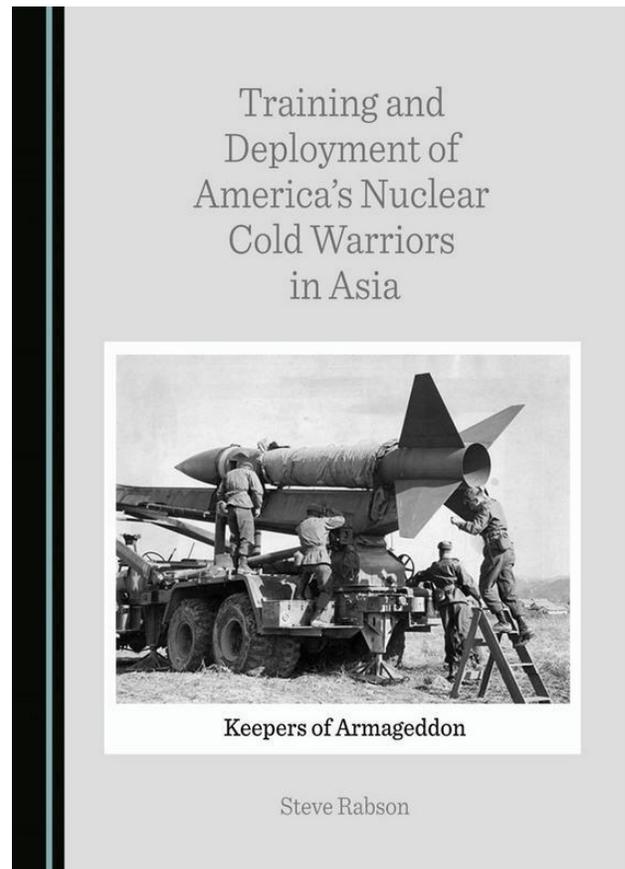


# Training and Deployment of America’s Nuclear Cold Warriors in Asia

**Steve Rabson**

**Abstract:** *The book presents personal accounts by veterans of an Army nuclear weapons storage base in Henoko Village, Okinawa during the 1960’s in the context of nuclear weapons history, Cold War tensions, and the proposal to use them in Vietnam. They describe their entrances into the Army, training, leave times, re-entry into civilian life, and illnesses associated with radiation exposure three of them later suffered, one of whom died in 2015.*

**Keywords:** *nuclear weapons, radiation, Okinawa, military occupation, secret, base town, Vietnam War, Honest John, Nike Hercules, nuclear land mines*



The book *Training and Deployment of America’s Nuclear Cold Warriors in Asia* (published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2022 and available for purchase [at this link](#) with a 25 per cent discount if you enter the code PROMO25) grew out of memories shared on an email group by veterans of the 137th Ordnance Company, a nuclear weapons storage base in Henoko Village, Okinawa during the

1960's. Members of the group write about our experiences on duty at the 137th and off-duty in Okinawa. We also describe our entrances into the Army, training, leave times, and re-entry into civilian life. Our accounts are told in the context of Cold War tensions, the grossly disproportionate American military presence in Okinawa, nuclear weapons deployments elsewhere in Asia, and the proposal to use them in the Vietnam War. It focuses much-needed attention on the dangers of nuclear weapons deployments, describing a little-known missile misfire accident that took the lives of two Army crewmen in Okinawa, an erroneous launch order there during the Cuban Missile Crisis that almost started a nuclear war, the loss of a hydrogen bomb and the drowning of a pilot when his plane rolled off an aircraft carrier near Okinawa, and cancers associated with radiation-exposure among base veterans one of whom died in 2015. It concludes that, far from "defending" and "detering," the deployment of nuclear weapons greatly increases the danger of war and nuclear armageddon.

Steve Rabson

### **Drafted into Nuclear Soldiering**

I first learned I was to be a nuclear warrior during the last week of basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, in early September, 1966. Our platoon sergeant handed me the orders for my next duty station, Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama. I was to train there for the military occupation specialty (MOS) 35-F20, Nuclear Weapons Electronics Specialist. Sergeant Shepherd said he had never seen orders like this before, and referred me to an Army manual where I learned that, after completing a "Missile Electronics" course at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, I would go for further training to the headquarters of the Defense Atomic Support Agency at Sandia Base in New Mexico.

At first I thought my orders might have been a mistake. I had majored in English and minored in music at the University of Michigan, playing jazz piano gigs in the Detroit-Ann Arbor area that helped cover college expenses. After graduation I was working as an advertising copywriter at John Wiley & Sons publishers in New York City when I was drafted. Nothing in my education or job experience had the slightest connection with electronics, let alone nuclear weapons. Two theories occurred to me. Maybe a clerk at Ft. Jackson had accidentally typed "engg" (engineering) instead of "eng" (English) as my college major on one of the countless forms they filled out on us. Or, maybe I had inadvertently scored high on the science and math portions of the seemingly endless series of aptitude tests we all took in basic training.

A few weeks earlier the headlines of the Columbia, South Carolina *Columbia Star* had announced a sharp increase in U.S. troops going to Vietnam. Yet few in our basic training company received orders for places like the Jungle Warfare School at Ft. Polk, Louisiana, or other advanced infantry training units. Much later I learned that a nuclear-capable missile, the Hawk, was deployed there, but the Johnson administration squelched the Army's proposal to consider the nuclear option during the Battle of Khe Sanh in 1968. Service in Vietnam was also unlikely for others of us who became nuclear warriors, though they too faced this possibility when they entered the Army.

### **On Leave**

At the library I learned about U.S. hydrogen bomb tests in the Pacific, starting in the 1950's. They spread radioactive contamination sickening Marshallese and driving them from their home islands that became permanently uninhabitable. A 1954 test also sickened the crew of a Japanese fishing boat, one of whom died in the hospital. During this period, besides

the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons were developed by England and by France, which also tested hydrogen bombs in the South Pacific starting in 1966, affecting an estimated 110,00 residents of Polynesia with nuclear fallout. Two years earlier, in October of 1964, the Chinese tested their first nuclear bomb in the Gobi Desert. I read about a nuclear accident. In January of 1966, a nuclear-armed B-52 bomber had collided with a tanker refueling plane and crashed in a field near Palomares, Spain, killing seven crew members with its four hydrogen bombs falling into the Mediterranean Sea. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October, 1962, had been headline news my sophomore year in college. Now I read that President Kennedy had agreed to remove U.S. nuclear missiles from Turkey as part of the agreement ending the crisis. The following year the Test Ban Treaty was signed in Moscow on August 5, 1963, which entered into force in October, 1963, one month before President Kennedy's assassination. The Treaty prohibited nuclear weapons tests "or any other nuclear explosion" in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water. While not banning tests underground, it did prohibit nuclear explosions in this environment if they cause "radioactive debris to be present outside the territorial limits of the State under whose jurisdiction or control" the explosions were conducted. The nuclear powers at the time—U.S., U.S.S.R., U.K., and France—accepted as a common goal "an end to the contamination of man's environment by radioactive substances."

### **Learning Missiles in Alabama**



**Headquarters Building, Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command photo**

I arrived by bus at night in Huntsville, Alabama, nicknamed "Space Capital" and "Rocket City." In those days it was a center of the U.S. space program, beginning with development of the Redstone rocket and later the Jupiter-C launcher that carried the first American satellite, the Explorer, into space in January, 1958. This followed a number of spectacular lift-off failures on national television that underscored America's lag in the space race with the Soviet Union which had successfully launched Sputnik in 1957.

Huntsville Arsenal opened in 1941 as a chemical weapons plant in anticipation of U.S. entrance into World War II. After the war, it was used mostly to store chemical weapons, gas masks, and incendiary bombs until 1949 when it became the Army's Redstone Arsenal Rocket Center for the research and development of rocket propellants. In 1950 it became the Ordnance Guided Missile Center which expanded rapidly, occupying a large land area with many new buildings. The name was changed again to the Missile and Munitions Center & School in 1966 where thousands of

students from the U.S. and several NATO countries took courses in missiles and munitions. I studied electronic circuitry for missile systems in classes with NATO non-commissioned officers.

Redstone and its related subcontractors were Huntsville's major employers. Its Marshall Space Flight Center was named for General George C. Marshall. However, the most ubiquitous presence in Huntsville was former Nazi scientist and SS member Wernher von Braun who had supervised development of the V-2 rocket. Called *Vergeltungswaffe* (the retribution weapon), it was intended to retaliate for Allied bombings of German cities. Beginning in 1944, V-2 attacks killed an estimated 9,000 civilians and military personnel in London, Antwerp, and Liege. In a program called "Operation Paperclip," American intelligence officers brought 127 German scientists to the U.S. in 1945 at the end of World War II to work for the U.S. military. Assigned to Fort Bliss, Texas in 1946, they were transferred three years later to White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico, site of the first atomic test explosion called "Trinity" on July 16, 1945. Moving to Redstone in 1949, von Braun later became the rocket designer hero of America's space program. (The Russians had recruited 177 German rocket specialists for their program, including von Braun's boss, which might explain their early lead in the space race.) But his work at White Sands was far from heroic. There were notable failures among the live-fire rocket tests he supervised in 1946. One rocket crashed just south of nearby Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. According to an Army veteran of White Sands, later stationed in Okinawa, this led to ridicule from soldiers there who took to calling him "Mr. Paperclip."

Particularly as a Jew, it troubled me to see Von Braun's name and picture everywhere on signs and billboards in the city. He stood flanked by smiling Army brass in photographs at the

entrances, on the walls, and in the offices, laboratories, and classrooms of the buildings at Redstone Arsenal where we took the Missile Electronics Course. How much was his involvement and knowledge of the worst Nazi crimes has been a subject of debate. He claims he was apolitical. Slave labor from the Mittlebau-Dora concentration camp was used for the construction he supervised of the V-2 rockets he designed. After the war, he admitted that several times he had been inside the camp where 20,000 prisoners died. The title character in the 1964 film "Dr. Strangelove," a German scientist working for the U.S. military who had a pompadour hairdo and a lingering habit of giving the Nazi salute, was modeled, at least in part, on him. Today Huntsville has a "Von Braun Center" with a sports arena for football, hockey and basketball, a concert hall, a movie theater, a playhouse, and conference rooms.

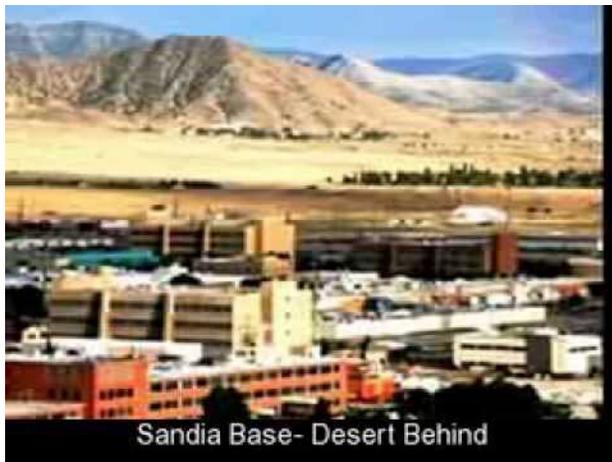


**U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command photo**

At Redstone we marched daily in fatigues and formation to and from our classes. The NCO's and warrant officer instructors taught us how to read schematic diagrams along with the

functions of coils, capacitors, resistors, and transformers, but with special emphasis on what were then called transistors or, more commonly today, semi-conductors. We assembled circuit boards, practiced soldering, and took regular quizzes. At this stage we were not taught any specific applications because everyone would be heading for further training on the circuitry of various missile systems or, in my case, nuclear warheads. Many were headed for West Germany to work on Pershing missile crews. A few of the better students had experience repairing televisions, radios, and other home appliances. Some had chosen the electronics school when they enlisted in the Army with an eye to a future career.

### Learning Warheads in New Mexico



When we reached Albuquerque late that night, it was in the midst of a rare winter rainstorm. Our car slogged through flooded streets where the inadequate drains were overflowing, and arrived at the gate to Sandia Base around three a.m. For twenty-five years after opening in 1946, it was the nation's principal nuclear weapons installation for their design and

assembly, and for training those who maintained them wherever they were deployed in the U.S. and overseas. Along with its subsidiary installation, Manzano Base, Sandia Base carried on the atomic weapons research, development, design, testing, and training that had begun with the [Manhattan Project](#) at Los Alamos, NM, during [World War II](#). Fabrication and assembly of nuclear weapons was also done at Sandia Base until it was merged into Kirtland Air Force Base in 1971, now storing the largest number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. We were assigned at Sandia Base in 1966 to a program run by the Defense Atomic Support Agency (DASA), established in 1959, that trained officers and enlisted men from all the services in the assembly, repair, and circuit-testing of nuclear bombs, warheads, artillery shells, and atomic demolition munitions (nuclear landmines).

The next morning, the fifteen or so newly arrived troops walked to the base auditorium for our "orientation." On the way we passed the headquarters building of the Defense Atomic Support Agency that oversaw the world-wide deployment of nuclear weapons and our training. On the building's closely cropped front lawn were metal statues of "Little Boy" and "Fat Man," the bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. High-ranking officers of all the service, including Army majors, Air Force Colonels, and Navy Commanders, walked briskly toward the entrance. All wore the DASA command shoulder patch, illustrated with a mushroom cloud that would soon be sewn on our uniforms, too. As in the subtitle to the movie "Dr. Strangelove," everyone seemed to be "learning how to love the bomb."



**Defense Atomic Support Agency shoulder patch.**

**Nuclear Weapons in Okinawa: An Ill-kept Secret**

Although the stationing of nuclear weapons in Okinawa was supposed to be highly classified information, at least some local residents were well aware of their presence. In fact, all they had to do was read American newspapers to learn about them, as in this July 26, 1955 report in the *Chicago Tribune*.

**ATOMIC WEAPONS REPLACE GIs IN FAR EAST** (Chicago Tribune Press Service)

Washington, July 26---Atomic cannon and

rockets are being shipped to the far east to bolster reduced ground forces, the army announced today. The army said the 633d field artillery battalion with six of the big 280 mm. cannon, and the 5th field artillery battery with Honest John rockets are being assigned to Gen. Isaac D. White. commending the 8th army and army forces in the far east. The army base in Okinawa announced the arrival of the battalion with atomic weapons.

**Trained in South**

The army said the 633rd battalion recently completed training at Fort Bragg, N.C. The Honest John battery, which has six launchers, was trained at Fort Sill, Okla.

The Honest John is described as a 762 mm. rocket, about 30 inches in diameter, and has a range of 20 miles.

Protests greeting the arrival of nuclear-capable Honest John rockets in 1955, later stored at the 137th Ordnance Company where we were stationed, showed that nuclear weapons in Okinawa were hardly a secret to local residents. How could they not be suspicious of the extremely high security at the base where squads of armed soldiers with sentry dogs patrolled its perimeter 24/7, where signs along the main road passing it ordered "no stopping," and where a large area of close-cropped grass surrounded by high-wire fencing contained several oblong, sod-covered concrete bunkers with steel doors? They could easily find out that the company's "SW" designation on the sign at its entrance gate stood for "special weapons"-- nuclear, chemical and biological. Among Okinawans inclined to do some research, the author of a book published in mainland Japan about U.S. bases included a chapter on nuclear weapons, noting that the 137th company profile in an Army manual listed a "nuclear ordnance platoon."



**The author at the 137th Ordnance Company, Henoko, Okinawa, May, 1968.**

In the 1956 edition of the student magazine *Ryū dai Bungaku*, its founder Arakawa Akira published his poem “The Colored Race,” protesting deployment of the Honest John rockets and calling for black soldiers to join Okinawans in resisting the U.S. military occupation. Occupation censors promptly shut down the magazine for one year, confiscated issues already printed, and expelled Arakawa and his co-editor Kawamitsu Shin’ichi, both students, from University of the Ryukyus. One stanza reads,

The whites,  
 The flabby, hairy whites  
 Bring the Honest John to our island,  
 Strut around arrogantly,  
 And act like our masters,  
 Calling us yellow.<sup>1</sup>

There could have been any number of reasons for the censors’ crack-down on this small student publication, but nuclear weapons in Okinawa were supposed to be a military secret during the U.S. occupation (1945-72).

In 1984 a Japanese book published photographs and maps from 1972 of the 137th Ordnance Company with detailed diagrams of the igloos in the nuclear weapons storage area.<sup>2</sup> An American source, a website for Army Ordnance veterans, includes the following as part of a brief career biography for Chief Warrant Officer 5 Cecil E. Hutson:

He attended the Army Nuclear Weapons Assembly Course at Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1962 and spent three years as NCOIC [Non-commissioned Officer in Charge] of the Nuclear Weapons Assembly Team with the 137th Ordnance Co, [Henoko,] Okinawa. Due to his exceptional service in that assignment, he was selected as the Nuclear Weapons Advisor, Chief of Maintenance, DCSLOG [Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics], 5th U.S. Army.

Among soldiers stationed at the 137th John Bero recalls, “After receiving the security clearance to go to work in the area, we were informed that no one was to use the word ‘nuclear’ on or off the premises.” Yet, this didn’t prevent Okinawans from learning the

truth about the unit. Headquarters clerk Mark Shelton told how one night in 1967 he boarded a taxi at Kadena Air Base for the 45-minute ride north to the 137th. When he gave “Army base Henoko” as the desired destination, the driver turned to look at him with an expression of amazement. “Army base Henoko?! That’s where the big bombs are,” he said, gesturing with both hands in the shape of a mushroom cloud. Company commander Major Carl Andrews, who often seemed obsessed with regulations and his own self-importance, once told another headquarters clerk, Bob Klein, that even the name of the 137th company commander was classified. Bob immediately offered to grab a paint can and run out to paint over Major Andrews’ name on the sign at the company’s front gate. Richard Jensen, nuclear weapons assembly specialist in the Maintenance Platoon, speculated that the notable failure of secrecy was intentional, so that potential enemies would be deterred. Bob Poznanski, a veteran of the Security Platoon, wrote,

Only a non-thinking fool would not know, especially after the Cuban missile crisis, that we were sitting in our very own company area on a secret pile of nukes that we were charged to guard, but were not supposed to know about despite the radiation warning signs.

Putative secrecy also applied to a non-nuclear cluster ammunition stored at the 137th that was said to violate the Hague Convention of 1899 on the Conduct of Warfare because it detonated a storm of deadly shards over a wide area indiscriminately killing or maiming everyone within it. Storage Platoon leader First Lieutenant Tom Wyle remembers that “because of its secret nature, it was never called by its official name, but referred to by the AR regulations that described it, which, if I remember correctly, were AR 380-34 and AR 380-12.” When it first arrived at the 137th, the Maintenance Platoon leader told us, after

seeing the macabre training films with the other officers, that a person would have a better chance of survival in a nuclear attack.

In January, 1968, General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, requested that the use of nuclear weapons be considered during the siege of Khe Sanh by the North Vietnamese Army. John Prados writes,

The 1968 Tet Offensive was one of those periods when U.S. losses ran high. At Khe Sanh, American Marines, some special operations troops, and ARVN rangers were in a siege situation that resembled Dien Bien Phu. A declassified cable from Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Earle Wheeler to Gen. William Westmoreland asked for his opinion on the efficacy of using tactical nuclear weapons at Khe Sanh. Westmoreland’s memoir claims the cable resulted from LBJ’s inquiries, but there is no evidence for that. In fact, the evidence refutes that claim, as Beschloss shows. On February 3, 1968, Westmoreland cabled that nuclear weapons should be considered if the situation around Khe Sanh and the DMZ got much worse. National Security Adviser Walt Rostow told LBJ that nuclear planning had begun. A Westmoreland dispatch on February 10 approved a secret operation called Fracture Jaw. Tom Johnson, LBJ’s note-taker and confidant, recalled the president as “extraordinarily upset” by this, according to Beschloss. Johnson quashed the move. On February 9 he had Secretary Rusk say before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that in Vietnam there were no weapons stockpiles or plans for their use.

On February 12 Gen. Wheeler ordered a stand-down of all Fracture Jaw preparations, with everyone sworn to silence. The White House put out a press

statement that Johnson had received no such recommendations. On the 16th LBJ told a news conference that presidents make all decisions on nuclear weapons deployment.

Westmoreland's request was denied, but during the Tet Offensive the Pentagon authorized the use of AR 380. In a 24-hour convoy operation, long lines of trucks filed up the coastal road to the 137th to load the ammunition, stored in two igloos in "the area," for transport to the Navy's White Beach Pier and shipment to Vietnam. We Maintenance Platoon members were ordered to carry our rifles out to the storage area and guard the two igloos 24/7 while they were open, but I fell asleep on the concrete floor inside one of them around midnight.

Tom Wylie recalls,

Since I was Storage Platoon leader at the time, it was my responsibility to get the ammo to White Beach. We worked around the clock doing it. I remember thinking when I was waiting at White Beach during the loading how we were so very careful handling the munitions and the local nationals, who were driving the fork lifts and hauling the containers, handled them as if they were crates of apples. I asked the supervising officer, Captain Allen, if I could go to Vietnam as a courier as I wanted to see Vietnam first hand and also, if you spent even one day in country, you would get hazardous duty pay for that whole month. He said no.

Presumably, because of the secrecy, we were told that the operation was a response to the seizure of a U.S. reconnaissance ship by North Korea on January 23, which came to be known as the "Pueblo Incident." Since AR 380 violated international law, it would have been necessary to put out a cover story when it was shipped to Vietnam. In retrospect, the story should have seemed fishy at the time since there were already more than enough "conventional" and

nuclear weapons in South Korea to destroy the North. Writing about its use in Vietnam, John Prados identified AR-380 as a "controlled fragmentation munition" or COFRAM.

President Johnson made one command decision affecting the impending battle at this time: permitting the use at Khe Sanh of so-called controlled fragmentation (COFRAM) munitions, shells and grenades, some containing submunitions, that exploded with very lethal high fragmentation effects. COFRAM was very hush-hush, "special compartmented information" to the security specialists, and not for foreign knowledge. David Lownds, though a full Colonel in the Marine Corps, knew practically nothing about COFRAM, which had been given highest national priority in a national security action memorandum in 1967. On January 12, 1968, almost as an afterthought in a cable arguing against any withdrawal from Khe Sanh, Westmoreland had asked for permission to use COFRAM in the battle. The request was unusual in that COFRAM ordnance stocks in South East Asia were far below the levels the logistics people considered necessary for use. LBJ decided to allow its use anyway.<sup>3</sup>

The shortage of COFRAM stocks in Southeast Asia would explain why it was transported from the 137th Ordnance Company in Okinawa. Former Marine Robert Jordan described its first use in Vietnam:

In less than 2 hours Lang Vei would have to report to a forward air controller overhead, "I've got a tank sitting on top of my bunker". That vehicle happened to be one of the last to be successfully knocked out. Later the NVA would rock a tank on top of the bunker with impunity in their effort to force out the last defenders. The time had come for COFRAM, the top secret

special fragmentation weapon. At least Rath Tompkins thought so; at 1.50 a.m. the 3rd Marine Division commander ordered Lownds to employ COFRAM against the tanks at Lang Vei. But Lang Vei protested against using "Firecracker", the radio euphemism for COFRAM, worrying that its use might compel airborne controllers to curtail air support, which Lang Vei wanted to keep overhead at all costs.

About an hour after these exchanges, the 26th Marines operations officer reported to division that NVA troops were inside the wire at Lang Vei and that tanks were moving both inside and outside the compound. The officer, Lt Colonel Edward J.A. Castagna, also mentioned Lang Vei's reasons for resisting the use of COFRAM. General Tompkins now advised sequencing the firepower, using Firecracker, then conventional artillery munitions, and then air. Before any decision was made, at 2.45 a.m. III MAF advised that its information indicated that at this point, everything moving above ground at Lang Vei was enemy. Tompkins converted his suggestion into an order. Khe Sanh began to shoot "packages" of twenty-eight COFRAM shells followed by five minutes of high-explosive or VT-fused shells, alternated with air strikes.<sup>4</sup>

In May, 2018, a former Marine gunnery sergeant who fought in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive wrote me in an email that he remembered "bombs that spewed flechettes of small darts used against massed enemy troops."<sup>5</sup>

During the Tet Offensive rumors were flying in Okinawa that President Johnson was considering General Westmoreland's recommendation to order a call-up of men on reserve status in the U.S. and extend the enlistments of those of us on active duty beyond our scheduled discharge dates. Johnson

was reportedly dissuaded by senior senators concerned that any more of their constituents ordered for military service would endanger their reelection prospects. Then, at the end of March, 1968, Johnson announced an initiative for peace talks and his own decision not to seek reelection. He ordered a reduction, though not a halt, to the bombing of North Vietnam which mostly ended speculation at the 137th that he might approve Westmoreland's request for extensions and his proposal to consider the use nuclear weapons.

If President Lyndon Johnson had been "extraordinarily upset" by the proposal to use nuclear weapons in Vietnam, his successor, Richard Nixon, advocated it himself. Dissatisfied with negotiations in Paris between Henry Kissinger, his National Security Adviser, and Le Duc Tho, representing the government of North Vietnam, Nixon issued an ultimatum through Kissinger in August, 1969. "If by November 1 no major progress has been made toward a solution, we will be compelled—with great reluctance—to take measures of the greatest consequence." One month earlier the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations had issued a plan for operation "Duck Hook" calling for possible nuclear bombing of military and economic targets in and around the capital of Hanoi along with the mining of North Vietnam's main harbor at Haiphong and air attacks on dykes to destroy much of the nation's food supply. Doubts expressed by the Secretaries of Defense and State about the plan's effectiveness and growing antiwar sentiment with a nationwide protest of some two million on October 15, 1969, led Nixon to abandon it.

On October 13 he and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff initiated another plan, "Operation Giant Lance," to threaten a nuclear air attack, this time on the Soviet Union. Its purpose was to coerce Moscow into pressuring Hanoi to accept U.S. terms for ending the Vietnam War. This plan called for a "show of

force” alert of eighteen nuclear-armed B-52 bombers for deployment on eighteen-hour long vigils to patrol the polar ice caps with the intention of appearing suspicious to Soviet reconnaissance systems. Neither the Soviet Union nor the North Vietnamese gave any sign of changing their policies, and the operation was cancelled on October 30, 1969.

Henoko, Okinawa, long suspected by Okinawans to be a nuclear weapons site, is specified as a “nuclear storage location” in the “agreed minute” negotiated between President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Satō Eisaku in Washington, but not released to the press, as part of the Okinawa Reversion Agreement announced the following month in November, 1969 that preceded the actual reversion of Okinawa from U.S. military occupation to Japanese administration on May 15, 1972.

Wakaizumi Kei, Satō’s special envoy and interpreter, published a draft of the “agreed minute” in his book *I Want to Believe There Were No Other Options (Tasaku Nakarishi o Shinzamuto Hossu, Bungei Shunjū, 1994)*. The existence of this document has never been officially recognized by the Japanese or U.S. governments. The English text of the agreement reads,

Agreed Minute to Joint Communique of United States President Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Sato (Draft) 21st November,

1969

United States President:

As stated in our Joint Communique, it is the intention of the United States Government to remove all the nuclear weapons from Okinawa by the time of

actual reversion of the administrative rights to Japan; and thereafter the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security and its related arrangements will apply to Okinawa, as described in the Joint Communique. However, in order to discharge effectively the international obligations assumed by the United States for the defense of countries in the Far East including Japan, in time of great emergency the United States Government will require the re-entry of nuclear weapons and transit rights in Okinawa with prior consultation with the Government of Japan. The United States Government would anticipate a favorable response. The United States Government also requires the standby retention and activation in time of great emergency of existing nuclear storage locations in Okinawa: Kadena, Naha, Henoko and Nike Hercules units.

Japanese Prime Minister:

The Government of Japan, appreciating the United States Government's requirements in time of great emergency stated above by the President, will meet these requirements without delay when such prior consultation takes place. The President and the Prime Minister agreed that this Minute, in duplicate, be kept each only in the offices of the President and the Prime Minister and be treated in the strictest confidence between only the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Japan.

As stated, the agreement not only pinpoints Henoko as a “storage location” for nuclear weapons, but specifies the option of its “activation” again “in time of great emergency” as determined by the United States government “with prior consultation of Japan” to which “the United States would anticipate a favorable response.” . . . For its part, the Government of

Japan agrees to “meet these requirements without delay when such prior consultation takes place.” Despite the stated desire to keep the agreement in “strictest confidence,” its subsequent revelation showed that Prime Minister Satō had not only broken his oft-stated promise of a post-reversion Okinawa without nuclear weapons (*kaku-nuki*), but he had violated his own proclamation in 1967 of “The Three Non-Nuclear Principles” for Japan (non-production, non-possession, and non-introduction), which was cited as a major reason for awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974. Its principles were subsequently codified into Japanese law by the National Diet in 1971. Thus, with nuclear weapons declared illegal in Japan, Okinawa became the only prefecture in the country where Japanese government policy allowed their introduction in violation of the nation’s laws.

An article entitled “Where They Were” by Robert S. Norris, William M. Arkin, and William Burr in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (November/December, 1999, pp. 26-35) explains, “Okinawa hosted 19 different types of nuclear weapons during the period 1954-1972.” Jon Mitchell writes that in 1971, one year

before reversion scheduled for 1972, the U.S. government demanded and received payment from the Japanese government to help defray the expenses of removing nuclear weapons from Okinawa, the first official U.S. admission of their presence. Yet, even after the 1972 reversion, a weekly internal report of the 400th Ammunition Storage Battalion at Kadena Air Base recorded the storage of a B61 nuclear bomb for five days in February of 1975.

In 2014 I visited one of the few G.I. bars in Henoko still in business from 1967-68. I asked the mama-san, probably in her seventies, if she remembered the old Army base that was now part of the Marines Camp Schwab. She smiled, recalling that the Army guys stayed in Okinawa longer than the Marines, and that some of them had rented apartments in Upper Henoko. I asked her if she knew what the Army did at the 137th. She looked all around us to make sure no one was listening, put her finger to her lips and then, lowering her voice, she whispered, “It’s a secret.”

**Steve Rabson** was stationed as a U.S. Army draftee at the 137th Ordnance Company (SW) in Henoko, Okinawa from July, 1967 to June, 1968. He is professor emeritus of East Asian studies at Brown University and has published books and articles about Okinawa, and translations of Okinawan literature. His books are *Okinawa: Two Postwar Novellas* (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1989, reprinted 1996), *Righteous Cause or Tragic Folly: Changing Views of War in Modern Japanese Poetry* (Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1998), *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, co-edited with Michael Molasky (University of Hawaii Press, 2000), *The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan: Crossing the Borders Within* (University of Hawaii Press, 2012), *Islands of Resistance: Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, co-edited with Davinder Bhowmik (University of Hawaii Press, 2016); and translator of *Okinawa’s GI Brides: Their Lives in America* by Etsuko Takushi Crissey (University of Hawaii Press, 2017). He was stationed in Okinawa as a U.S. Army draftee in 1967-68., and is an *Asia-Pacific Journal* contributing editor.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Between 1946 and 1958 the U.S. nuclear testing program drenched the Marshall Islands with firepower equaling the energy yield of 7,000 Hiroshima bombs. In 1946, Navy Commodore Ben Wyatt met with the 167 people living on Bikini Atoll. Wyatt asked the Marshallese to relocate, and for use of their atoll “for the good of mankind.” He explained that they were a chosen people and that perfecting atomic weapons could prevent future wars. The residents were promised they could return one day, but of course they had no choice in this matter. Immediately following this speech, the U.S military began preparations to relocate all residents to Rongerik Atoll, an uninhabited island with limited resources 125 miles away. Residents of Bikini Atoll were resettled on other Bikini islands in 1969, but then evacuated in 1978, after radiation levels were determined to be excessive. ([Atomic Heritage Foundation - Marshall Islands](#))

<sup>2</sup> “The Absolute Weapon: Consideration of the Nuclear Option in Vietnam,” *The VVA Veteran*, November/December 2018, Vol. 38, No. 6, pp. 35-37.

<sup>3</sup> John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh*, Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Jordan served as a gunnery sergeant and Marine combat correspondent in Vietnam, 1968-69. He is the author of “Operation Meade River: The Largest Helicopter-Borne Combat Operation in Marine Corps History,” *The VVA Veteran*, May/June 2018, Vol. 38, No. 3.