Hell Comes to Kobe

Tony Silva

January 21, 1995. A weather-perfect Saturday morning, sun shining brightly through clear blue skies, just a nip of January to redden the cheeks. With some minor anomalies, the mood at the Hankyu Umeda train station in central Osaka was similar to what one might observe during any of the many festivals held through the year. The people accepted the inconvenience of the overcrowding willingly, even cheerfully. Station attendants roped off access to the platforms to prevent any human spillage onto the tracks and measured out the flow of humanity, trainload by trainload. Most of the crowd were attired in what we in the states would describe as camping attire - jeans, fatigues, knapsacks, etc. The usual Japanese "hiking" unforms - ersatz liederhosen - were conspicuous by their absence. I had anticipated the worst train ride ever (and that includes some nasty business), and in some ways it was, but not in the way I'd expected. Certainly I'd never been on a more crowded train. The usually stoic pasengers cried out in real pain and fear at the second stop, when even more people tried to press their way onto the already grossly overcrowded train.

Despite all this, the mood was tentatively upbeat. Sure, there was this disaster in Kobe, but the train was full of good people, doing good things, and feeling good about themselves. The jerry cans of water, blankets, tarps, and napsacks full of food and other essentials took up even more space, but almost everyone was in full good samaritan mode, offering to let strangers rest their load on their laps for the ride into earthquake stricken Hyogo Prefecture. Only here and there on the train could I see faces with expressions that might have mirrored my own, expressions of those who knew.

The train rolled westward - a local, as they all were - but no one was less grateful for even this minimal service. The engineer eased the overloaded train gently over the rougher spots of roadbed and gingerly inched it over the questionable bridges. About 7 minutes into the ride, the first quake damage was visible.

"Oh, look! That house fell down!"

Eyes were wide open, hungry for the first taste of the spectacle of tragedy.

"Oh, and look at that one!"

"Look over there!"

Aided by the aggressive shoving of a tiny old lady behind me, I'd managed to find myself in a seat. My napsack full of bottled drinking water from Osaka was wedged between me and the seatback, and under my legs was an empty jerry can I'd use to get

some general use (undrinkable without boiling) water from one friend's house to another once I got into Nishinomiya. I'd been in Nishinomiya when the earthquake hit. I didn't need to see what lie outside the windows of the train.

As the train moved farther west and the scale of the damage made itself apparent, the mood of my fellow riders changed, as I knew it would. By the time we arrived in Nishinomiya, it was no longer a trainload of cheerful good samaritans. We had all seen it now. Now we all understood. Faces had changed from those of cheery volunteers to something much more serious. I'd seen a week of these faces, an incredible fatigue behind an almost hyper-alertness, a fear in the eyes under persevering strength. The faces of a war, I thought. Except for an occassional look into the faces of my fellow passengers, I kept my head down.

When the train finally pulled into the Nishinomiya Kitaguchi station, as far west as it could go, the train car was silent. We disembarked with none of the usual shoving and pushing. With heavy steps, carrying a weight far heavier than the payload of our water and provisions, we made our way out of the station toward our varied destinations. This wasn't TV.

The earthquake struck at 5:46 A.M., January 17, 1995. I had been up for a few minutes on the second floor of a two-story house I rented at the west end of Nishinomiya. I'd put away my futon, turned on the first floor heater to make my exit from the shower on the first floor less of a shock, and had turned on the mini-heater in the second floor toilet in preparation for my morning read. I'd even taken a moment to browse the dictionary I'd bought myself for Christmas to confirm the meaning of a word. I'd just dropped trou and had taken my first step toward the toilet when all hell broke loose.

The sound came first, indescribable, but unforgettable if you've ever heard it, an ultra-low-frequency gut-wrenching roar of unmistakable "wrongness." Then, the simultaneous agonizing groan of the house around me giving way and the floor being knocked clear from under my feet. Knowing on one level that it must be an earthquake, yet at the same time totally uncomprehending of what could be happening, my early (but apparently deep) training in the height of the red scare came to my rescue. Every Tuesday morning, in response to an air-raid warning siren, we'd dive under our desks regardless of what else was happening in the classroom. I had learned well. I scrambled under the low table in the center of the room, shut my eyes, and hung on, as they say, for dear life. The table and I had quite a ride around the room, or, more accurately, the floor did quite a dance under us, as the house made a violent surge in one direction and then another, tossing us from one corner to the next. A semi-moment of calm, then, just as I had the briefest moment to think that it might be over, a series of nauseating vertical humping bounces. The wail of the earth groaning in pain joined with the sounds of the house coming apart around me tortured my ears.

This hellish symphony was accented by what in retrospect was not such a great danger, but in the dark, under the table, the sound of a heavy light fixture crashing down on the table under which I was riding was quite a fright. My thoughts at the time were clear and few. Two, to be exact. One was "NO!," a now almost humorous self-revealing artifact of my near-neurotic need for control. The other was "Let this be quick." I was pretty sure things were over for me under that table. And not only for me, because it sure felt like the end of the world.

And then it was quiet.

And dark.

And I was alive. And unhurt.

There was no sound, no light, but there sure as hell was dust. Old Japanese houses are basically two-by-fours nailed together, slathered over with plaster and topped by heavy slate tiles held together by gravity and mud. All that mud had long since dried out and the dirt and dust had been coming down good and heavy during the earth's polka, and now it was everywhere - in my eyes, in my mouth, in my lungs, in the crack of my ass.

But I was alive and it was checkout time. The trick was finding some clothes and finding my way out of the house - in the dark. Ordinarily, no big thing, but the quake had done an interesting remodeling of the house, and nothing - and I don't mean furniture, but walls, doors, and stairs - was where it had been minutes ago. The stairway had a scary lateral swing to it, but held my weight. Once I got downstairs, finding my way out was easy, since the sliding front doors had popped clear off the front of the building.

Wearing sweatpants, 2 shirts, and 2 jackets, and somehow, holding my wallet, I sat down in the street a safe distance from the crumbling structure, waited for dawn, and savored survival.

Two friends, the owners of the house, soon arrived by car. They lived nearby in a newer house which withstood the quake, but feared for my safety in the old building. From their car radio we were able to get the first reports on the scale of damage. With houses smeared across roads which were themselves buckled and littered with telephone poles, power poles, and cable, attempting to travel any distance by car was futile. We tried, but gave up when, 20 minutes and 500 meters from the house, stuck in traffic under a viaduct, we were treated to the first of what were to be hundreds of "aftershocks" – strong enough in normal times to be considered serious earthquakes themselves. Plan B was to get on my motorcycle, toppled, but undamaged, to check on another friend who lived nearby. It meant going back into the house to get the keys, but it was light now, and I had friends there to dig me out if the worst happened.

The ride east revealed the incredible scope of the damage. Almost every pre-war structure, about 30% of the homes in the area, had either gone down completely or suffered extensive damage. Some newer buildings were bad, too, including some large apartment buildings with whole floors collapsed, or with the whole structure leaning precariously over the road below. The damage. The faces. And we were the lucky ones.

My friend's apartment building was OK, but he wasn't answering his door. I learned from a neighbor that he had been seen after the quake and was fine. In fact, he was at the moment making the hour-long walk back to my house to check on me. After a few back-and-forth trips on the bike, we eventually met up around one that afternoon back at his place. I don't think anything I drink in this lifetime will taste as good as that first beer that day.

Miraculously, my girlfriend and her brother spent the better part of that first day driving to Nishinomiya from Osaka. They made it to my house, and seeing that my motorcycle was gone, surmised my safety and likely whereabouts. We weren't able to meet, but she did leave a plastic bag hanging on my friend's apartment's doorknob containing drinking water and sandwiches. I am very lucky.

I spent several days there after that - no water, no gas, no telephone. No sleep, either, since darkness was much too closely linked with the memory of the earthquake to trust it enough to sleep in it. Not to mention the aftershocks. But, we had heat from a kerosene stove, fire from a portable propane grill, plenty of beer, whiskey, and food. Even electricity and the luxury of a TV, which showed us even more destruction than we could see from the seventh floor balcony. The day after the quake we returned to my rented house and risked some gentle, hurried moments to retrieve what we could from the deteriorating structure. Photos. Passport. CD's and a handful of books. Clothes. The house was razed by the city soon after that.

In several hours it will be exactly three weeks since hell came to the Kobe - Ashiya - Nishinomiya area. I've fared very well, thanks to the support and help of some wonderful friends. I'm back at work, and I've found a new place to live. My insurance company (I'm one of the 3% of the Hyogo residents having earthquake insurance) has been very cooperative. My students greeted me with tears of joy and a box of canned food upon my return to my school. Friends have offered household goods, money, and incredible support. As I said, I am very lucky.

Others in are not so fortunate. Over 5000 people have died. Thousands are still homeless, living in shelters, in buildings ready to collapse in the next aftershock, or in tents in parking lots. Most of the area has no water, and none of it has gas. Telephone service is erratic. Major expressways are still closed to allow the passage of emergency vehicles in and out of the area. Other arterial streets, marginal in ordinary

circumstances, are choked with people bringing food, water, medicine and other supplies into the area. Trips into the area by friends and family outside have become a routine for many. I will echo here the media observations of the heroic forebearance of the Japanese people, both victims and volunteers. Hyogo is full of heroes. But, it has been three weeks, and I can't help also echoing here the maddening observation of the lack of action by the government. There is much to be answered for in this proud, wealthy nation.

PM renews commitment to restoration

Two months after the devastating Hanshin quake, the government's plans for rebuilding the area remain vague

Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama indicated in a statement released Friday that the government would come up with medium- to long-range restoration plans for the quake-devastated areas as soon as possible, but provided little information about specific measures.

In the statement, released exactly two months after the Jan. 17 earthquake, Murayama said, "I am proceeding with discussions aimed at quickly putting together a basic national policy for restoration."...

Murayama said ...that there are still more than 80,000 people taking refuge in shelter areas because of the quake and pointed out the need for continued support for the affected people.

– Mainichi Daily News, March 18, 1995.