



NUCLEAR WAR, NUCLEAR PEACE

“There is no one truth when it comes to World War II.”
—Ari Beser

Ari Beser should know. His paternal grandfather was the only person to have flown in both of the planes that dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His maternal grandfather had employed a young Japanese woman who survived the bombing of Hiroshima. Spurred by this dual connection to these 1945 events, Beser set out to document his paternal grandfather's story, along with those of the survivors. “This is not just an American story or a Japanese story. It's a human story,” he says.

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Ari Beser's grandfather, Lieutenant Jacob Beser, poses in front of the B-29 bomber, *Enola Gay*, before it dropped the first atomic weapon ever used in combat on the city of Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945.

MAIN IDEA American scholar Ari Beser investigates the stories of atomic bomb survivors to promote peace and reconciliation.

ATOMIC HERITAGE

Growing up, Ari Beser had long heard tales of his grandfather's crucial role in the most historic of events. An engineer, Lieutenant (Lt.) Jacob Beser modified radar systems to suit the unique needs of the bombing mission. He was unapologetic about his part. He viewed the bombings as a necessary step in ending the war with Japan. Nonetheless, he expressed the wish that no such tragedy should ever happen again and made a point of ensuring that his grandchildren were aware of his story.

Lt. Beser left behind a technical memoir about his time on the Manhattan Project, the research and development initiative during World War II that produced the first atomic weapons. From the memoir, Ari Beser gained a wealth of firsthand information about his grandfather and his perspective on World War II. To better understand the perspective of the Japanese impacted by the bombing, Beser set out to talk to some of the remaining *hibakusha*—survivors of the bombs.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Through projects that aimed to raise awareness of the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Beser did just that. A Fulbright–National Geographic Digital Storytelling Fellowship allowed him to travel to Japan in 2015 for the 70th anniversary of the bombings. The bombs together had killed some 200,000 people. Thousands more suffered radiation sickness. Beser has interviewed more than 50 *hibakusha* about their experiences during and in the wake of the bombings.

Despite the horrors they experienced, many *hibakusha* were eager to talk to Lt. Beser's grandson. The survivors bore no ill will toward the family of the man who had participated in the bombing missions. Ari Beser's frank but respectful approach gained him the trust of his interviewees. "How do you always get me to say things I've never said before?" asked a relative of Sadako Sasaki, who gained international renown for folding over 1,000 paper cranes as she battled leukemia caused by radiation exposure.



11.7.7 Discuss the decision to drop atomic bombs and the consequences of the decision (Hiroshima and Nagasaki); CST 1 Students compare the present with the past, evaluating the consequences of past events and decisions and determining the lessons that were learned.



Ari Beser (left) poses with Daniel Truman (right), grandson of President Harry Truman, who ordered the use of atomic weapons against Japan in 1945. They are joined by survivors of the bombs and their family members in Hiroshima, Japan.

Gaining that trust was a necessary step. The accounts of the *hibakusha* are universally awful. They recount vividly the bright flash, the heat, and the wind generated by the bomb. And they all have tales of the carnage they witnessed in the aftermath. The rivers were choked with human remains, and horribly injured survivors wandered in search of help. Many were burned and stripped of skin. Even those who recovered endured years of chronic pain and wounds that wouldn't heal. As painful as reliving these memories is, the *hibakusha* insist that recording them is essential. Remarkably, many suspend judgment of the actions taken by the United States. Beser concurs. "We are each other's history," he says. "We all have a relative somewhere that fought in some war. This just happens to be my family's story."

It is his hope—and the hope of the *hibakusha*—that the exchange of these stories will put an end to nuclear warfare once and for all.

HISTORICAL THINKING

- 1. READING CHECK** What does Beser hope to accomplish by talking to bomb survivors?
- 2. ASK AND ANSWER QUESTIONS** If you could interview Beser's grandfather about his wartime experiences, what would you ask, and what would you hope to gain from such an interview?
- 3. MAKE GENERALIZATIONS** How do most survivors view the bombings?