

The man who wouldn't look away

Aug. 6, 1945: The atomic bomb put incomprehensible powers of destruction in human hands. [AP]

Maj. Claude Eatherly piloted the weather plane that surveyed Hiroshima before it was bombed, said Anne Harrington in The New York Times Magazine. He was left racked with guilt—and pilloried for his regrets.

The B-29 bomber banked hard to avoid the blast. The explosion lit the plane's interior with a brilliant flash, so bright that some of the aviators momentarily thought they had been blinded. More than one noted a strange metallic taste in his mouth. A loud clap broke around them as the first of three shock waves hit, causing the plane's aluminum body to vibrate violently. Looking down, they saw the fireball unfurling.

The American airmen who flew the mission to drop the atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, were witnessing a man-made cataclysm unlike anything seen in the previous history of human warfare. They watched as fire swallowed the city whole: "It was like no ordinary fire," a crew member later recalled. "It contained a dozen colors, all of them blindingly bright." Just when it appeared that the explosion was subsiding, "a kind of mushroom spurted out of the top and traveled up, up to what some say was a distance of 60,000 or 70,000 feet."

The atomic bomb was the most ferociously deadly weapon ever created by human ingenuity—a technology that multiplied the power of these few men and planes to a degree out of all comprehensible scale. In Hiroshima alone, some 70,000 people were killed instantly—a horrific deed fit for gods or monsters—but overhead in their plane the airmen were normal men in human bodies, no more able than anyone else to fully comprehend or bear responsibility for the mission they had been chosen to execute. In the ensuing decades, only one of the 90 servicemen who flew the atomic bombing missions, Maj. Claude Eatherly, came forward to publicly declare that he felt remorse for what he had done. Eatherly, then an outgoing 26-year-old Texan, piloted the advance weather plane tasked with assessing target visibility over Hiroshima, giving the go-ahead to drop the bomb that day. His role in the bombing would haunt him for the rest of his life.

The discrepancy between the tremendous power of humanity's inventions and the limited ability of any single person to comprehend, let alone control, the moral and practical implications of that power, is what Günther Anders, the postwar German-Jewish philosopher and antinuclear activist, called "the Promethean gap."

Prometheus is a character from Greek mythology who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. With fire, humans were launched on the road to ever more powerful inventions—a cascade of technological advances that would also unleash new forms of death, destruction, and exploitation. In the Greek myth, the gods punished Prometheus with eternal torment.

For Anders, the U.S. service members tasked with dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the prime example of people caught in the Promethean gap. On the one hand, these U.S. servicemen were cogs in the atomic machine. They were couriers sent to deliver a deadly message about U.S. capability and commitment to winning the war. If one of them had declined the assignment, someone else would have stepped up to fill his shoes. Under these circumstances, it was possible to be "guiltlessly guilty." On the other hand, as participants in and witnesses to the violence, these men came closer to connecting with the physical consequences of and responsibility for their actions than any others.

Once their initial sense of astonishment subsided, most of the airmen reconciled themselves to the bombings by focusing on their affiliation to their fellow American servicemen, whose lives they may have saved by obviating the need for a ground invasion of Japan. Others simply distanced themselves from the morality of the decision entirely.

Col. Paul Tibbets Jr., who commanded the Army Air Forces unit tasked with delivering the atomic bombs and piloted the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, defended his actions until his dying days. "I made up my mind then that the morality of dropping that bomb was not my business," he told an interviewer in 1989. "I have never lost a night's sleep on the deal."

Unlike Tibbets, Eatherly reported suffering from nightmares about the bombings, and his guilt drove him into a spiral of self-sabotage. In April 1957, *Newsweek* ran an article, "Hero in Handcuffs," that reported that Eatherly was in a jail cell in Fort Worth after breaking into two post offices in rural Texas. It described a tattered postwar life: Eatherly had been in and out of psychiatric treatment at a VA hospital in Waco, had served time in a New Orleans jail for forging a check, and had been involved in a series of stickups at small-town grocery stores. But his crimes were so poorly executed—at least once he fled the scene, leaving the money behind—that his psychiatrist and one of his defense

attorneys separately reached the conclusion that Eatherly must have intended to get caught.

Eatherly's plane, the Straight Flush; Eatherly, Dallas city jail, 1959 (r.)

At his trial for the post-office burglaries, Eatherly's psychiatrist testified that his patient suffered from a guilt complex stemming above all from his role in the bombing of Hiroshima. In carrying out these petty crimes, what Eatherly actually wanted was punishment. A jury found him "not guilty by reason of insanity," and he was released. Eatherly's guilt fascinated Anders because it provided him with a glimmer of hope for humanity—a path forward for nuclear peace activists through the Promethean gap. For Eatherly, his dutiful service and the standard justification that the atomic bombings saved lives by ending the war, were not enough to quiet his conscience. In 1959, Anders wrote to Eatherly and they struck up a correspondence. Anders was eager to co-opt the pilot's story in the service of generating political will to eliminate nuclear weapons, casting Eatherly as "a symbol of the future." For his part, Eatherly quickly developed the hope that Anders would provide the platform that he lacked.

"Through writers like yourself," Eatherly wrote in one of his first letters to Anders, "someone will...give a message that will influence the world toward a reconciliation and peace. You may be the man, if I can be of any help to you, count on me."

In a 1961 interview with reporter Ronnie Dugger, Eatherly explained that he was not convinced by the orthodox explanation about the atomic bomb as a war-winning weapon; the Japanese were putting up so little resistance by early August that Eatherly believed the war would have ended even without the nuclear devastation. Logically, he knew that if it had not been him, it would have been someone else to give the go-ahead to drop the bomb. Yet he still appeared to feel, and suffer under, the enormity of his role in the atomic bombings. Anders saw in Eatherly's behavior a person attempting, in his own way, to be held accountable for his actions rather than finding ways to disclaim or reject responsibility.

With Anders' encouragement, Eatherly sent a message to the people of Hiroshima. "I told them I was the major that gave the 'go-ahead' to destroy Hiroshima, that I was unable to forget the act, and that the guilt of the act has caused me great suffering," Eatherly reported to Anders. "I asked them to forgive me." Thirty "girls of Hiroshima," young *hibakusha*, or atomic bomb victims, left alive but scarred by the blast, responded. "We have learned to feel towards you a fellow-feeling," they wrote, "thinking that you are also a victim of war like us."

By the 1960s, Eatherly became something of a cause célèbre, especially in war-ravaged Europe and Asia where his remorse fulfilled a deep-seated desire for compassion. In

1961, Anders published his correspondence with Eatherly, complete with a preface from the renowned British philosopher, mathematician, and antinuclear activist Bertrand Russell. In 1962, Eatherly was one of four people given “Hiroshima Awards” for “outstanding contributions to world peace” at a major peace demonstration in New York. NBC made a TV drama based on his story. The British papers embraced him as a symbol of antinuclear protest. Poets described his plight in verse.

The more visible Eatherly became as a symbol of peace and disarmament, the more heated the debate was about the sincerity of his experiences and feelings. Journalists wrote detailed books and articles examining his claims and motives.

“Is it possible,” investigative reporter William Bradford Huie asked in his 1965 book, *The Hiroshima Pilot*, “that Eatherly feigned guilt to attract attention and perhaps profit?” Instead of guilt, Huie suggested an inferiority complex. “The truth,” he concluded, “seems to be that when Claude Eatherly began evidencing mental illness and ‘turning to crime,’ he was a disappointed and immature man who thought he had been overlooked.... Instead of being the Hero of Hiroshima, he was a man who was disappointed at having been left out of the attack on Hiroshima.” Eatherly himself was silenced by throat cancer and died in 1978, at the age of 59, in a veterans hospital in Houston.

We are now living in the 75th year of the atomic age. Eatherly’s experiences deepen our understanding of the human dimensions of what it means to undertake enormous acts of wartime violence. His remorse highlighted the ethical quandary of winning a righteous war that nevertheless cost such a huge toll in human lives. Passing judgment on whether he was a hero for speaking out about his suffering, or a malingerer out to capitalize on his wartime experiences, became a way to stake a claim within the debate about nuclear weapons.

Eatherly was aware of his predicament, and it grew into a larger question on the use of nuclear weapons that would go on to outlast him and his legacy: “I have been having such difficulty in getting society to recognize the fact of my guilt, which I have long since realized,” Eatherly lamented to Anders in one of his letters. “The truth is that society simply cannot accept the fact of my guilt without at the same time recognizing its own far deeper guilt.”

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