

Typhoon Teaching in Okinawa Japan

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One of my most memorable experiences teaching for UMUC in Okinawa Japan revolves around teaching in “typhoon alley”, a place in the Pacific where tropical storms and typhoons roared through frequently. As a native Floridian, I was familiar with the atmosphere of excitement prior to the arrival of tropical systems like typhoons, yet the contrast between overseas Americans and local Okinawans was always a subtly entertaining novelty: base commissaries and shopettes were packed with Americans hurriedly stocking up on “essential” supplies like cigarettes and beer, potato chips, and hot dog buns while local nationals throughout town casually secured their lawn furniture and other yard accoutrements with the nonchalance of a New Yorker strolling past someone publicly urinating on the street. This juxtaposition of activity—both frenzied and staid—was almost always accompanied by a litany of emails sent out by both the military and university administration about the potential of suspending base services and canceling classes. *Almost* always.



View of graves and town from outside the gates of MCAS Futenma

One summer, while teaching an Introduction to Sociology course at *MCAS Futenma*, I had an experience unlike any before, and unlike any I would encounter again in my time at UMUC. Futenma was arguably one of the most controversial military installations in the world, evidenced by the many semi-permanent Japanese protestors picketing in front of it for years. As a backdrop, this took place in the summer of 2012, at a time when UMUC Okinawa experienced one of its many turnovers in staff, leaving the position of Area Director essentially vacant for a short period of time. Describing UMUC in Okinawa as a “revolving door” at that time is both cliché and an understatement; this was more of a high RPM spinning top where staff enter in from above but were rapidly ejected at high speed due to the centrifugal force. For further reference, this was after the time that the President of UMUC inexplicably stepped down from her position with neither notice nor explanation. Okinawan faculty knew little about this but were informed by a speech—delivered by a member of the University’s administration and accompanying attorney no less (flown at great expense from Adelphi, Maryland to Okinawa)—to ‘refrain from talking to the press about anything’. Having taught at other universities in the US yet being somewhat new to UMUC, I found this rather peculiar. It made me feel as though I were working for some

Hollywood-esque organized crime outfit, and that the boss and their lawyer was insinuating that I should “keep quiet or else”. But I digress. Since most of the faculty were not teaching courses that summer, the Area Director vacancy went largely unnoticed because no notification was sent out, a somewhat common occurrence in the early 2010s. This time was not, however, without its implications.

A typhoon was approaching the island, as happens regularly during the summer and fall sessions. However, this time neither myself nor the students received any notification from the Area Director that classes were cancelled, despite being in what the military refers to as *Tropical Cyclone Conditions of Readiness (TCCOR)*. A certain *TCCOR* designation usually means the suspension of many ‘non-essential base activities’, including classes. Instructions about class cancellations were sent out by the Area Director for Okinawa without fail in previous typhoons. However, this time, unbeknownst to us there was no one acting in that position, so no one had been notified.

Being the dedicated academic, I diligently went to class per usual in my sport coat and tie driving my tiny but scrappy Japanese *keijidosha*, a Honda Life model. Futenma is located at the top of a hill, and I showed my military ID to the Japanese gate guard at the entrance to the base. However, this time there weren’t any protestors present, which was a bit unusual at that time. Japanese protestors are very polite, chanting things like ‘down with the base’ and ‘no more Americans’, which would strangely stop as you passed by, only to hear many of those same protestors courteously say ‘konnichiwa’ or wave hello. After passing through the gate, one could hear the protestors resume their chants when nearly out of earshot. On this occasion there was nothing but the Japanese gate guard and thick grey storm bands streaking across the sky.



My Trusty Honda Life

When I arrived at the education center—which was only a minute or two drive from the base gate—I parked my car and for the first time could feel gusts of wind rocking it. Having been through many hurricanes in the past, I didn’t think much of it. I gathered together my materials for class, which were voluminous: one backpack containing all of my books, papers, student exams and assignments; a second backpack containing my laptop computer (with all of my lecture notes and materials), computer adaptor, mouse, and extension cord; a plastic shopping bag stuffed to the breaking point with a set of computer speakers (including subwoofer) and assorted electrical plugs, so students could hear the video clips I sometimes show to augment my lectures; and lastly, a second shopping bag containing a bulky projector to display PowerPoint slides and video clips, in addition to its own hefty proprietary power adapter, all carefully wrapped in a bespoke semi-clean t-shirt. I always had to wrangle everything together, a challenging task that required barely squeezing all of the straps into my hands before making sure my keys to the education center were strategically placed for quick use. This process always reminded me of carrying groceries up many flights of stairs as a graduate student living in a dormitory.

The muffled sound of wind-whipped palm fronds seeped into the car while I stuffed every recess of my hands with bags and keys, eventually stretching one finger loose to pry open the inside door handle during a pause between gusts. Without a moment to react, a blast of wind immediately ripped the door from my finger, slamming it against the front quarter panel of the car (making a notebook sized dent, as I would later discover). An umbrella in these conditions was unfathomable because there was no way to carry one while lugging all of my teaching gear, not to mention that the sideways rain would have rendered it completely useless. After slamming the car door closed while struggling to keep ahold of my bags against the wind, I ran to the side of the education center, which to my surprise was unlocked! I stepped inside the darkened cinderblock corridor of the education center, wiped the raindrops from my glasses, and breathed in the distinctive and unforgettable aromatic combination of musty Okinawan air and military-grade industrial cleaning products. The building seemed deserted as I could only hear the soft hum of a vending machine against the subdued sound of wind gusts whistling across the windowsill.

I walked down the corridor, rounded a door into the classroom, and to my surprise there were three students sitting in the darkened room. I made a small talk joke about them hanging out in the dark and set up my equipment. Unfortunately, my teaching gear became soaked during what was probably only a fifty-foot walk between my car and the education center: the projector wouldn't turn on, the computer speakers made an unsettling crackling sound when plugged in, and even my computer had water droplets all over it. I carefully dried off the computer and thankfully it worked.

I held class as usual, despite that only three out of about fifteen students were present; the music of the typhoon's gusts occasionally hitting the classroom windows gave us all something to marvel at. When class was over, I cautioned the students about leaving the building in the storm, and we all stepped outside. This time, however, I was prepared- students went one way while I went the other to my car. When I got home, I laid everything out and placed it near an electric dehumidifier (a near household essential for the Okinawan climate). To my surprise and delight, everything worked the following day after it had thoroughly dried out.

I later learned that we were not supposed to hold classes that day, despite that no email had been sent by an Area Director. I thought to myself- 'I never want to go through all of that again', my main problem being that I was continually struggling with carrying so many bags and backpacks as a "Professor Without Borders" (the slogan of UMUC travelling faculty). For the next month, I searched the internet for a tiny projector, Bluetooth sound system, and a single bag that would hold all of that plus a computer and my students' papers and exams. I ended up finding a briefcase that had a rubber gasket around the edge to keep water droplets from seeping in, a necessity, I felt, given my experience. I used that case and gear



My Teaching Gear

for the remainder of my time at UMUC, and it served me very well, even through numerous tropical storms.

To this day, I still carry that bag when I am teaching on campus, albeit at a more traditional four-year university in the US. When I first accepted my current appointment, that bag elicited a few strange looks and some offhanded comments like 'what is that, the nuclear football', or 'are you a part of the CIA'. I always chuckle to myself when I hear of comments like those, because my colleagues are simply unaware of the unique set of experiences that led me to carry that bag, which now brings back so many warm memories of my time living and teaching in Okinawa Japan.