

Brit who survived the Nagasaki Bomb

WHEN the Nagasaki bomb exploded Arthur Christie was standing less than a mile away. He was holding a broom, he remembers. He has never talked about it much: people's eyes accuse him of lying. After the war he got on with his life as a family man and engineer. It was not until years later that he heard of radiation.

I met him after work one evening this week at the small flat in Ealing where he lives with his wife Helen. They have three healthy sons and a clutch of grandchildren. At 62 Arthur Christie looks as right as rain, although he has had bladder trouble for 26 years and has to be careful about his food. There have been no tests but he has always wondered.

At the end of 1943 Leading Aircraftman Christie, then aged 21, weighed about seven stone. He had been in captivity in Java for 18 months along with his mates in the Stores unit. "We thought it was a huge joke at first," he said. "It was not long before we changed our minds."

They were shipped to Japan like sardines, many dying in the cramped tiers of bunks. They arrived in the middle of winter, still dressed in tropical kit. On disembarkation they were sprayed with freezing disinfectant. Christie accompanied ten other Britons to a camp in Nagasaki holding 300 PoWs, mostly Australians and Dutch. The British contingent of 18 fell by two during the first winter.

They were put to work in a shipyard some four miles away. "In this country you'd need a five-year apprenticeship to be a riveter. We became riveters in one day. They expected you to climb 50 or 60 feet up vertical ladders with a bloody great air gun on your shoulder. The Japanese would be shouting their heads off for us to get up there. It's surprising how quickly you get used to that sort of thing."

After a year he was relieved to be transferred to a nearby iron foundry, making moulds for engine castings and propellers. He was spared the daily march to the shipyard, but conditions were still grim — sparse clothing and a diet of rice and soup. "In camp we

ing about food and recipes. believe anyone thought we were always hungry. There were one or two who took it badly, but I don't were going to lose the war."

Air raids in April 1945 cheered them up. The Japanese built concrete shelters in the camp and promptly shut the prisoners inside when the alarms sounded. On August 9, ignorant of the first atomic explosion at Hiroshima three days previously, they registered a change in the routine. There was an air raid at about 10 am. Instead of returning to the factories after the all-clear, the PoWs were ordered to clear up bomb debris inside the camp. Christie was inside, near the communal bath-house, sweeping up glass splinters from the skylight.

"I had a broom in my hand. A few yards from me some prisoners were looking up at the skylight. They were very excited because they had seen a plane. They called for me to come and look. I remember that as I turned the bomb exploded. It is difficult to describe the intensity of the flash. There was a flash and explosion at the same time. As the blast came I was buried under the building along with the other prisoners."

"I honestly thought, that's it. I think I lost consciousness. Then when I came round I couldn't move. I shouted for help and one of the prisoners eventually pulled me out."

"There was nothing to see. It frightened the life out of me. You could see right across the valley. All the buildings were down apart from one or two shells. Small fires had started everywhere. The tops of trees and telegraph poles were alight. Anything that could burn was beginning to burn. In the course of the afternoon and evening the whole valley was on fire."

He found the sights almost beyond comprehension. Skin was hanging from the injured. The dead were grotesquely bloated. Salvaging food and belongings, the surviving prisoners crossed the valley to shelter in the hills. He saw a horse, literally skinned alive, still standing tethered to a post.

He volunteered to cross to the other side of the burning

town with a Japanese guard to take food and supplies to a group of prisoners. On this journey he saw numerous women and children, motionless but alive, lying ringed by fire. "They were terribly burned. There was nothing you could do."

The following day they searched for Japanese survivors and did what they could for the injured. They cremated the dead on large piles of wood.

They spent the rest of the war in a camp at some distance from Nagasaki, returning to the town by boat a couple of times for clearance work. By then their relationship with the Japanese had changed. They bought a bull-ock and shot it with a guard's rifle. Two prisoners with butchering experience carved it up on the floor. It kept them going until the Americans dropped supplies. Eventually the 16 British survivors were evacuated to Okinawa.

This year Arthur Christie went back for the first time with his former comrade Ron Bryer to film Return to Nagasaki, due to be shown on ITV on Tuesday in the First Tuesday series. Yorkshire Television was able to track down only five remaining survivors in Britain.

Christie is at a loss to explain how he withstood the radiation dosage of a 20-kiloton device. "I was tick on and off for a few days afterwards, but what could you put it down to? We didn't know anything about radiation. We couldn't understand why people were so badly burned. We guessed it was something new. When we left England we didn't even know about flying bombs and rockets."

Although not involved in the peace movement, he is in favour of an arms freeze. "They are talking about bringing in more nuclear weapons. How many do they need to wipe out the cities? You can tell people about it and read about it in books, but it's very difficult to make people realise what a terrible thing the Bomb is."

"In my opinion if we got rid of nuclear weapons it wouldn't make any difference as long as America and Russia are facing each other. I think all the governments of Europe should keep on and on at them."