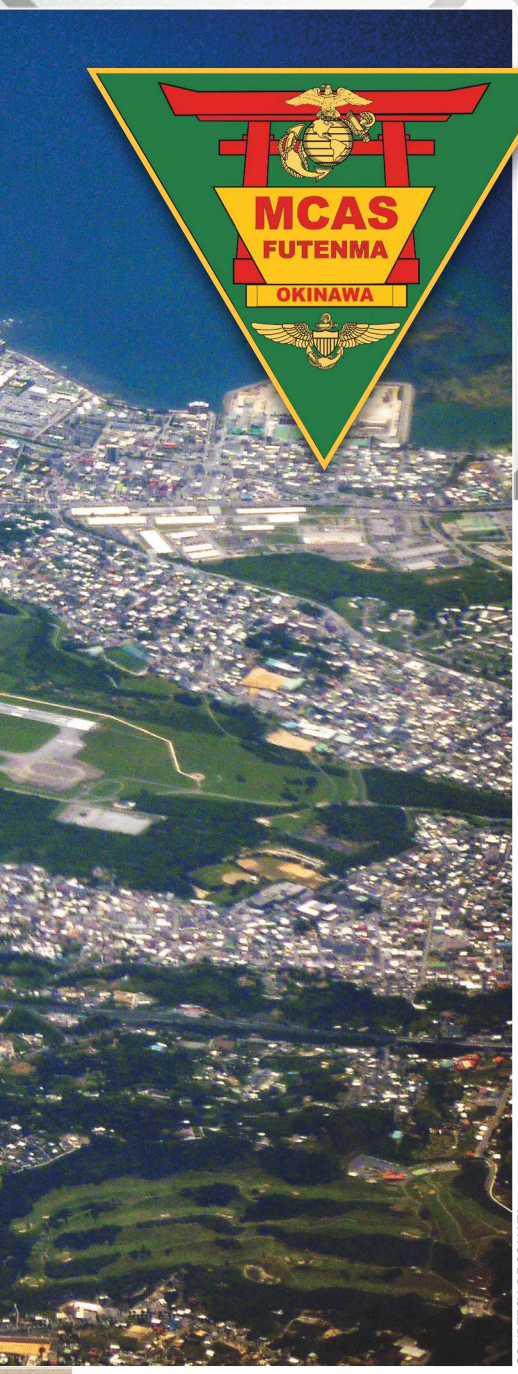
BEYOND THE FENCE LINE

Understanding MCAS Futenma and Okinawa's Grievances



COURTESY OF SONATA

Left: An aerial view of MCAS Futenma, Okinawa, Japan, taken in May 2010. It was established as a U.S. military air base in 1945.

Below: An F-35B Lightning II jet assigned to VMFA-121 awaits refueling at MCAS Futenma, Okinawa, Japan, Dec. 17, 2020.

LCPL DALTON J. PAYNE, USMC

By Sgt Kyle Daly, USMC

The call was sent out over the air station's tower frequency.

"An H-53 just went down, H-53 just went down."

At 2:18 p.m., on a hot August day in 2004, the worst that could happen, did happen. A CH-53D intending to land at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa, Japan, couldn't remain airborne. The transport helicopter, with a rotor diameter stretching a little more than 72 feet, crashed about 300 yards from the air station's fence.

Wrapped by a highly condensed city of homes, businesses, parks and schools, MCAS Futenma's location on the Pacific island provides no breathing room for emergency landings outside the air station's fence line.

The crew of the large helicopter, call sign "Dragon Two Five," lost control of their tail rotor and quickly declared an emergency: "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday."

The aircraft struck the side of an administration building at Okinawa International University. The impact ruptured a fuel tank, and a fire erupted.

A transcript of the air station's tower radio calls provides a glimpse of the terrible scene.

The crew of another aircraft, call sign "Dragon Three One," reported they could see the crash site.

"Dragon Three One has contact with the, uh, fireball to the, uh, southwest of the field."

Futenma Marines who witnessed the crash climbed over two fences to get to the downed helicopter. They pulled the injured crew from the aircraft. All three crew members—two pilots and a crew chief—survived with injuries. No one on the ground was killed or injured.

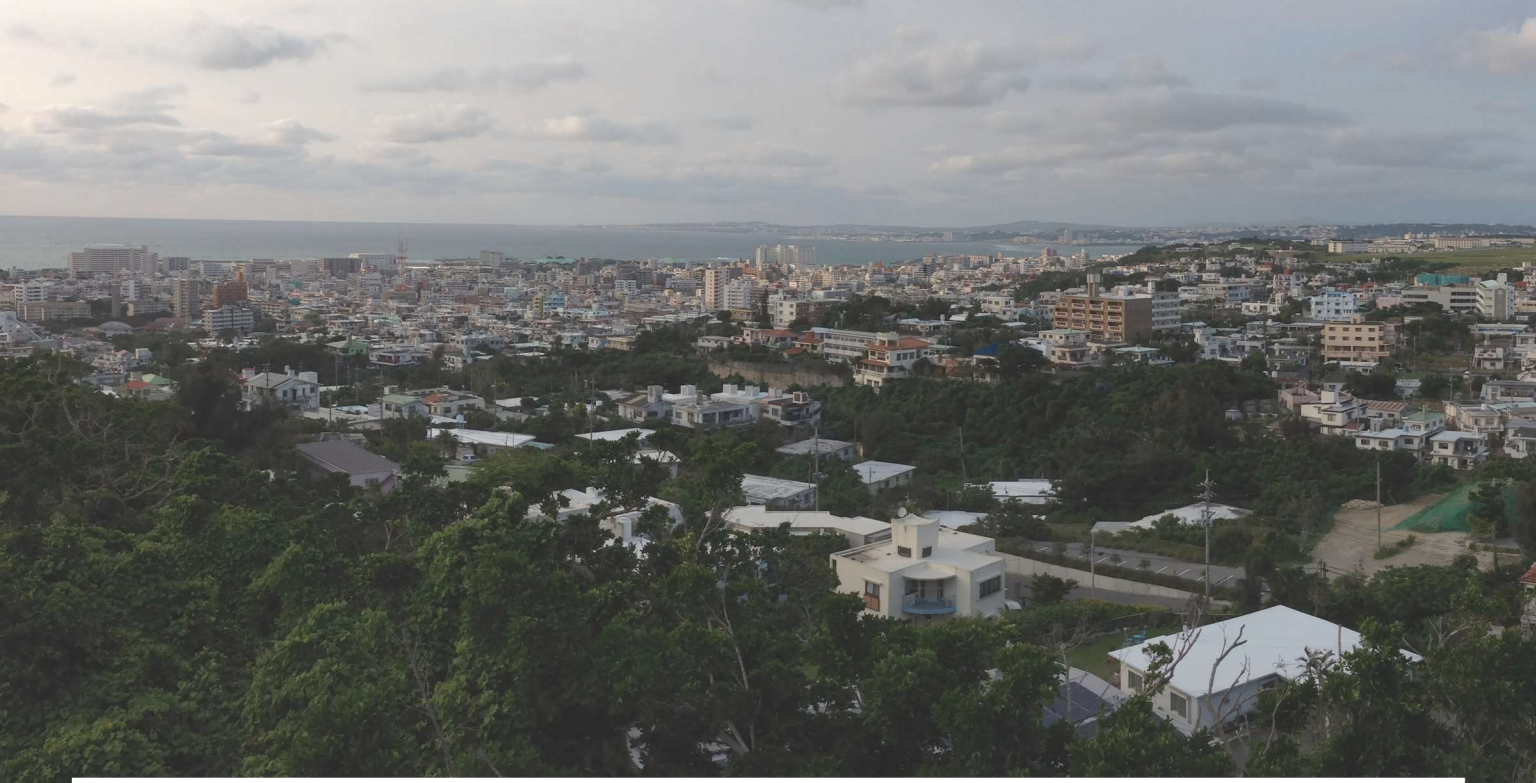
An investigation would later find that improper maintenance caused the crash. Specifically, maintainers failed to install a cotter pin on a bolt in the aircraft's tail rotor section. The bolt fell out, and subsequent events led to the tail rotor departing the aircraft.

The commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Brigadier General Duane D. Thiessen, later praised the actions of the aircrew, who had avoided causing loss of life on the ground. In his endorsement of a command investigation report, Thiessen would write that "this was a mishap that should never have occurred." A Marine spokesman would be quoted in a November 2004 *Stars and Stripes* article saying that the Marine Corps was "in the process of imposing appropriate administrative actions against some of the Marines" involved. The same article stated that maintenance procedures were reviewed, and additional preflight checks were implemented to ensure that such a crash never happened again.

In the hundreds of aviation mishaps by U.S. military aircraft in the decades since World War II, the one that occurred on Aug. 13, 2004, in Okinawa, doesn't, on the surface, seem to stand out. None of the crew died. No one on the ground was killed or injured. The crash was not combat-related, nor did it occur behind enemy lines. And, as the investigation found, the cause of the crash was unique only to the aircraft itself.

Because of these facts, I knew I had to ask Dr. Fumiaki Nozoe, an associate professor at Okinawa International University, a question that other Marines like me might have when looking at the past.

At Nozoe's university, there stand the remnants of a charred tree that was burned by the fire of the 2004 crash.



The tree's remains serve as a memorial for the incident.

"Why is there a memorial?" I asked Nozoe during a Zoom call in early April. "Why is this remembered?"

Each year, on the anniversary of the crash, students and faculty gather at the charred tree.

The university president, in a speech, calls for the closure of MCAS Futenma, and then students also give speeches not only to remember the 2004 crash, but to discuss "the Futenma issue" and their feelings about "the more broad Okinawa base issue," Nozoe told me.

The word "issue," in this sense, is an all-encompassing term that covers, but is not limited to, the following topics: the potential danger of another crash at Futenma; a now 25-year-old agreement to close Futenma; the delayed construction of an airfield where Futenma's operations can be moved; and an anti-base sentiment magnified by politicians and activists.

I knew what Nozoe meant when he said "issue," a word that also shares a synonym in academic papers and opinion pieces online. This synonym is "problem," as in the "Okinawa problem" or "base problem."

It wasn't until recently that I knew of these terms.

Servicemembers stationed in Okinawa often have a limited understanding of this island and the issues and the problem that so many activists, politicians and local residents discuss.

I should know. I'm one of those servicemembers.

For the past three years, I've lived and worked at MCAS Futenma, flying in and out of the air station as a crew chief on the MV-22 Osprey.

Inside this American bubble, I've progressed with my aircraft maintenance qualifications and climbed the Marine Corps ranks, concentrating on the day-to-day tasks and not giving much thought to what happens beyond this base's fence line. After all, why should I?

"We don't have a deep well of institutional thinkers and people who have a good understanding of Japan and the history. Part of the problem comes from the turnover in personnel of all ranks."—Joe Stavale

In 2014, Joe Stavale, now a retired Marine Corps lieutenant colonel, wrote an article published in *Marine Corps Gazette* in which he addressed "an American deficiency that deserves better attention."

Stavale, who served as a foreign area officer specializing in Japan, wrote that "Americans are still struggling to maintain an effective level of institutional understanding and continuity on the issues that are important to Japan and are embarrassingly surprised and frustrated by Japanese viewpoints and positions on issues that impact the U.S.-Japan alliance."

Speaking to Stavale on the phone in early April, I read him the passage from his six-year-old article and asked whether he still believes this struggle is true today. Without hesitation, Stavale affirmed that it is.

"We don't have a deep well of institutional thinkers and people who have a good understanding of Japan and the history," Stavale told me.

Part of the problem comes from the turnover in personnel of all ranks, he explained. Those stationed in Okinawa and elsewhere in Japan are in country for periods as short as six months, or for many, three years.

The U.S. and Japanese governments have a strong security alliance born out of agreements reached between the two countries following the conclusion of World War II. The two governments both agree that the military's presence on Okinawa is strategically significant, not just to Japan and the U.S., but to the security of the region.

"Understanding the Japanese and their viewpoints on defense and the U.S. military presence in Japan will enable American stakeholders to better manage the alliance and ensure a politically stable future as we rebalance to make our forces operationally ready, regionally dispersed, and politically stable," Stavale wrote in his 2014 article. "Failing to break through just a veneer understanding of our alliance partner's views and attitudes will perpetuate miscalculations, incorrect assumptions, a reactive posture

A view from the Kakazu Height Park Observatory, Nogiwan, Okinawa, on April 29, 2014. (Photo by Superkamaji)

toward the media and public opinion, frustration at all levels of coordination and policymaking, and the adoption of unsuccessful positions that will fail in finding a mutually acceptable outcome to common challenges in the future."

I asked Stavale if it is important for Marines like me—junior Marines and NCOs, not the ones making major decisions—to understand the alliance and the issues attached to it.

This young generation of Marines ask tough questions, he said. They ask why.

"Maybe before, we were too reliant on the leadership to make the connections," he said. Going forward, Stavale added, we should "rely on the junior personnel to make the professional linkages."

"But to do that you have to have a good understanding of the alliance—why you are even based here."

When I posed this same question to an Okinawan resident, a Marine of a much older generation, he responded with this advice: "In principle, I think it's always better to know the situation that you're in."

"It Was Shattered"

In March, during a week of relaxed coronavirus restrictions for the Marines stationed in Okinawa, I ventured to a coffee shop in downtown Naha, the island's capital city, to meet with that 84-year-old Marine, a man who first stepped foot on the island six decades ago.

We sat at a table inside the shop, located on the second story of a shopping mall. Doug Lummis looked at me through his oval-shaped glasses. He wore a black beanie that fit snuggly over his long, scraggly hair. He had a white beard and wore a brown jacket that covered a blue button-down shirt.

With his adult son at his side, Lummis asked me to look into his eyes and tell him the truth: "Are you a policeman?" he said.

I laughed at the question and assured him I was not a police officer.

"OK, I believe you," he said, with a pinch of humor in his voice.

Though it put me at ease for the interview, I knew there was perhaps a kernel of sincerity in wanting to know if I had ties to law enforcement. That's because, in addition to being a U.S. military veteran, a retired university professor, and a published author, Lummis is also an activist.

Lummis is the coordinator for the local chapter of Veterans For Peace, a nonprofit organization made up of U.S. veterans who are against armed conflicts and intervening in the affairs of other nations. He has participated in anti-base protests, including an ongoing sit-in at the construction site of the new airfield designed to replace Futenma.

Knowing this and being aware of the gulf that exists between an anti-base activist and an active duty servicemember, I began the interview on common ground. Lummis and I are both Marines, and we both received orders to Okinawa. I first asked him to describe his service.

Lummis served for three years in the Marine Corps, 1958 to 1961, following his studies at UC Berkeley in California. After finishing The Basic School in Quantico, Va., followed by a year stationed at Camp Pendleton in California, Lummis completed his short time in the military on this Pacific island.

When he arrived in the early 1960s, about 15 years removed from the Battle of Okinawa, the island was still under U.S. control.

"It was shattered," Lummis said of the island. "Many people were living in what you would call slums, that is to stay, hand-built houses—hand built out of scraps by amateur builders."

Despite the low wages of U.S. servicemembers at that time, the 84-year-old described the economic gap between Okinawans and Americans as "gigantic."

"If you took that money and stepped off the base, you were rich," he said.

Okinawans, many of them farmers who no longer had land to farm on, would find things to sell to American servicemembers—trinkets, candies, cigarettes, "or their bodies," Lummis said.

The U.S. military occupied Japan for about seven years following the war's end in 1945. When the U.S. returned Japan to its people in the early 1950s, the two governments agreed to allow American military forces to be stationed in the country. A revised agreement reached in 1960 specifies that those U.S. military forces in Japan are meant to provide security to Japan and to maintain peace in the region. Under a new constitution drafted after World

Below: Col Henry Dolberry Jr., CO, MCAS Futenma, greets a representative from the 15th Anti-Air Regiment of the Japan Ground Self Defense Force Oct. 26, 2020.

LCPL ZACHARY LARSEN, USMC

War II, Japan had vowed not to settle disputes through armed conflict.

But while most of Japan gained back its sovereignty in 1952, a civil administration that fell under the U.S. War Department controlled Okinawa and other Ryukyu islands. The administration created a democratic government for the islands, but U.S. officials could overrule any laws passed by that government. It wasn't until 1972 that Okinawa was finally returned to Japan. But in the period between the end of World War II and the return to Japan, the American military on Okinawa assumed control of former Japanese military installations and built other bases, according to a 2016 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report.

"The United States paid locals for the acquired land, but in some cases this purchase reportedly involved deception or outright coercion, using bulldozers and bayonets to evict unwilling residents," the report states. "During the period of American administration, Okinawans had no political authority or legal redress for crimes committed by servicemembers—though the worst crimes were prosecuted through court martial."

During his time on the island, Lummis said he witnessed "structural discrimination," or the unfair treatment of Okinawans built into the system in which they lived.

In the officers' quarters, according to Lummis, each room had a housemaid.

"A young woman who would wash our clothes and make the beds and clean the rooms," he said. "And the wages were fixed. We were told if we gave more, it would disrupt the Okinawan economy."

Witnessing poverty and all its consequences—seeing what Okinawans had to do to feed themselves—affected Lummis. He ended his service in Okinawa and took a ship to mainland Japan where he enrolled in a language school. Lummis would eventually return to UC Berkeley for graduate studies during a decade in which the northern California college campus saw its share of student protests. He got involved in the Free Speech Movement, which protested the ban of political activities on campus. Lummis would later return to Japan and teach at a women's college for 25 years before retiring. In 2000, he moved to Okinawa, the island where his wife is from.

Differences Between Okinawa and the Mainland

Okinawans are ethnically different from other Japanese citizens. Before it became a Japanese prefecture in 1879, the Ryukyu Kingdom, which includes Okinawa and other nearby islands, was, for more than four centuries, "a nation of courteous officials, farmers, fishermen, and traders," according to George H. Kerr's book "Okinawa: The History of an Island People." Okinawa's location between mainland Japan, China and other East Asian countries—an ideal outpost for trade—caught the eye of both Asian and Western nations long before World War II.

During the war, Japan gave little

thought about Okinawa, "and did virtually nothing to prepare it for the crisis of invasion," according to Kerr's book.

"Okinawa retained importance only as a potential field of battle, a distant border area in which the oncoming enemy could be checked, pinned down, and ultimately destroyed," Kerr writes.

During the Battle of Okinawa, between 40,000 and 100,000 civilians died.

Lummis explained that Japanese today speak of "structural discrimination" against the Okinawans in terms of the U.S. bases.

He told me a story of a woman from mainland Japan who visited him in Okinawa. The woman was part of a movement that supported Article 9, the section of Japan's constitution that declares the country will not use war to handle international disputes. Lummis was driving the woman through a residential area next to the base's fence line.

"She looked at the fence and houses alongside and said, 'I could never live in a place like that.' " The woman, he explained, was referring to the Okinawan residences next to the fence.

"At first it sounds like a powerful, anti-base sentiment, but then wait a

Japanese protesters gather outside MCAS Futenma in Ginowan, Okinawa, on Nov. 8, 2009.

NATHAN KEIRN

minute, what did she just say? You could rephrase it as, 'I can't imagine how those people could live in a place like that,' " he said. "In other words, look at what a sensitive, aware, sympathetic person I am, compared to [Okinawans]. They just live there and don't even care. In the U.S., I guess they call that a 'dog whistle.' "

Although the island of Okinawa makes up less than one percent of Japanese land, the tiny prefecture houses about half of the 53,000 U.S. military personnel in the country, according to the CRS report. The Okinawan prefectural government's website for its Washington, D.C., office states that more than 70 percent of land exclusive to U.S. military facilities in Japan is based in Okinawa.

"Some Okinawans see the decision to host the bulk of U.S. forces on Okinawa as a form of discrimination by mainland Japanese, who also do not want U.S. bases in their backyards," the report states.

In September 1996, 89 percent of participating Okinawan voters cast ballots in favor of a non-binding referendum that called for the reduction of U.S. military bases on the island. That vote—the first time Okinawans voiced their opinion on the matter—came during a year in which both the U.S. and Japanese governments were making major changes in the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Conversations about reducing the American military's presence on Okinawa were sparked by the horrible actions of three servicemembers—two Marines and a Sailor—in September 1995, when the three men, all in their early 20s, abducted and raped a 12-year-old Okinawan schoolgirl.

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Stavale, who retired as a lieutenant colonel in 2019, was a sergeant stationed in Okinawa when the incident happened.

"It was just so shocking and embarrassing," Stavale said. "It was not our finest hour at all. We should be held to a higher standard. Nobody should have any fear or worry that a U.S. servicemember would do anything to hurt them."

The incident sparked protests attended by thousands, gained the attention of the international press, and pushed both the U.S. and Japanese governments to discuss how to alleviate the burden of the American military on Okinawa—a burden that included the military's use of land, aircraft noise and crimes committed by servicemembers.

That's when the idea was proposed: close Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

"A Base for Rapid Reinforcement"

"The original agreement called for the [air station's] functions to be relocated within five to seven years and Futenma would be closed," said Dr. Robert Eldridge, a former deputy assistant chief of staff of government and external affairs for Marine Corps Installations Pacific. "I don't think D.C. understood what the functions of Futenma are when they were discussing it."

In March, inside my barracks room on Futenma, I spoke to Eldridge via Zoom. Eldridge has written multiple books and opinion articles about the U.S.-Japan alliance and the importance of Okinawa for the security of the region.

He received his doctorate in political science from Kobe University. He worked as a political adviser for both U.S. and Japanese government officials and was also with military commanders during the humanitarian response to the great earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in 2011.

In his writings, Eldridge has pointed out the importance of MCAS Futenma.

The airfield was constructed in 1945 during the Battle of Okinawa as a location for American forces to station B-29 bombers, according to a 2012 article Eldridge wrote, called "The Okinawa 'Base Problem' Today." In 1976, it was designated a Marine Corps air station.

In the event of an emergency, aircraft intending to land at Naha International Airport on the island's southwest side or at Kadena Air Base farther north can divert to Futenma. In the event of a tsunami, Futenma, unlike Naha, is located on higher ground and could be used as "an emergency hub," according to Eldridge.

Futenma is also one of a handful of bases designated to support United Nations Command-Rear forces if the need arises. Its 9,000-foot runway can support large transport aircraft. Kadena Air Base also has this UN designation.

Kadena and Futenma are two American military airfields that are about a 20-minute drive from each other, depending on traffic. On the surface, it would seem like overkill to have two major air bases on a small island, but the Air Force doesn't operate like the Marines, who have ground troops that also live and train on Okinawa.

"Being co-located in Okinawa with the ground troops, the aircraft facilities at Futenma allow the Marines to train and deploy together, which is essential to the Marine-Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) doctrine," Eldridge writes.

Eldridge told me there was an idea to merge the operations of Kadena Air Base and MCAS Futenma, but it never gained traction.

"The main issue why they should never think of doing that is that you should never purposefully eliminate your options in a contingency," he said. "By closing Futenma, you're giving China a huge advantage in a contingency—you just made it infinitely easier for them. One less target to bomb. Etcetera. Etcetera."

Marines with 1st MAW participate in a formation run on MCAS Futenma, Okinawa, Japan, May 28, 2019.

Former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry, who led the deparment from 1994-1997, also described the importance of Futenma in a 2017 documentary made by the Japanese media organization, NHK.

"The primary purpose of Futenma is to serve as a base for rapid reinforcement of our troops in South Korea in the event of an attack from North Korea," he said.

In such a situation, Perry added, Futenma would serve as a facility for reinforcement as other air units move to the region from places such as Hawaii, Alaska and the continental United States.

"We never considered just giving up the base," Perry said of the agreement reached between the two governments in 1996. "We always considered what can we do to keep the capability that we feel is vital and lessening the negative impact on the Okinawan people."

"High-Level Arm Twisting"

Although its closure was proposed more than two decades ago, MCAS Futenma is very much open for business. The air station houses two Osprey units and provides maintenance spaces for other rotary wing aircraft. Fixed-winged aircraft use its runway for training.

Marines like me live and work at the base, maintaining and flying on aircraft and training with ground troops on a continuous basis.

So, why is it still here?

The question has a complex answer, but that answer can be summed up with one word: politics.

In January 1996, Ryutaro Hashimoto became the prime minister of Japan. During a visit to the United States only weeks into his term, Hashimoto brought up the possibility of closing Futenma to President Bill Clinton. Even at that time, Okinawan residents living near Futenma had complained for years about the noise of aircraft and expressed

SSGT LAURA GAUNA, USMC

concern about the airfield's proximity to so many schools.

"One reason that the prime minister was so interested in helping Okinawa was that his political mentor was the prime minister that actualized the return of Okinawa back in '72," Eldridge said. "So there's a lot of sentimental feelings that this prime minister had toward Okinawa."

Hashimoto resigned as prime minister only two years later.

According to Eldridge, every prime minister who has followed, except for Hashimoto's immediate successor, Keizo Obuchi, who suffered a stroke and later died less than two years into his term, never had that same connection with the southern prefecture. That's one reason Okinawans have struggled to be heard on the issue of military bases.

In the weeks and months following the September 1995 rape and the massive anti-base protests that erupted from the incident, the U.S. and Japanese governments established what was called the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO), which was tasked with proposing solutions to alleviate the burden of housing American military forces on the island.

The SACO Final Report, which came out in December 1996, recommended that thousands of acres of land used by the U.S. military be returned to Okinawa residents. This included MCAS Futenma. The report stipulated that the base be returned within five to seven years, but only "after adequate replacement facilities are completed and operational."

In the years to follow, the Futenma issue, which included a proposed replacement facility on the northern part of the island, would both begin and end political careers in Japan, from mayoral seats to the prime minister's office.

In 1996, a proposal emerged to build a heliport in waters east of Nago City in northern Okinawa. The city held a vote in December 1997 that asked residents to weigh in on the proposal. Although it wasn't a simple "yes" or "no" option for voters, those who opposed the plan appeared to have the majority with just over 50 percent.

The report stipulated that the base be returned within five to seven years, but only "after adequate replacement facilities are completed and operational."

Despite this majority, the city's mayor Tetsuya Higa agreed to allow construction of the heliport. A Reuters news report at the time described the mayor as succumbing to "high-level arm twisting" by the Japanese prime minister, who "dangled the prospect of 150 million yen (about $2 million) in sorely needed economic assistance to Okinawa."

Higa subsequently resigned.

Even though he initially agreed to cooperate with the central government's effort to replace Futenma, then-Okinawa Governor Masahide Ota came out against the heliport proposal after Higa resigned, Eldridge writes.

In 1998, Ota lost a re-election bid, and a "nominally conservative" governor, according to Eldridge, took his place. That governor, Keiichi Inamine, a businessman with no background in politics, was "viewed as pliable."

Governor Inamine eventually spoke in favor of the agreement to build a replacement facility and close Futenma. That's because, according to Eldridge, Okinawa played host to the G8 Summit in 2000, which brought world leaders, including President Bill Clinton, to the island.

"That was seen—correctly—as a quid pro quo for accepting the relocation," he said.

It was decided that the Henoko district of Nago, where the Marine Corps' Camp Schwab is located, would be the site of the new facility, and that it would be a landfill project. But the Japanese government moved slowly, and anti-base protesters continued to fight the project.

In late 2004 and early 2005, with Donald Rumsfeld at the helm of the U.S. Department of Defense, American officials decided to go back to the drawing board and reconsider the option of Henoko as a replacement site.

Eldridge advocated for another replacement site at the Katsuren Peninsula on the east side of central Okinawa. Eldridge's plan, which was actually an idea that came from an Okinawan construction company president with ex-

perience building offshore landfills in the area in the 1990s, called for the building of an artificial island that would hold a heliport and two runways. The benefits included a short construction process, minimal impacts to the environment and a location that was away from residences.

"This concept incorporates the biggest lesson from Futenma—don't build an airfield where people live or can live," Eldridge wrote in 2019. Eldridge predicts that the day the Henoko replacement facility opens for operation—if it opens—"noise" and "danger" complaints will begin pouring in.

Many groups supported Eldridge's plan, including the Marines, local politicians and business leaders in the Okinawa Chamber of Commerce and Industry, he said.

"The Pentagon liked my plan too, and they told me in an email 'this is the best plan ever,' " Eldridge said. "But, they said, 'the Japanese government has to propose it.' And they said, 'for the Japanese government to propose it, the Okinawans have to propose it.' "

In the end, Japan did not want to shift gears. In 2006, the Japanese and U.S. governments agreed to keep pushing forward with the Henoko idea in a deal meant to realign American military forces in Japan and eventually relocate approximately 8,000 Marines to Guam. The agreement called for the targeted completion of the replacement facility by 2014, which would come and go.

Today, the Japanese government still hasn't shifted gears, with construction at Henoko taking place and anti-base protesters still trying to disrupt the project.

Politics, however, have been the leading disrupter.

In 2010, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama resigned because he broke a campaign promise to move Futenma's operations off Okinawa, thus keeping the Henoko project alive.

Okinawa Governor Hirokazu Nakaima, who took office in 2006, won his election while being "vague" on the base issue, said Doug Lummis. In 2010, however, Nakaima's campaign called for the complete removal of Futenma's operations from the island. He won the 2010 election and maintained that position throughout his second term.

But his stance seemed to change when, in 2013, he struck a deal with the government of Japan, giving his approval for the Henoko landfill project—an approval required by law, and one that only the governor of the prefecture could

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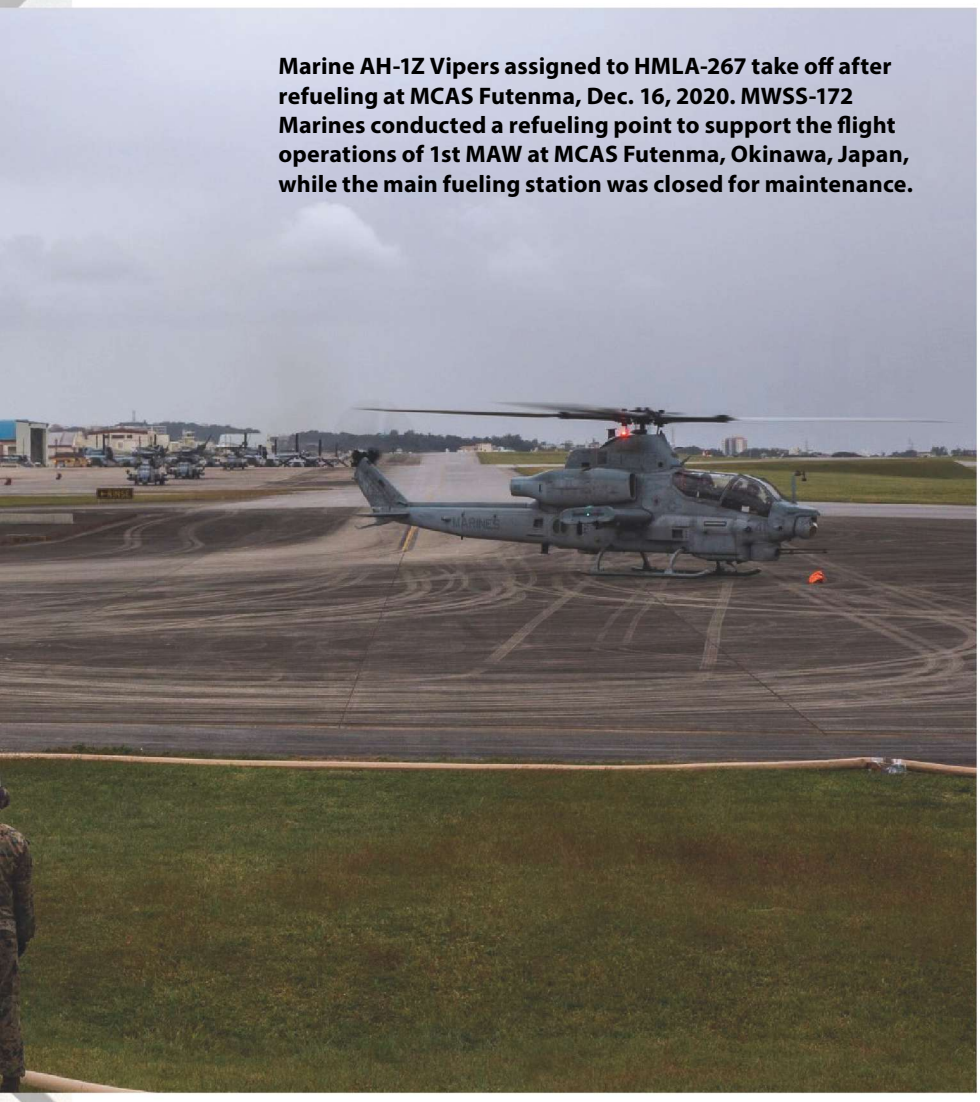
provide. It was the last major hurdle Japan's central government had to clear before it could begin the construction project. News reports state that, in return, Japan's prime minister promised Nakaima a huge spending package for infrastructure and development projects on the island.

Nakaima lost his seat the following year to Takeshi Onaga, an Okinawan mayor who was against the Henoko project. Onaga's successor and Okinawa's current governor, Denny Tamaki, was elected following Onaga's unexpected death in 2018. Tamaki has maintained Onaga's anti-base stance.

According to a 2019 CRS report, Onaga and Tamaki have "employed a variety of political and legal strategies to prevent or delay construction of the [replacement facility] at the Henoko site." This has included taking the central government to court.

In February 2019, a non-binding referendum was held on Okinawa with a 52 percent turnout. Of the voters who cast ballots, about 72 percent opposed the construction of a new base. According to CRS, "most Okinawans oppose the construction of a new U.S. base for a mix of political, environmental, and quality-of-life reasons."

Lummis explained that Okinawans' opinions on the base issue are not so black and white; that is, there isn't a group in favor of having the bases versus



Marine AH-1Z Vipers assigned to HMLA-267 take off after refueling at MCAS Futenma, Dec. 16, 2020. MWSS-172 Marines conducted a refueling point to support the flight operations of 1st MAW at MCAS Futenma, Okinawa, Japan, while the main fueling station was closed for maintenance.

LCPL GERARDO W. CANO, USMC

a group against having bases.

Michael Bosack, a former deputy chief of government relations at Headquarters, U.S. Forces Japan, wrote an article in 2018 that explained the gray area Lummis described. Bosack described the differences among the island's elected leaders.

"There are plenty of Okinawan politicians who enjoy great relations with the bases they host but oppose the terms of the intergovernmental agreements that dictate the existence of those bases," Bosack wrote. "Conversely, there are politicians who recognize the strategic importance of U.S. bases in Japan without wanting Okinawa to have an unequal share of the base-hosting responsibility, let alone bearing that responsibility in their own constituencies. Further, there are anti-base politicians who see cooperation with base-related initiatives as a means to extract the maximum amount of concessions from the central government for their constituents."

In December 2019, the Japanese government announced the Henoko project would take another 12 years because more would have to be done to improve a soft seabed where the proposed runways are to be constructed, according to a *Japan Times* article. It also will cost three times as originally estimated.

That means Futenma will likely be open well past the year 2030—three and a half decades after the two governments called for its closure.

Two MV-22 Ospreys with VMM-262 prepare to take off from MCAS Futenma, Okinawa, Japan, Sept. 29, 2017, in support of Exercise KAMANDAG.

LCPL ANDY MARTINEZ, USMC

"Of Course it's Dangerous"

The thing that shows why Henoko is "such a joke," Eldridge said, and why better plans for a replacement facility haven't been considered, is that the original reason for closing MCAS Futenma was the so-called danger to the local community.

Eldridge disagrees with this assessment, pointing out that no Okinawan resident has been killed or injured since the airfield came into existence.

But, according to Eldridge, the people he argues with will point to the 2004 CH-53D crash as an example of the danger the air station poses. In response, Eldridge reminds them that the crash happened eight years after the two governments originally agreed to close Futenma "within five to seven years."

"If you're saying Futenma is such a dangerous airfield, why haven't you helped with the speedy relocation?"

I discussed the same idea of danger with Lummis, who has argued in his public writings that the safety restrictions that apply to military airfields in the U.S., specifically "clear zones" at the end of the runways where crashes are likely to occur, don't apply to Futenma, an airfield in a foreign country. Futenma's clear zones, as depicted in a 2012 environmental review for basing the MV-22 Osprey at the air station, extend beyond the base's fence, where schools and other buildings are, Lummis writes.

"Well, of course it's dangerous," Lummis said of Futenma. "I think that the people operating the base know that it's dangerous, and I think they're being as careful as they possibly can."

The military, Lummis said, will do what it can to make things as safe as possible, adding, "so long as it doesn't interfere seriously with normal operations."

Futenma's clear zones, as depicted in a 2012 environmental review for basing the MV-22 Osprey at the air station, extend beyond the base's fence, where schools and other buildings are.

Lummis also acknowledged that in the event of a crash, it's rare for the people on the ground to get hurt; it's more likely the people in the aircraft don't walk away.

"Accept Such a Reality"

Dr. Nozoe, who has taught at Okinawa International University for eight years, has conducted research on the history of the U.S.-Japan alliance. He is not Okinawan, he's from mainland Japan.

During our conversation, I asked the university professor whether he and his students hear aircraft flying in and out of MCAS Futenma.

"Yes, of course," Nozoe affirmed, adding that sometimes he has to stop class because of the noise.

The Japanese government, Nozoe said, made improvements at the university to mitigate the noise, such as strengthening the windows. In addition, improvements were made to the air conditioning system, which is required on hot days when the windows have to be shut for the aircraft sounds.

However, many of his students are used to the noise, and they just accept living with the U.S. military on the island, he said. If they think about the base issue, they'll have to think about the unfairness of Okinawa hosting so many military installations.

"They don't want to think about that, so they can't help but accept such a reality," he said.

Author's bio: Sgt Daly is a Southern California native who joined the Marines after working as a full-time journalist. He graduated from Arizona State University with a bachelor's degree in journalism. In 2019, he won the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation's MSgt Tom Bartlett Award for Outstanding Writing. His previous work and contact information can be found at kylejdaly.com.

LCPL MADELINE JONES, USMC

Marines stand in formation on the flight line on MCAS Futenma, Okinawa, Japan, June 7, 2019 during the MAG-36 change of command ceremony.