



Debarring Questions Over Futenma Airbase 普天・・詰蘭・假鬆と関して排除される質問

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Just over nine years ago, after a US military heavy-lift helicopter [crashed into the middle of our university campus](#)¹ – only a slightly more muscular stone's-throw from the US Marine Corps' Futenma base than I might be relied on to manage - it was difficult to find anyone on the other side of the fence who could talk in any meaningful way about preventing the same thing happening again.



Okinawa International University, August 13, 2004. Photo courtesy of Okinawa International University

I even began developing the impression that no one associated with the US military really cared about my colleagues' or my students' wellbeing, especially after I heard an admittedly second-hand remark from the nearby Kadena Air Base (the largest and most intrusive US base in Okinawa), that went something along the lines of, "What are these Okinawans complaining about? Don't they know we're here to protect them?"

More clearly attributable comments from further up the chain of command were no more reassuring. According to the BBC, a year before the crash, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had apparently called Futenma, ["the world's most dangerous base."](#)²

On the same day the helicopter crash seemed to spectacularly endorse Rumsfeld's view, Secretary of State Colin Powell sought to reassure people here by claiming that, "We do everything we can ... [to make sure our equipment is safe and our helicopters are safe and well-maintained and our pilots are well trained.](#)"³

Needless to say, "everything we can" meant anything other than doing the obvious: shutting down the base immediately without any further discussion.

When I tried to talk to Marine Corps Community Relations during the period immediately following the crash, I was told that they didn't accept calls from the public, but would only communicate with Okinawa's elected representatives, who, just three years earlier, had been described by the US military's own supreme commander as, ["all nuts and a bunch of wimps."](#)⁴

My frustration was only slightly alleviated when the US military relented somewhat and allowed me to talk to Kaori Martinez, the Marine Corps Community Relations Officer with whom I eventually managed to have a number of polite conversations.

The most recent of these was just a few months ago, when she informed me, with typical good-humour, that I was “debarred” from the March 3, 2013 Osprey “Family Day,” an event organised to enlist military friendly Okinawan families into a cast of extras recruited to act out the fiction that the aircraft poses no danger to the almost 100,000 of us living and working along the crash-path of what US Marines themselves have christened the “The Widow Maker.”

Mine was not the most irrational – or even disturbing – “debarment” we had talked about. In a conversation three years earlier, we had discussed the anxieties of some of our international students, who had their identity documents and faces photographed before being inexplicably turned away from the annual [Futenma Flightline Fair](#).⁵ They now understandably worry about how this information could be misused to debar them from entering the United States.

As for the event from which I was “debarred,” the [Japan Update reported](#)⁶ that, “Families participating [were to be] given a brief on the MV-22 Osprey’s capabilities, a tour of the aircraft and the opportunity to ask questions to Osprey pilots and other subject matter experts.”



Ospreys taking off from the Futenma base. Photo taken from Peter Simpson’s office.

Having been denied the opportunity to raise what I consider to be vitally important public safety questions, both as a resident of Ginowan City and a teacher in the likely flight-path of a future crash, I would like to know how the assembled pilots and experts would have responded to the following questions or comments:

- Do you think it might have been in bad taste to call this occasion a “Family Day,” given that the aircraft you were showing to the public is best known, particularly among US military spouses, as the “Widow Maker?”
- Former [Brigadier General Donald Harvel](#),⁷ after viewing video evidence of the April 2010 crash in Afghanistan, reported that engine failure was the most likely cause of the accident. After his retirement, he said that he was forced to change investigation findings to blame the crash on pilot error. If you could meet the widows of the pilots and crew of that and earlier crashes, could you look them in the eye and say with confidence that their husbands were responsible for what happened?
- Emergency landing procedures in the event of engine failure form part of basic training for pilots of other aircraft, and video can easily be found of pilots performing these tasks in [helicopters](#)⁸ and [planes](#).⁹ Would you be prepared to demonstrate the Osprey’s capability to land in such an emergency, and then post the footage on the internet, as other pilots have done.
- If the answer to the last question is ‘no’, could this be because the Osprey would drop to the ground like a stone?
- If the answer is ‘yes’, please prove it somewhere else because, judging from experience, experimenting in the skies over Ginowan City would be unlikely promote the US military’s “good neighbor” policy.
- Those who have studied Okinawa’s recent past, or who have lived through it, tend to have bad memories of Okinawa “defending Japan,” as this led to the carnage of the Battle of Okinawa and a 68-year struggle against an ongoing military occupation. On the other hand, how can an aircraft that only carries a handful of troops with or without other weapons, contribute to Japan’s security, while there are already hundreds of thousands of highly trained allied military personnel elsewhere in the region?
- Of course, it is undeniable that the US military has made a positive contribution to disaster relief efforts in the region over the last few years, most obviously during “Operation Tomodachi” after the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster two years ago. Personally, I don’t think this should be a task for a foreign military force, but even if I put that opinion to one side, is the MV-22 an appropriate vehicle for search and rescue purposes?
- If so, could you explain why the civilian version of the aircraft had to be shelved, and whether the aircraft’s notorious [down-blast](#)¹⁰ might not have something to do with this?
- On the other hand, if the MV-22 is such an asset in search and rescue operations, wouldn’t it make more sense to deploy it far and wide so as to spread its benefits to the largest number of people?
- And wouldn’t such an arrangement also reassure the people of Okinawa that the MV-22 does not present a danger to any particular subset of the Japanese population?

Elsewhere, [two Osprey crashes](#) and a fire¹¹ have already occurred in the year since the US began deploying the aircraft in Okinawa, as well as the fatal crash of [another helicopter](#)¹² here just two months ago. In these circumstances, shouldn’t the need to provide answers to questions like these be treated as a matter of life and death?

Links

1. <http://noflyzone.homestead.com/files/nfzindexe.htm>
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11404406>
3. <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/35231.htm>
4. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=81535&page=1#.UYtYfb9pu2w>
5. <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.343206629084670.76182.135412153197453&type=3>
6. <http://www.japanupdate.com/2013/03/mv-22-osprey-family-day-set-for-mcas-futenma/>
7. <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/10/air-force-silenced-general/all/>
8. http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_210189&feature=iv&src_vid=Je1gl4-OLx8&v=h5WoDFwikfQ
9. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_Ohm7w7C9U
10. http://www.theregister.co.uk/2010/06/02/osprey_park_mishap/
11. <http://www.q2mil.com/V-22Amishaps.htm>
12. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-23586018>

Peter Simpson teaches at Okinawa International University and lives and works next to the US Marine Corps Futenma air base, located in the center of Ginowan City (pop.95,000). He is co-editor of [Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific](#) (2013). In this article, he draws attention to the anguish and outrage inflicted on the municipality by the forced deployment of the Osprey, a hybrid aircraft about which many safety questions appear to remain unanswered.

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