

Michael S. Murphy

Book Review

*First into Nagasaki: The Censored Eyewitness Dispatches on Post-Atomic Japan and Its Prisoners of War*

By: George Weller, edited and with an essay by Anthony Weller

New York: Crown Publishers, 2006. 320 pp

Reporting news for the United States military during World War II was a difficult process. Reporters spent much of their time with the troops near and at the front line. Their stories about the war effort, combat, and personal interest segments were inspiring, uplifting, and dramatic all at the same time. However, there were rules that foreign correspondents were forced to follow. Government control of the news was comprehensive. All the new stories were mandated to go through the Office of War Information to be censored before it went to print. The “Code of Wartime Practices for the American Press” (1942) was voluntarily adopted by the major news outlets and members of the press. It wasn’t until 1943 that the government allowed stories and pictures detailing graphic details of the horrors of war, including American dead. President Roosevelt, himself, ordered the truth to be shown to give Americans a sense of what our GI’s were going through.

Of these wartime correspondents, George Weller was one of the most renown. Captured by the Nazis and traded for a German journalist, Weller watched the Belgian Congolese Army attack Italians in Ethiopia, saw the invasion of Crete, interviewed Charles de Gaulle in South Africa following an escape through Lisbon, and overcame malaria to report on the war in the Pacific. He was the first foreign correspondent trained as a paratrooper, and he won a Pulitzer

Prize for his report of an appendectomy on a submarine. He wrote the book Singapore is Silent in 1942 after seeing the city fall to the Japanese, and he advocated a global system of United States bases in his 1943 book Bases Overseas. Weller even witnessed the surrender of the Japanese in 1945 aboard the battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Harbor. It was at that time that General Douglas MacArthur issued an order banning all US personnel from entering the city of Nagasaki, the second city struck with an Atomic Bomb.

George Weller decided that he needed to see Nagasaki in person in order to get the perspective tell the story of the Atomic weapon. He defied General MacArthur's order, impersonated a Colonel, and took a train to the bombed out port city. For six weeks, Weller investigated the devastation of the bombed out city, interviewed citizens, and even liberated an American prisoner of war camp on the outskirts of town. He wrote about the destruction of the city, what he saw in the two surviving hospitals, and interviewed the American POWs regarding their reaction to the Atomic Bomb and their ill-treatment at the hands of their Japanese captors. While in Nagasaki, he sent dispatches back to Tokyo detailing everything he saw. Unbeknownst to him, the Censorship Bureau made sure none of his stories ever made it to print.

First into Nagasaki also includes Logan "Scotty" Kay's Diary on Wake Island, which chronicled the events of two men who survived for three months in the scrub brush of the island after the Japanese takeover in 1941. Because of the conditions, they were forced to give themselves up to the Japanese and were sent to a POW camp on the island of Kyushu. Remarkably, both men survived their captivity despite the fact that keeping a diary was considered a capital crime and punishable by death.

Another section of the book is a very detailed description of events of the *Oryuko Maru*, one of the notorious “Hellships” that sailed from Manila to Kyushu. The topic of hellships was another area of censure by the US government. There were approximately 200 hellships that traveled from the Philippines to mainland Japan. Their purpose was to transport Allied POWs to Japan to work as slaves for the Japanese war effort. Conditions were so atrocious that many of the POWs died from disease, starvation, beatings, stabbings, gunshots, suffocation, and from Allied bombing. The *Oryuko Maru* carried not only Japanese military and Japanese civilians, but also 1,600 American POWs. The trip took 17 days, and by the time they reached their destination, only 300 POWs survived.

Weller died in 2002 thinking his dispatches had been lost. Later, his son, Anthony, found the carbon copies George’s dispatches in his father’s attic. Anthony edited the correspondences, and included his own essay about his father, which resulted in giving the world a different perspective about WWII in the Pacific. More importantly, the finding of the dispatches, and the subsequent publication of the First into Nagasaki, demonstrates the barbaric nature of the Japanese military, as well as the arrogance of the US government for keeping the information from the American public through its censorship policies.

First Into Nagasaki is a book I would recommend to any serious student of World War II. In the first section of the book, it gives a first-hand glimpse into a world that has never been seen. Since the press was not allowed into Nagasaki, the American public never knew the damages occurred from the Atomic Bomb. Because of the censorship policy of the US military, the American public never knew about the atrocities committed by the Japanese military regarding POWs in the slave camps and the use of hellships. Anthony Weller has done the field

of academic scholarship a favor by printing his father's story and his dispatches so that the world can learn by the mistakes of the past. As George Weller stated, "It is through knowing the truth that people discover their hidden will."