

I Will Never Forget the Voice Yelling “Escape!” During the War

忘れられない 戦時中の「逃げろっ！」の声

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When it comes to the time of the air raid in July I'm reminded of my uncle. He actually lived in Osaka but in the first air raids in the spring of 1945, he was burned out of his home. He then encountered another attack in a different city. Barely getting away with his life and only a backpack he tried to return to his birthplace Koyadaira. He made it to Tokushima but he couldn't afford the next ticket so, until he could, he was living under our roof. He must have been in his early 30s. That year most of Japan's major cities suffered air raids. Especially Tokyo and Osaka were targeted frequently, hence the high number of casualties.

But at that time Tokushima also became victim of an air raid, during the night on July 3rd and 4th.

When the air raid alarms and sirens were going off, the sky that I saw from Sako, in the east, was lit up red. The bombs of the B29s exploded with a roar. The incendiary bombs hummed as they zipped downwards and, every time, the flames came increasingly closer. The house across the street started burning. The flames burst

through the roof, and while the sparks were boisterously dancing in the air, they also rained down on the street and our house. The house next from ours also caught fire. I immediately filled a bucket with water by the storm sliding door in front of our entranceway (*genkan*), and started pouring it on the latticed shutters that were the border to the house next door. I yelled “Taihi, Taihi”, but the usually bragging civil defence servant just ran away. My uncle yelled “What are you doing? Escape! Quickly!” while I was frantically pouring water. “What?”, but the house isn’t burned down yet. At the time I was training at a middle school (of the old system) to become a soldier or a marine. Hearing “Escape!” was a shock to me. But the flames kept getting closer so I had no time argue.

I tossed the bucket and we started running toward the mountain behind our house. But the road was blocked by fire. The world destroying conflagration closing in on me before my eyes robbed me of any time to think. So we headed towards Sako Station. There was an underground air raid shelter from the army. After calming down a little we realised there was no sign of any other human being. My family were the only ones running. I felt lonely and left behind but at the same time I felt ashamed because we were fleeing.

The air raid shelter was already crammed with people. “Please let us in. Let us in!”

But the civil defence servant stood with an imposing stance in front of the entrance, waved his hand and said “No. It’s already too crowded here.” Behind me the number of people was just increasing. Without looking at the shelter my uncle grabbed my hand and we just kept running. I kept up with him and ran. Heading towards the Yoshino River the narrow streets were full of people. Everyone was hurrying towards the Yoshino River. On top of that the fire bombs kept making eerie noises while falling down. There were people in front, to the right and to the left of me who were directly hit by incendiary bombs, caught fire and collapsed. But no one stopped running. Being pushed and carried by the wave of people we arrived at the river bank of Yoshino River. When I turned around the entire city was a sea of raging flames. The flames dyed the skies red. That’s when I first thought “we made it!”

The fact that he yelled at me “Escape!” while I was desperately trying to extinguish the fire and that he kept running without worrying about the air raid shelter, saved my life. When I inquired later I learned that everyone in the bunker died of heat and lack of oxygen. There are stories like that from air raid shelters all around. Buckets to extinguish flames and air raid bunkers are futile measures for protection in the wake of a real air raid. It was the scream of a man who had already survived two air raids before that saved me. The voice yelling “Escape!” during the war still reverberates in my ear

today. If I hadn't obeyed that call back then, I wouldn't be here now.