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Assault on the Sea: A 50-Year U.S. Plan to Build a Military Port on Oura Bay, Okinawa

Ryukyu Asahi Broadcasting (Video) and Satoko Norimatsu (Introduction and translation)

So often, Okinawan voices go unheard outside of Okinawa. So often, probing TV documentaries on such sensitive issues as the Battle of Okinawa or on Okinawa-Japan-U.S. relations are shown once and archived, never to return to public view. So often, even if they are broadcast outside of Okinawa, they are aired at odd times. This was the fate of this documentary on Oura Bay, which TV Asahi scheduled at 2:40 a.m., but it deserves the attention of more than a few night owls. The documentary, "Nerawareta Umi: Okinawa,Oura-wan - Maboroshi no gunko keikaku 50 nen" (The Targeted Sea - A 50-year Unrealized Plan for a Military Port in Oura Bay, Okinawa), was produced by QAB (Ryukyu Asahi Broadcasting) and broadcast in the first week of October 2009. This program reveals the little-known fact that the plan to build a large-scale U.S. military complex in Oura Bay, including a military port, was initiated as early as the mid-1960s. Oura Bay is located on the northeastern shore of Okinawa Island, adjacent to USMC Camp Schwab and Cape Henoko, where the U.S. and Japanese governments are planning to build the controversial "replacement facility" for the Futenma Air Station. While it is widely believed that this facility is being built as a substitute for the dangerous Marine airbase in a crowded residential area of Ginowan City, the evidence disclosed here confirms that the U.S. aims to take advantage of this opportunity to close an obsolete base and build (for the most part at Japanese expense) the brand-new military complex that it has sought to build since the 1960s.

Previous Japan Focus articles have examined the controversy over the base in detail. What this special report adds is its detailed and sensitive visual depiction of the subtle and mixed emotions of the local residents toward the base construction plan. Residents, including the uminchu (fishermen) who appear in this documentary, have been largely ignored by government planners. Over generations, those plans appeared in many different forms, ranging from coercive land expropriation, to the destruction of coral reefs in the name of "land surveys," and rumors of hefty compensation for individual households. Henoko, which has hosted USMC Camp Schwab for the last 53 years, is now confronted with a plan for a new high-tech base – a "Futenma relocation" base. For the past six decades, the base issue has divided the remote fishing village, whose residents cherished the value of cooperation through cultural traditions like Shima (Okinawan sumo wrestling) and the Henoko Tug-of-War Festival, events that have often welcomed the participation of USMC members.

This documentary was filmed before the historic regime change in Japan in September 2009, with the landslide victory of the left-of-centre Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) over the long-ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Viewers may notice the general apathy among residents over the base plan and their reluctant acceptance of their inability to stop it. They did not anticipate the dramatic turn of events in the offing after Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio took office, having pledged to reverse the previous government's commitment to the base construction plan. After his failure to follow through on that pledge led to Hatoyama's resignation in early June 2010, new Prime Minister Kan Naoto disappointed Okinawans by endorsing the Henoko base plan within hours of his appointment. At the Battle of Okinawa Memorial on June 23, Kan reinforced Okinawans' fear and anger by expressing his "apology" and "appreciation" to the islanders for bearing the additional burden of the new base.

The Okinawan struggle to stop the new base construction will continue. This documentary sheds new light on the historical context of the controversy over the new base plan in Henoko/Oura Bay.

Since the documentary is in Japanese, an English summary is provided below, but the beauty of Oura Bay, and the richness and liveliness of such cultural expressions as Okinawan-style sumo wrestling (shima) and the Henoko Tug-of-War can only be appreciated by watching the video. See below for YouTube links.

Satoko Norimatsu

Henoko fisherman ("uminchu" in the Okinawan language) Gishitomi Shoji, 35 years old and the father of a fifth-grade boy, is a champion of Shima, Okinawan-style sumo wrestling.

***Uminchu* (fisherman) Gishitomi Shoji** (Photo from QAB website)

He fishes in Oura Bay, adjacent to Camp Schwab. Except when military drills are underway, he is allowed to fish within waters under U.S. jurisdiction. Camp Schwab was built in 1957, during the U.S. military occupation of Okinawa. Around that time, many tracts of land in Okinawa were forcibly expropriated by the U.S. military for new base construction. For example, in 1953, the military came to the island of Iejima to conduct a "land survey," bearing guns. When they returned, they burned houses, including those in which sick people lived. Hundreds sat-in to protest, but they were removed by force, with bulldozers. [See Ahagon Shoko and C. Douglas Lummis, I Lost My Only Son in the War: Prelude to the Okinawan Anti-Base Movement.] To Okinawans, "land survey" came to mean "a warning of land expropriation."

In 1955, a "land survey" came to Henoko too, alarming residents. 85-year old Kayo Soshin recalls, "It wasn't even like, 'This place may become a base.' It was just going to be a base. There was no consultation, nothing. It was the same as the Japanese military (during the war) – suppression from above." Kayo, then a community leader, fiercely opposed the plan at the beginning, but the power of the military was overwhelming. Confronted with the choice of being arrested and losing his land or agreeing to give up the land, he chose the latter. "There was no way to win. I shifted to thinking about how we can profit from this situation."

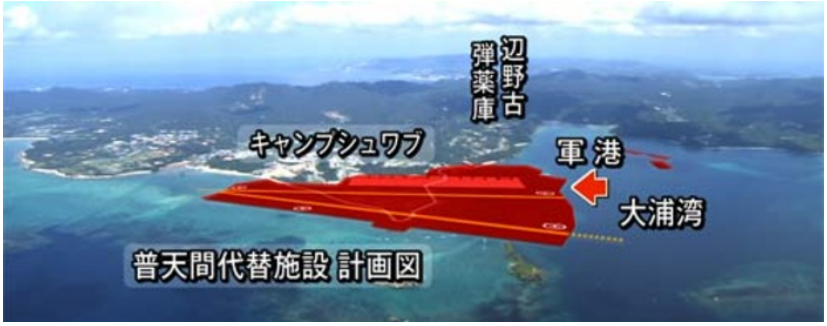
In the 1950s, anti-base movements spread across Okinawa, including the "Island-Wide Struggle" (1956) to oppose land expropriation and permanent land use by the U.S. military. In that political climate, many Okinawans were disappointed to learn that Henoko had given in. Of course there were gains such as having electricity, and the establishment of shopping and entertainment districts. But Henoko has lived with the base (Camp Schwab) for the last fifty years, despite accidents and crimes associated with the base (4 felonies; 11 assaults/thefts/break-ins; 14 plane accidents/misfire incidents).

Fisherman Gishitomi does not directly profit from the base, as do landowners who earn rent, but he has accepted the reality that his community has relied on the base-related income. Around the time when his son was born, however, Henoko was confronted with another problem. In 1995, Okinawan rage erupted after the rape of a 12-year old girl by three GIs. Then-Governor Ota Masahide announced his refusal to provide any land to the U.S. military. The Japanese and the U.S. governments, fearing the AMPO relationship would be adversely affected, announced that they would return the dangerous Futenma Air Station in crowded Ginowan City. Somehow, however, this decision shifted into a plan to build a "replacement facility" in Henoko. When the environmental survey started, a division occurred within Henoko, between those who sat-in to protest and those who supported the base, with conflict centered on the fishermen whose boats were hired by the government to cooperate with the survey. Gishitomi is among those fishermen who earn charter fees from the government. Contention over the base continues to divide the residents of the small town.

Kayo Soshin, Henoko community leader in the 1950s (Photo from QAB website)

The division among residents is also shown in the second part of the documentary on YouTube, which starts with an Okinawa Defense Bureau information meeting for Henoko residents about the environmental assessment. As Defense Bureau staff describe the minimal effects they anticipate on the coral reefs, Gishitomi gets frustrated with the lack of information on the possible effects on fishing. One of the residents says, however, "Many people agreed, having heard that each household would receive money." In April 2004, the chief of Henoko District went to Tokyo and asked the Defense Facilities Administration Agency for compensation of 150 million yen (approx. $1.5 million) for each household in Henoko. The central government did not promise to compensate individual families, but rumors of this kind of compensation continued to divide the Henoko residents.

The plan to build a base in Henoko is called a "relocation plan," but the Henoko plan entails a military port in addition to an air station. Rather than a "relocation facility," it is a new military complex quite different in nature from Futenma Air Station. With a military port, weapons can be loaded directly onto ships from the Henoko Ammunition Depot.



"Futenma Relocation" Plan (Photo from QAB website)

Gishitomi fears that his fishing grounds would be reduced by the port construction. "Neither the governor nor the mayor met with the local fishermen to explain the base plan. They just come to tell us what they are going to do. I am angry, and this is why I just say, 'Is that so?' It's not because I agree. Even if I protest, they will do it anyway. Japan and the U.S. just do whatever they want to do here."

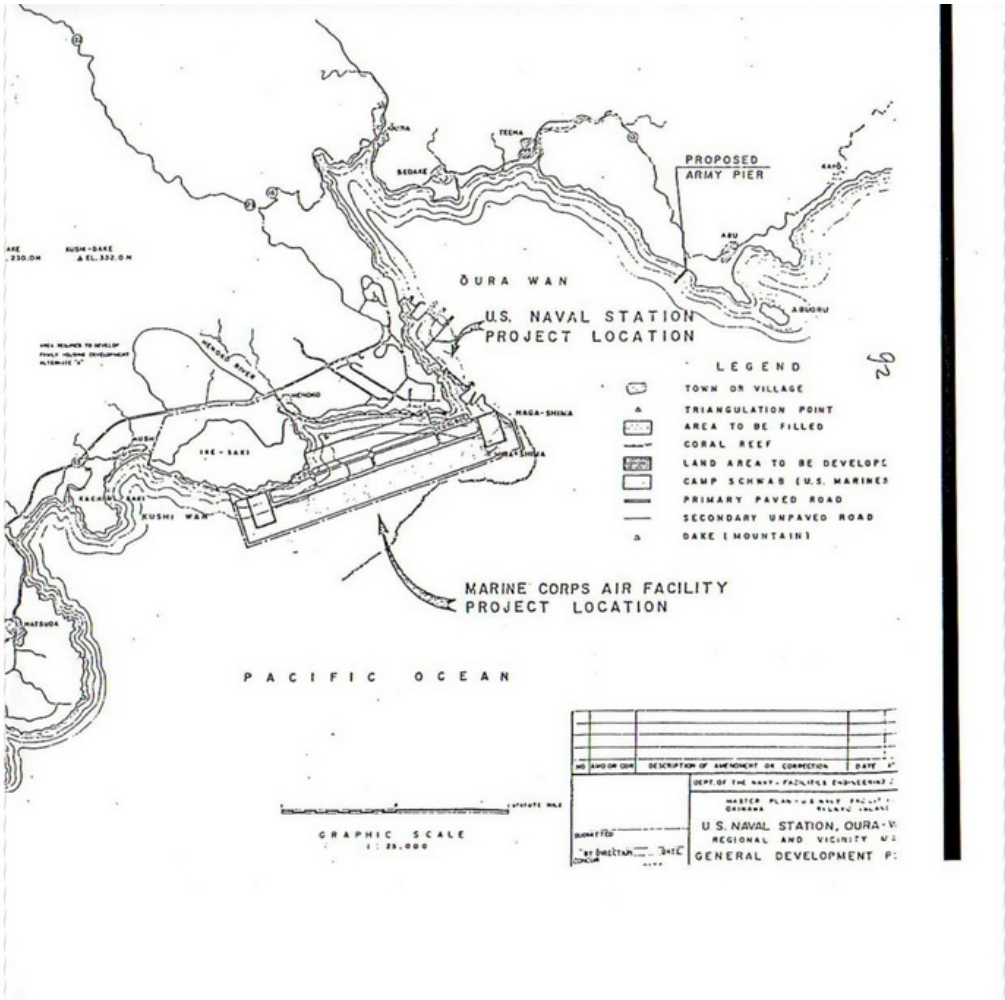
This has not always been the case. The documentary introduces a group of fishermen who formerly opposed the plan.

Asato Fumio has been fishing for 70 years (Photo from QAB website)

Asato Fumio, an 82-year old fisherman, still sets out to sea every day with his wife Chiyo. 47 years ago (April 19–25, 1962), the U.S., after warning of drills, suddenly blasted the coral reefs in Oura Bay. The first time they did it, "I went to the village chief and protested, 'Are they allowed to do that?' I saw many dead fish." Chinen Chuji, who was a reporter for the newspaper *Jinmin* (People) at that time, knew that there was already a plan to build a military port there. Chinen wrote about those fishermen who stood up to stop that project. Tamaki Akinobu, one of the fishermen who protested then, recalls, "It was shortly after the Henoko base (Camp Schwab) was built. Fishermen acted together to stop it. There were seven or eight boats."

The U.S. military blasted the coral reefs because they were in the way of their drills. The fishermen's catches dropped drastically, and the drills became more intense. The damage to the bay worsened. On July 9, 1969, the U.S. military blasted Oura Bay again. Newspapers reported that the U.S. was planning to build a base to host nuclear-powered submarines. Journalist Chinen says, "The U.S. faced a problem if they couldn't build a base to host nuclear submarines there. They used to call at Naha Port, but because of the strong protests there, they were kicked out."

On May 27, 1966, Albert Watson, then U.S. High Commissioner on Okinawa, announced that the U.S. planned to build a new military port. Chinen also reported on October 29, 1966 that a possible site for the military port was Oura Bay, which was deep enough to accommodate nuclear submarines. The neighborhoods of Abu and Kayo, on the northern shore of Oura Bay were covertly surveyed with an eye to building an ammunition depot. Two documents support this allegation: in December 1965, the chief of Kushi Village approved a plan for the U.S. military to survey 1,584 acres on the north side of Oura Bay; in 1966, the *Master Plan of Navy Facilities on Okinawa* had a complete blueprint of the new military port – including an air station and a military port at Camp Schwab, an Army ammunition depot on the northern shore of Oura Bay, and a pier for Army use.



The blueprint for a new air station, a military port, and a pier, from the *Master Plan of Navy Facilities on Okinawa*, 1966
(Photograph from Makishi Yoshikazu,"US Dream Come True? The New Henoko Sea Base and Okinawan Resistance," Japan Focus, February 12, 2006)

"Military bases are like cancer cells. They spread. People talk about reorganizing and reducing them, but they just don't work that way," Chinen argues. "The whole Oura Bay would be an ammunition depot."

(The third part of the documentary, as it appears on YouTube) Oura Bay became the target of the plan to build a military port, in the middle of the Cold War and during the escalation of the Vietnam War. The plan, however, did not materialize. Resistance against military bases accelerated during 1960s. Movements to protect land spread across the Ryukyus, including land struggles on Miyagi Island and in Gushikawa Village, the movement to stop construction of an electric power substation in Uema, Naha, and opposition to an urban training facility in Onna Village. Without these struggles, Okinawa would have many more bases than it now does. The U.S. gave up its plan to build a military port in Oura Bay. Asato Fumio says, "At that time all the *uminchu* were against it."

This U.S. military port plan of more than 40 years ago has now been revived as a plan to "replace" Futenma Air Station. The government is conducting an environmental impact survey, and this time, many *uminchu* are cooperating. The charter fees that the government pays are a reliable source of income for many. Asato, however, refuses to cooperate. "I have no use for it," Asato says. "For a while, you lead a good life with money, but what happens afterwards?"

In 1996, Okinawans were happy to hear that the Futenma Air Station would be returned, but fifteen years later, it has not been returned. Meanwhile, Henoko, the village that has hosted a military base for the past 50 years, has been subjected to heavier burdens. The title of an email written by Colonel Richard W. Lueking, Commander of the Futenma base on April 17, 1996 is shown on screen as "Futenma Relocation." It reads, "I HAVE A COPY OF A DEC 1966 DOCUMENT SUBJ: 'MASTER PLAN OF NAVY.'" "THE ESSENSE OF THIS PLAN IS COMBINED NAVAL STATION–MARINE CORPS AIR FACILITY AT OURA-WAN." This document shows that the 1966 plan provided the basis for the "Futenma relocation plan."

The military port plan has returned. Tamaki says, "We are receiving money from Japan's Ministry of Defense. It helps with the fishermen's household expenses. We have thoughts in our minds, but we can't speak them." Gishitomi, during his night-fishing, says, "What can we do? The plan has been there for a long time. There is no way we can stop it. We have to turn this to our benefit…. Sometimes I wonder if it's right to build a base. Other times I think it is good, and it will help my child's life. I don't know." Camp Schwab is brightly lit all through the night. Gishitomi has never known an Okinawa without bases.

Title page on the documentary website. "The Targeted Sea – A 50-Year Unrealized Plan for a Military Port in Oura Bay, Okinawa"

It has been over ten years since Japan and the U.S. decided to build this "relocation" base. Lately we don't hear the outspoken protests at Henoko that we once heard. The residents cannot speak out, with the weight of the base burden and the compensation offer on their shoulders. The inability to speak out, however, is different from acceptance of the base. Kayo says, "We don't protest because it would do no good. We did protest before… it seems like a dream now. We have grown used to this (the reality of the bases). We are desensitized."

The Tug-of-War Festival in Henoko is held every three years. Residents weave a thick, 90-meter (300-feet) rope, and on the day of the festival, wind their way through the village, carrying it. Even with differing opinions, Henoko residents work together on such occasions. The festival brings the 2,000 Henoko residents together.

Henoko residents have never been asked, "Is it okay to place a base here?" For all these years, Okinawans were confronted with the choice to accept or oppose the bases, but with the assumption that the bases would be built anyway. Japan is now trying to build yet another base there. The sea has been targeted for 50 years… Today, only a few surviving fishermen in Oura Bay remember an Okinawa without bases.

Links to the documentary on YouTube:

Part I

Part II

Part III

The official program website.

Related Articles:

Makishi Yoshikazu, US Dream Come True? The New Henoko Sea Base and Okinawan Resistance

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Gavan McCormack, Ampo's Troubled 50th: Hatoyama's Abortive Rebellion, Okinawa's Mounting Resistance and the US-Japan Relationship

Part 1

Part 2

Part 3

Kikuno Yumiko and Norimatsu Satoko, Henoko, Okinawa: Inside the Sit-In

Oichiai Eiichiro's article (in Japanese) at Nikkan Berita on the Oura Bay documentary

Satoko Norimatsu, a Japan Focus Associate, leads various peace initiatives, including Peace Philosophy Centre, Vancouver Save Article 9, and Hiroshima/Nagasaki Peace Studies Tour.

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