

## **Jeju/Okinawa Dispatch 4**

Finally, as promised, here is the final report on the recent Veterans for Peace journey. Our experiences on Jeju and Okinawa and, more to the point, the lessons learned, are too important to fall prey to my struggle to just sit down and put pen to paper or fingers to the keyboard. So here goes:

An overview of the consequences of the U.S. military's presence on Okinawa is helpful to an understanding of the Okinawans' obstinate resistance:

- Okinawa represents .6% of Japan's total landmass yet 74% of exclusive U.S. military use facilities are on the island.
- U.S. military bases occupy over 20% of Okinawa's landmass.
- Additionally, U.S. military forces control 29 sea zones and 15 restricted air zones.
- Environmental degradation associated with the disposal of toxins related to military operations is widespread.
- There is a crime wave associated with the U.S. military's presence including rapes, murders and lesser crimes. (Note: The Okinawan government has documented 5,747 criminal cases involving GIs, between 1972 and 2011.)
- Aircraft accidents are inevitable. (Note: 70 U.S. military aircraft have crashed on Okinawa between 1972 and 2011 including 41 helicopters)
- Noise pollution is a given.

Add this all up and it looks, feels, sounds, and smells pretty much like a U.S. military occupation.

By sharing a few highlights I hope to convey why, to a person, the Veterans for Peace delegates have returned home, committed to amplify the voices of the victims. Maybe our heightened awareness and empathy can make a difference.

### **Miyamori Elementary School**

After briefly viewing Futenma Marine Air Station and Kadena Air Base as reported in my last dispatch, our VFP delegation traveled up the island to visit Miyamori Elementary School, in the city of Uruma. Here we had our introduction to one of the tragic incidents that comes with life amidst continuous on-going military exercises. On June 30, 1959, an American F-100 fighter jet on a training flight out of Kadena Air Base had crashed into the school and nearby homes, taking the lives of 11 students and 6 others. Among the 210 injured were 156 students. One of the faculty members and several students escorted us through a commemorative exhibit. Over 55 years have passed, yet the anguish expressed by our guide in the re-telling seemed fresh. Intervening history and the inevitability of future incidents made this so. A cherubic 7<sup>th</sup> grader sang a lovely remembrance song she had written that touched us all deeply.

## **Camp Schwab/Henoko**

Having seen Futenma we would visit the site of its proposed re-location, Cape Henoko, on our second day in the field. Thirty miles north of Futenma, Henoko is adjacent to Camp Schwab (8.4 sq miles), a sprawling Marine Corps base.

Okinawans and their allies have been protesting there, on a daily basis for nearly two decades. Most of us have been tracking the confrontation for years and knew that though Okinawan activists are dedicated to non-violence there have been occasional ugly incidents, some arrests made, and the heat of exchanges has ebbed and flowed. As a group we were seasoned veterans of political protest and we had confident, well-informed leadership, yet this was a new "landscape". My colleagues may have shared my low-level anxiety, knowing that emotions were very likely to be high on both sides of the barricades and there are always unknowns.

The decision that the replacement facility was to be sited at Henoko provoked particularly strong objection unique to the location:

- \* The proposed new facility will include two runways, each of which will be over 4,000 feet long jutting into the pristine waters of Oura Bay.

- \* These waters and their precious coral beds are a critical habitat for a diverse community which includes sea turtles and the endangered dugong, a large marine mammal.

- \* Over 250 acres will be reclaimed from the sea, requiring that a comparable area of coral will be covered with 21 million cubic meters of trucked-in dirt and sand. Note: Marine biologist and author, Katherine Muzik, estimates this to translate into 3.5 million truckloads of fill or 959 trucks a day for 10 years!

- \* Futenma Air Station now has more than 50 take-offs and landings each day. These will be added to the noise pollution currently contributed by live firing drills, aircraft noise and, at times, 30 explosions/day caused by explosive ordnance disposal at Camp Schwab.

On our arrival, in the pre-dawn hour, scores of protesters were visible in the street- and head-lights milling about the two Camp Schwab base gates within a few hundred feet of one another. Visible also were an equal, if not greater, number of uniformed Japanese police, whose numbers seemed to be growing exponentially, and assorted police and military vehicles. Lined along the street, opposite the base, were probably a couple dozen bazaar-style tents which, we would learn later, were protest headquarters and sheltered all support activities. Here activists would meet, eat, strategize, regenerate, sleep, dance, browse through issue-oriented literature, and purchase t-shirts and other souvenirs to help support the cause.

Clambering out of our mini-bus in our distinctive, bright yellow Veterans for Peace sweat-shirts, our group of 11 was immediately recognizable as an affinity

group. It soon became clear by the warmth of our reception that many of the regulars knew we were Veterans for Peace and that we were a delegation from the states. We were embraced, figuratively and literally, from then throughout our stay. In spite of a challenging language-barrier, we quickly realized we were accorded a welcoming of rock-star magnitude.

A digression here about **Rachel Clark**, our interpreter: It is impossible to overstate how capable or how valuable she was. For much of every day her services were critical to our mission as very few of the people with whom we interacted spoke English and, collectively, we would not have been able to communicate our way back to our motel. Rachel, a Japanese-American from New Jersey was brilliant---calm under pressure, professional, tactful, totally dedicated to our purpose and, oh yeah, able to “simultaneously” interpret. She is now an associate member of Veterans for Peace. We simply could not have done better.

Thanks to Rachel, with whom we were all wired, we were able to track not only what was being said, but were able to stay together and to participate in every way. Within minutes of our arrival, we joined most of the other activists who were amassing, seated on the pavement in front of one of the gates through which all construction vehicles would have to pass. After being warned several times to disperse and refusing to do so, the police began removing us, one-by-one. Protesters resisted as aggressively as practitioners of non-violence could, wrapping themselves tightly around one another, and the young police (for the most part they appeared to be fuzzy-faced 18-year-old police cadets), with expressionless faces, dealt with the vexing entanglements with non-violent, professional patience. One-by-one we were broken away from our colleagues and carted off to the holding pens created by barricades and vehicles. Once the roadway was cleared the gates opened and vehicles critical to the construction project passed in or out of the base. Only after the traffic had passed were we released and able to plop ourselves down, once again impeding progress.

Organizers seized the intervals between the periods of relative drama associated with our removal as opportunities to communicate, strategize, and connect. Announcements relative to upcoming anti-base events were shared, songs sung, poems read, dances were danced, and, luminaries were introduced. Any activist was welcome to take the mic and we, as visitors-in-solidarity and Veterans for Peace activists, were urged to speak. At various times all of us did taking full advantage of the opportunity. These occasions constituted seminars serving the cause of anti-base awareness.

Most impressive were the words of our “youth brigade.” VFP member **Mike Hanes** was a Force Recon Marine combat veteran who served during the Iraq invasion, whose first overseas duty station had been at Camp Hansen (19 sq. mi.) on Okinawa barely 20 years ago. His good friend, and fellow San Diego

VFP chapter-mate, **Will Griffin**, served in the Army as a paratrooper and as an engineer in both Afghanistan and Iraq. At every opportunity Mike or Will spoke with such passion and wisdom, the rest of us, a bit on the tattered side (apologies to my colleagues), were in awe. The Okinawan activists seemed to me equally enthralled. Often Mike and Will addressed the young riot police and military personnel, standing nearby, directly and forcefully. They called upon them to become critical thinkers, to pay attention to the consequences of their work, to become more empathetic. Both Mike and Will have become futurists—focusing on the consequences of their decisions and the future of the planet. They identify themselves as global citizens. They know, first-person, of the futility of war and are totally dedicated to problem solving in order to assure the survival of our species. If we, as a group, were admired and appreciated and warmly received, Mike and Will were adored—their shared an undeniable charisma. Just as we older VFP members found hope for the future of VFP in Mike and Will, so did the Okinawans, who met and heard their words find hope for the planet.

We returned for several hours on two other mornings to stand sing, dance, speak and prostrate ourselves in solidarity with scores, at times hundreds, of “regulars.” Together we were also again hauled away to the holding pens by the Japanese police—away from the gates to allow construction to proceed. These were to be, for all of our VFP delegation the most enriching, emotionally fulfilling minutes/hours we experienced. As was the case on Jeju this was why we had come—to share the pain Okinawans and villagers of Gangjeong endure, inflicted on them by our government. By welcoming us, the Okinawans, as the Jeju Islanders had done before, gifted us with the opportunity to demonstrate our common humanity.

The below photos taken by our peerless chronicler and colleague, Ellen Davidson, will give you sense of the action at Camp Schwab/Henoko:





Photos by Ellen Davidson

## Popular Opinion

The prefecture's first referendum on the issue on September 8, 1996 revealed Okinawan feelings toward our bases. Of the 541,638 citizens who participated, 90% voted for base reduction. The strong sentiment persists to this day.



On May 17 of last year some 35,000 Okinawans gathered in protest. Protesters here hold signs that read, “No to a new military base at Henoko.” We had learned that this is ground zero or the focal point for a wide-spread anti-base sentiment, directed generally at all U.S. military presence.

In 2012, when the U.S. announced that two squadrons of MV-22 Osprey helicopter were being based at Futenma, 101,000 Okinawans turned out to protest and to again call for the closure of Futenma. In 2013, the prefecture petitioned the Japanese government to demand the helicopters be booted off the island. Over 4,000 anti-Osprey protesters marched in Tokyo. Leaders of all 41 municipalities on Okinawa called on the central government to cancel the relocation of Futenma anywhere within Okinawa Prefecture.

## **Meeting Ota Masahide**

A living icon, Ota Masahide is Okinawa's Howard Zinn. Born on Kumejima Island, 60 miles west of Okinawa, in 1925, Ota was drafted as a 19 year-old out of Okinawa Teachers' College by the Japanese army along with the rest of his high school. Of the 1787 boys inducted, many as young as 14, over one half died in the Battle of Okinawa. Only 37 of Ota's class of 125 survived. Their shared traumatic nightmare explains, in part, the inherent predilection for peace embraced by all Okinawans. In a life-long quest to make Okinawa an "Island of Peace" Ota pursued an academic and political career. He has written over 100 books, served as Governor of Okinawa from 1990-1998, and has worked tirelessly to reduce the disproportionate burden imposed on Okinawa by the U.S. military bases. He is widely known as the "Conscience of Okinawa."

On one of our last days in Okinawa we visited the Prefectural Peace Museum that Ota was instrumental in creating. It contains the Cornerstone of Peace Monument unique in that here are inscribed the names of over 240,000 lives lost during the Battle of Okinawa—combatants from both sides and, perhaps, as many as 100,000 Okinawan civilians. Here we had the honor to meet with and hear Ota's thoughts with respect to the "base" issue.

Ota spoke of the discrimination suffered by Okinawans at the hands of the U.S. and the Japanese governments. Referencing the fact that of the 712 members of the Japanese national Diet (Congress) only 8 are from Okinawa, he maintains that Okinawa has virtually no representation. This, he says, is an instance of "structural discrimination," as defined by the Norwegian peace studies scholar, Johan Galtung. He finds it ironic that the current Japanese leadership, under Premier Shinzo Abe, has been strongly influenced by the U.S. to forsake the Japanese Constitution, particularly the war-renouncing aspects of Article IX. The irony is not lost on the majority of Okinawans, who having suffered so inordinately during WWII now live under the occupation of the U.S. military.

## **In Closing**

The injustice inflicted on Okinawa begs attention. It is rooted in the power imbalance of the U.S.-Japan relationship and the historical discrimination inflicted on Okinawa by their national government. The resistance is strong and dogged. It exposes the lop-sided relationship and threatens the presence of the U.S. bases in Japan and, by extension, the U.S. strategy of its empire of bases on foreign lands altogether.

The argument can be made that these bases, rather than making anyone— the host-base nation, the U.S., the region, the world— safer, do just the opposite. They surely heighten tensions and they act as "trip-wires." The bases are burrs in the saddles wherever they are. All we have to do is consider the likely U.S. response to a hypothetical hostile foreign military presence in Cuba or Grenada

or anywhere else in the Western hemisphere.

Gallup polls and other polling agencies regularly corroborate international opinion that the U.S. is the gravest threat to world peace. Those 800 bases of ours in some 150 foreign countries are the “tip of that spear.” Note: They also have enabled the 13 military interventions in the Middle East that have created a cauldron of rage and instability.

We returned from our work on Jeju and Okinawa in strong concurrence with VFP board member and lead delegate, Tarak Kauff. Tarak frequently assured our hosts that their example made clear we could serve the VFP mission in no better way than to send delegations such as ours back to Korea and to Okinawa and to other places that the U.S. military empire is creating strife and instability.

The activists on Okinawa can succeed, but the outcome at Henoko will be dependent on:

- 1) the inspirational example of the Gangjeong villagers and their allies on Jeju, where the struggle may be lost, but a vision for the future may yet be realized; and
- 2) the solidarity of a growing anti-base movement.

As we took our last bus ride en route to return flights to the U.S. we agreed we would continue our work to expose and publicize the cause.

Thanks for reading. I close with three messages to ponder—

From Alice Walker’s **“Reflections on Working Toward Peace”**

“There is always a moment in any kind of struggle when one feels in full bloom.” Because whatever the consequences, people, standing side by side, have expressed who they really are, and that ultimately they believe in the love of the world and each other enough to be that-which is the foundation of activism. For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile.”

An inscription at the **Cornerstone of Peace Monument** in Okinawa

Whenever we look at the truth of the Battle of Okinawa  
We think there is nothing as brutal  
Nothing as dishonorable as war.  
In the face of this traumatic experience  
No one will be able to speak out for  
Or idealize war.

It is human beings who start wars.  
But more than that  
Isn't it we human beings who must also prevent wars?  
We have abhorred all wars  
Long yearning to create a peaceful island.  
To acquire  
This  
Our unwavering principle  
We have paid dearly.

The philosophy that unites the peace movement on Okinawa

“Nuchi du takara,” meaning,

### **LIFE IS PRECIOUS**

Dud Hendrick  
Veterans for Peace  
Tom Sturtevant Chapter  
Deer Isle, Maine