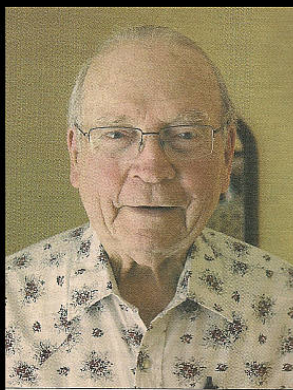


From Hinckley to Hiroshima

Michas Ohnstad had no idea when he was drafted in 1945 that he would soon be working with the first U.S. medical team to investigate the effects of the atomic bomb on the people of Japan.



MICHAS OHNSTAD
At home in North Branch



MICHAS OHNSTAD
As a private in World War II

By Al Zdon

When America dropped the two atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945, it was the first time – and so far the last time – such a terrible weapon had been used.

In a matter of seconds, between 90,000 and 160,000 people were killed in Hiroshima.

Both the U.S. and the Japanese wanted to know what the effect of the bomb was at ground zero. Radiation was little understood at the time. In particular, they wanted to know how the most destructive weapon ever conceived affected the people who lived in and near Hiroshima.

And so, in September, 1945, only weeks after the bomb was dropped, a team of American and Japanese doctors was sent to ground zero to do scientific research on the survivors.

For nearly four months, they labored in a bombed-damaged hospital right in the devastated city.

As the project began, people were needed to help the doctors. In Yokohama, a 19-year-old soldier who had never seen combat was plucked from the headquarters staff. It was probably because his service jacket showed he had learned shorthand and other clerical skills in high school.

On Sept. 2, 1945, orders were cut to send one Private Michas Ohnstad, a native of Hinckley, Minnesota, to temporary duty in Hiroshima to serve with the Joint Commission for the Investigation of the Effects of the Atomic Bombs.



Mike Ohnstad grew up on a farm outside of Hinckley. "Everybody was a farmer in those days, that's how you survived. Everyone was poor, and most of us didn't realize it."

Born in 1926, he first attended a one-room school house about three miles from his home. "There were no buses. You got to where you were going by your feet. And it was just like the old joke: It was uphill both directions."

After seven grades at the schoolhouse, Ohnstad moved on to Hinckley High School, and after eighth grade, he was able to take a bus. "There was no football or sports or band for me. Country kids went home after school." He graduated from Hinckley High School in 1944.

Ohnstad's mother was a first-generation Swedish immigrant and his father was a second-generation Norwegian settler. They attended, when they could, the Lutheran Church at Cloverdale.

Meanwhile, World War II was raging in Europe and in the Pacific. "It wasn't as easy to follow the news in those days. Mainly, you paid attention to announcements that another Hinckley lad was killed. Hinckley and Pine County suffered a lot of casualties."

He knew at some point he would be part of that war. "All of us at that age knew we would be drafted. I didn't anticipate it with eagerness or regret. I just knew the time would come. Nobody liked to go to war, but everybody knew they had to do their share, and they did."

In January of 1945, eight months after graduation, Ohnstad received his greetings from Uncle Sam. "They gave me an option of the Marines, the Army or the Navy. It blew my mind. I didn't know I had an option. But I was pretty ambivalent about it, and I just went with the Army. Later I wished I'd joined the Marines."

Ohnstad reported to Fort Snelling and was sent to Jefferson Barracks in Missouri for assignment, and then to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for basic training. By the middle of May, he was ready to join the war effort. "It was a time of great turmoil. Roosevelt had died, and the whole country was going through a big transition."

By July, he was on a troop ship headed out into the Pacific. It took 21 days to reach the Philippines. "We zig-zagged all the way across the ocean."

After arriving in Manila, he was sent to join the 43rd Infantry Division in a field artillery battalion on Luzon.

"The Philippine campaign was over with, and the leadership was sorting out what to do. We were told in the field that the next move would be to invade Japan. We were regrouping for what was next.

"They told us that if we did invade Japan, there would be a million casualties. Then what happened on Aug. 6th and 9th turned all that around."

What happened was the use of the world's first two atomic bombs, first at Hiroshima and three days later at Nagasaki. "Our initial reaction was generalized relief. We wouldn't have to invade Japan. Our hope was that the war would end. But until Japan surrendered, who knew what would happen."

On August 14, western Pacific time, Japan did in fact surrender. "I don't know anyone who wasn't relieved." It was also Ohnstad's 19th birthday.

Days later, Ohnstad was on a troop ship to Japan. He was now assigned to the First Cavalry Division, and was on temporary duty to MacArthur's headquarters. The ship docked at Yokohama.

On Sept. 2, Ohnstad and a sergeant were sent on temporary duty to Hiroshima. "I don't know why I was picked, unless it was because I had studied shorthand and office procedures in high school."

The two were flown from Yokohama to Hiroshima. "I think it was a C-46. I know we had a Jeep on board, and we had plenty of D-rations. I was just along for the ride. Looking back, you might think I knew what was going on, but I knew nothing."

The plane first landed at the wrong field. "The airstrip was too short for a takeoff, but we took off anyway. Every one of us lads was down on the floorboard of the plane hanging on."

The transport finally landed in the right place, and Ohnstad found he was assigned to one of three American military groups which were assembling to determine the medical and other results of the atomic bomb. There were also two Japanese groups studying the effects. Ohnstad recalls that the military group was being called the Atomic Bomb Commission.

On Oct. 12, General MacArthur combined all the groups

into the Joint Commission.

Ohnstad found he was an assistant to the American and Japanese doctors and nurses who were studying the effects of the blast. "We ate, slept and worked on site. Our group was off limits to any other American or Allied service people."

The group was supported by the two GIs, by a small group of Japanese nurses, and by two cooks, who had recently been serving as soldiers in the Japanese army.

“One of the cooks had lost his wife and two daughters in the war. He was an army sergeant and a combat veteran, but there wasn’t one ounce of hostility towards us. There’s a mystery in the human personality. There was no animosity with the Japanese people. They were a captured people. They had surrendered, and now they were moving on with life.”

The scene at Hiroshima was staggering. “It was total devastation, and way beyond what I imagined it would look like. They told us nothing would grow there for a hundred years, but here and there the grass was greening up again. Life was trying to start again.”

Looking back, Ohnstad said that written records sometimes indicate the Joint Commission people were able to determine the amount of radiation they were experiencing. “It’s just not true. We had no dosimeters. None of us. We had no idea about the radiation.”

They did know that radiation was dangerous. “There was an absolute uncertainty about what it was or what it did. But you’d have to be pretty dull not to pick up that it was dangerous. That didn’t make us heroes. This was just another wartime mission. We knew there was a risk factor.”

The group lived and worked at Ujina Hospital. “A doctor and I did medical evaluations. They did autopsies on the deceased civilians. It was my job to take notes on what the doctors were finding. I was also involved with interviewing the Japanese survivors.

“I remember one Japanese lady came in and she seemed pretty normal. But then she took off her head scarf, and I could see that her hair was just starting to grow back out again. It was just like a cancer patient who’s had radiation.”

“You could also see the effects of the blast on people’s clothing. Certain colors were more damaged than others. We didn’t understand why.”

“And, of course, some of the patients died. Conditions were very primitive.”

Ohnstad said the American and Japanese doctors worked well together. “I would listen to their conversations. They would determine who was going to do the autopsy. It was a learning process of working together.”

The doctors kept sections of body parts so that the effects of the blast, the heat and the radiation could be studied. “The burns depended on the proximity of the person to the blast. But all of them had some radiation consequences.”

The American doctors and the Japanese doctors were all leaders in their fields and came from major universities. Doctor Averill Liebow from Yale University was one of the top lung specialists in the world, and later had a disease named after him. Doctors came from Duke, Cornell, the University of Texas, the University of Southern California and others.

Dr. Tsuzuki Masao, on the Japanese team, was that nation’s leading expert on radiation.

“There was a high professional level on both sides, scientists you might say.”

As Ohnstad talks about those days in Hiroshima, his voice begins to tremble.

“It wasn’t a job. I was doing what I had to do. As I look back, it was part of the history of the human family. It was too intense for a 19-year-old lad to experience – to see the damage of war at its worst.

“I never looked for divine intervention, I had my faith. I was just doing what soldiers have to do. In my case, it was carrying body parts around.”

Ohnstad worked at it for over three months, taking notes, doing questionnaires with survivors, carrying human organs around for the doctors to examine. Just after the first of the year, the team’s work came to a close.

The Joint Commission would be replaced in a few months by the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, an agency that would study the effect of the bomb on people for many years.

Ohnstad was sent back to MacArthur's headquarters staff in Tokyo. His job was somewhat less dramatic than studying the effects of the atomic bomb. He spent his days spraying Japanese civilians with DDT to kill the lice that were rampant in Japan following the surrender.

"We didn't do it to protect the Japanese, we did it to protect our troops from typhus. But the Japanese would line up in long lines to get sprayed. Of course, nobody knew much about DDT in those days except it would kill the lice."

Later, Ohnstad started doing more clerical type work in the Dai-Ichi Building in downtown Tokyo, where MacArthur ruled the occupied nation.

"I would see MacArthur almost every day, although we never talked. I think I might have said good morning to him. I could kick myself for never having tried to get his autograph."

Ohnstad knows that MacArthur's career had its ups and downs, but at that time in Tokyo, he was greatly respected by both sides. "I was just a 19-year-old, and I was impressed in every respect. The Japanese people also admired him. For one thing he was punctual to the minute. The people would know when he was coming out of the building, and they would wait until he came out, and then bow in respect to him until he got in his car."

"He was the conqueror, but the Japanese people loved him.

"It was a massive occupation, but the way we did it was a tribute to MacArthur and a tribute to the United States. We came as a conquering nation, but we didn't treat them like a conquered people. We respected the people. MacArthur was a gentle man."

Later, in Korea, MacArthur was relieved of command when he disagreed with President Truman about how to pursue the war. MacArthur wanted to aggressively attack the North Koreans and Chinese, while the president was seeking peace.

"History may have proved his point," Ohnstad said. "We're not done with Korea yet. MacArthur had a brilliant mind, and people need to read his biography."

By January, 1947, Ohnstad had enough points to be sent home. He had spent two years and 11 days in the Army, most of it in Japan.

He returned to Minnesota and earned several degrees including a bachelor's in pre-seminary training at an Illinois college. He then went into seminary training at Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Paul. He was ordained in 1956.

He traveled to Halifax to do mission development, and then took a pastoral position at St. John's Lutheran Church in Stacy. He studied in Sweden, and became a chaplain at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

From 1978 to 1988, he was the American Legion Department Rehabilitation Director. He served on the board of the Minnesota Veterans Homes. In 1990-91 he was named American Legion National Chaplain by National Commander Bob Turner.

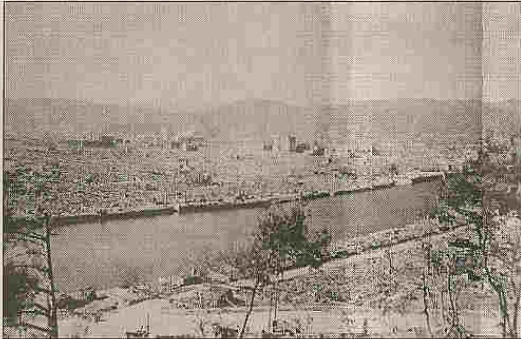
"The Legion was a big part of my life, and I support what the Legion does."

Ohnstad also served in the Minnesota Legislature for one term. He and his wife, Alma, have been married for 45 years, and they live in North Branch.

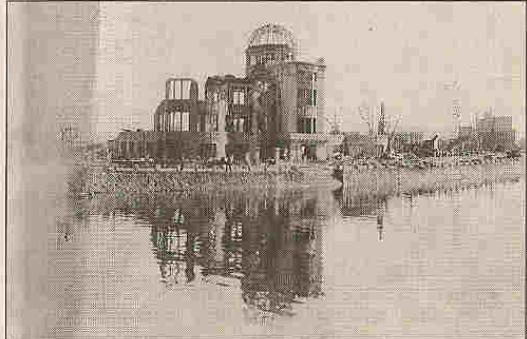
Looking back at those days in Hiroshima, Ohnstad said he has been surprised that almost all the historical records on line only indicate an American presence beginning in 1946. "We were there first, and we were the only ones there at that time. We evaluated the consequences on the civilian population of Hiroshima. That story isn't being told. Those were the hero doctors. They were the historic doctors."



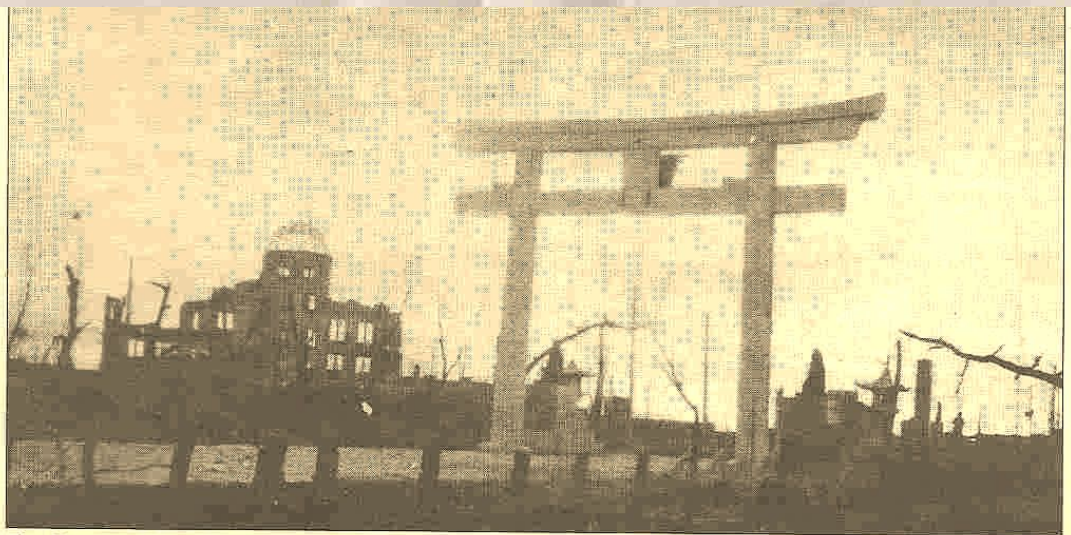
Ohnstad purchased cameras in Japan and took these photographs of the destruction himself.



A river winds its way through the devastation.



The dome is reflected by a river or canal.



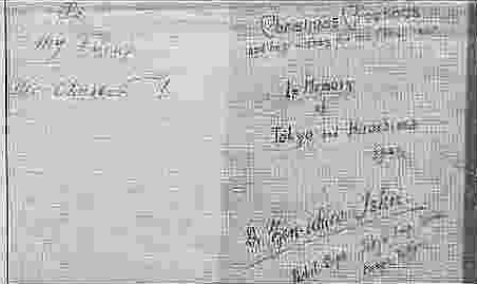
The Genbaku Dome, at rear left, later the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, was photographed by Ohnstad in 1945. The dome was near the epicenter of the bomb that was dropped on Aug. 6, 1945.



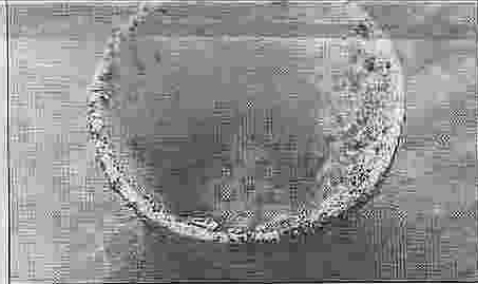
Two Japanese soldiers, Okabe and Oonishi, were the cooks for the Joint Commission. Okabe's wife and two daughters were killed by the atomic bomb.



Japanese Red Cross nurses supported the Joint Commission at Hiroshima. From left: Miss Touruka, Miss Nishimura, Miss Ada, and Miss Moki.



Ohnstad received a Christmas card from one of the Japanese doctors working on the project. It is signed: Dr. Zen-ichiro Ishitani, Pathology Department, Tokyo Imperial University.



A small cup that Ohnstad salvaged from the ruins is still in his possession. The cup shows the burns and blistering from the bomb.

30 Sep 45

AG 220,453 ACPD

SUBJECT: Order.

TO : EM concerned, Hq 1st Cav Div, APO 201.

Fol-named EM, now on TDY Advance Ech, GHQ AFPAC, APO 500, WP Hiroshima and Nagasaki and such other places adjacent thereto as may be necessary on further TDY for the purpose of carrying out instructions. Upon compl this TDY, EM will return Advance Ech, GHQ AFPAC, APO 500. EM are auth tvl between Hiroshima and Nagasaki at such times as may be necessary in the accomplishment of their mission. EM will report to COL A. W. CUMPTON for dy. Tvl by mil acft is dir for accomplishment of an emerg war mission. Rail, Govt mtr and water transportation auth. Transportation Corps will furnish necessary transportation. TDM. Alws of 50 pounds personal baggage auth each EM while traveling by air. Per diam auth EM while traveling by acft in accordance with Sec I, AR 35-4810, 19 Apr 45. 65-*** P432-02 A 212/60425.

S Sgt Hial D. Huffaker 39196806
Pvt Michas Ohnstad 37782972

By command of General MacARTHUR:

Quilt of Valor



Michas Ohnstad, Pine County Genealogy Society member, was presented a Quilt of Valor on September 25, 2017 by Gladys Enzenhauer and Lyn Johnson.

He was surrounded by wife, Alma, and other family members and friends at the Kaffee Stuga Cafe in Harris, Minnesota.

Mr. Ohnstad graduated from Hinckley High School in 1944, received Army armored basic training and served in WWII in the Philippines.

Following the atomic bombing of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, he received orders from General MacArthur to serve in Japan with the Atomic Bomb Commission investigating the effects of the atomic bomb.

After that several month assignment, he was transferred to the USA Typhus Commission and then concluded his military service at General MacArthur's Headquarters, Tokyo.

Mr. Ohnstad's devotion to humankind has never stopped since his discharge, including his role as a Lutheran Pastor, Director of several human service organizations, State Representative in the Minnesota legislature, and finally, closest to his heart, the Grange, the farmer's welfare organization.