war on civilians.

Southard shares Taniguchi’s abhorrence of nuclear war. She maintains that dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not the only alternative to an invasion of Japan. The United States, for example, might have modified its demand for unconditional surrender.

Southard also fills her book with graphic descriptions (accompanied by photographs) of the injuries, disfigurement, radiation-related illnesses, psychological suffering, and career- and marriage-related handicaps endured by survivors.

Maggots crawled in every orifice and open wound of victims, she writes; pregnant women miscarried or gave birth to stillborn babies. Desperate for surcease from the pain, however momentary, some hibakusha joked that it would be great if the swollen faces of corpses actually were watermelons so they could eat them.

Most important, perhaps, Southard reveals that the United States censored — and then suppressed — information about the devastating impact of initial and residual radiation exposure. In testimony before
the U.S. Senate, for example, Gen. Leslie Groves claimed that radiation exposure was “a very pleasant way to die.”

During (and after) the American occupation of Japan, the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission studied survivors but did not treat them. The survivors, Southard demonstrates, were caught between the governments of the United States and Japan, each of which wanted the other to assume moral, financial and medical responsibility for the bombings.

The legislature of Japan did not pass the Atomic Bomb Victims Medical Care Law until 1957. According to Southard, this law, which required applicants to prove they were at a specific location when the bomb was dropped and authorized treatment of a relatively small number of illnesses, was “profoundly inadequate.”

On Aug. 12, 1945, Southard indicates, Wada Koichi visited her best friend. In his dark partially destroyed home, Wada did not instantaneously see that his eyeball was hanging out of its socket, his mouth split open all the way to his ear.

“I didn’t do anything,” her friend whispered to her just before he stopped breathing. Wada took him to mean “I didn’t do anything wrong, so why do I have to die this way?”

In a world in which civilians are targets of war and/or “collateral damage,” Southard demands better answers to Tanaka’s question.

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