

## SOME NOTES ON LIFE AT YOKOTA AIR BASE FROM ONE OF THE SUMMER HELP

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Many of the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) faculty who read my notes will have spent part of their academic careers travelling the world, teaching under challenging circumstances, sometimes in active war zones like Vietnam, Afghanistan and Bosnia. They are true scholar-gypsies and the heroes of these memoirs. This is their story, not mine. Nevertheless, you may be mildly diverted by some recollections of my brief stint working in your ranks.

In the summer of 1986, Julian Jones, erstwhile Asian Division director, invited my wife and me to teach the summer term as adjuncts at Yokota Air Force Base in Japan. Our family, including our two children, was traveling in Hawaii that summer anyway, and this seemed like an excellent opportunity to see some of Japan. In addition, I had just completed my PhD. in Film Studies at NYU and was hungry to chalk up more teaching time.

My major interest then, as now, is the relationship between any documentary film and the specific entities that produced it. For instance, while *Triumph of the Will* reflects Nazi propaganda, it also was not a film much liked by Dr. Goebbels, not produced by his Propaganda Ministry and probably made more because of the cozy relationship between Adolf Hitler and its director, Leni Riefenstahl. So, I took the opportunity of my special topics course at Yokota to show some important documentary films, most from the World War II era. I also assumed these might be interesting to a military audience. In general, I asked my class to ask themselves what propaganda is. Was there a difference in approach between producers and nationalities, or is all film propaganda substantially the same? This is a meaty subject.

Perhaps the most controversial film that I showed, at least as far as the University of Maryland was concerned was *Know Your Enemy: Japan* (1945). Since, as far as I know, no one then saw the film outside of my class, my showing it made no difference to anyone. As it turned out in 1945, the film was a little too leftist for General MacArthur, who had his own plans for Emperor Hirohito after the war, and the film reportedly received little or no circulation. The other films that I showed were classic ones, and are probably better-known now than they were then, but seemed new to my class.

My wife, who is a tenured professor at Peabody Conservatory (now part of Johns Hopkins), gave a lecture to interested parties at Yokota on teaching piano to beginners, a subject she knows backwards and forwards. So, our academic obligations were not burdensome.

Yokota AFB was not a hardship post. In many ways it was like a small town in the Middle

West, flat, quiet, neighborly, a tight knit community, with low 1950s-era prices due to the PX and various subsidies provided by a grateful Uncle Sam to its warriors, a good swimming pool, snack bars, cheap alcohol, and due largely to the University of Maryland, good educational opportunities.

Babysitters and other helpers were plentiful from off-base Japanese who sought a look at Little America

and a chance to improve their English. It was in many ways an extremely pleasant life, not close to the hardships I heard about from Maryland faculty passing through.

Julian introduced us to many of the regulars who taught at UMUC or administered the program, including Talbot Huey and his wife Ott, whose notes are included here. They were an interesting group of people. One couple included a flamenco guitarist, Bill Berglof, and his wife, Atsuko, a Japanese flamenco dancer. Naturally, they had met in a flamenco troupe. Bill was now an area director and Astuko taught Japanese on the base. They were nice enough to serve us a dinner consisting mainly of raw octopus, which is very tasty.

Only occasionally did you remember what the business of this place was through the sights and sounds of C-130s and C-141s which took off and landed incessantly, going on their, to us, mysterious missions. They were, of course, cargo planes, but they still wore Viet-Nam style dark green warpaint, and to me they managed to look huge, brutal and menacing.

We did face some challenges at Yokota. I assume that if I had been by myself teaching, I would have been billeted in a BOQ. But as I was traveling with my wife and children, Julian went to the trouble of finding a house on the base whose military family was away for the summer. What Julian did not know was that one of the family was a Mother Theresa of pussycats. She had decided to adopt all the cats on the base who had been abandoned by service families ordered to other posts or rotated home. There must have been over a hundred cats roaming about the place, coming through windows which were always open, the males spraying the walls and furniture at random. The ammoniac smell of cat urine overwhelmed us. In addition to this, the woman's housekeeper, who also seemed dotty about cats, fed them by opening huge cans of cat food and kept the many food dishes overflowing, day and night. As you may be aware, Japan is not hurting for roaches, so in addition to the cats, there was a swarm of roaches whose magnitude was only limited by the roaches' capacity for reproduction, which like that of the cats, seemed inexhaustible. Julian and his wife, Pat, helped us out and put us up in their own house for a time. We tried to reciprocate by baby-sitting their daughter, Callie, and in general acting like well-behaved house guests.

Julian and I had been friends in high school and college, and we were happy to accept his invitation to see parts of Tokyo and Japan. He and Pat took us to a very good ryokan, a traditional Japanese inn where we did Japanese things and ate Japanese food, the contents of which, while delicious, will forever remain something of a mystery. Julian and his friend, Jim Cramer, also helped us experience Japan. Jim lived on the economy and was involved in a new Maryland enterprise, International Business and Management Institute, teaching international management and the finer points of western culture to Japanese managers headed abroad. The topics ranged from western management practices to where you hold the stem of the wine glass and how eating pasta politely differs from eating (and slurping) Japanese noodles. They took us to several great Japanese restaurants, as well as a French one that was even then mind-boggling expensive. We visited Shinjuku, which put the bright lights of Broadway to shame. We also took several trips to marvelous Buddhist shrines and wonderful Japanese gardens that left me determined to buy a Japanese snow lantern when we got home.

When we did not have Julian and Jim to show us the ropes, we were quite out of it. Keiko Macdonald, a Japanese instructor teaching cinema studies, was kind enough to invite me to see some films with her at the Tokyo Museum of Modern Art. I got up early on the appointed day, took the train and the right subway line to the neighborhood where the museum was supposed to be, but I could never find it. I

wandered around for three hours asking in English where it was, but no one could tell me, or indeed probably did not know what I was even asking. My wife was asked to tea by a woman who had taught at Peabody, and after some similar trials she finally found the tea house. (My wife always lands on her feet.)

I have to admit that the culture in Japan was so foreign that I was often at a complete loss. I have coped fairly well in Western Europe: I spent a year in France and another in Germany, but Japan was mind-boggling to me. Again, this is nothing new to old Japan hands, but the Japanese do not believe in the silly formality of street names. The only ones in Tokyo were those General MacArthur had erected in 1945, and forty years later, these were few and far between, which was my essential problem in finding the Museum of Modern Art. The Japanese philosophy seems to have been that if you did not know where you were going, you probably did not belong there anyway.

Nevertheless, the trip to Japan was fascinating, and it has stayed with me. 1986 was about the time that American fascination with Japanese culture reached its peak. There was a widespread feeling that Japanese products were becoming superior to American ones, that American products were lacking in quality and workmanship, and America was falling behind the Japanese. At the same time, Japanese culture, especially in the form of manga and anime began to influence American culture, as it still does. By watching television at the Jones', I got my first taste of the strange world of Japanese anime. My children, already hooked on Transformers, learned to love *Dr. Slump*. It was and is a strange, wonderful culture. I have been trying to learn some Japanese ever since, without notable success.

As for my Maryland students: I found them serious, industrious, respectful, and in many cases extremely well-versed in the history of World War II, even though this was already forty years after it ended. If they thought my lectures were fluff, they were certainly too polite to say so. One young man asked me if I could give him a list of films on the AVG, which impressed me because I doubt that many of us know that the AVG was the group of volunteers who flew in China and Burma, usually known as the Flying Tigers. The students reminded me very much of the descriptions I have read of the serious, dedicated men who returned from WWII and went to college under the GI bill. It was a privilege to teach them.

Many thanks, University of Maryland University College. It was a pleasure.