Darkness Over Kobe

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Two American airmen shot down during the firebombing of an ancient Japanese city became the unwitting victims of a cycle of cross-cultural vengeance.

In the early morning hours of March 17, 1945, the wail of air raid sirens ripped the mantle of calm from Kobe, Japan. My father, Lieutenant (junior grade) Murray Glusman, a young Navy doctor on the medical staff of the Kobe Prisoner of War Hospital, peered from behind blackout curtains and marveled at the sight. Hundreds of B-29 bombers surged through the sky. The Yanks were back at last.

The Kobe POW Hospital occupied a former mission school in the foothills of the Rokko Mountains. The compound of small, wood-shingled buildings in a pastoral setting was a showpiece intended to help convince the world how well the Japanese were treating their captives, including the doctors and corpsmen who comprised the Allied medical staff. But nothing was going to erase the prisoners' memories of the beatings they'd been subjected to at Ichioka POW Camp in Osaka or the executions they'd witnessed at Cabanatuan POW Camp in the Philippines. Nor would they forget the scores of patients they'd seen perish from dysentery and beriberi due to a lack of food and medicine after the fall of Bataan, or the men they'd known who died horrifically as victims of Japanese surgical experimentation —which "even in its most favorable light," as my father wrote in his medical notes at the time, constituted manslaughter.

The planes targeted Kobe's waterfront first, dropping thousands of tons of magnesium thermite incendiaries as they swept the city west to east. Then they

hammered it south to north, flying so low that their identification numbers were visible. Buildings ignited on impact, firestorms raged down streets. The bellies of the B-29s reflected the red glow of the burning metropolis.

One plane appeared in the glare of searchlights, and my father watched as it plunged into the harbor after being nailed by anti-aircraft fire. Two miles north of Kobe's city center, over the Maya mountains, another B-29 was fired on and then rammed by a Japanese "Tony" fighter. At the nearby Futatabi internment camp, civilian Harold E. Brinkerhoff watched the bomber disappear into a cloud. "There was an explosion and a burst of light," he said. The wings were severed from the fuselage, but one wing still had its engines intact and spun counterclockwise away from the camp. Two parachutes blossomed out of the debris before it went into freefall, streaking over Mount Futatabi like a shooting star.

My father experienced a wave of mixed feelings as he watched the bombers head off to the horizon while Kobe burned to the ground. He was an ethical man who had sworn allegiance both to the American flag and to the Hippocratic oath. As an American, he was filled with pride by the sight of the B-29s that March night and reveled at the prospect of retribution against the Japanese. As a doctor, he felt concern both for the civilian victims of the firebombing and the American airmen who were shot down. What he had no way of knowing at the time was that somewhere on that nearby mountainside a cycle of retribution more horrible than he could imagine was beginning to unfold.

At about 8 a.m., a Japanese schoolboy, Kaoru Fukada, informed local authorities that he had spotted an American aviator on Mount Futatabi. The airman was 2nd Lt. Robert W. Nelson, the navigator of Z Square 8 (serial no. 42-24849), a ship dubbed *St. Bernard* because it had often come to the aid of disabled aircraft. A freckle-faced kid who had done his preflight training at Ellington Field, gone on to navigation school at San Marcos and then earned his wings at Roswell, N.M., Bobby Nelson had married his longtime sweetheart, Betty, before being assigned to the 500th Bomb Group of the Twentieth Air Force's 73rd Bomb Wing. He walked with such a proud military bearing, said his old barracks mate from Ellington Field, Ed Keyser, that it looked as if his back was in a brace.

Miraculously, Nelson was uninjured except for a few scratches on his face. Half a mile away, radio operator Sergeant Algy S. Augunas of Bay Shore, N.Y., lay with a broken leg. The rest of the crew had died. Five bodies were found in the plane's tail assembly, 500 yards above Futatabi internment camp. The bombardier, 2nd Lt. Erwin A. Brousek, lay 60 feet away, next to his unopened parachute, partly decapitated. Still strapped in their seats 140 feet from camp were airplane commander Major Robert J. Fitzgerald and pilot 2nd Lt. Robert E. Copeland, who the day before had been playing bridge with his buddies back on Saipan.

The body of engineer 2nd Lt. James C. Bond was never recovered. But in the wreckage of Z Square 8, a flight boot with the name "OGATA" written on it in white letters turned up. The boot belonged to Captain Jun'ichi Ogata. Ogata was an ace fighter pilot with the Japanese Army's 56th *Sentai*, one of two intercept groups in the Osaka–Kobe area, and the man flying the plane that had rammed the B-29.

Nelson and Augunas were first taken prisoner at about 8:20 a.m. by guards at Futatabi. Around noon, detainees there saw Nelson enter the compound in the company of local police. He strolled in "with a swaggering walk," civilian Charles F. Gregg wrote in his diary, "and occasionally looked down on the coppers!" Nelson was given tea, a piece of bread, and before he left, "he smiled at us, turned and raised his hand in salute."

Nelson and Augunas were hauled to the Kikusui Bashi Police Station, where they were briefly questioned before being turned over to Saburo Osakabe of the Kobe Prefectural Police Station. He alerted the headquarters of the Osaka *Kempeitai*—the dreaded secret police.

The *Kempeitai* were Japan's equivalent of Germany's Gestapo. They made a mockery of bushido, the samurai warrior code of conduct. The *Kempeitai* were racist, ruthless, secretive and sadistic. They could stop a man in the street simply because of the way he looked. They took the law into their own hands and wielded it like a sword against suspected enemies of state.

On orders from the Central Army staff, Nelson and Augunas were imprisoned in the 22nd Infantry Guard House and then transferred to the Osaka Military Prison, where the Central Army had its area headquarters.

Osaka, Japan's second largest city, had been devastated by a B-29 raid on March 13 that had left half its population homeless and eight square miles of the city in ruins. More raids would ensue. By mid-May, as the Battle of Okinawa roared, the XXI Bomber Command began dropping tons of illustrated propaganda leaflets over Japanese cities warning civilians of continued B-29 strikes "that will envelop you and burn you to ashes." (See "Fire From the Sky," P. 44)

The American firebombing of Japan terrorized the civilian population, exposed the military's inability to protect the homeland and underscored the inefficacy of its civil defense. But its real objective was to destroy Japan's war machine. And the Japanese knew what they had to do. Just as the *Kempeitai* had made an example the previous January of captured B-29 navigator Lieutenant Ray "Hap" Halloran by publicly exhibiting him naked in a lion's cage at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo, so Nelson and Augunas would be used to uphold the honor of a nation staring at defeat. Pieces of the wreckage of Z Square 8 had already been put on display at the Kobe Young People's Club. This was what happened when the enemy dared to bomb Japan.

Robert Nelson and Algy Augunas were tried under the "Military Law Concerning Air Raids" before a military discipline tribunal of three judges— two combatant officers and one judicial officer—in a process similar to a Japanese court-martial procedure. The law applied to enemy airmen who bombed, strafed or inflicted casualties on Japanese civilians or private property that had no military significance, or who committed any "brutal acts against humanity." Punishment was usually death by firing squad, though the chief of the tribunal or commander of the Fifteenth Area Army could commute the sentence to life imprisonment or a minimum of 10 years.

The 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War stipulated that a "detaining Power" had to notify a representative of the "protecting Power" of an upcoming trial and of a sentence handed down. In the case of a death penalty, the accord called for a three-month delay before the sentence was carried out. Japan signed but did not ratify the Geneva Convention and, like a slap in the face to the Western powers, routinely flouted its terms. But then the United States flouted the Fourth Hague Convention (1907), to which Japan was a party, and which prohibited "bombardment, by whatever means, of towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings which are undefended."

The trial of Nelson and Augunas took place in Osaka Castle on July 18, and lasted a mere 40 minutes. The airmen stood the entire time, dressed in their uniforms. Both appeared to have lost weight. They had no defense counsel, following Japanese legal procedure. Lieutenant Yorio Ogiya made a brief opening statement as prosecutor and charged Nelson and Augunas with the bombing of Nagoya and Hamamatsu from December 1944 to February 1945 and Tokyo, Osaka and Kobe in March 1945. Captain Buichi Ono, the judicial officer, followed up with questions about their backgrounds: place of birth, education, military service and respective positions in a B-29 crew.

The majority of questions were directed at Nelson. Asked if he knew what types of bombs were used in the raid over Kobe the night of March 16-17, Nelson replied through interpreter, Sgt. Maj. Takao Mori:

"I didn't see them loaded, but I was told they were incendiary bombs."

"Did you know actually that the plane dropped bombs over the cities?" Captain Ono pressed.

Nelson replied that he was told bombs were dropped, though he did not know the specific target.

Were the statements he had made and signed during the pretrial investigation true?

Nelson said that they were, but the statements were never read in court. Had he seen them he wouldn't have been able to understand them anyway because they were written in Japanese.

When it was Augunas' turn, he admitted that he had heard crew members say they were going to either Osaka or Kobe, though he did not know of a specific target.

But did he see any fire in the city?

"I didn't see any fires myself, but I was told that the city was on fire when the plane came over the city."

Augunas was also asked if the statements he had made and signed were true, though again no statement was read aloud, and all Augunas would have been able

to recognize was his signature.

Then Lieutenant Ogiya addressed the court, reiterating the charges against the Americans who had violated the "Military Law Concerning Air Raids" and therefore deserved the death sentence. Ogiya's statement was never translated into English for the benefit of the accused.

After a brief recess, the guard called the court to attention. Major Norio Yamanaka, the presiding judge, read the sentence. Nelson and Augunas were found not guilty of the first charge—the bombing of Nagoya and Hamamatsu—but guilty of the second and third charges, pertaining to the bombing of Osaka and Kobe in March 1945. By order of the Military Discipline Conference of the Fifteenth Army Area Headquarters and the Central Army Headquarters, the charges against the airmen carried a sentence of death.

Nelson was stunned. But in fact the fate of the men had been sealed before the trial even began. Two months earlier, Maj. Gen. Kiyotomi Otahara, head of the Judicial Section of the Fifteenth Area Army, had conducted separate interrogations of Nelson and Augunas at the Osaka Military Prison. He then dictated to Sgt. Maj. Yasakuzu Shimamura, a clerk, their purported first-person narratives, which Nelson and Augunas signed and marked with their thumbprints. In mid-June Otahara submitted his written opinion to Lt. Gen. Eitaro Uchiyama, commanding general of the Japanese Fifteenth Area Army and Lt. Gen. Kunitake, his chief of staff. Charges against Nelson and Augunas for the bombings of Nagoya and Hamamatsu were dropped, on the grounds of insufficient evidence. But they were found guilty of the "indiscriminate bombing" of Tokyo, Osaka and Kobe in the March raids. A life sentence, Otahara argued, was too light for violations of Military Discipline Regulations, even though Uchiyama was aware that some of the airmen in Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle's squadron, shot down in a surprise attack against Japan in April 1942, had had their sentences commuted. His recommendation was forwarded to Field Marshal Shunroku Hata, commander of the Second General Army at Hiroshima as well as to the War Ministry in Tokyo.

The execution of Nelson and Augunas was authorized and preordained before the defendants took the stand. Their graves had already been dug.

When Nelson was asked if there was anything he wanted to say to the court, he replied that he didn't think their deeds were against international or military law, since they were only obeying the orders of their army. But, he said: "If the sentence is fixed, there is no help. I only did my best to [*sic*] the States."

Augunas remained silent.

The Japanese adjourned for lunch. Afterward, Nelson and Augunas were blindfolded, had their hands tied behind their backs and were transported by army truck to the Shinodiyama Military Parade Grounds in Yokoyama-mura. Accompanying them were Ogiya, Ono, lst Lt. Jisei Minami, a doctor, Private Inoue, a Buddhist priest who was an inmate, and three guards from the Osaka Military Prison who constituted the firing squad.

The initial Japanese account of what happened next is horrific enough, even though it turned out to be only partially true. According to interpreter Takao Mori, the men were greeted on their arrival by several other guards, who had dug two graves at the top of a small hill. Augunas had difficulty walking; a guard had to carry him on his back. The group took a brief rest, and then Nelson and Augunas, still blindfolded with hands tied, were made to sit at the edge of their respective graves. Three guards loaded their rifles, faced the prisoners, and Ono read the execution sentence, which Mori rendered into English.

"Is there anything you want to say or do now?" Ono asked the Americans.

Nelson wanted to shake hands with Augunas and requested that his family back in the States be told of the circumstances of his execution. He wanted his darling wife, Betty, to know, too. He asked where exactly he was.

"May I tell the name of the place?" inquired the interpreter.

An officer replied: "It is up in the hills on a Military Firing Range, situated outside a city near the sea."

Then Augunas spoke up.

"I don't hate none of you, because you did your duty as I did my duty, only what I want to say is that this damn war will be over soon and there will be peace forever.

That is all."

The guards untied the ropes from the prisoners' wrists, allowing them to clasp hands.

"Good luck," said one.

"See you again," said the other.

Tears streaked down Augunas' face from beneath his blindfold.

According to the initial Japanese account of the execution, the fliers were then placed in their graves, their backs to the ground, heads inclining slightly uphill. At the command of Captain Kanji Nakamichi, chief of the Osaka Military Prison, Sergeant Shosaku Santa shot Nelson in the head from 6½ feet away, and Sergeant Yoshibumi Matsui fired at Augunas. Augunas was killed instantly. Nelson was still alive, and Nakamichi ordered Sgt. Maj. Toru Matsuda to fire a second shot.

Once Lieutenant Minami pronounced them both dead, the riflemen cleaned their guns, dirt was shoveled into the graves, and Private Inoue said a prayer for both of the crewmen. The graves were unmarked, identified only by a small rise in the ground, beneath which was a small piece of wood with the number "600" written on it for Nelson, and "60l" for Augunas.

The full story of what happened to Nelson and Augunas is even more chilling. A postwar inquiry by the Chief Investigation Division, Legal Section, of General Headquarters/Supreme Commander of Allied Powers revealed that many of the witnesses had lied about the means of execution.

Major General Otahara, the official who conducted the initial interrogations of Nelson and Augunus at Osaka Military Prison, and Lt. Gen. Kumitake, the chief of staff of the Japanese Fifteenth Area Army, had ordered the executioners to chop off the heads of the two American airmen samurai-style. "Do it splendidly," Otahara told Captain Nakamichi. "Do it with courage."

The way Otahara's orders were carried out was any- thing but splendid or courageous. Nakamichi instructed Sando and Matsui, the guards who had dug the graves for Nelson and Augunas that morning, to decapitate them with swift strokes

of their swords. Sando struck Nelson's neck twice, but failed to sever his head completely. Nakamichi then ordered him to shoot Nelson, whereupon Sando fired two bullets into the navigator's skull. Matsui struck Augunas once but also failed in his attempt. At Nakamichi's command, he shot Augunas once in the head.

Otahara winced when Lieutenant Ogiya, his go-between with the kangaroo court, told him of the botched beheadings. Captain Ono, the judge who handed down the sentence on Nelson and Augunas, ordered that the cause of death be listed as "execution by shooting."

General Kunitake of the Fifteenth Area Army had read the Potsdam Declaration —"Stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals, including those who have visited cruelties upon our prisoners"—and was eager to protect his commanding officer, General Uchiyama, given the imminent Allied occupation of Japan. Kunitake ordered all persons connected to the case to conceal the facts if they were questioned by American authorities and to report that Nelson and Augunas died in the bombing raid over Kobe.

On August 23, 1945, eight days after Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan but before the first American occupation forces arrived on the mainland, Uchiyama instructed Ogiya to disinter the bodies of Nelson and Augunas and cremate them. Their ashes were then placed in two wooden boxes and hidden without markers in a secluded spot of the Sanadayama Military Cemetery in Osaka.

Tokyo had advised *Kempeitai* units to destroy all evidence of war crimes. Indeed, when Dr. Marcel Junod, chief delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the Far East, arrived in Tokyo on August 17, 1945, he found many officials preoccupied with "burning tons of papers, propaganda sheets and compromising documents."

By September 1945, newspaper articles began to appear on the deaths of other captured American airmen. Soon, the Japanese conspiracy to cover up the gruesome executions of Nelson and Augunas was exposed in its entirety.

In August 1947, the U.S. Eighth Army Military Tribunal in Yokohama concluded Case #123, *U.S.A. vs. Eitaro Uchiyama et al.* For their roles in the trial and execution of Sergeant Algy S. Augunas and 2nd Lt. Robert W. Nelson, Eitaro Uchiyama, Norio

Yamanaka, Buichi Ono, Hideo Matsumori, Norio Ogiya, Kanji Nakamichi and Michio Kunitake received sentences ranging from three to 30 years' imprisonment. Kiyotomi Otahara, the former head of the Judicial Section of the Fifteenth Area Army, was sentenced to death by hanging. The cycle of revenge was complete.

While I was growing up, my father rarely spoke about his experiences as a young Navy doctor at the Kobe POW Hospital, and I rarely inquired, careful to observe the cloak of silence he wrapped around his memories of war. He was saddened but not surprised when, years later, he learned the fate of Robert Nelson and Algy Augunas. When I asked him how he felt about the American fire raids on Kobe, he could not suppress a smile at the recollection of B-29s filling the sky "with a terrible kind of majesty," as he put it. If the B-29s carried on their wings the promise of salvation, the destruction on the ground—2,669 dead, 11,289 injured and 242,468 homeless—was almost too ghastly for contemplation. Some of my father's patients were caught in the crossfire during a decisive attack on June 5, 1945, that leveled 4.35 square miles of the city and destroyed 51,399 buildings, including the Kobe POW Hospital. He recalled treating fellow POWs as well as Japanese burn victims as smoke rose from the ruins. "We were doctors," he said. "Our mission was to help others. We didn't discriminate."

Nor did the architects of the XXI Bomber Command's incendiary campaign, which caused a staggering 183,367 civilian deaths in total. "We knew we were going to kill a lot of women and kids when we burned that town," Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay bluntly remarked after the devastating March 9-10, 1945, attack on Tokyo. "Had to be done." If strategic bombing alone failed to destroy the Japanese economy, it "almost certainly shortened the war in the Far East," argued historian Richard Overy. The time gained saved the lives of countless Allied POWs who were riddled with disease or, like my father, on the brink of starvation.

The last time my father saw Kobe was in August 1945 in that strange twilight between the Japanese surrender and the American occupation. He would never forget the image of Japan's most cosmopolitan city reduced to ashes. To the end of his life, he remained haunted by the thought that the shimmering skyline of Manhattan could just as easily be razed.