

Living With the Nightmare of Planes and Aircraft Carriers at U.S. Bases in Japan: Upgrading Iwakuni and Yokosuka

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Translated by Aaron Skabelund

Dealing with the Din of Jets for 35 Years

As part of the reorganization of American military forces in the Pacific, the United States military will relocate 59 carrier jets to the Marine Air Corp Station near Iwakuni in central Japan from the Naval Air Facility at Atsugi near Yokohama. For 35 years, Atsugi has fulfilled a

In recent years, the mayors of cities hosting American bases in Japan, and particularly in Okinawa, propelled by powerful citizen movements, have resisted American plans for base reorganization that would expand the US military presence in their communities. In many cases, powerful pressure from Tokyo, in the form of threats to cut off development aid to local communities, and offers to buy off local opposition, have succeeded in dividing local communities and forcing local officials to yield to the power of the center. The Hiroshima-based Chugoku Shinbun here examines realignments involving Atsugi Air Base, Iwakuni Marine Base and Yokosuka Naval Base, three locales experiencing major upgrading of U.S. military power and changes in the structuring of U.S. forces in Japan. ms

leading role in the worldwide strategy of the American superpower. How have the citizens of Atsugi dealt with the din of fighter planes and what is the nature of their relationship with the base? To understand what the future may have in store for Iwakuni, we decided to closely examine the situation in Atsugi.



Major US Bases in Japan and Okinawa

One evening we stood directly below the flight path taken by the Atsugi carrier jets in the city of Yamato. The tremendous clamor of the jets caused the street lights to dim slightly as they passed overhead. One resident observed that “Today’s noise is quieter than usual.” People passing by hurried along their way as if they were not the least surprised by the roar.

“Sometime they fly over in intervals of just a few minutes. It causes stress to build up,” reported Mr. Ogata Sei, a 72-year old former elementary school principle. Ogata is among the plaintiffs in the Third Atsugi Noise Suit that again resulted in the courts ordering the government to pay area citizens compensation.

In preparation for the suit, Ogata recorded noise

levels for six years after he retired in 1998. The planes land and take off early in the morning and late at night. Ogata always kept a notebook and timepiece next to his pillow. He would record the likely type of aircraft, the number of times the jets passed by, their direction, and the time. On average about 100 aircraft would fly over per day. The record for a single day was 460 passes. The data was likely the deciding factor in the citizen’s successful suit. But the monthly compensation payments that Ogata receives from the government are just 12,000 yen, and the noise continues.

In February, Mayor Fukuda Yoshihiko won reelection in Iwakuni and announced his acceptance of the relocation of the aircraft to the nearby base. Ogata said, “Honestly, the outcome of the Iwakuni election was a relief.” Indeed, many Atsugi residents shared Ogata’s reaction.

Carrier aircraft began using Atsugi in 1973, when the Midway made nearby Yokosuka its home port. The carrier is the key to the offensive power of the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the Pacific. In order to control the airspace around the carrier and be ready to conduct aerial assaults of enemy territory, the fighter planes engage in constant intense training.



U.S. Navy F-15 Tomcats based at Atsugi

This roar created by the American military's pretension to protect global democracy could be called the "sound of freedom." But as a suburb of the capital metropolitan area, the area around the Atsugi base has experienced a sudden population increase. The opposition of residents, who call the jet noise a "burden," grows stronger and the court agreed with the third citizen lawsuit that the government was responsible to pay compensation.

The move to Iwakuni, where facilities are increasingly being relocated offshore, was the government's trump card to try to breakout of the ongoing dilemma. Many residents hope, thanks to Iwakuni, that the area around Atsugi will change after the realignment of U.S. forces.

"Maybe property prices will rise," said a sixty-year-old estate agent in central Daiwa. The din affects almost the entire city and makes most of its buildings eligible for house sound insulation

because of weighted equivalent continuous perceived noise levels (WECPNL) over 75. Property values are lower than those in surrounding areas.

However, many Iwakuni residents are anxious. They feel that "the relocation only shifts the burden from one region to another, which is not a solution." In addition, some people are concerned that the noise levels deemed acceptable by the government are too high.

About 30 kilometers northeast of Atsugi is a residence in the Seya Ward of Yokohama. This residence experiences noise levels of just below 75, which the government designated as sufficient to qualify for compensation. Yet, its seventy-one-year-old owner emphatically says, "The noise is so loud that I cannot even hear the television." The entire house shakes each time a plane comes in for a landing. For years, he has born this burden.

The government has indicated that after the relocation of the fighter wing to Iwakuni acceptable noise levels will be set at roughly 75 and the affected area will be smaller. Atsugi residents who have dealt with the noise for thirty-five years say, "One cannot simply deal with the din through data. Iwakuni is going to be suffer from now on."

Yokosuka as a Home Port

At the Yokosuka base, the U.S. Seventh Fleet's aircraft carrier begins to move. Some observers think that it is on its way to the seas around Taiwan. Because of its routine nature, the ship's departure was hardly noticed in Japan, but was reported by Taiwanese newspapers with words like "aiming to guarantee a smooth general election" and "vigilance in the Taiwan Straits." The carrier's departure took place four days before the historical election that returned the Kuomintang to power for the first time in eight years.

The Kitty Hawk is the third aircraft carrier to make Yokosuka its home port. The ship has a full-load displacement of 82,000 tons, is 323 meters long, and has a crew of approximately 5,600. This floating airfield has the capacity to launch around 80 fighters from its deck.

The United States can begin aerial bombardment at any time. Its activities are not limited to actual wars, but in ways that most Japanese cannot imagine it can exert diplomatic pressure simply by dispatching its forces. When international tensions rise, it is said that the first thing that U.S. presidents ask is, "Where are the aircraft carriers?"

Before the 1996 Taiwan general election, the U.S. dispatched two aircraft carriers to the region to prevent any military action by China. The United States has eleven carriers that shoulder its global

strategy. But Yokosuka is the only port abroad that a carrier calls home.

On 5 October 1973, near the end of the Vietnam War quagmire, the aircraft carrier Midway arrived at Yokosuka over protests. The U.S. military had decided as part of the reorganization of its forces to station the Midway-led task force at the port, home to the biggest dry dock in East Asia.

One American objective was to have its ally shoulder the huge expenses of maintaining the aircraft carrier. American spokespersons did not call Yokosuka a "home port," rather they simply claimed that the Midway would contribute to Japanese economic development. Shimagawa Masashi, a Rikkyo Women's College professor and expert on U.S. military forces in Japan, has observed that "aircraft carriers spend most of their time at sea, so U.S. officials took the public position that the carrier would only be at Yokosuka for repairs and rest and relaxation for its crew. Thus its sailors were never counted in the total of American personal stationed in Japan, but from the beginning the military treated Yokosuka as a home port."

The U.S military used this rationale to combat public opinion against stationing of the Midway at Yokosuka, which was heightened by concerns about the transport of nuclear weapons on carriers. From 1973 until the Midway departed

for good from Japan in 1991, it never returned to the United States. Supported by Japanese “host nation support” (*omoiyari yosa*), the Midway received all of its maintenance at Yokosuka and little by little the city became its home port.

During those nearly two decades, the ship’s fighter planes changed. They began to use electronically guided missiles. They carried Tomahawk cruise missiles that could be used to strike enemy radar and anti-air missile installations. In short, the offensive power of carriers moved up a notch.

The Kitty Hawk, which participated in the attack on Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, called on the Hokkaido port of Muroran last October. Previously, the Independence, had docked in Otaru. Together, the two carriers were mobilized in a campaign to curry the favor of the Japanese public.

A public affairs official repeatedly declared that the purpose of the visit to Muroran was to “resupply, rest, and to nourish goodwill.” But some commentators have observed that another aim of the visit is to check on port facilities and boost the willingness of the public to accept the deployment of a carrier in case of a military emergency.

The role of Japan is growing more important. The relocation of the fighter wing to Iwakuni not only

secures a training environment necessary to maintain offensive power, it bolsters efforts to connect carrier tactics in real-time with global conditions.

The Kitty Hawk is scheduled to be replaced in August at Yokosuka, for the first time, by a nuclear-powered carrier, the George Washington. Professor Shimagawa observes, “By placing a nuclear carrier in Japan, the United States seems intent on sending a message to countries it regards as potential enemies that it is committed to continuing to station a carrier nearby.”

At Yokosuka, headquarters of the American naval forces stationed in Japan, dredging of the harbor continues in preparation for the arrival of the George Washington in August. Workers must dredge about 20 meters below the surface in an area of 30 hectares around the number 12 berth, where carriers dock. The 2.8 billion yen cost is another example of Japan’s financial support for U.S. forces stationed on its soil and in its waters.



The USS George Washington Nuclear-Powered Carrier

The discharge of this fourth carrier to be stationed at Yokosuka will be 12,000 tons. The fighter group will be moved to Iwakuni along with the Fifth Fighter Group. The George Washington's runway is 10 percent larger than that of its predecessor and it can stay in foreign waters for twice as long to prosecute wars as needed. Since the government announced the deployment of the carrier in October 2005, Yokohama city and Kanagawa prefecture, responding to U.S. plans to reorganize its forces, shifted their stance and consented to its deployment. Kanagawa governor Matsuzaka Shigefumi agreed to the plan contingent on the transfer of the carrier planes.

The U.S. navy emphasizes that for "over 50 years, U.S. nuclear ships have never had an atomic reactor accident and have never had a radiation leak that negatively affected people or sea life." But opponents of the plan continue to raise doubts, noting, for example, that the carrier Stennis made an emergency shut down of its reactor in San Diego Bay in 1999.

In February, the Yokosuka branch of the Yokohama Regional Court dismissed a suit to stop dredging but in unusual language requested that the government "use effective diplomacy and gain access to more information."

As public concerns refuse to dissipate, a

signature-gathering campaign to place the issue on the ballot in Yokohama continues. The campaign has already gathered over 20,000 signatures, over three times as many as required to put the question on the ballot. "Even people who were once indifferent are now helping us with this campaign," reports one activist. It is now over 30 years since the first carrier, the Midway, arrived. Once again, the relationship between deployed ships and the host community is uncertain.

A Year at the Atsugi Base

What are the operations of the carrier aircraft unit at Atsugi over the course of a year? When the carrier departs for a mission, the planes accompany it so the average noise levels are not the same year round.

A city employee of one of the communities located around the base, Daiwa, regularly receives telephone calls from citizens complaining about the noise levels and asking why nothing can be done. On some days, over 100 calls deluge the department. Kanagawa prefecture estimated that last year there were 5,920 complaints about the noise from citizens in Kanagawa and neighboring city of Machida located in Tokyo prefecture. These complaints are, of course, concentrated during periods when the carrier returns to port in Yokosuka.

The fighters are a “front line unit” launched from the decks of the carrier when it is at sea. The planes go back and forth from the base to training airspace and each time they create noise. There are various flying formations involving a single to a number of fighters. Sometimes planes take off and land again in intervals as short as 2 to 4 minutes. At Atsugi, the flight path of planes is not clearly delineated.

When the carrier draws close to Yokosuka, there is an abrupt rise in complaints because of an increase in flights. A source of many complaints is night landing practice (NLP). To replicate flying off and onto the carrier deck, the jets repeatedly take off and land at Atsugi in the dark with their engines at full bore. Usually this training takes place far away at Iwo Jima, but last May, because of poor weather conditions the training took place mainly at Atsugi. Citizens protested loudly. In a single month, local governments received over 2000 complaints. A representative of a local anti-noise citizens group, Atsugi Kichi Bakuon BÅ□shi Kisei DÅ□mei declares that “If the navy conducted NLP somewhere other than Atsugi, it still would not be quiet.”

Last year in September and October when the fighters conducted night landing practice at Iwo Jima, the carrier remained at Yokosuka. A few days earlier before the fighters departed from Atsugi, there was an upsurge in complaints

because pilots were practicing to land on the carrier.

In principle, fighters are not to fly between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m., according to a pact between the United States and Japan. But the agreement appears to have become a dead letter. Lately, according to the citizen’s group, “takeoffs and landings in the middle of the night are on the rise.”

Outline History of the Atsugi Base

1941: The Japanese Imperial Navy completes construction of the Atsugi airfield.

9/1945: The U.S. military requisitions the former Imperial Navy airfield and converts it into an army transportation base.

12/1950: The U.S. navy transforms the base into a facility to support aircraft carrier planes through repair, supply, and reconnaissance.

9/1963: The United States and Japan agreed on regulations to reduce aircraft noise.

7/1971: The Air Self-Defense Force begins to share the base with the American military.

9/1973: The carrier fighter unit of the Midway is stationed at Atsugi.

9/1977: A Phantom carrier reconnaissance plane crashes in Yokohama

2/1982: Night landing practice (NLP) begins.

1/1989: Japan and the United States agree to use Iwo Jima for NLP

4/1993: Facilities are completed at Iwo Jima.

7/1995: The Tokyo High Court reaffirms the lower court order that the government pay redress in the first noise lawsuit.

7/1999: The court orders the government to pay compensation in a second lawsuit.

5/2006: The United States and Japan decide to transfer the carrier aircraft unit to Iwakuni.

7/2006: The court orders the government to pay compensation in a third lawsuit.

12/2007: A fourth noise lawsuit is filed.

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