

# Ground Zero 1945

Pictures by Atomic Bomb Survivors

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## Hellfire

Essentially, we remember grand and even cataclysmic events through one or a few emblematic fragments—a particular image or two that, in Hersey's phrase, burn into the mind and remain branded there. "This is the scene I can never forget," survivors say in explaining the particular subject of their artwork. The intensity of this carries over to most viewers of the picture in ways rarely replicated in the cooler, more detached medium of photography.

For these survivors, these amateur artists, the part contains the whole. For those of us who come to these pictures as outsiders, these many parts comprise an intricate mosaic of the human experience of nuclear devastation. The pictures remind us of the *individuals* who made up the huge number of casualties and fatalities that occurred at and around Ground Zero 1945.

We can perhaps best approach this mosaic by imagining August 6, 1945, from a distance, with a single American B-29 bomber, accompanied by two escort planes, releasing a parachute over Hiroshima.

*Parachute dropping the  
atomic bomb on  
Hiroshima; the bomb  
exploded over 500 meters  
above ground, maximizing  
burn and blast effects.*

*HARADA Haruo  
10 years old in August  
1945  
[09\_01]*



The morning scene is serene. The parachute cradles "Little Boy," the first nuclear bomb, timed to explode between 500 to 600 meters above ground. Then comes the "mushroom cloud" as seen from the outskirts of the city. This is what impressed the crew of the *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the bomb, as it turned away. It is the image with which most American narratives of the use of the bomb end.

*The "mushroom-shaped"  
cloud from the bomb's  
explosion, seen from the  
outskirts of Hiroshima.*

*HORIKOSHI Susumu  
6 years old in August  
1945  
[03\_02]*





When the bomb was tested in New Mexico in July 1945, an awed American observer described the explosion as "brighter than a thousand suns." In Japanese, the well-known phrase for the extraordinary light of the nuclear explosion, and the thunderous blast that followed, is *pica-don*—literally (and prosaically) "flash-bang."

*"Pika-don," the blinding  
flash and massive  
explosion of the bomb.*

*YAMADA Sumako  
20 years old in August  
1945  
[09\_02]*



The temperature at the center of the explosion was between 3,000 and 4,000 degrees Centigrade (5,400 to 7,200 degrees Fahrenheit); unshielded people suffered flash burns within a radius of 4.5 kilometers (2.8 miles); all wooden structures within 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) were obliterated, and firestorms immediately began to sweep through these ruins.

*KOJIRI  
Tsutomu  
4 years old  
in August  
1945  
[06\_33]*



*Downtown Hiroshima in ruins, as seen two weeks later.*

Corpses lay everywhere. In many depictions by *hibakusha*, the dead are naked and bright red or coal black.





HAMADA  
Yoshi  
26 years  
old in  
August  
1945  
[15\_34]

*Bomb victims at Kokuzenji temple.*

Certain phrases run like a thread through the words of survivors. "It was like hell (*jigoku*)" or "this is what hell must be like" is said over and over. Traditional Buddhist painting actually provided vivid depictions of hell as a place (much like Dante's *Inferno*) of raging fires, grotesque figures, unspeakable tortures and pain.



NAKANO  
Kenichi  
47 years  
old in  
August  
1945  
[02\_33]

*Hiroshima in flames on the afternoon of August 6. The writing on the painting speaks of encountering "living Hell in this world."*

For many survivors, the attempt to escape the firestorms that spread from the epicenters of the explosions or the memory of someone who failed to escape these hellfires—became the image burned on the mind.





*The artist and an injured girl attempting to escape “a sea of flames.”*

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