

## BURCHETT IN HIROSHIMA

Wilfred Graham Burchett, an Australian journalist, was the first Allied reporter to enter Hiroshima and was the only person to get an uncensored story out of Japan. After a 400-mile train ride from Tokyo, he arrived on the night of Sept. 2, 1945. In the morning he was escorted by police car to the Communications Hospital where he pounded out copy on his Baby Hermes while sitting on a pile of rubble. It was published in the *London Daily Express* on Sept. 5<sup>th</sup> under this ominous headline.

**30<sup>th</sup> Day in Hiroshima: Those who escaped begin to die, victims of  
THE ATOMIC PLAGUE  
I write this as a Warning to the World  
DOCTORS FALL AS THEY WORK  
Poison gas fear: All wear masks**

*In Hiroshima, 30 days after the 1<sup>st</sup> atomic bomb destroyed the city and shook the world, people are still dying, mysteriously and horribly- people who were uninjured in the cataclysm from an unknown something which I can only describe as the atomic plague. Hiroshima does not look like a bombed city. It looks as if a monster steamroller has passed over it and squashed it out of existence. I write these facts as dispassionately as I can in the hope that they will act as a warning to the world.*

*In this first testing ground of the atomic bomb I have seen the most terrible and frightening desolation in four years of war. It makes a blitzed Pacific island seem like an Eden. The damage is far greater than photographs can show. When you arrive in Hiroshima you can look around for twenty-five and perhaps thirty square miles and you can see hardly a building. It gives you an empty feeling in the stomach to see such man-made destruction. I picked my way to a shack used as a temporary police headquarters in the middle of the vanished city. Looking south from there I could see about three miles of redish rubble. That is all the atomic bomb left of dozens of blocks of city streets, of buildings, homes, factories and human beings. There is just nothing standing except about twenty factory chimneys-- chimneys with no factories. A group of half a dozen gutted buildings. And then again, nothing.*

*The police chief of Hiroshima welcomed me eagerly as the first Allied correspondent to reach the city. With the local manager of **Domei**, the leading Japanese news agency, he drove me through, or perhaps I should say over, the city. And he took me to hospitals where the victims of the bomb are still being treated. In these hospitals I found people who, when the bomb fell suffered absolutely no injuries, but now are dying from the uncanny after-effects. For no apparent reason their health began to fail. They lost appetite. Their hair fell out. Bluish spots appeared on their bodies. And then bleeding began from the ears, nose, and mouth. At first, the doctors told me, they thought these were the symptoms of general debility. They gave their patients Vitamin A injections. The results were horrible. The flesh started rotting away from the hole caused by the injection of the needle. And in every case the victim died. That is one of*

*the after-effects of the first atomic bomb man ever dropped and I do not want to see any more examples of it.*

*My nose detected a peculiar odor unlike anything I have ever smelled before. It is something like sulphur, but not quite. I could smell it when I passed a fire that was still smoldering, or at a spot where they were still recovering bodies from the wreckage. But I could also smell it where everything was still deserted. They believe it is given off by the poisonous gas still issuing from the earth soaked with radioactivity by the split uranium atom. And so the people of Hiroshima today are walking through the forlorn desolation of their once proud city with gauze masks over their mouths and noses. It probably does not help them physically. But it helps them mentally.*

*From the moment that this devastation was loosed upon Hiroshima, the people who survived have hated the white man. It is a hate, the intensity of which is almost as frightening as the bomb itself. The counted dead number 53,000. Another 30,000 are missing, which means certainly dead. In the day I have stayed in Hiroshima, 100 people have died from its effects. They were some of the 13,000 seriously injured by the explosion. These casualties might not have been as high except for a tragic mistake. The authorities thought this was just another Super-Fort raid. The plane flew over the target and dropped the parachute which carried the bomb to its explosion point. The American plane passed out of sight. The all-clear was sounded and the people of Hiroshima came out from their shelters. Almost a minute later the bomb reached the 2,000 foot altitude at which it was timed to explode- at the moment when nearly everyone in Hiroshima was in the streets.*

*Hundreds upon hundreds of the dead were so badly burned by the terrific heat generated by the bomb that it was not even possible to tell whether they were men or women, old or young. Of thousands of others, nearer the center of the explosion, there was no trace. The theory in Hiroshima is that the atomic heat was so great that they burned instantly to ashes- except that there were no ashes. If you could see what is left of Hiroshima, you would think that London had not been touched by bombs. The Imperial Palace, once an imposing building, is a heap of rubble three feet high, and there is one piece of the wall. Roof, floors and everything else is dust.*

On the morning of Sept. 7<sup>th</sup> Burchett stumbled off the train in Tokyo to discover that senior U.S. officials had called a press conference to dampen down the story that had been wired around the world. Brigadier General Thomas Farrell, deputy head of the super-secret Manhattan Project, was explaining that the bomb had been exploded at a sufficient height over Hiroshima to avoid any risk of 'residual radiation.' My first question to the briefing officer. *Have you been to Hiroshima?* No, he replied, but then he explained, *Those I had seen in the hospital were victims of blast and burn, normal after any big explosion. Apparently the Japanese doctors were incompetent to handle them or lacked the right medication.* He discounted allegations that those who had not been in the city at the time of the blast were later affected. *Why were fish still dying a month after the blast,* I asked. The spokesman looked pained. *I'm afraid you've fallen victim to Japanese propaganda.* Hiroshima was immediately put off bounds. *I was*

*whisked to a US Army hospital where doctors told me my low with-corpuscle count was caused by antibiotics I had been given for a knee infection.*

Years later he found out this condition was related to radiation sickness. He died of cancer in 1983, shortly after his book was published.

Excerpts from Wilfred Burchett's book, *Shadows of Hiroshima (1983)*