

Nuchi Du Takara, Okinawan Resistance and the Battle for Henoko Bay ぬちどう宝 抵抗する沖縄、辺野古・大浦湾の闘い

Jon Mitchell

On 13 August 2004, a U.S. Marine Corps transport helicopter crashed onto the campus of Okinawa International University, Ginowan City, injuring the three service members on board and sparking a large fire. Although the accident occurred on civilian soil, U.S. forces cordoned off the scene and blocked access to Japanese police investigators; according to some reports the only local representatives allowed through the blockade were delivery drivers bringing pizzas to the American MPs. That night, the national Japanese TV news networks either failed to cover the crash or afforded it scant attention.¹

To many Okinawans, the lessons of the accident seemed clear: the U.S. military felt it could operate with impunity on their island and the mainland didn't give a damn.

A decade later nothing has changed - except that, in many ways, the situation has become much worse.

Despite repeated promises from Tokyo to reduce the military burden on Okinawa, U.S. bases still take up 10% of the prefecture (and 18% of Okinawa Island) but give back less than 5% to the local economy. Military aircraft continue to crash, lose chunks of fuselage and make emergency landings - to which the mainstream media turn a blind eye.² At the same time, increasing awareness of environmental contamination created by the bases - including dioxin, PCB and lead pollution - has made many residents fearful not only of the dangers from the skies but the very land

beneath their feet.³

In a 2012 survey conducted by the prefecture and made public this January, 74% of Okinawans said they felt the large military presence on their island amounted to discrimination.⁴ In a healthy democracy, these Okinawans would be able to rectify their grievances via the ballot box. But the island has a long, well-documented history of electoral interference - first by the CIA during the 1960s when the island was under U.S. administration and then, ever since, by Tokyo-orchestrated economic threats, bribes and dirty-tricks campaigns.⁵

With their democratic means exhausted, Okinawans have been forced to seek alternative ways to express their anger. And here - like nowhere else in Japan - resistance manifests itself in many forms.

The most visible expressions are the protests which occur almost daily outside the gates of Okinawa's larger U.S. installations - Camp Gonsalves, Camp Schwab and MCAS Futenma. Demonstrators line the roadsides holding colorful banners calling for the bases' closure and tying to the fences red ribbons - the color of Okinawan anger. One of the most famous of these demonstrations is the weekly Saturday night candlelight vigil held outside Camp Schwab on Henoko Bay, which has been held since November 2004.

Many Christian groups are involved in these peace campaigns; for instance, outside Futenma, there is a weekly protest involving gospel singers. Since June, Catholic nuns have

also joined the seven-year long sit-in at Takae where the Pentagon has been building large Osprey landing pads in the pristine Yamburu jungles.⁶

Following a military crash or crime, these small-scale demonstrations swell exponentially. After the 2004 helicopter crash, 30,000 people protested; in September 2012, a demonstration against the deployment to Okinawa of Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft drew more than 100,000. Many of the participants in these demonstrations are in their seventies and eighties - possible proof that Okinawans' renowned longevity is fueled not only by a diet rich in tofu and goya but also a healthy dose of civil disobedience.

"The elderly protesters are especially passionate," explains Kazue Nakamura-Huber, a co-founder of grass roots peace movement New Wave to Hope. "Their enthusiasm can even intimidate younger Okinawans. The younger generation feels just as angry as their elders (about the military presence) but with jobs or children to look after they're sometimes too busy to attend rallies."

Many of these younger Okinawans take a different approach to resistance.

Take for example, hip-hop artist Kakumakushaka who raps about the U.S. occupation of Okinawa - including *Tami no Domino*, a blistering track about the 2004 helicopter crash. Then there are the designers for fashion label Habu Box whose t-shirts feature bright hibiscuses flowering from the barrels of G.I. rifles and jackets embroidered with U.S. Ospreys clashing with giant *shiisa* - the mythical lion-dog that can often be seen guarding Okinawan rooftops.



On the edge of the newly-created exclusion zone on Henoko Bay

Humour has always been a timeless tool to subvert authority - think Mark Twain, Bill Hicks and Jon Stewart - and Okinawan comedy troupe, Owarai Beigun Kichi, performs skits to sell-out audiences lampooning daily life alongside military fencelines. Included in the group's 2014 line-up are two new mascots: the cutely-punned Mesprey (in Japanese, the suffix "mes" is used for female animals and "os" for males) and a barrel of Agent Orange spluttering defoliants.

To circumvent what they perceive as media censorship of Okinawan voices, many in the younger generation harness technology - including Twitter, Facebook and live-streaming - to broadcast their anger. This approach bore fruit when, in February, 60 university students organized a flash-mob to coincide with U.S. Ambassador Caroline Kennedy's first visit to the island.

"This peace campaign was a first for Okinawa," explains New Wave to Hope member, Ginoza Eiko. "Many people joined in and it was a new and different expression. From now on, I think young people will continue to find new ways to express (their feelings against the bases.)"

From teenagers and pensioners to fashion

designers, comedians and musicians, the peace movement on Okinawa is remarkable in its diversity, but one philosophy unites it: a belief in *Nuchi du takara*, life is precious.

Legend dictates that the words were uttered by the last king of Okinawa Sho Tai upon being banished from the island after the Japanese annexation of Okinawa in 1879.⁷ But the words took on deeper meaning two generations later during the Battle of Okinawa when in the spring of 1945, between a quarter and a third of the island's civilian population was slaughtered.



"War is miserable. But it is not a natural disaster - it is manmade. That means if we all work together, we can overcome it," explains Jahana Etsuko, the curator of the peace museum House of Nuchi du Takara located on Iejima, the birthplace of Okinawa's civil disobedience movement.

According to Jahana, the Battle of Okinawa also accounts for why there are so many women in the Okinawan peace movement: widowed by the war, "They took those tough experiences and naturally became strong."

Satoko Oka Norimatsu, co-author of *Resistant Islands*, points out that "On Okinawa, the World War Two generation and the subsequent generations (through collective memory) have

been severely traumatized by the Battle of Okinawa - and the people there know that the military only attracts violence and death, instead of peace and stability."

In particular, this World War Two suffering affords Okinawans a perspective on today's resurgent Japanese militarism lacking among many mainlanders. While PM Abe promises that a stronger military will help to protect Japan, Okinawans recall the last time Japan's leaders marched the country into war - the Imperial Army bases in their communities made them a target and when fighting began, Japanese soldiers looted food, forced families from the safety of their caves and pressured hundreds to commit group suicide.⁸

"Now the Japanese government is claiming to protect us from China," says New Wave to Hope member Kinjo Naomi, whose uncle was killed and father wounded in the Battle of Okinawa. "But both the U.S. and Japan have stolen our human rights for decades. They should use our tax money for education and healthcare - but instead they're wasting it on the new base."

The new base Kinjo mentions is the one planned alongside Camp Schwab at Henoko Bay, Nago City.

First dreamed up by the Pentagon during the Vietnam War when Okinawa was a key launchpad for bombing during the conflict, plans were soon abandoned due to the cost. Resurrected in the 1990s, now the Japanese government is pushing forward aggressively with construction - despite latest polls showing opposition standing at 80% and a local election in Nago in January which returned Mayor Susumu Inamine, a staunch opponent of construction.⁹



Many of those interviewed for this article believe the reason behind Tokyo's insistence is simple: in the coming years, the new base will be used for a revived Japanese military - either solely or jointly with the U.S. in what the military dubs "interoperability".¹⁰

"It's clear the Japanese government eventually wants to use the Henoko base as its own. And now that it has committed itself to the plan, it can't lose face by backing down," says Hideki Yoshikawa, of the NGO Citizens' Network for Biodiversity in Okinawa and International Director of Save the Dugong Campaign.

Norimatsu agrees.

"The U.S. and Japanese military have become more and more integrated. For example one of the Japanese cabinet's key phrases is 'seamless' operation. This seamlessness - between both peace time and war time, and between the U.S. and Japanese military - is really behind all the changes that the US and Japanese governments are trying to bring about. 'Seamlessness' is the key and for that purpose Japanese bases will be used by the U.S. and vice versa."

To prevent this from happening, Okinawan campaigners have been staging a protest sit-in near the proposed site at Henoko for the past 10 years - one of the longest running

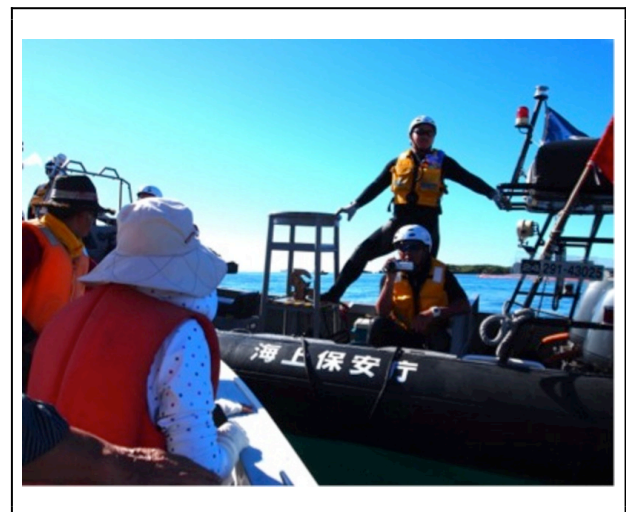
demonstrations in the world.¹¹

This summer, Henoko has once again become the prime focus for peace campaigners.

One stormy day in June, outside Camp Schwab, 60 protesters waved banners as passing motorists tooted their horns in support. Meanwhile at the sit-in tent, campaigners explained about the bay's unparalleled biodiversity to 100 mainland visitors.

Further down the beach, near Camp Schwab's fence line, a scene took place which must have made military police monitoring the security cameras first reach for their glasses - and then their panic buttons.

Across the sands, two dozen people accompanied by a massive shiisa were in close pursuit of PM Abe Shinzo and LDP secretary general, Ishiba Shigeru. As the crowd whooped and blasted trumpets, the shiisa chomped its teeth forcing the terrified politicians to stumble - until finally, with nowhere else to run, they were driven into the sea.



"That's a wrap!" shouted Ishikawa Mao, Okinawa's most famous photographer.¹²

Moments later, as the men playing the politicians took off their rubber masks and the shiisa's two occupants wriggled free from their

costume, she explained her thinking behind this hallucinatory tableau.

"I want these photographs to show the many different ways that Okinawans protest - as well as the full range of their anger."

"On Okinawa, the shiisa is like a god that protects us and chases away bad things. The Japanese government has done so many bad things to Okinawa. It truly is the lowest of the low."

As powerful as the shiisa is, it may be another equally mythical animal that wins the day for Henoko: the dugong, a cousin of the manatee.

"In Okinawan mythology, the dugong has divine status - it is a messenger of the sea gods. But today, there are only between 3 and 10 alive," explains Yoshikawa.

Between May and July, 110 dugong grazing trails were discovered near Henoko and despite Japanese government assertions that the new base will not impact them, these feeding areas will almost certainly be destroyed by the 21 million cubic metres of landfill slated for the new base.

Whereas Tokyo seems happy to allow the endangered dugong to die out, support has come from an unexpected quarter - the U.S. judiciary.

In 2008, the District of Northern California Court ruled in the Dugong vs Rumsfeld lawsuit that the dugong was protected as a natural monument and the Department of Defense - if it went ahead with the base construction - would be failing to take into account the preservation of the dugong.¹³

Currently, lawyers on both sides of the Pacific are feverishly attempting to ascertain whether the Pentagon has complied with this ruling. On July 31, for example, representatives from U.S. environmental law nonprofit organization

Earthjustice filed a lawsuit with a federal court in San Francisco, demanding that construction of the Henoko base be halted.¹⁴

Instead of waiting for the outcome of these legal cases, the Japanese government has stooped to new lows in dealing with demonstrators. Last month, with U.S. backing, it created a 2-km exclusion zone in the seas around Henoko and threatened to prosecute anyone entering it under the *keitokuhō*, a long-mothballed criminal law dating back to 1952 when the Japan-U.S. security treaty first came into existence. In addition, Tokyo ordered the National Police Agency to create a special team to suppress protesters and installed sharp metal grills outside Camp Schwab to prevent sit-down demonstrations from blocking the gates.¹⁵



Japan Coast Guard Battles Citizen Demonstrators in Kayaks

With the stakes so high, the battle for Henoko Bay looks set to challenge the Okinawan protest. However, what seems certain is that campaigners young and old will remain dedicated to nonviolent civil disobedience and the spirit of *nuchi du takara*.

"The Japanese government has looked down on

Okinawans for many years,” says Yoshikawa. “Now we are up against those in power in the US and the media, too. But we’ll keep fighting. We won’t give up - we can’t.”

8.23 - *The March on Henoko*

Yoshikawa’s words proved prescient: on August 23 thousands marched on Henoko.

In the biggest show of anger to date, more than 3600 people lined the road outside Camp Schwab. Farmers. Fishermen. Families. Teachers. University students. World War Two survivors. They crowded the pavements and hillsides, chanting “Stop construction” and “Save the Bay”.

Many carried placards printed “Nuchi du Takara.”

At the start of the demonstration, Okinawan legislators and peace campaign leaders gave impassioned speeches against Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s re-militarization of Japan and the discrimination against Okinawans.

Nago Mayor Susumu Inamine received the strongest welcome. Fresh from a trip to explain Okinawa’s plight to South Americans, he mounted the podium wearing a cape decorated with multicolored dugong and greeted the crowd in Okinawan.

Inamine likened the situation on Okinawa to World War II - but this time, the island was under attack not by the U.S. military, but by the Japanese government.

“We all need to work together to save Henoko Bay,” he said. “You can all help. We’ll never give up.”

The scale of the demonstration - and the anger of those in attendance - suggests tough times ahead for PM Abe’s plans to push through construction of the new base before Okinawa’s gubernatorial election in November.

With the clock ticking down to the election, Tokyo is rushing to complete preliminary stages of the new base as quickly possible. It has dispatched more than 100 vessels to the area to deter protesters from taking to the seas and started drilling the sea-bed at two of sixteen planned spots to ascertain whether the ground will be able to withstand the 21 million cubic metres of landfill it plans to dump in the bay.

However, these moves appear only to have strengthened protesters’ resolve.

Ashitomi Hiroshi, one of the leaders of the Henoko peace movement, explained that nonviolent resistance against construction would escalate in the weeks to come.

“PM Abe’s government will keep piling the pressure on us but we won’t give up. The world needs to know the sufferings of Okinawa - both during World War Two and today. We want peace in Asia and no military bases here on our island,” he said.

Dozens of local residents have established a new sit-in tent outside the gates of Camp Schwab - and on August 19, they claimed a major victory against the authorities when they succeeded in turning away deliveries of construction materials to the base.

Meanwhile, flotillas of kayakers daily take to the sea to protest construction. More than a dozen of these have so far been detained by Japanese authorities - later to be released without charge.

On August 22, 32-year-old canoeist Iwata Katsuhiko received spinal injuries while being restrained by Japan Coast Guard officers after he was pulled from his boat.

“When the media aren’t watching, the coast guard turns violent. This isn’t how civil servants should behave,” he said. “But we won’t give up and as soon as I recover, I’ll head

back to sea."



Iwata Katsuhiko

The mobilization of the Japanese coast guard against peaceful protesters has angered many Okinawans including a contingent of elected officials who surveyed the planned construction site on the sea on August 22. While inspecting the bay's coral beds and dugong grazing trails, they were gruffly ordered to leave the area by coast guard members.

The officials, including Arakaki Seiryō, chairman of Okinawa Prefectural Assembly's special committee on U.S. bases and Okinawa Assembly Member Yamauchi Sueko, hailed the coast guards on loudspeakers and accused them of putting the interests of the U.S. military ahead of the Japanese and Okinawan citizens they're supposed to be protecting.

Also, peace campaigners have begun playing on their boats' loudspeakers the theme song of the popular Japanese movie series "Umizaru" which glamorizes the work of the Japan Coast Guard.

The message to those now assailing peaceful

protesters?

Their actions are far from heroic.

On August 20, House of Councilors member for Okinawa Itokazu Keiko took the Japanese government to task at a special meeting focused on racial discrimination at the United Nations in Geneva. Calling for a halt to the construction at Henoko and Osprey helipads in the nearby Yanbaru jungles - she told the committee that the Japanese government discriminates against Okinawans and ignores their human rights.

Okinawa's memorials to peace

View [Okinawan Memorials to War, Peace and Protest](#) in a larger map

With its perpetual flame for peace and slabs of granite inscribed with the names of the more than 241,000 people who died on all sides during the Battle of Okinawa, the **Okinawa Peace Memorial Park** in Mabuni is the island's most famous monument - but also one of its most controversial. Critics argue that it whitewashes responsibility for the war by listing the innocent dead alongside the soldiers who killed them; moreover, in 1999, prefectural officials altered displays at the park's museum to downplay atrocities committed against islanders by the Japanese military. Norimatsu and McCormack also note how President Bill Clinton in 2000 used his visit to the park not to promote peace but to justify the Pentagon's ongoing presence on the island.¹⁶

Fortunately for visitors looking for alternative - and less sanitized - memorials, there are over 400 other monuments to war and peace on Okinawa. Many of these pull no punches in chronicling civilians' suffering during World War Two - as well as cataloguing post-war injustices committed by the U.S. authorities and islanders' ongoing dedication to nonviolent civil disobedience.

The best place to start a tour of these lesser-known museums is the **House of Nuchi du Takara** on Iejima Island, the birthplace of Okinawa's peace movement. Upon entering, visitors are confronted with a small set of bloodstained clothes and the description that they belonged to an Okinawan child stabbed by Japanese troops to silence it when U.S. soldiers were in the vicinity. The museum was founded by Ahagon Shoko - the Gandhi of Okinawa - and other displays record the postwar "Bayonets and Bulldozers" period when, in the 1950s, the Pentagon violently seized farmers' land to turn the island into a bombing range. Exhibits include photographs of islanders' homes razed by U.S. troops and several dummy nuclear bombs dropped on the island during Cold War training drills.¹⁷

Due to the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the storage of nuclear weapons on Okinawa has long been a sore point in Japan - to which the Pentagon responds with blanket neither-confirm-nor-deny statements. The **Monument to World Peace** in Onna village helps to lift the veil on this secret history. Housed within a former nuclear missile silo built by the U.S. in the early 1960s, the museum details the presence of more than 1200 atomic devices on Okinawa prior to its reversion to Japan in 1972. Among its exhibits is a display based on Jon Mitchell's interviews with former U.S. nuclear technicians stationed on the island during the Cuban Missile Crisis. According to the veterans, the presence of U.S. weapons of mass destruction turned Okinawa into a target; furthermore, Pentagon plans to launch an atomic attack on China at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis would have plunged the entire region into war.¹⁸

Further south, Yomitan village is home to Okinawa's most famous sculptor, Kinjo Minoru, and dotted among the sugarcane fields are many of his statues which deal with historical events that some in the current Japanese government would rather forget. One statue -

Han no Hi - depicts the suffering of Korean labourers brought forcibly to Okinawa during the war to work for the Japanese military. Another at **Chibichirigama** cave commemorates the forced suicide of 83 Okinawans in April 1945; this memorial struck such a nerve with Japanese far-rightists that they attempted to destroy it in 1987. Today it has been rebuilt behind protective bars.

To the east, within the grounds of **Miyamori Elementary School** in Uruma City, there is a reminder of why many Okinawans protest so strongly against the military presence on their island. On June 30 1959, as the pupils sat down for their daily milk break, an F-100 fighter jet plowed into the school killing 18 children and adults. The American pilot parachuted to safety. A simple stone memorial listing those who died stands at the scene of the crash - permission to visit can be obtained from the school office.¹⁹

Proof of the ongoing risks of operating military hardware within crowded civilian communities is the charred tree standing on the campus of **Okinawa International University**, Ginowan City. Damaged in the August 2004 helicopter crash, today it is the scene of annual memorial services in which local residents call for the closure of the adjacent MCAS Futenma base - in 2003 dubbed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as the most dangerous in the world.

The Okinawan peace memorial that is most difficult to access is also the most inspirational. Sited a 3-hour drive from Naha in the northern Yambaru jungles, the stone monument in **Ada village** pays tribute to the hundreds of local villagers who, in 1971, blocked USMC live-fire exercises in the area.²⁰ Following their lengthy sit-in at the heavy gun emplacements and target areas, residents eventually forced the military to abandon its drills. Today a large memorial near the scene immortalizes their victory - Japan's only monument to the power of people's protest.

Mao Ishikawa's photo exhibition on the history of Okinawan injustices - Dai Ryukyu Shasshin Emaki - will be held at Naha Shimin Gallery, Naha, from September 16 to 21.

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Related articles

- Gavan McCormack and Urashima Etsuko, [Okinawa's "Darkest Year"](#)
- Gavan McCormack, [Okinawa Facing a Hot Summer](#)

Notes

¹ For example, see James Brooke, "A Crash, and the Scent of Pizzatocracy, Anger Okinawa", *New York Times*, September 13, 2004; Miyume Tanji, "Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa," Routledge, New York, 2006.

² For a partial list of U.S. military accidents, see for example this link from "Close The Base" [here](#).

³ See Jon Mitchell, "Okinawa - The Pentagon's Toxic Junk Heap of the Pacific," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 11, Issue 47, No. 6, November 25, 2013. Available [here](#).

⁴ "2012 survey reveals that 74 percent of Okinawan people view the concentration of U.S. military bases in Okinawa as discrimination," *Ryukyu Shimpō*, January 29, 2014. Available [here](#).

⁵ For example, see Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, "Resistant Islands - Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States," Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2012. Pp. 137~158.

⁶ "Women religious plan coordinated protests over American forces in Okinawa," *UCA News*, July 3, 2014. Available [here](#).

⁷ McCormack and Norimatsu, p.4.

⁸ For example, see *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁹ See Gavan McCormack, "The Front Line in the Struggle for Democracy in Japan - Nago City, Okinawa," *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 4, No. 3, January 27, 2014. Available [here](#). For the latest opinion poll on opposition to the Henoko plan, see [here](#).

¹⁰ For an exploration of the faux justifications of the Pentagon's plans for Asia see Stephen Harner, "The NYTimes' 'China Threat' Myth, The 'Pivot To Asia,' And Obama's Foreign Policy Legacy," *Forbes*, June 22, 2014. Available [here](#).

¹¹ See for example Kikuno Yumiko and Norimatsu Satoko, "Henoko, Okinawa: Inside the Sit-In," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 8-1-10, February 22, 2010. Available [here](#).

¹² For more on Mao Ishikawa, see Jon Mitchell, "Okinawa shutterbug captures varied reactions to Hinomaru", *Japan Times*, November 19, 2011.

¹³ See Hideki Yoshikawa, "Urgent Situation at Okinawa's Henoko and Oura Bay: Base Construction Started on Camp Schwab," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, July 8, 2014. Available [here](#).

¹⁴ For an account of the latest lawsuit see this July 31 [article](#) by Earthjustice.

¹⁵ Yoshikawa, 2014.

¹⁶ McCormack and Norimatsu, pp.42-43.

¹⁷ Jon Mitchell, "Beggars' Belief: The Farmers' Resistance Movement on Iejima Island, Okinawa," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 23-2-10, June 7th, 2010. Available [here](#).

¹⁸ Jon Mitchell, " 'Seconds Away From

Midnight': U.S. Nuclear Missile Pioneers on Okinawa Break Fifty Year Silence on a Hidden Nuclear Crisis of 1962," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 10, Issue 30, No. 1, July 23, 2012. Available [here](#).

¹⁹ For example, see "Memorial held for 55th anniversary of U.S. military jet crash into Miyamori Elementary School", *Ryukyu Shimpo*, June 30, 2014. Available in English [here](#).

²⁰ Jon Mitchell, "Rumble in the Jungle", *Japan Times*, August 19, 2012. Available [here](#).