Nuclear weapons

‘You don’t brag about wiping out 60-70,000 people’: the men who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Stephen Walker
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The mushroom cloud over Nagasaki, 9 August 1945. Photograph: Galerie Bilderwelt/Getty Images

This summer will mark 80 years since the attacks stunned the world. Today, every one of the crew members who carried out the bombings is dead. Here, one of the last writers to interview them reopens his files

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‘It was a beautiful morning. The sun was shining on the buildings. Everything down there was bright – very, very bright. You could see the city from 50 miles away, the rivers bisecting it, the aiming point. It was clear as a bell. It was perfect. The perfect mission.”

I’m sitting in a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco opposite the navigator of the Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August

1945. The year is 2004, and Theodore “Dutch” Van Kirk, aged 83, has agreed to be interviewed for a book I’m writing for the 60th anniversary of that fateful mission. Van Kirk informs me, with the trace of a smile, that this will probably be the last interview in his life.

We have spent the afternoon looking through wartime logbooks from his 58 overseas combat missions. Now, between servings of dim sum, he is telling me about the 59th, the one that wiped out a city, along with well over 100,000 people.

“The instant the bomb left the bomb bay, we screamed into a steep diving turn to escape the shockwave. There were two – the first, like a very, very, very close burst of flak. Then we turned back to see Hiroshima. But you couldn’t see it. It was covered in smoke, dust, debris. And coming out of it was that mushroom cloud.”

The crew of the B-29 bomber Enola Gay. Stephen Walker interviewed Theodore ‘Dutch’ Van Kirk, navigator (1); Tom Ferebee, bombardier (2); Paul Tibbets, pilot (3); Bob Lewis, co-pilot (4); George ‘Bob’ Caron, tail gunner (5); and Robert Shumard, assistant engineer (6). Photograph: Photogquest/Getty Images

He stops a moment, awe visibly registering on his face. “The city was gone. It was only three minutes since we’d dropped the bomb.”

Van Kirk died in 2014. In the years since we met, all the other crew members who flew on the missions to Hiroshima, and to Nagasaki three days later on 9 August, have also died. Meanwhile, the numbers of *hibakusha*, those who survived the attacks, are rapidly dwindling. We are passing into a twilight of history. As we approach the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings, this biological fact seems disturbingly relevant. Twenty years ago, the world was a dangerous place. Today, it’s more so. More nations are developing nuclear weapons with few, if any, effective international controls. Tactical nuclear strikes have been explicitly threatened by Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un. And, just in the last week, war has broken out in the Middle East over fears that Iran may be very close to having a bomb. In such times, perspective matters. The shocked testimony of those like Van Kirk needs to be heard. History has lessons to teach us.

It was this thought that prompted me to reopen my files, to reread the transcripts of interviews with some of the crew members of both attacks. Much of this material was untouched for two decades; nothing relating to the Nagasaki mission was published. Here were some of the last testimonies of those who did the unthinkable. They were in their 80s or 90s, nearing the end of their lives. How did they remember it?

On 4 August 1945, Charles “Don” Albury, a 24-year-old B-29 pilot, was summoned to a secret briefing on Tinian, a Pacific island 1,500 miles south of Japan. Then the biggest bomber base in the world, Tinian was a jump-off point for a conveyor belt of the almost daily destruction of Japan. About 300,000 people had already died and 9 million were now homeless.

But Albury’s outfit had yet to take part in the attacks. Known as the 509th Composite Group, they occupied a secret compound on a far corner of the base. “Security was very, very tight,” Albury told me when I met him at his home in Orlando, Florida. Then aged 83, he grinned mischievously. “I remember one time the base commander got too near one of our planes. A guard nearly shot him.”

Even the 509th’s crews knew nothing about their ultimate missions. And they had been training for almost a year. First in Utah, later on Tinian: “We kept dropping practice bombs and flying these crazy steep turns. We did it day after day. For months.” But nobody told them why, and few dared ask. Those who did could find themselves swiftly dispatched by their leader, Paul Tibbets, a battle-hardened bomber pilot, to hardship posts above the Arctic Circle. “You learned to keep your mouth shut,” said Albury.

But in that 4 August briefing a part of the secret was about to be revealed.

Nine days earlier, on 26 July, President Truman had delivered his ultimatum to Japan in the Potsdam declaration: either surrender unconditionally, or face “prompt and utter destruction”. The means of that destruction was not specified. And Japan had not surrendered.

If I live for 100 years I will never get these few minutes out of my mind

The scene of devastation at Hiroshima, 1945. Photograph: Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

In the tropical heat of the briefing hut, Tibbets informed his crews that within 48 hours they would destroy a Japanese city with a single bomb unlike any in history, “and hopefully”, recalled Albury, “win the war”. The bomb, said Tibbets, had been tested in New Mexico on 16 July. Its blast was equivalent to the destructive payload of 2,000 B-29s. The target would be one of three cities, in this order: Hiroshima, Kokura (now called Kitakyushu) or Nagasaki. The deciding factor would be the weather. On explicit orders from Washington, it had to be clear for the drop.

“Nobody and nothing moved in that room,” said Albury. “We were just stunned.” Tibbets then introduced a quiet, balding naval captain, William “Deak” Parsons, who would join the mission. Parsons had witnessed the New Mexico test. He told the men that the explosion would be the hottest and brightest thing since the creation. He warned them to wear welders’ goggles because its light would be dazzling enough to

blind them. But he didn't warn them that the bomb was radioactive. "Nobody," said Van Kirk, "told us this was going to be an atomic bomb."

Van Kirk remembered Tibbets making a final announcement. "He said anybody who isn't comfortable with this and doesn't want to go, doesn't have to go." Nobody spoke. "This was going to be a day history would remember," Albury recalled. He had left a wife and baby daughter in America. If this bomb was successful, the war might be over. Then he could go home.

By midnight the following night, they were ready.

One of the men who would be flying was Morris Jeppson, a 23-year-old electronics specialist recruited by the atomic scientists at Los Alamos to work on the bomb's revolutionary fusing system. For two weeks in 1944 the FBI interrogated everybody in Jeppson's life before he found himself sharing a plane ride with Los Alamos's director, J Robert Oppenheimer, "a real gentleman who talked nuclear physics with me but never talked weapons". Sitting in his Las Vegas kitchen, Jeppson, then 82, chuckled at the memory. "Perhaps he was checking me out."

If so, he passed the test. He and Parsons would monitor the electronic wizardry of the bomb – nicknamed "Little Boy" – all the way to the drop.

The 'Little Boy' bomb at Tinian island before being loaded on to Enola Gay. Photograph: PhotoQuest/Getty Images

They would also have to arm it in flight, an exceptionally delicate job that should really have been carried out on the ground. But both men had recently watched too many heavily overloaded B-29s crashing on take-off. “We saw them burning on the runway,” said Jeppson, “and we saw it often.” Harold Agnew, a brilliant 24-year-old Los Alamos physicist who would be flying in an accompanying B-29 filled with blast-measuring instruments, had also seen those crashes. If this happened with Little Boy, the consequences could be horrific.

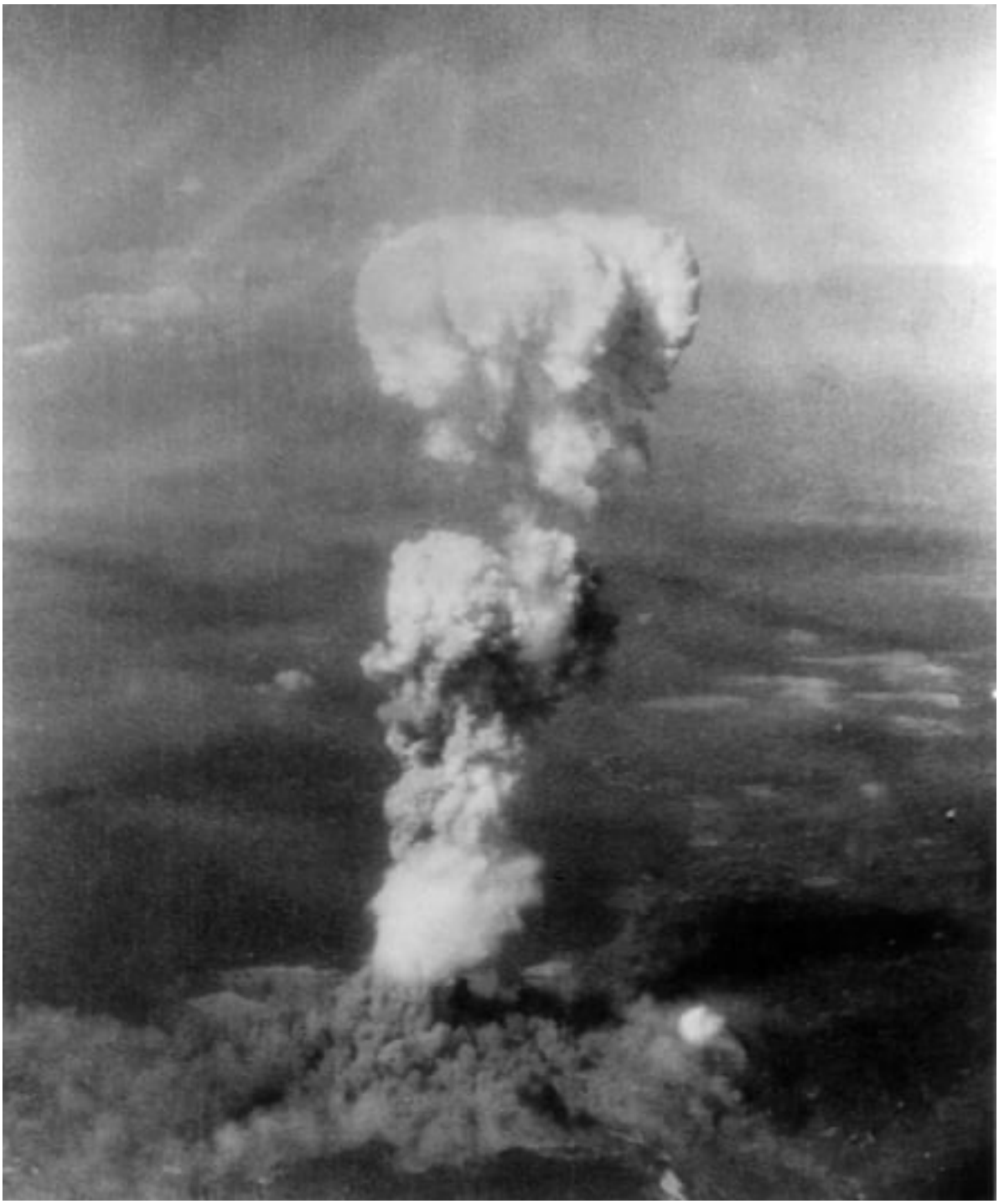
“That bomb was completely unsafe,” Agnew, then 83, told me when we met at his San Diego home. And he would know. In 1942, as part of a secret team working in Chicago under the Nobel-prizewinning scientist Enrico Fermi, he had witnessed the world’s first controlled nuclear chain reaction. “If they’d crashed, anything could have happened.” Parsons would need to be able to improvise, fast. In the hours before take-off, he and Jeppson began practising how to arm an atomic bomb in flight. Over and over, the two men ran over the checklist, leaving nothing to chance.

Out on the hardstand, the bomb-carrying B-29, now sporting the name of Tibbets’ mother, Enola Gay, was bathed in floodlights. “That was our first surprise,” said Van Kirk. “The plane was all lit up and there were all these people – photographers, newspapermen – everywhere. It looked like a Hollywood premiere.”

The analogy is eerily accurate. Back in May, before it was certain an atom bomb would even work, a secret target committee had stressed the importance of making its “initial use sufficiently spectacular … when publicity on it is released”. What mattered was “obtaining the greatest psychological effect against Japan”. But to Van Kirk, “all the photos and questions from reporters felt like breakfast for the condemned man”. He was relieved that Tom Ferebee, Enola Gay’s bombardier, had earlier cleaned out all the underwear and silk stockings the crew had stashed inside the plane as good luck charms.

At last the surreal scrum was over. At 2.45am Enola Gay, along with Agnew’s plane The Great Artiste, co-piloted by Albury and carrying blast instruments, and a third camera plane later dubbed Necessary Evil, took off from Tinian’s North Field runways, lined with fire trucks in case of the worst. “I really did have faith in Paul [Tibbets],” said Van Kirk. “I knew we were grossly overloaded. But he got us off – just a few hundred feet from the end of the runway.”

Under a moonless sky, the strike force struck north over the Pacific. Tibbets lit his pipe. One hour ahead, three reconnaissance aircraft also flew towards the three possible targets. In keeping with Washington’s orders, their task would be to radio back how much cloud there was over the aiming points. Ultimately the weather would choose which city was obliterated – and which spared.



The atomic blast rising over Hiroshima, 6 August 1945. Photograph: Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Fifty miles out of Tinian, Parsons and Jeppson clambered into Enola Gay's bomb bay to begin arming Little Boy. "Parsons knelt by the bomb with a wrench. I held a flashlight," said Jeppson. The work was fiddly and dangerous. Part of the procedure involved inserting four bags of cordite – a form of gunpowder – into the bomb's breech plug. "That worried me more than anything," said Van Kirk. "Loading all that damn

gunpowder while we were on the aeroplane, for Chrissake." In 15 minutes the checklist was completed. But there was still one final step before the bomb was fully armed. That would come later.

Enola Gay sped through the night into a golden dawn."That morning the sunrise was the most beautiful I'd ever seen," Van Kirk remembered. He plotted a course to Iwo Jima, an island that had seen appalling battles in early 1945. Now it was the rendezvous point for the three planes. "My biggest fear was: don't screw this up," said Van Kirk. But his calculations were spot on. Iwo emerged dead ahead, along with The Great Artiste and Necessary Evil.

An hour and 20 minutes from the Japanese coast, Jeppson – now by himself – climbed back into the bomb bay, to replace Little Boy's three green safety plugs with three red arming plugs. He double-checked the red plugs were correctly set, gave the third one a final twist – "That was a moment," he remembered – and left. He was the last person to touch or see the bomb. Enola Gay's co-pilot, Bob Lewis, pencilled in his log: "The bomb is now live. It's a funny feeling knowing it's in back of you. Knock wood."

But on which city would it be dropped? The answer soon came from the weather planes ahead, radioed in code. Conditions were excellent over the primary target. Tibbets switched on the intercom: "It's Hiroshima."

"Everybody was getting excited," recalled Van Kirk. "I could see the city out the window. We all formally identified it." Ahead was the point from which Enola Gay would begin its bomb run. "By this time it was a game for me. I was trying to hit that initial point exactly at nine o'clock." Van Kirk smiled. "I'm a punctual person. When I say I'm going to pick my daughter up at five o'clock, that's when I pick her up."

He was punctual now. On cue, Enola Gay swung towards a striking T-shaped bridge that Tibbets later described as "the most perfect aiming point in the whole damn war". Ferebee hunched over his bombsight. Unlike almost every other city in Japan, this one, with a population of about 350,000, had almost never been bombed. It had been preserved instead for atomic obliteration. It satisfied every requirement: it had a sufficient military presence to claim it as a valid military target. It had hills on three sides that would concentrate the blast, creating even greater damage. And, as it had been kept intact, it would demonstrate with brutal clarity to the Japanese what an atom bomb could do to a city.

It was impossible to imagine that something so inconsequential and light – approximately 6kg – could erase a city

Fifteen seconds before the drop, Ferebee flicked a switch. A warning tone sounded across the airwaves. Agnew heard it on The Great Artiste. "We were flying right beside the bomb plane when the tone went. We opened our bomb bay doors, ready to drop

our blast-measuring instruments." His pilot Albury stared down at the city. "We could see everything, the bridge, everything. It was a sunny, beautiful day." Then the tone stopped and Little Boy tumbled out.

"Tibbets went hard into that steep turn," said Van Kirk. "Engines going full blast. I started timing." Oppenheimer had told Tibbets that the shockwave could crush their plane like a giant hand swatting an ant. There were 43 seconds before Little Boy exploded. "Everybody was counting," continued Van Kirk. "Everybody was waiting for that bomb to go off because there was a real possibility it was going to be a dud." Jeppson counted in his head – too quickly. "I had a moment of panic. I thought: it's a dud. And then, within two seconds, there was this flash."

Van Kirk was wearing his goggles, but still "it was like a photographer's flash going off in your face". "The whole plane lit up with a white light," said Agnew. "I scribbled a note: 'Boy, this thing just went off, it really did.'" On Enola Gay, the tail gunner, George "Bob" Caron, screamed a warning as the shockwave tore up towards them. "And then, whang!" continued Agnew. "We got whacked. And then a few seconds later we got whacked again." "The whole plane suddenly bounced hard, twice," said Jeppson. For a horrified instant he thought the shockwave might smash through Enola Gay's hull.

Harold Agnew holds the plutonium core of the 'Fat Man' bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Photograph: wikicommons

"Then," he said, "we headed to the windows. I watched this churning on the ground. And this cloud started building up, rising, rising, rising. It was awesome."

From his navigator's window, Van Kirk also stared in amazement. "It was already up to, oh God, 25,000ft and going up rapidly. Anything and everything had been kicked up by that bomb." The sunlit city he had been looking at moments before was now a

huge cauldron of boiling black tar. In The Great Artiste, Albury gazed, transfixed. “We watched that cloud rise. It had every colour of the world up there, beautiful colours. To me it looked like salmon colours, blues, greens.”

Behind him, Agnew’s oscilloscopes measured the size of the blast – the equivalent of about 13,500 tonnes of high explosive, four times the tonnage that had wiped out Dresden in February 1945. He grabbed a 16mm cine camera he had smuggled into the bomber before takeoff. He began filming, his hands shaking. “The city wasn’t there. There was just nothing there. That dust cloud covered the whole city.” He didn’t know it yet, but Necessary Evil’s official cameras would all fail. Agnew’s illicit camera would yield the only movie footage of the Hiroshima bomb.

“My God, what have we done?” wrote Enola Gay’s co-pilot Lewis in his logbook. “If I live for 100 years I will never get these few minutes out of my mind.” Then Tibbets spoke to the crew. “Fellows,” he said, “you have just dropped the first atomic bomb in history.”

“You just can’t imagine something that big,” said Van Kirk. “We couldn’t see how the Japanese could continue the war. Nobody said anything about the people on the ground. That wasn’t mentioned at all.”

Pilot Paul Tibbets receives a medal moments after landing the Enola Gay after the Hiroshima mission. Photograph: George E Staley. Courtesy of Stephen Walker

The same theme rippled across all three crews. “To me it was a great relief – that it worked,” said Jeppson. “I was happy. I thought I’d be going home.” “Did I think the war was over?” asked Albury. “I was hoping it was. I knew Hiroshima wasn’t there any more anyway.” But the mushroom cloud was. They could still see it, even when they were 400 miles away.

Enola Gay landed back at Tinian to a heroes' welcome. Hundreds were cheering as they taxied in. "We got out of the plane," said Van Kirk, "and there were more generals than I'd ever seen in my life. We wondered what the hell they were doing there." They soon found out. Barely had Tibbets stepped from his B-29 before the Distinguished Service Cross was pinned to his chest. It was so unexpected that he was still holding his pipe.

Most of the exhausted crew went to bed. Jeppson went drinking with friends. "I remember one of them asked: 'So what did you do today?' And I said: 'Well, we ended the war.' They thought I was pulling their leg."

But the war didn't end. And three days later, on 9 August, the atomic squadron did it all over again.

Hiroshima, Van Kirk told me, was "the perfect mission" where everything went right. But the next one would be "screwed up", the mission where almost everything would go wrong. Frederick Ashworth went on it. When I interviewed him in Santa Fe he was 92, a long-retired vice-admiral, but in August 1945 he was a young atomic weaponeer who would fill Parsons' role, babysitting the bomb to the target.

The primary target wasn't Nagasaki. It was Kokura, 100 miles further north and home to one of Japan's largest military arsenals. With Hiroshima devastated, this number two city had now moved up to the top slot; Nagasaki was the backup, in case Kokura was socked in.

"Originally the second bomb was intended to be dropped on 11 August – five days after Hiroshima," said Ashworth. A lean, spare man, he spoke quietly with great precision**.** "But a typhoon was coming in. So we had this window. And the thinking was: we hit them, bang, with the second one, right off the bat."

The bang would come from a different kind of bomb. Unlike Little Boy, "Fat Man" was far more sophisticated, utilising plutonium, rather than enriched uranium. "I actually carried the plutonium core in its funny little case," Agnew told me. "I wanted to see what it felt like. And I wanted my picture taken." He dug out the photo for me. Grinning for the camera, he holds the small case in his left hand. It was impossible to imagine that something so inconsequential and light – approximately 6kg – could erase a city.

Agnew wouldn't be flying this time. But at midnight on 8 August, two days after Hiroshima, Albury found himself once again in the briefing room alongside his aircraft commander, Charles "Chuck" Sweeney. Tonight he would be co-piloting Bockscar, the plane carrying the bomb. "It was tense," he told me. "I hadn't been sleeping too much. I just lay on my bed. I'd written to my wife, telling her I loved her. I just wanted to get on with this mission and get home."

The briefing was short. Conditions at Kokura were forecast clear, but, because of major thunderstorms en route, Bockscar would rendezvous with the instrument and camera planes over Yakushima, an island south of Japan. “Tibbets reminded us we were under strict orders from Washington to bomb visually,” recalled Ashworth. “Under no circumstances were we to bomb otherwise.” Then they went out to the ramp.

“And that’s when we had the first problem,” said Albury. A fuel transfer pump had broken, meaning there were 600 gallons of fuel on board they couldn’t use. Normally they wouldn’t need it, but ahead were those storms. Tibbets called a rapid conference. The stakes were tremendous. With their short weather window, any delay might affect the outcome of the war. “He said: ‘Chuck, it’s up to you. You’re commander of the aeroplane.’ And Chuck said: ‘To hell with it, we’ve never used that fuel before: it’s just ballast. I think we should go.’”

At nearly 4am and running late, Bockscar gunned down Tinian’s wet runway, once again lined end to end with fire trucks in case of a catastrophic crash. Thirteen minutes after takeoff, Ashworth’s assistant, Philip Barnes, climbed into the bomb bay to replace the green safety plugs with the red plugs. With Fat Man now fully armed, the plane ran headlong into the first of the thunderstorms.

“It was bumpy,” said Albury. “We flew into some pretty big clouds and we saw typhoons go by.” Back near the bomb bay, Ashworth and Barnes watched their bomb control panel like hawks, monitoring Fat Man’s warning lights as lightning stabbed the night skies. “Then this white light suddenly came on,” said Ashworth. “That’s what you see when you’re about to drop the bomb.”

Bob Caron with a newspaper headlining the Hiroshima attack. Photograph: National Archives and Records Administration (Nara). Courtesy of Stephen Walker

There was a silence as I took this in. Did he think the bomb might go off?

“Absolutely. Sure. That was precisely what was concerning us.” His next sentence was a masterpiece of understatement. “I told Sweeney we were having problems and we were working on it.”

Barnes saved the day, coolly tracing the fault to a misplaced switch. The mission continued into a storm-tossed dawn. But when Bockscar joined up with the instrument plane over Yakushima, the third camera plane – captained by James Hopkins – wasn’t there. “Everybody was looking out the window,” said Albury. “We were circling all the time but we couldn’t see him.” They kept circling. What nobody knew was that Hopkins was 10,000ft too high. “Fifteen minutes goes by, then another 15 minutes,” said Ashworth. They were using up valuable fuel. “I said to Sweeney: let’s get out of here. We’ve got to get on with the mission.”

“We were pretty late by now,” said Albury, “maybe a couple of hours late when we got to Kokura.” The bombardier, Kermit Beahan, started the bomb run. But the winds had changed direction. Thick smoke from a raid on nearby Yahata the previous night was blanketing Kokura. In an appalling irony, American bombs were preventing the use of the atom bomb. “Kermit said: ‘I can’t find the aiming point!’” Albury continued. “We made a second try and it was still the same thing. Now our engineer started talking about fuel.”

They tried a third run from a different direction. That failed, too. Flak was bursting below. Each bomb run was taking 20 minutes and tempers were mounting.

I will not say I was guilty. Under the same conditions I’d do it again, because I honestly believe it saved a lot of lives

Sweeney and Ashworth argued about what to do, finally agreeing to divert. Kokura had been saved by an accident of the weather. Now it was Nagasaki’s turn to be attacked.

But when they got there, the city was covered in cloud. “We *had* to get rid of that bomb,” said Ashworth. With their critically low fuel, they might now not make it to base – which would mean ditching in the sea. Their options were stark: ditch with the atom bomb; jettison it over the ocean; or break direct orders and drop it on Nagasaki through cloud with their primitive radar. They had just minutes to decide.

“By now everybody’s talking back and forth,” said Albury. “There was too much tension.” Then Beahan began the final bomb run. “There was no other choice,” said Ashworth. “We had to get that bomb on Nagasaki. But bombing by radar is notoriously inaccurate.” With seconds to spare, Beahan suddenly spotted a stadium he recognised through a cloud gap. Moments later, he yelled, “Bombs away” – then corrected himself:

“Bomb away”. “Thank God,” thought Albury as Sweeney threw Bockscar into the rollercoaster turn.

“But we didn’t know where the hell that bomb had gone off,” Ashworth said.

In fact, in one of the most bizarre coincidences of the war, Fat Man had detonated almost directly over the factory that once made the torpedoes used in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It killed almost 40,000 people instantly. At least another 40,000 would die later from injuries and radiation sickness.

Pilot Paul Tibbets and bombardier Tom Ferebee reunited in the Enola Gay cockpit in 1981.Photograph: Ben Martin/Getty Images

This was Albury’s second atomic explosion in three days. The same Technicolor images pepper his interview, the same “greens, blues, pinks” of the mushroom cloud, “every colour of the rainbow, always changing and moving up pretty fast. I was just thinking: thank God we dropped it safely.” The jarring adverb hung between us. How do you drop an atom bomb safely?

But Ashworth was seeing it for the first time. **“**This was new to me … It was like nothing you ever saw.” His language became suddenly reluctant as I pressed him further. “I try to keep a relatively neutral reaction to these things – it’s a personal psychological reaction. This is the job I’m here for, this is what I’m supposed to be doing. I don’t have time to reflect: should I be worried about those guys down on the ground?”

He didn't, perhaps couldn't, answer his own question.

Bockscar barely made it back, landing unannounced at Okinawa, the closest American airbase, with a minute's fuel left in the tanks. There were no crowds to greet them, no generals to pin medals on their chests. Nobody even knew they were coming.

There also was no official investigation into their breach of orders. In the end, accuracy was irrelevant. The bomb had done its job. And six days later, on 15 August, battered by both nuclear attacks, as well as a crushing Soviet invasion of Japanese-occupied Manchuria, Japan finally surrendered.

About 200,000 people ultimately died from the two bombings, and possibly many more. The exact figures will never be known. Eighty years afterwards, arguments still rage about whether these annihilations were justified, avoidable or saved more lives than they ended. But what did the crews themselves believe?

"I will not say I was guilty. I will not apologise for it," Van Kirk told me. "In fact, under the same conditions I'd do it again, because I truly, honestly believe it saved a lot of lives." Most of his crewmates clung to this mantra with the same granite faith. Ashworth, who died in 2005 aged 93, always remained proud of his participation in what he called "a major contribution to the war". Agnew, who later became a director of Los Alamos, held the same view until his death in 2013 at 92. "We had to drop it," he explained. "The Japanese began this war. If there hadn't been a Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima would never have happened." Tibbets went several leagues further. In 1976 he caused an international incident when he simulated the nuclear attack,flying a B-29 in a Texas airshow, complete with a mushroom-shaped explosion. He said he'd "never lost a night's sleep over the fact that I commanded the bombing".

Navigator Theodore 'Dutch' Van Kirk. Photograph: Getty Images

But there are occasional peepholes into troubled consciences. “You don’t brag about wiping out 60-70,000,” admitted Robert Shumard, a flight engineer on Enola Gay, who died in 1967. And Caron, its tail gunner, confessed to “a partial feeling of guilt” when he saw photos of burned children from Hiroshima. “I wish I hadn’t seen them,” he added. Jeppson, who died in 2010, once suggested the bomb might have been demonstrated “without the need for destroying a city”. He personally wrote to me of his “sorrow” at Hiroshima’s “great tragedy”.

And then there was this unexpected postscript.

At the end of our interview, Albury told me how he had returned to Nagasaki – barely three weeks after bombing it. Tibbets had decided to fly to Japan with some of his team on the strangest of sightseeing trips. They wanted to visit Hiroshima but the airfield there was badly damaged, so they landed at Nagasaki instead. Van Kirk was also on that trip. “We arrived two or three days before any American troops,” Van Kirk told me. “There were maybe 20 Americans in the whole city. Nobody knew who we were. We didn’t put a sign on ourselves. It was eerie. Very eerie.”

They drove into the city. “There’s all this damage you see from just one bomb. I was amazed,” said Van Kirk. “It scares the hell out of you.”

“We took pictures,” said Albury. “The people didn’t look very happy, I can tell you.” In the ruins, he saw “a shadow on the wall, where somebody was probably walking by when the bomb went off”. There was no trace of the body. The thousands-of-degrees heat from the bomb had simply vaporised it. Then, in a hospital, he saw the dead and dying, “some of the people laying out on the ground outside. It was the only place I saw bodies. They were treating some of the people on the lower floors.”

He suddenly stopped. “It was devastation,” he said finally. “I can’t go back there. I don’t dwell on this too much. It’s been almost 60 years.” There was a long silence. We ended the interview there and I thanked him. But it seemed his mind was still in that hospital.

Then he said, very quietly: “Never again.”

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https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/22/atomic-bomb-hiroshima-nagasaki-author-stephen-walker