

ATOMIC AGE REDUX - OLLI Presentation, February 12, 2014

After our class, one participant advised me that I was mistaken, that the Nagasaki bomb was in fact also a fission bomb. It used plutonium 239, a man-made element, instead of uranium 235, which is a highly refined version of a naturally occurring element. However, as this bomb employed a more complex and sophisticated firing mechanism, it was appreciated that feedback and have corrected my presentation notes accordingly. Thank you.

Two questions raised during the class motivated me to do additional research. Here are my findings.

First, every source that I researched indicates that the B-29 was in fact the first pressurized heavy bomber employed in World War II. There were several pressurized passenger aircraft, such as the Boeing Stratoliner, developed in the late 1930s and 40s that had a pressurized cabin. While the Stratoliner employed the same wings, tail, landing gear, and engines that were used on the B-17 bomber, the B-17 bomber was not pressurized in so far as I can determine. Air and Space Museum Superfortress was the most sophisticated propeller-driven bomber of WW II, and the first bomber to house its crew in pressurized compartments."

Of special interest to me, I needed to verify my contention that Emperor Hirohito knew about what was going on during WWII. According to all the sources that I researched, Hirohito was fully aware of the attack on Pearl Harbor and apparently took a keen interest in military affairs throughout the war. Hirohito personally vetoed the recommendation of the cabinet to the appointment and member of the royal household to serve as prime minister. Instead he personally chose Hideki Tojo. Moreover, he assented to the message sent to the civilians on Saipan. The Emperor personally ratified the removal of constraints on the treatment of Chinese prisoners during the war. Further, he authorized the use of chemical weapons in China. According to my research, it was a deliberate de occupation forces under Gen. MacArthur, despite evidence to the contrary, to portray Hirohito as a powerless figurehead, distant from decision-making. They believed that they needed the Emperor to keep the country united during the early and uncertain days of the occupation. It worked. In fact, one source I researched reported that MacArthur's staff worked hard to attribute ultimate responsibility for the Japanese war crimes to Tojo and other military leaders.

It is interesting to note that, during the occupation, Hirohito was forced to reject the long-established belief among the Japanese people that he was divine. Further, as evidence of his personal transition after the war, Hirohito boycotted the Yasukuni Shrine when he learned that Class A war criminals had been secretly buried there.

And so, the debate about World War II goes on. Alan McKie