

## A Story Captured in Photographs

Written by Kazuo Aiba

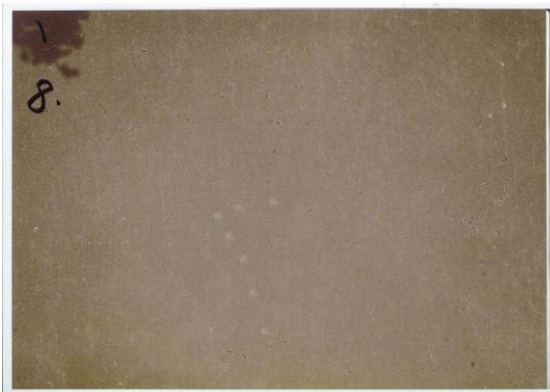
In August 1945, the war between America and Japan would end. But this is a record of events beginning on the afternoon of February tenth.

Snow that had fallen from the fifth to the morning of the sixth had mostly disappeared. The wind was sharp and stronger than usual, but the sky was clear and sunny.

From about 1:00 pm, an air raid alert was issued and a full air raid siren began its intermittent warning cry from 2:25 pm.

My father, Sadatoshi Aiba, was twenty-four years old and on this day he was preparing to do some farm work but was taken aback to see a squadron of B-29s approaching from the east. It was his first time seeing the bombers so he ran back into the house to get his camera to photograph them. He could already hear the distinctive low engine roar of the B-29s as they came almost overhead. Hurriedly, he began snapping photos as soon as he returned outside.

One photograph shows the seven planes from the third squadron to appear. Each formation flew in at four minute intervals and there is said to have been a total of nine according to the book *Ginyoku no Aruchizan* (Nagashima Yoshiaki, Kadokawa, 2005). The same author states that the bombing began just after 3:00 pm and that the last B-29s left forty minutes later (US military records state that the raid lasted for thirty-six minutes). We can assume that the bombing began at 3:05 and lasted until 3:40.



Two B-29 units (the 313<sup>th</sup> and 73<sup>rd</sup> bombardment wings) had converged over the Pacific

with a total of 108 or 120 planes according to different sources. Turning west over Mt. Tsukuba, the B-29s headed on toward the Nakajima aircraft plant located in Ohta City.

As a prelude to the crashing of two B-29s in the Akizuma area, Corporal Saburo Umehara of the Japanese air defense forces had reached the area of Mt. Tsukuba in his fighter.

US reconnaissance planes that had come on February seventh and eighth had flown at a high altitude of 10,000 meters. On the tenth, however, the planes of the actual raid faced strong west winds (about 100 m/s) and had to lower their altitude. Around the area of Shimodate Township in Ibaraki Prefecture, the altitudes fell below 8500 meters.

The payload of the 73<sup>rd</sup> bombardment wing was four tons of explosives each. The less-experienced 313<sup>th</sup> bombardment wing B-29s each carried five-thousand pounds. Each plane itself weighed in at thirty-three tons—quite the strain on even the cutting edge American technology of engine turbo-superchargers. Flying speeds would have been around 350 kph.



Corporal Umehara

The machinegun rounds fired by Corporal Saburo Umehara's fighter may have damaged the fourth engine of a B-29 nicknamed Deaner Boy. Corporal Umehara (born in Ayabe City, Kyoto Prefecture) soon lost control of his own plane due to B-29 machinegun fire received above Mt. Tsukuba and it went down in a ball of fire in the mountains near Shimodate/Ohtsuka. Local volunteers have erected a stone memorial to the corporal within the present day confines of the Shimodate Country Golf Club and incense is lit there on the first of every month.



Second Lieutenant Toshizou Kurai

Another plane that had taken off from an airfield in Sagamihara was flown by Second Lieutenant Toshizou Kurai was also headed for the skies above Shimodate. However, at an altitude of nearly nine-thousand meters, Kurai's machineguns froze making attack impossible. At thirty degrees below zero and suffering from oxygen deprivation, Kurai was plunged into a slow motion world of no sound. A doll sent by a volunteer corps that Kurai kept on his waist seems to reveal his character. Kurai had already shot down three planes and must have looked confident this day as well. Unfortunately, within minutes his plane, too, had crashed in the Nogi Township of Tochigi Prefecture.



Major Yoshizawa and his bloody air helmet.

In addition, Major Heikichi Yoshizawa had taken off from the Narimasu airfield accompanied by Second Lieutenant Ryozo Ban (born in Beppu) in another plane. Ordered to the skies over Ohta City, they flew at full speed in their famous Hayate fighters. Yoshizawa's subordinate fell behind and he arrived alone to engage and fire his machineguns at the B-29s.

A B-29 that Yoshizawa had been tailing suddenly veered upwards and skillfully fired back. Several rounds pierced Yoshizawa's tail assembly and black smoke appeared. According to the written account of Morio Misawa (residing in Oizumi), the fighter continued to follow the B-29 even as it trailed smoke and eventually made it to a spot slightly above and in front of the B-29. At this point Yoshizawa attempted to switch back and crash his fighter into the B-29. He missed, however, and crashed downward

having only grazed the much larger bomber's nose. At one point a parachute was seen to open, but Yoshizawa's body came unattached and he plummeted to his death. The bloodied parachute only was eventually found where it had landed atop a building of a high school in Oizumi. A memorial to Yoshizawa (erected by his older sister) resides in Kichijoji's Daihouji Temple. It is said that the number of visitors to the memorial is decreasing. It was confirmed on 24 May 2018 by Isao Arai that Yoshizawa's flight helmet has been preserved.

The diary of Kazuo Takano, the ex-mayor of Oizumi, states that "the bloody parachute of Major Yoshizawa was found on the roof of Oizumi Agricultural High School and turned in to the Oizumi police department." Part of a wing from Yoshizawa's fighter also landed within the school grounds according to a record written by former principal Kazuyoshi Kawakami.

The B-29 fuselages increasingly glimmered with reflections of the setting sun. Their glittering forms could be seen increasing against the still blue sky and became more and more apparent from below. The first through fourth squadrons to arrive are said to have been made of eleven, nine, seven, and twelve B-29s respectively. Two B-29s from the fourth squadron were eventually to crash, but it was the seven planes of the third squadron that were photographed by Sadatoshi Aiba's "Baby Pearl" camera as they appeared in the skies above the Akizuma area.

The time was then approximately 3:20 pm.

At an altitude of 8500 meters, the thirty meter long figures of the B-29s can barely be made out as airplanes in the photos produced by the Baby Pearl, which had been manufactured in 1937.

The fourth squadron's Deaner Boy (serial number: 42-24815) was having engine trouble. Flying ahead of it was the Slick's Chick's (serial number: 42-24784), leader of the squadron. When the Slick's Chick's slowed down and approached the Deaner Boy, things took a turn for the worse.

Fire erupted from Second Lieutenant Toshimitsu Kurai's machineguns. The rounds are believed to have reached the B-29s flying toward the center of the fourth squadron. One of the B-29's serial number may have ended in 867. Nicknamed the Sassy Lassy, one of

its crewmen may have been Jeff Samp, the father of one of the Akizuma memorial ceremony's participants, Nancy Samp.

With his plane still trailing smoke, Kurai is thought to have made his way from the area above Tatebayashi City to the skies above Mt. Akagi where he caught up with the B-29 squadron. Kurai was slightly ahead of one B-29 and attempted to attack by dropping suddenly. According to an account written by Noboru Yamanaka (Ohtsutsumi, Koga City), Kurai had taken aim at the leader of the squadron and pulled his trigger.

However, the B-29 guns were fast. In the shortest of moments, the hydraulic system of Kurai's Hayate was pierced and, losing control, he could only fly straight ahead. Kurai's control stick failed to respond and the right wing of Kurai's Hayate rammed into the base of a B-29's tail assembly. From this collision, a purple flash appeared that looked bigger than the plane itself when seen through the thin fog in the air.

With major damage to its right wing, Kurai's Hayate fighter tumbled twice as it plunged downward to crash in a field located in the Sagawano area of Nogi Township, Tochigi Prefecture. The B-29 it had collided with was the Slick's Chick's, which rose sharply due to friction with the air against its broken tail and was plucked from the sky.

Pointing directly down, the Slick's Chick's was hit from behind by the Deaner Boy and broke into four main pieces. The cockpit landed half way between present day Bando Chemical Industries and Ippongi at Hitotsubashi 1415. The engines became wound up with the Deaner Boy and fell with it. The main wings fell into a field in Akizuma about one-hundred meters west of the Deaner Boy's crash site. The tail of the Slick's Chick's was blown onto a new course by a westerly wind and landed east of Asahi Bridge. The gunner who was found leaning upward against the machineguns in the tail section had a beard and was identified as Sergeant Frank R. Kastenmeier.

In a US military document filed later on 11 February 1945 (housed in the National Archive) two B-29s were reported to have crashed in Akizuma that day at 3:25 pm after a midair collision at 28,000 ft. The report was made by First Lieutenant Robert Carithers, of the Dragon Lady (serial number 42-24778). Another report of witnessing two planes colliding at 28,500 ft (3:30 pm) was filed by First Lieutenant Wittness Aylsworth, who had been aboard the Black Cat (serial number: 42-24802).

From the area above Mt. Tsukuba, the Deaner Boy began to emit black smoke from its fourth engine and eventually crashed into the Slick's Chick's. Even though its propellers were still moving, the cockpit controls lost function and the engine alternatively sped up and slowed down on its own. According to an account given by Hideo Aoki of Kamieda, Ohta City, the two B-29s intertwined and fell, like leaves in the wind, to the ground.

On the edge of the Akizuma area, two crewmen jumped out in their parachutes. Two-hundred meters east of Akizuma, the altitude was too low for their parachutes to fully open and the two airmen fell to their deaths. The site of the parachutes blowing and flapping in the wind looked like something off the battlefield. According to Etsuo Shiraishi who currently resides in Akizuma, these were the only soldiers not to have been burned in the wreckage.

Passing over Akizuma, the two fuselages landed at Kakinokicho 947, Sunada 959, and Hitotsubashi 1415. The three pieces landed at approximately the same time and the Deaner Boy managed to land somehow slide in upright with its nose pointing southwest. It seems that the cockpit and mid-area of the fuselage began to burn. The field located at Kakinokicho 947 belonged to the father of Akizuma resident Michio Iizuka according to whom unexploded bombs had to be removed from the field and a pond created by an explosion remained until about 1967.



Melted duralumin from the Slick's Chick's.

The field at Sunada 959 belonged to Waichi Iwasaki and presented many problems when subsequently growing crops. It took five years to remove the various parts of the

plane that had landed in the area. The melted piece of duralumin in the photograph was collected at this time. I originally received two such pieces from my grandfather, but gave one to Takashi Ohtsuka (of Nakano). Another smaller piece has been lost.

My mother, Nami Aiba (Kazuichi Iwasaki's youngest daughter), witnessed the crash of the two B-29s from one-hundred meters north of the Akizuma Bridge. Also, Akira Nagashima of Koizumi, Ageoshi City was five years old at the time but remembers holding his mother Harue's hand and carrying his sister Kazue on his back from the station to Michitaro Nagashima's home, which is where his father was born. At the time, he witnessed B-29s emitting black smoke and saw crowds of people.

After the planes began their descent to the ground, Sadatoshi Aiba put his camera into his left pocket and stood watching with his two younger sisters Fumi and Toshi. (Toshi died on 14 May 2018, but stated to Isao Arai on 12 August 2017 that the three siblings had been together that day)

The three looked at each other in disbelief and started to run. Checking the camera, Sadatoshi saw that four more photographs remained on the film.

The three decided to go north. They passed by Takashima Elementary School and by the time they had reached Akizuma Bridge, the smoke from the planes was being blown toward Akizuma village on a west wind.





The siblings could immediately understand where the wreckage was located. With the prefectural Ashikaga Road to the left, they moved onto an agricultural path through the rice fields. Regardless of the excitement, they couldn't get too close. Sadatoshi avoided being seen by others by holding the camera against his belly and only letting the lens protrude through a buttonhole of his work clothes. The camera's focusing lens was set at the infinity position with a wide aperture and a 1/100 shutter speed.

Bringing his entire focus to the fallen B-29, Sadatoshi snapped a photograph. The smoke from the two planes seemed to engulf Akizuma. Between its plumes, one can see the snow remaining on Kanayama. At times the sound of machinegun rounds exploding in the heat rang out and circular clouds of smoke appeared in the wind like bubbles. Behind the rear assembly, the rear part of the Ashikagaorihime Mountains can be seen. The white peak of Mt. Shirane is also clearly visible against the clear sky. The pleasant sound of the camera's shutter must have been barely audible.

Next, the photographer was drawn towards the tail unit. Fortunately, not many other people seem to have arrived, so he moved around to the north and took a picture of the lifeboat and tail fin.

The early evening sun created dim shadows on the horizontal fin which later provided clues and proof regarding the time of photographing. The lifeboat appears in the shot almost looking like a rugby ball.





The last photo was taken with an eye to photographing the whole scene by crossing to the west. The smoke in the photo is rising towards the east. Debris scattered in the foreground is also emitting smoke. This photo would be the last for the day. The white-walled building in the top left side is the residence of Etsuo Shiraishi.

After the sound of the last shutter click, the three started their walk home. My father nodded in response to his sisters, who must have been upset or tired, and urged him to return.

Looking behind them, they would have seen the approaching twilight. Judging from the photo, it must have been after 5:00 pm.

昭和20年2月12日 毎日新聞



Mainichi Newspaper, 12 February 1945



Takashimamura village office (after Typhoon Katherine in 1947).

At about this time, Nakamura Tadashi of a national defense photographer's unit was arriving by motorcycle at the Takashimamura village hall from Kumagaya City in Saitama Prefecture. Because it was getting too dark to take photographs, he asked my grandfather, Ichigi Aiba, to make arrangements for him to stay overnight. At the time, the village hall had nowhere to sleep so he ended up resting on the sofa in the reception room. My grandfather stayed there with him.

The photograph Nakamura eventually took was featured in the morning edition of the Mainichi, Asahi, and Yomiuri newspapers on the 12 February.

On the eleventh, the morning after the crash, Sadatoshi Aiba was called up for civil defense duty. Out of film for the camera he had used the previous day, he searched for an alternative and found film remaining in another slightly larger camera he owned (a Minolta Auto Semi). Keeping the camera concealed within the civil defense vest he wore, Sadatoshi left for his duties.

The fields of Akizuma must have still been cold around 8:00 am that day. The day's work would be divided into a day and night shift that day on orders of the unit leader Toraichiro Yamazaki and village head Seisaku Kimura. The national defense photographer Nakamura who had stayed in Takashimamura can also be seen in the photos taken using the Minolta.

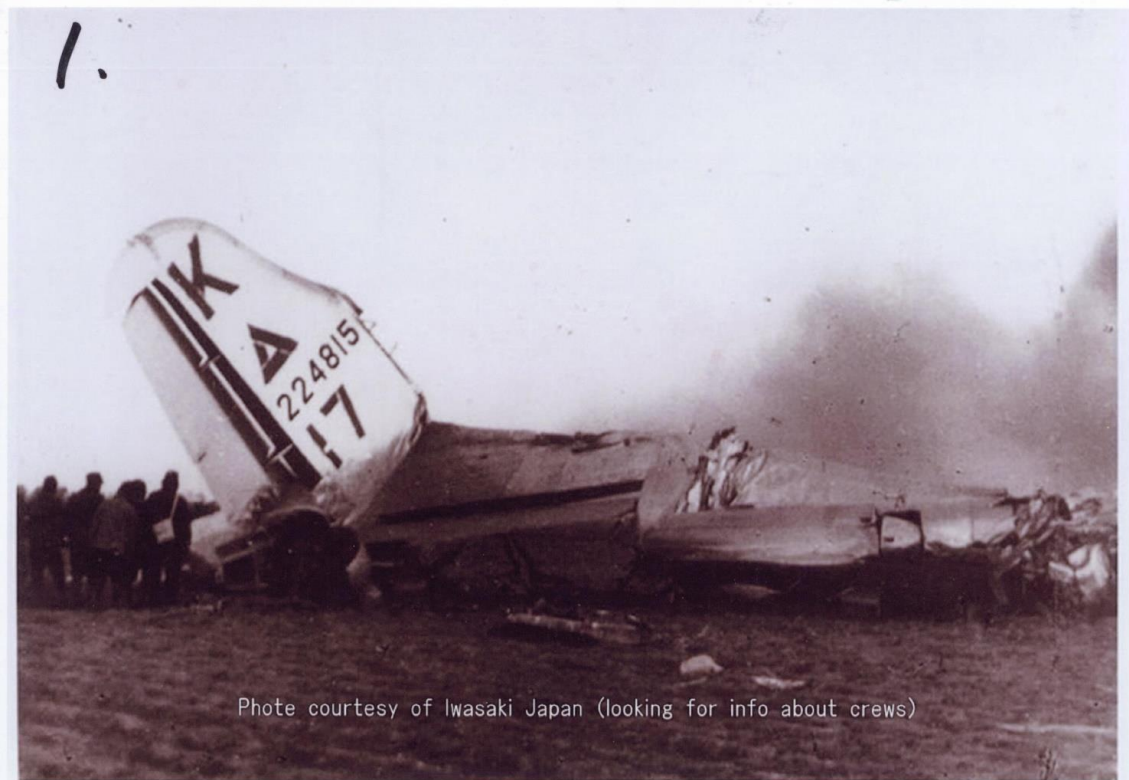
At 10:30 am on 11 February, the photos show that although the smoke seems to be half of what it was the day before, the fires were still smoldering. Taking pictures as possible, four similar views to the day before were photographed. They show from the north side that the lifeboat was now gone and the rear gunner's anti-flak box had been removed.

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None of these photos would have been allowed to exist if known about at the time. Although my father probably had no such plans originally, he decided to burn the negatives around 1955 and I remember helping him. He did keep the nine prints that had been made.

These photos are a record of tragedy—a testament to sad events that not many people remember today. My father took these photos in that very spot and, seventy-three years later, I can still stand there and almost hear the sound of the camera shutter snapping shut. It is my sincere hope that the tale these photos tell can somehow serve as a promising starting point for further peace and tranquility in the world.

In closing, I would like to offer my gratitude to local historian Isao Arai, who shared documents from the American national archives and provided much support in general as I was writing the above. In addition, I am thankful for the various verbal testimony provided by the people of the Akizuma area.