
Okinawa Field Trip

The Struggle of Okinawans to Move On

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Known as the last battlefield between the Allied Forces and the Japanese Imperial Forces, Okinawa is one of the bloodiest sites during the World War II in the Pacific. With thousands of bombs dropped, and millions of bullets and mortars fired, I just could not imagine myself being in that horrible situation. Are we lucky though that we have missed or survive those painful times and live as we are today?

It was almost 71 years ago since the battle ended, but to our tour guides and lecturers (resource persons in Okinawa) it sounds to me like it happened just recently as they narrated the painful part of Okinawa`s history. Although the remnants of the war can be hardly seen around Okinawa, except for the war monuments and museums, I wondered how they recalled those moments like it happened just recently. They have briefed us place by place and astoundingly made recollection of exact dates and numbers during the war, with their emotions. It was my first time to be on a tour like that where the tour guides (and also the lecturers) are emotionally connected with what they are talking about. Amazing!

Day 1

From Haneda Domestic Airport, it took us almost three hours to reach Naha Airport in Okinawa. Naha Airport is a modern first class airport much better than our International Airport in Manila. Aside from that, a monorail connects the airport to the City proper of Naha. I was not surprised to see those modern and state-



of-the-art facilities because I know I am in Okinawa (Japan). What surprised me,

however, was when our tour guide said that the monorail is part of the ODA of the Japanese Government. ODA? Did I hear it right? Yes, she said ODA. The ODA that I know (Official Development Assistance) is the development assistance being provided by the Japanese Government to developing countries like my country, the Philippines. Although Takamatsu-sensei during the pre-travel briefing, and based on history books, mentioned that Okinawa was not Japan's territory up until 1872 when the Ryukyu (now Okinawa) was annexed by the Meiji Government. It was only upon hearing the "ODA" when the "territory facts" sink-in to me. It made me ask the questions: Is Okinawa really part of Japan's territory? If yes, Is Okinawa being treated by the Japanese Central Government as part of Japan's territory?

The Shuri-jo was our first destination straight from the Naha Airport. On our way to the castle, our tour guide started to tell stories about some of the historic sites during the war. Another thing that caught my attention was when she mentioned about the unexploded bombs unearthed right inside the



school complex. Her voice suddenly sounded emotional with her face appeared with sadness and anger. The Shuri-jo looked amazing. The original castle was heavily bombed by the Allied Forces during the war since it was used as headquarters of the Japanese Imperial Army. The now standing structures are replicas of the old ones. Our tour guide explained that the reconstruction of the castle was based on the U.S. military`s surveillance photograph taken before the war.

Our last activity of the day was an interactive discussion with Prof. Makoto Arakaki. He is an Okinawan. He appeared enthusiastic for the whole two hours of his lecture (7pm to 9pm), and he was very composed. His topic was about "Footsteps of Okinawa and Okinawan Identity". It was about Okinawa during the Ryukyu Kingdom, under the Japanese control, under the U.S. administration, and now back to the Japanese Government. It was a long discussion that mainly centered on the identity crisis among the Okinawans. He asked me about my identity as a Filipino, with his view that we too were colonized by the Spaniards (300+ years),

Americans (44 years), Japanese (4 years), and then back to the Americans (2 years). I answered, "YES I am sure I am Filipino." He took my answer with little doubt, pointing to the western influence (especially by the Americans) mainly to our culture. Our case being Filipinos is almost the same with the Okinawans, except for the fact that we were able to secure our independence. In a way, I could say I understand the sentiments of the Okinawans, like that of Prof. Arakaki's. I know they too want their identity. Or should I say they too want independence?

Day 2

Our second-day activity started with a visit to the Kakazu Takadai Park. The elevated part of the park was previously used by the Japanese Army as gunner-bunkers to hit the landing Allied Forces along its shores. From the Park, we could see the Futenma U.S. Marine Base. The Futenma airbase is



one of the most sensitive issues the Okinawans are dealing with right now. While looking at the base, our tour guide explains the hazards it poses to the people living around it. Then she recalled the accident that happened in 2004 where a U.S. military CH-53D helicopter crashed into the Okinawa International University campus. Although no civilian casualty was hurt during the incident, our tour guide relayed the constant fear that they (Okinawans) feel knowing that the military aircraft are flying just above them almost every day.

The Sakima Art Museum, situated just beside the airbase, was our next stop. It is a museum dedicated to the abstract paintings depicting the scenes during the war. The paintings were mostly in black and red color, suggesting the darkest and bloodiest moments of Okinawa and the Okinawan people. Some portraits of war survivors were also on the display. I could say those are the pictures of people in deep pain and sadness, hatred and anger, anguish and hopelessness. The most troubling scene that I could recall in the paintings (and as explained by Mr. Sakima) was that of a father killing his family members to avoid the supposed evil intentions by the invading Americans. The instructions came from the Japanese Imperial Army that it is better for them to kill their relatives than suffer

and be murdered by the Americans. I was shocked to hear that story. That is one of the greatest lifetime sacrifices a person can do for his family. I am sure that their sacrifices still burden those who are still living war survivors who witnessed or followed the orders to kill their relatives. I would put their sacrifices next to my Christian belief, to offer one's life instead, so others may live.

In the afternoon, we visited the Okinawa International University (OIU) and attended the lectures of Prof. Masashi Hamasato and Prof. Manabu Sato. Their topics mainly touched upon the increasing poverty in Okinawa, and they said that the Japanese Government is neglecting this issue. They have pointed out that Okinawa has the highest poverty incidence all throughout Japan. After the Day 1 activity, probably I have the reason. It is also on the same campus of OIU where the U.S. CH-53D military helicopter crashed.

Day 3

The highlight of our third-day tour was about how the people of Okinawans preserve their memories of the war with their war museums and war memorial sites. We visited the War Memorial for Korean victims, the Cornerstone of Peace Memorial, the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum. We also visited the cave called Itokazu Abuchiragama, a cave used by the Japanese Imperial Army. Another site we visited was the Himeyuri Museum. A museum founded by the war survivors, female student survivors, that were forced to serve as nurses for the wounded Japanese soldiers.



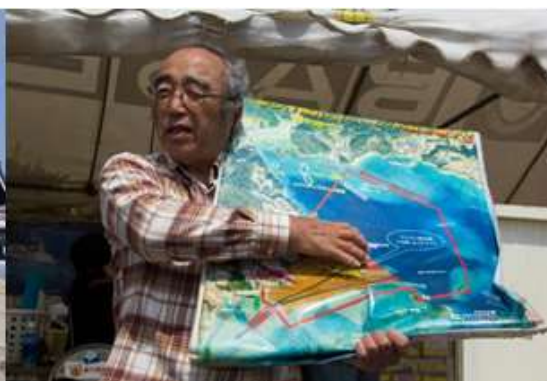
Day 4

Our fourth day was spent with a lecture by the Okinawa Prefectural Government staff about the Energy Policy of the island. They have a very detailed presentation

on the present and future plans to secure the energy requirements of Okinawa. It was interesting for me to learn that the American bases in Okinawa are not paying their energy consumption bills. They consume almost 10% of the island's energy resources. The Japanese taxpayers shoulder the burden as part of the agreement between the Japanese and American Governments. In exchange for what? Some say it is in exchange for the security guarantee the U.S. government is providing for the Japanese territory. Others call it a deterrent for any nation, especially against China, that would attempt to encroach in the Japanese territorial zones. Or is it a prize earned by



the Americans after winning the war and the consequence the Japanese to endure after losing? If so, why the Okinawans have to take the biggest share of that burden? The latter question is not mine, it is the question of most Okinawans. The people in Henoko is the most vocal opponent of the American presence in Okinawa. Aside from hosting the USMC Camp Schwab, Henoko is also the relocation site of the Futenma Airbase. The people of Henoko are against the relocation. They argued that the troubles being experienced by the people surrounding the Futenma Airbase would only be transferred in their area, aside from the enormous environmental damage it would bring. Apparently, they want to live in peace.



The four-day tour is too short to see the real picture of Okinawa. But it is long enough to hear the real sentiments of the Okinawans. The sceneries are picturesque in every angle I focus my camera. It is a beautiful place. But talking with the local people reveals the hidden wounds behind their smiles and underneath their bustling cities. It was 71 years since the war ended but, it is so hard for them to move on. The American Military presence I think continuously reminds the Okinawans of their horrific past. They want the Americans out. They want independence.
