More than sixty-five years after the Great Tokyo Air Raid of March 10, 1945, and the subsequent firebombing and destruction of Japan’s cities by the United States Army Air Forces in World War II, a cursory examination of the relevant English-language literature, both popular and academic, reveals a striking lacuna. Researchers have covered substantial ground in analyzing various historical aspects of the U.S. bombing campaign against Japan. Specifically, much has been done to situate the events within the emergence of strategic air war in the twentieth century and within the concurrent evolution of American military air power doctrine. Scholars have discussed the air raids within the context of the evolution (and subsequent violations) of principles of noncombatant immunity during war, and have also provided important analyses regarding when and why the United States chose to target Japan’s cities for destruction.¹

¹ Nihei Haruyo, eight years old during the Tokyo firebombing of March 10, 1945 shows a map of the areas destroyed by the bombing at the Tokyo Air-raid Center. Photo by Norimatsu Satoko. See also this site.
survivor accounts and other available sources – of the actual experience and legacies of the firebombing.

In the future, researchers will be able to examine a multitude of topics related to the firebombing raids that destroyed a significant percentage of most of Japan’s cities, wiped out a quarter of all housing in the country, made nine million people homeless, and killed at least 187,000 civilians, and injured 214,000 more. The wartime reorganization of neighborhoods and cities under ever-changing civil defense policies merits attention, as does the unexplored contradiction between the established expectations of city residents in relation to air defense/firefighting and the Japanese government’s knowledge of the inefficacy of such tactics in the face of incendiary weapons. Other avenues of research include: the disintegration of family structures through voluntary and forced evacuations of school children from Japan’s cities, the many children orphaned by the air raids when their parents were killed in the cities, issues related to large-scale population transfers out of cities following the initiation of the U.S. firebombing campaign, and the postwar return of residents to their devastated cities. Whole books could be written on the destruction (and reconstruction) of larger cities such as Osaka, Yokohama, Nagoya, and Kobe. Additionally, the contentious issue of the Japanese government’s postwar treatment of air raid victims, while discussed briefly in this special issue, warrants extended analysis. Last, translations and analyses of some of the oral histories, fiction, and poetry written in Japan about the air raids would greatly enrich the field of Japanese studies.

While the above mostly represents a “wish list” of topics that merit research, it is a privilege to take a small step in the direction of furthering research into air raids conducted against Japan with the following set of articles, collectively titled “The Firebombing of Tokyo: Views from the Ground.” For many readers, the most striking portion of this collection will be “That Unforgettable Day--The Great Tokyo Air Raid through Drawings.” These eleven paintings and the accompanying descriptions of various experiences of the March 10 firebombing viscerally communicate the horror of the event, whether viewed from the perspective of a young evacuee witnessing the burning of the heart of Tokyo from a neighboring prefecture, or via Miyamoto Kenzo’s haunting “My Child” illustration and description of being scarred as a young boy by the experience of witnessing a pregnant woman unable to move while her child was incinerated in front of her. These illustrations, similar to some of those found in Unforgettable Fire: Pictures Drawn by Atomic Bomb Survivors, draw our attention to the heart of the matter: the civilian experience of a holocaust that has been largely forgotten in the United States and globally. In “The Tokyo Air Raids in the Words of Those Who Survived,” Bret Fisk provides a few examples of the different forms of survivor accounts extant in Japanese, which he categorizes as “Complete Personal Narratives,” “Incomplete Episodes and Incidents,” and “Sites of Mass Suffering.”

His examination emphasizes the lack in English of oral histories or other personal narratives of the people whose lives were changed forever by the firebombing of urban Japan.

Another unique aspect of this collection is that it contains the first translation into English of writing by Saotome Katsumoto, the central figure in the decades-long movement in Japan to remember the Tokyo air raids. Saotome’s story is a remarkable one. His life was forever altered by the March 10 raid (which he experienced as a twelve-year-old boy), yet with little formal education he managed to forge a career as a writer. Saotome infused his works with a heartfelt humanism and empathy for the weakest members of society, and he became an activist in the cause to memorialize the air raids in the late 1960s. As a core member of
In closing, it is our pleasure to announce the establishment of an online bilingual digital archive - JapanAirRaids.org – dedicated to the dissemination of information regarding the World War II air raids against Japan. In addition to a variety of primary and secondary documents, the archive features a strong visual and multimedia component, with numerous Army Air Forces photographs, videos of survivor interviews (with English subtitles), sound recordings, and more. Since the website officially opened in late November 2010, it has attracted over 50,000 unique visitors. This unexpectedly high level of interest is surely a strong indication of the need for such an archive and it is our hope that the wide range of air raid-related documents and other resources that the website showcases will act as a catalyst for additional research into this important topic.

Bret Fisk is a writer and translator living in Odawara, Japan. He is co-creator of the digital archive 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.

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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


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

Notes


2 These are conservative estimates from the Overall Report of Damage Sustained by the Nation During the Pacific War, Economic Stabilization Agency, Planning Department, Office of the Secretary General, 1949, which may be viewed here.


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