

# The Tokyo Air Raids in the Words of Those Who Survived, 被災者が語る東京空襲

Bret Fisk

## The Tokyo Air Raids in the Words of Those Who Survived, 被災者が語る東京空襲

Bret Fisk

*Description:* Bret Fisk provides a brief description of the types of first-person accounts that exist in Japanese regarding the civilian experience of the Tokyo air raids. Examples of such accounts are given under the headings: "Complete Personal Narratives," "Incomplete Episodes and Incidents," and "Sites of Mass Suffering."

*Text:*

In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas sets forth three steps for determining whether a given conflict can be considered a "just war." Aquinas' first assertion is that war must only be instituted by the proper authority. Second, war must always be waged in the name of a worthy cause—to avenge or punish a wrong or to restore what an enemy has unjustly seized. Finally, war must be prosecuted while maintaining "rightful intention," namely, "the advancement of good" or "the avoidance of evil." Several questions come immediately to mind. Who is to say what constitutes the proper authority for declaring war? Don't all nations consider their various causes to be just—no matter how conflicting they might be? Couldn't such a vague formulation be used to validate almost any conceivable military adventure? However, because the main thrust of Aquinas' argument is contained in that third point regarding "rightful intention," I would maintain that even after more than seven centuries

Aquinas' simple formula has yet to be surpassed either in terms of simplicity or profundity. After acknowledging that "a war may be declared by the legitimate authority, and for a just cause, and yet be rendered illicit through a vile intention," Aquinas quotes Augustine to further illustrate what such vile intention might consist of: "The passion for inflicting harm, the cruel thirst for vengeance, an implacable and relentless spirit, the fever of revolt, the lust of power, and such like things, all these are rightly condemned in war."

The purpose of this paper is not to argue pro or con that the incendiary bombing of civilian populations during World War II was an act of "wrong intent" in an otherwise justly prosecuted war effort. However, it is my firm conviction that before such a debate can be held in any seriousness, unflinching and detailed information about what such bombing entailed for the enemy noncombatants on the ground must be held alongside estimates regarding the destructive effect of bombing on enemy war production and other such means of gauging the efficacy of strategic bombing. Unfortunately, such information has been largely unavailable in English until now. Through our book and digital archive projects, Cary Karacas and I hope to address this lack of English material regarding the effects of the B-29 incendiary air raids on the Japanese population. In Japanese, there has long been a wealth of personal accounts and commentary on the air raids. My personal reading and translation work has led me to mentally compartmentalize this vast amount of information into three rough areas: complete personal narratives, incomplete episodes and

incidents, and sites of mass suffering. Hopefully, it will be helpful for those coming to this topic for the first time if I detail these simple groupings with examples here.

### Group One: Complete Personal Narratives

Many volumes of survivors' accounts have been produced in Japan. The stories they tell are invariably emotional, vivid, and written with a sense of urgency that belies a heartfelt desire for the past to be neither forgotten nor repeated. I have yet to come across anything written in a vindictive or resentful spirit. The following is an abridged retelling of an account given by Tsukiyama Minoru (sixteen years old at the time of the March 10, 1945 air raid):

Tsukiyama Minoru remembers the night of March 10 as a cold one. Around the time that his family finished eating dinner, they heard the sound of an air raid siren that was quickly silenced without incident. Relieved that they wouldn't have to enter the family's bomb shelter that night, Minoru and his older brother prepared for bed. However, as the two boys were chatting in their futons, the warning siren rang out once more. Minoru's brother turned on the radio and the brothers listened in the darkness to an announcement that enemy aircraft had been spotted off the coast. Minoru and his brother were used to the air raid routine, but as the pair prepared to join their family downstairs this time, they heard a neighbor outside yelling: "Enemy planes! Enemy planes!" Soon thereafter came what they knew could only be the roar of B-29 engines.

Almost stumbling downstairs in their haste to join their father, mother, and six-year-old sister in the family's bomb shelter under the front porch, the boys were astonished to see the night sky light up in an instant. This was the first time Minoru had seen flares used for illumination during a raid. The flares seemed to float several hundred meters above them and Minoru felt the B-29 aircrews watching from

above. Hearing the whoosh of falling incendiaries, Minoru quickly slid into the shelter. Everyone held their breath as incendiaries began to land all around them. Minoru's little sister began to cry. It became as light as midday when fires broke out in every direction and Minoru knew in an instant that all the day-to-day firefighting training and tools—brooms, hooks, ladders, water-soaked straw mats, household water stores—would be worthless that night. Minoru's own home would soon be engulfed in the general conflagration.

Minoru's father began to shout: "It's too dangerous! We've got to leave!"

Minoru, with his father and brother, hurriedly went back inside the house to retrieve a few important documents, foodstuffs, and the memorial tablets from the family altar. Back outside, they loaded everything onto a bicycle cart and the family of five set off to find shelter anywhere they could. The long thoroughfare they entered, however, was already overflowing with evacuating crowds. Everywhere were people, bicycles, and hand carts. Minoru was overwhelmed by the chaos and noise. The wind and flames seemed to feed into each other and both gained intensity. Pots and pans blew about on the ground and blankets flew through the air. People ran in all directions. As Minoru later recalled: "People were thrown into a living hell to suffer, agonize, and die. One by one, without sin and regardless of age or sex, they became nothing but blackened clumps of charcoal." Minoru's family wanted to reach Sarue Park, but flames blocked their path. As they fled their home, the B-29s flying overhead seemed low enough that Minoru could reach out and touch them. Minoru's brother stopped. He'd forgotten something and wanted to go back for it.

"I'll be right back!"

Minoru's father called back to his son: "We'll keep straight on, so hurry and catch up with us!"

“I will. I’ll be right back!”

Minoru continued to press forward with his parents and sister while occasionally untangling burning bits of blankets and other items that caught on the wheels of their bicycle cart. Crossing a large intersection, the four of them eventually made it to the underpass of the Sobu train line in Kamezawa. Houses had been demolished for fifty meters on either side of the train tracks. Materials salvaged from the demolition had been used to construct shelters throughout the open spaces below and on each side of the tracks. Dome-like structures covered with dirt, the wooden entrances to the shelters were covered with metal plating. Minoru’s family began to search for an open shelter, but they were all full. Able only to secure a place for his wife and daughter, Minoru’s father led Minoru to the side of one of the massive pillars supporting the train tracks above their heads. They were forced to abandon their belongings on the way.

Even with the distance between their pillar and the surrounding buildings, the flames crept closer and closer. Soon Minoru and his father were engulfed in a red cloud of sparks. At the base of each pillar squatted seven or eight refugees seeking shelter on the downwind southern side. While huddling in this fashion, Minoru wondered how much the nearby houses were burning and, holding to the pillar, put his head out to get a glimpse. Immediately he was beaten back by a hail of sparks and almost fell. Minoru and his father beat out the red sparks around them—“more like miniature fires themselves”—with their bare hands. There was nothing they could do to stop it when their bicycle and belongings began to burn in the spot they had been abandoned. Much worse, however, the shelter that Minoru’s mother and sister had entered was also engulfed in flames. Unable to do anything to assist their loved ones, Minoru and his father slapped with their hands and stomped their feet in a desperate effort to extinguish the fires on and around

them.

“If you let your hands or feet be still for even the briefest of moments, your clothes would instantly burst into flame. Small sparks would enter from our collars and sleeves and make their way through our clothes. It was so terribly hot—our clothes singed, and our hands, feet, and faces stung from the burns they received. I could tell at a glance that my father and the others huddled there together were tiring. No one seemed capable of enduring much more.”

A boy near Minoru, who looked to be an elementary school first grader, suddenly rolled a few meters forward. Minoru had stamped out sparks that landed on the boy’s back several times, but was now far too busy trying to keep from combusting himself. The boy’s head covering had caught on fire and Minoru heard him scream: “It’s hot! It hurts! Help me!” The child untied his head covering and threw it as far as he could, but after struggling for a few more seconds, his entire body erupted into flames. “It as if he’d been drenched in gasoline. I watched as in a nightmare as his body shook with its last spasms.”

Minoru was wearing a metal helmet that had grown so hot he could only bear to have it touch his shaved head for thirty seconds at a time. Minoru’s last energy was spent in a frantic battle to bat away the never-ending cloud of sparks assailing his body while lifting the helmet on and off when he could stand its heat no longer.

Minoru heard dull thuds as burning chunks of lumber began falling to the ground around them. He soon realized that the beams supporting the train tracks five meters above their heads had caught on fire and were falling piece by piece as the metal frame that held them in place melted and stretched. “It was unbelievable—we were already half-dead and now we had the additional anxiety of waiting for those burning beams to come crashing down on us.” By the time Minoru had started to

pant for breath “like a goldfish suffering from oxygen deficiency,” he saw that the little boy’s clothes had burned away to reveal soft white flesh that quickly turned black in the heat of the flames. After what seemed like an eternity, Minoru began to hear voices around him proclaiming that the fires were beginning to burn down.

“It was a miracle—there’s just no other word for it. If it had taken the flames just a few more minutes to die down, I might very well have died.”

When they were finally able to move around again, Minoru and his father went to investigate the shelter his mother and sister had entered.

“It was a horrible sight. The entire structure had collapsed and a few wisps of purple and white smoke were all that we could see. Knowing they both must be somewhere under the debris, we could only stand there in shock for some time. In the end, it was really more surprising that we had survived than that they had died. My father just hung his head and I found my own tears unstoppable. They just kept coming.”

Minoru and his father paced the vicinity. The number of corpses and the stench they made was overwhelming. As the pair passed by a tiled area full of corpses that must have been a tub from a public bath, they heard a high-pitched voice from behind.

“Minoru! Father!” (Editor’s note: it is common in Japan for married couples to refer to each other as “Father” and “Mother.”)

Minoru’s mother’s hair was a burnt mess. Her face was black and her tattered trousers were singed.

“My father and I were initially overjoyed, but, as my mother tearfully told us what had happened, we were soon weeping again.”

There had been eleven or so people in the shelter. As the heat inside grew unbearable, no one could take it anymore and they all began calling out to Minoru’s mother: “Open the door, please! It’s too hot. Please, you by the door, open it!”

The moment Minoru’s mother opened the door, however, massive flames bore down upon everyone in the shelter. Minoru’s mother instinctively moved away from the pain of the fire and could only remember rolling across the ground for a few moments before losing consciousness. The next thing she remembered was waking up to the cold north wind while lying on her side in the dirt.

“My little sister, Tomiko, had perished with all the others inside the shelter. My mother went wild as she screamed and wailed, ‘Forgive me, Father! Forgive me!’”

Minoru’s brother never returned, nor was his body ever found. Another sister, several years Minoru’s senior, had been living and working in another neighborhood at the time of the raid. She was also never seen again.

“Another change of fortune that may have been a common experience for many who experienced the air raid came less than four months after March 10 when my mother died in Gunma Prefecture that July. She never saw the end of the war. That’s what the war did to what had once been our peaceful family.”

## Group Two: Incomplete Episodes and Incidents

Within every personal account there are glimpses into the experiences of those who suffered alongside the authors themselves. While incomplete as narratives, these details and images do help to round out our perception of the overall air raid experience and contribute greatly to an appreciation of the enormity of human suffering caused by these raids. Below is a sampling of such observations

gleaned from more complete narratives like that of Tsukiyama Minoru.

Nineteen-year old Nakagawa Fumiko and her father were forced to huddle in the center of a large street when two crowds of refugees fleeing in opposite directions met and came to a standstill. On each side of the road, wooden home and shops burned furiously. The heat was so intense that by standing up or even moving too much to either side one's clothes and body would immediately combust. Nakagawa heard a baby crying and saw the infant's mother stand up to try and quiet the baby. As soon as she stood up, the woman's hair burst into flames, and, still holding fast to the child, she ran about shouting: "Help me! Help me!" The more she ran, however, the bigger the flames became. Nakagawa watched the woman and her child burn to death.

Nakagawa similarly describes a young couple trying to shelter their small children between them from the heat on both sides. However, when the father shifted his body, he too caught fire. Nakagawa comments: "But he still couldn't move in order to protect the children. I heard him shouting to his wife: 'Forgive me, dear! Forgive me!' I can still hear the sound of that voice today."

A young mother named Hashimoto Yoshiko survived with her one-year-old son by jumping into a canal from the bridge she had reached in the company of her parents and a younger sister. During the flight from their home, another teenaged sister had gotten separated from the family in the chaos because she was slowed down by carrying a pot of rice she knew the family would need later. This sister and Hashimoto's parents were never to be seen again.

Even amid an environment of utterly random destruction, individual acts could still have horrific consequences. Suzuki Genichi (a fifteen-year-old male) tells of an incident at the Kikuhana Bridge. The bridge was wooden with

lumber shops on both ends and more lumber floated in the canal below. Those on the bridge were horrified when a man threw down the burning belongings he was carrying and attempted to stamp out the flames with his feet. Whether or not it was a result of this incident, the Kikuhana Bridge did burn down during the early hours of March 10.

Suzuki also describes the horror of watching people on fire jump from the Kikuhana Bridge into the canal below. He himself suffered burns to his head and face while his body was submerged in the cold water of the canal. While the two of them clung to a piece of wood floating in the canal, Suzuki exchanged words with another young man. Suzuki was horrified when a red hot sheet of iron blown by the wind landed directly on the head of his companion. Moments before screaming in pain and sinking into the canal, the young man had voiced his determination to survive the attack—he was nineteen and had just passed his military physical.

One recurring theme in survivors' tales is the sight of the elderly giving up and waiting for death while chanting for Amida Buddha's mercy. Descriptions are also common of people gradually shedding each layer of clothing before finally dying from heat and exhaustion. A fireman in one neighborhood gave up trying to put out the fires around him and merely stayed at his post to spray water onto the fleeing crowds until he too succumbed to the heat, smoke, and exhaustion. An extended family of seven members escaped to a bridge over one of the Shitamachi area's many canals. Their grandfather broke his leg when he jumped to the banks below. From that spot he watched as his six family members huddled together and died on the bridge.

Some of the most poignant accounts of what happened to the people around them come from survivors who were children at the time. One sixth-grade girl who managed to survive



with her sister under a pile of dead adults in the entryway of the school to which they had taken shelter also recounted hearing later of a woman in the neighborhood who had been forced to leave her handicapped oldest child behind in order to flee the flames with her two younger children. The woman had known there was no way to save the lives of all three without her absent husband's assistance in carrying the oldest child.

### Group Three: Sites of Mass Suffering

Within the densely populated and heavily developed areas targeted on March 10, 1945, there were certain locations that seemed like obvious havens to the hundreds of thousands of fleeing civilians. Most prominent among these were the area's elementary schools and parks both because they were officially designated refugee centers and because the schools happened to be rare concrete structures amid a sea of wooden homes and shops. Unfortunately, those who fled to the elementary schools were often among those to suffer the most harrowing deaths. The concrete walls tended to turn the buildings into giant incinerators; rather than being shielded from the heat outside, thousands of people were steamed, asphyxiated, and eventually reduced to ashes.

Kikukawa Elementary School is just one example. Those who investigated the halls and classrooms the next day found nothing but belt buckles, metal helmets, and the occasional bone fragment scattered among the powdered remains of all who had sought shelter there the previous night. The only survivors were a handful of people who had escaped the stifling heat inside the school in time by climbing onto the school's rooftop. Witnesses later attested to a pile of belongings that had been discarded little by little at the entrance to the school by the crowds seeking shelter within. This pile of goods eventually became a fiery blockade that prohibited anyone from exiting the school once the temperature began to rise inside. It was

also rumored that fire was initially introduced to the structure's confines when someone opened a window in an attempt to save someone outside.

Just a few blocks away from Kikugawa stands Chuwa Elementary School. This school was also a concrete structure, but many refugees actually survived therein. Even so, Chuwa Elementary School is a prime example of the struggles and losses incurred by even the luckiest of Shitamachi denizens. The doors of Chuwa Elementary were locked early on by those who had first taken refuge there. While this seems like a horrendous act of cruelty to those on the outside, it may be the reason why a significant number of people did end up surviving in the school. At any rate, one man eventually learned that his wife and children died pounding on this door, and another man who had sent his wife and children ahead before eventually finding a way into the school himself never found the bodies of his own family members. He could only assume they were among the many scorched and unrecognizable corpses that circled the building the next day.

More successful was a seventeen-year-old girl who crouched down to let her pregnant mother step over her body and up into the building through a window that had just been broken by a furious laborer. However, tragedy struck again when a family of nine similarly tried to enter from another window. The first two were able to get in, but as they reached below to pull up their loved ones, all seven succumbed to the heat and perished in the schoolyard. Another concrete building that was the site of horrific losses was the Meijiza Theater. Although there was a large park adjacent to the theater itself, this space was off limits to citizens because it was the site of anti-aircraft guns. As a result, people had no recourse but to crowd within the theater building.

Kawagoe Tadao, a second year medical student

at the time, visited the theater a week after the March 10 attack. Near the entrance, Kawagoe found what he describes as “a mountain of ashes.” These were the remains of people who had likely perished in a belated attempt to escape once the building became too hot. However, throughout the structure Kawagoe found a layer of ashes at times several inches thick. Interspersed were spots where molten iron had dropped down and hardened into stalagmites on the floor when the ceiling’s metal reinforcing melted from the intense heat. On the stairway and within the basement of the theater as well, Kawagoe found nothing but piles of bones. His personal estimate is that at least 5000 people were incinerated within the theater.

Finally, the bridges over the various rivers and canals of Shitamachi were invariably sites of large-scale carnage as groups of fleeing citizens met atop them and found themselves exposed to falling incendiaries with no recourse but to jump into the freezing currents below. Among the most famous of these is the Kototoi Bridge over the Sumida River. A young mother, Takagi Toshie, describes fleeing the fires of her neighborhood with a baby strapped to her back while also holding the hands of her elementary school-aged son and daughter. Having almost crossed the Kototoi Bridge, which was becoming increasingly crowded with refugees, discarded bicycles, futons, and other baggage, Toshie Takagi became separated from her two children as they were jostled by the crowds surrounding them. Just after calling out to the pair of children she could no longer see, Takagi remembers hearing someone’s terrified scream: “The bridge is on fire!” Takagi describes what ensued as nothing but a flash of white light as the superheated air around them exploded into flame. She plunged off the side of the bridge. In the fall to the concrete below, Takagi injured her back and broke her right hand. Takagi’s two children on the bridge were never seen again. The husband to whom she dreaded reporting the deaths of her children

had also gone missing after staying behind to assist in the neighborhood firefighting association’s attempt to put out the flames. His body was also never recovered. Takagi’s baby somehow managed to survive the fall from the bridge, only to die of malnourishment a few months later.

*Bret Fisk is a writer and translator living in Odawara, Japan. He is co-creator of the digital archive [JapanAirRaids.org](http://JapanAirRaids.org). Fisk’s first novel is in Japanese, [Between the Tides](#) 「潮汐の間」, published by 現代思潮新社 in Tokyo. Fisk can be reached at: [bretfisk@gmail.com](mailto:bretfisk@gmail.com).*

*Recommended citation: Bret Fisk, *The Tokyo Air Raids in the Words of Those Who Survived*, 被災者が語る東京空襲, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 9, Issue 3 No 3, January 17, 2011.*

Works cited:

*Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Benzinger Brothers, 1920. (Available online [here](#)).

All details regarding air raid survivor experiences in this paper are taken from:

Tokyo Daikushu o Kiroku Suru Kai (The Association to Record the Tokyo Air Raids), eds. *Tokyo Daikushu -Sensaishi* (“Great Tokyo Air Raid—War Damage Documentation”), vol.1, Tokyo Daikushu o Kiroku Suru Kai, 1973.

See the following articles included in this special issue:

That Unforgettable Day--The Great Tokyo Air Raid through Drawings あの日を忘れない・描かれた東京大空襲

Saotome Katsumoto, Reconciliation and Peace through Remembering History: Preserving the Memory of the Great Tokyo Air Raid 「歴史の記憶」 から和解と平和へ東京大空襲を語りついで

Yamabe Masahiko, Thinking Now about the Great Tokyo Air Raid 今、東京大空襲を考える

Cary Karacas, Fire Bombings and Forgotten Civilians: The Lawsuit Seeking Compensation for Victims of the Tokyo Air Raids 焼夷弾空襲と忘れられた被災市民—東京大空襲犠牲者による損害賠償請求訴訟

Articles on relevant subjects include:

[Robert Jacobs](#), 24 Hours After Hiroshima: National Geographic Channel Takes Up the Bomb

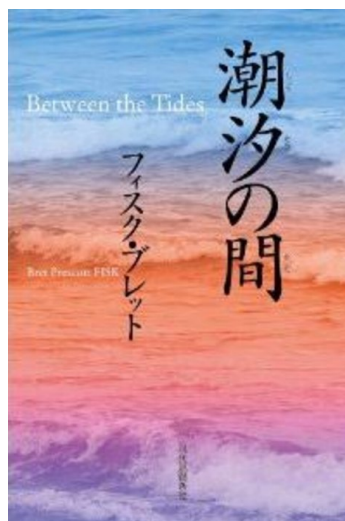
[Asahi Shimbun](#), The Great Tokyo Air Raid and the Bombing of Civilians in World War II

[Yuki Tanaka and Richard Falk](#), The Atomic Bombing, The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and the Shimoda Case: Lessons for Anti-Nuclear Legal Movements

[Marilyn B. Young](#), Bombing Civilians: An American Tradition

[Mark Selden](#), A Forgotten Holocaust: US Bombing Strategy, the Destruction of Japanese Cities and the American Way of War from World War II to Iraq

[Yuki Tanaka](#), Indiscriminate Bombing and the Enola Gay Legacy



Click the cover to order.