

The Island Idyll and the US Occupation

David McNeill

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by David McNeill

For six decades, the inhabitants of Okinawa have lived alongside thousands of US troops. Now new plans for base expansion have provoked fierce resistance.

Taira Natsume is a mild-mannered, bespectacled parson and pacifist in the Martin Luther King mode, but he warns he will not be pushed too far. "If the authorities come back with more people we'll be waiting for them," he says. "I'm not a violent man but they're not going to get through." It is a baking hot day in Henoko, a tiny fishing village in Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture. For 110 days, the reverend and 8,000 supporters have been coming to this sun-bleached beach to fight off government engineers trying to begin drilling surveys for a proposed offshore helicopter base for the US military.

protesters, many in their sixties, have scuffled. White-haired pensioners have gone toe-to-toe with security guards and taken to canoes and wetsuits to block the invaders. "I'm full of anger," 64-year-old Toyama Sakai says. "How can they do this to this place? We already put up with so much." Okinawans live in one of the most beautiful places on earth, a string of pristine islands dosed with ecological Viagra, anointed in tropical sun, bathed in the azure-blue waters of the Pacific, and coated with a lush carpet of green, spiked with palm trees. The region is also home to one of the world's largest concentrations of US military bases. The Americans invaded in 1945, mounting a savage attack that wiped out close to a third of the local population and left 50,000 US troops killed or injured. They never left.



Henoko anti-base activists on day 110 of their sit-in protest against the construction of a new base.

As the protest has dragged on, engineers and



Rev. Taira Natsume standing in front of the proposed site for the offshore US military helicopter station.
"We've had enough."

In 1972, two decades after Japan regained independence, the islands reverted to Japanese rule but most of the bases stayed. The bases already occupy a fifth of the main island and include Kadena, the biggest and most active US Air Force base in east Asia, and Futenma, which occupies 25 per cent of the Ginowan city. Now, after years of promises by Tokyo and Washington to scale down the military presence, the plan to build the Marine base, 1,500m by 600m, over a coral reef off Henoko to replace an older base in Futenma has enraged the people. Higashionna Takumam a fisherman, says: "They're going to steal our livelihood and destroy the local environment. We're not going to stand for it."



Sign Warning trespassers on the gates of US military facility on Okinawa

Mr Higashionna has just returned from San Francisco where he filed a suit against the US Defense Department, claiming the base threatens the habitat of the imperiled dugong, a gentle sea mammal classed as a "natural monument".

More than 50,000 US military personnel and dependants, including 17,600 Marines, are on Okinawa, which has a population of 1.3 million; the US military controls much of the land, sea and air, including all air traffic up to 6,000 meters. Over the years, Okinawa has sent off troops to wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, and if war with China or North Korea comes, US troops from Okinawa will fight it, whether the Okinawans like it or not.

Chalmers Johnson, a former CIA consultant and author of *Okinawa: Cold War Island*, says: "It is simply unimaginable that an ally would do this sort of thing. It's just an accident waiting to happen. "When [US Secretary of Defence] Donald Rumsfeld visited Okinawa last November, he was told by the island's governor, 'You people are on the active volcano and when it explodes it is going to bring down your entire strategy in Asia in much the way the fall of the Berlin Wall did for the USSR'. Building a 39th military base in Okinawa is absurd."

The past four weeks or so have been typical,

the people say, just low-level stuff: On 8 July, a Marine major charged with the rape of a Filipina base worker was convicted of molestation. On 16 July, an Okinawan was hurt in a hit-and-run accident traced to a soldier at Camp Hansen. On 23 July, a drunken off-duty Marine hit a policeman. On 8 August, another Marine attacked a taxi driver. The day before, the US Air Force had admitted that a 2.5kg piece of metal embedded in the garden of a house had fallen from an F18C fighter in June. *The Okinawa Times* made it the lead story and asked: "What if children had been playing in the garden?"

Nothing major happened; nothing like the rage that overtook the island in 1995 when two Marines and a sailor kidnapped and raped a 12-year-old girl and left her for dead, a crime that capped years of brutal sex crimes and gave rise to the largest protests in Okinawan history. This is what happens, said the thousands who came out in Okinawa's largest protest, when you train young men barely out of their teens to kill like machines on a crowded island that does not want them.

The gang rapists knew that if they made it back to base before the police found out, they were safe under the Status of Forces Agreement that protects US forces here, which is why most of the rage was directed at the Japanese government that foists 75 per cent of all US military bases in Japan on this little speck in the Pacific. Islanders believe they are bearing the burden of Japan's military alliance with the US and, with it, America's military strategy for east Asia.

Chibana Shoichi is Malcolm X to Taira Natsume's Martin Luther King, a firebrand famous on the island for burning the Japanese flag on national television. "The Japanese government wants US military protection but it knows they can never move these bases to the mainland because there they would be kicked out," he says. These days, Mr Chibana fights for the return of 236sq m of ancestral land, part of 530,000sqm leased by Tokyo to the US military. "Here, we're powerless so they get away with

it. This is the best place in the world for the US military. They love it here. The Japanese government pays them ¥6,700bn (£32bn) a year. They pay for their houses, their fuel, water, cars. The only thing the government doesn't pay is the salaries of the soldiers." The 1995 protests were a watershed and forced the US and Japanese governments to agree to return Futenma Marine Corps air base to Okinawa within five to seven years. The agreement was timed to greet the arrival of Bill Clinton, then US president, who had come to Japan to renew the US-Japan security treaty. Mr Clinton shook hands with the then Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro and the protesters left the streets. Today, the return of Futenma is still 16 years away and another base is being built.

Three generations of Okinawans have now grown up listening to the roar of tank and jet engines and reluctantly learning the alphabet soup of US military hardware: F-15s, B-52s, HH-60 Helicopters, KC-135 air refueling aircraft, C-130 cargo planes. New additions like the ubiquitous Humvee have been added to the convoy of green metal trundling across the Island's narrow roads. The soundtrack to this pounding symphony of moving machinery is Limp Bizkit, Nickelback and Slipknot, the music that leeches out of cars driven by military personnel and the bars that cater to them. Most of these bars are on a strip outside the main gate to Camp Hansen in the village of Kin, where riots against the bases in the 1970s shook the shaky truce between the military and the local people.

In one bar, the Japanese mama-san, who claims she knew R Lee Emery, the pit-bull drill instructor in *Full Metal Jacket*, says the Henoko protesters are "idiots", adding: "The bases bring revenue." At 7pm, the bar is starting to fill with big, tattooed men with boy's faces. The area around the strip has been the site of dozens of rapes and attempted sex assaults; few Okinawan women will go there after dark. The word many islanders use to describe this situation is "occupation".

Kuba Tatsuno, a mother raising four children in the shadow of Kadena, says: "Why should they be able to stay and take all the best land? Some people say the US soldiers are shut up in the bases, but they can come out anytime they like to drink and play and grab local women. We're locked out of our land."



Kuba Tatsuno and her four children standing outside the Futenma base. "They train people to kill in there. I can hear them screaming at each other. It scares me."

"They train people to kill behind those fences. I can hear them shouting all the time. Every day my house fills up with the smell of gasoline, the windows shudder and the engines drown the kids' lessons. And the planes roar over so close. It's only a matter of time before they kill someone again."

Like most islanders, she knows planes regularly crash inside and outside the bases. In the worst, in the 1950s, a jet fighter hit a school, killing 17 children and injuring 121.

The Japanese government has responded to the anger by pouring in cash from the public trough, and backing political conservatives such as the present governor, Inamine Keiichi. Inamine replaced the fiercely anti-base Masahide Ota, who wrote in the Asahi newspaper: "When local people are denied free use of their own land, air and sea how could they be considered citizens of a free nation?" The refrain from Tokyo and from the Governor's office is that if the bases go the economy will collapse. Mr Ota says: "Base-related revenues make up only 5 per cent of the total. There would be jobs for 10 times more people if the US forces were to vacate their bases in urban areas and the returned land was developed." He believes Okinawa could earn much more from tourism. "The bases are hampering the development of Okinawa's economy, not sustaining it."

The Henoko movement arrives at a crucial time. Washington is experimenting with plans for a more mobile, decentralized military, and, with South Korea increasingly chafing against the US presence there, Japan is seen as the key regional center of control.

Mr Johnson says: "The US must prevent what happened in Korea, which is the more genuine anti-American democracy, and the Americans there are just hated. Rumsfeld is not worried about democracy but he knows Okinawa is prone to something that may be outside the control of the government."

Douglas Lummis, a former Marine and now political scientist who lives in Okinawa, says: "People have been saying for years, 'Of course we don't want the bases'. Then they lower their voices and say, 'But what can we do'. Now they have something. I think the Henoko battle will be won and it will energize the anti-base movement."

The Rev. Taira says the islanders have had enough. "The soldiers get drunk and crash their cars. There are four accidents a day; two rapes a month. Almost every person on Okinawa has a family member who has been assaulted. Then the soldiers go off to kill poor people in Iraq

and Afghanistan. It makes my blood boil."

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