Engaging Japan: An American Naval Officer’s Relationship with Japan during the Cold War

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Early Years: From Sasebo to the Tokyo Olympics

It all started on 2 June 1963, the day I graduated from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. That same day, I was commissioned as an ensign in the United States Navy. Although ensigns are lowest in the pecking order of naval officers, I got my first choice of duty, a coastal minesweeper homeported in Sasebo, Japan. I knew nothing of Japan, but my junior and senior year Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps instructor convinced me that small ship duty (“where you will immediately be a department head”) was preferable to serving on an aircraft carrier (“where you will be the assistant Coca Cola procurement officer”). Since I was single, I also desired to test the World War I Navy recruiting slogan, “Join the Navy and See the World!” Sasebo was the most remote place where the Navy based ships, and Japan sounded exciting.

Full of misperceptions and false expectations, I departed from Milwaukee for Sasebo via six weeks’ training in firefighting, communications, and cryptography in San Diego. My mother, pretending to be joking, bid me farewell, cautioning, “You won’t marry a Japanese girl, will you?” I expected to fulfill only my minimal obligation of four years of naval service as a repayment for four years of university education. I naively thought that, even if I stayed in the Navy for more than thirty years, I would never see combat. I was convinced that America’s big wars had ended with World War II and that Korea probably meant the end of lesser ones as well.

Many people know that the destroyer USS Maddox (DD-731) was the first American naval ship shot at in Vietnam and that the Maddox and the USS Turner Joy (DD-931) thought they were attacked two days later in 1964. Very few know that the second (or third) U.S. ship to incur hostile fire in Vietnam was the USS Peacock (MSC-198), a coastal minesweeper assigned to guard against the North Vietnamese seaborne infiltration of South Vietnam. My first naval duty was aboard the Peacock, which was based at Sasebo. My first participation in real “General Quarters,” that is, duty under genuine emergency circumstances, is burned in my memory.

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But little or no glory attended the moment. Several years later, the
crews of logistic vessels such as oil tankers (AOs) were awarded haz-
ardous duty pay for refueling naval combatants hundreds of miles off
shore in uncontested waters. When the Peacock’s commanding officer,
Lieutenant Doug Menikheim, asked if we could receive this special pay,
however, he was told we could not unless the ship had bullet holes to
prove we had been under attack.

Most of my second year of duty on the Peacock was spent on Vietnam
patrols. That experience definitely abolished my naïve view that wars
were obsolete. I also learned that grounding a ship meant the end of a
naval career for a ship’s captain and others implicated in it was not
necessarily so. The then current saying was “running aground can ruin
your whole day!” One beautiful, sunny day, of which there were many
when we were peacefully patrolling off the southern coast of Vietnam, I
was serving as officer of the deck (conning officer) when Doug
Menikheim, usually a very calm and reassuring voice, said in great anxi-
ety, “Jim, we’ve run aground; all engines back emergency.” Astonished,
I replied, “Sir?” Doug, who immediately regained his calm, said, “Look
at that object ashore. It’s not moving relative to us because we are
aground.” Fortunately, we had grounded on sand in uncharted waters.
No damage was done to the Peacock, and neither Doug’s nor my career
suffered as a consequence.

I learned more psychology in six months as a naval officer than I had
in four years as a psychology major at Marquette. My first commanding
officer taught me much about what a naval officer should not be. Watch-
ing his successor, Doug Menikheim, who transformed the Peacock from
an unhappy, inefficient ship to a top-performing unit of the U.S. Seventh
Fleet manned by a crew with high morale, was another great learning
experience. By the time I left the Peacock for six months’ training as a
department head at Newport, Rhode Island prior to reporting as opera-
tions officer aboard a destroyer based in Yokosuka, I had begun to think
about staying in the Navy for an extra two years if I got the right duty
assignment. I wanted to see if I could do nearly as well as Doug
Menikheim, as a lieutenant commanding a small ship.

Serving aboard the Peacock produced a totally unexpected highlight
of my first Japanese experience: watching the 1964 Tokyo Olympics from
almost front row seats. That summer, the Peacock had done some “check
sweeping” off major South Vietnamese ports to ensure that no residual
mines left from World War II would interfere with American operations
there. At that time, neither our crew nor the American people knew that
the fighting in Vietnam would escalate dramatically in 1965. Before re-
turning to Vietnam for its first war patrol, the Peacock called at Yokosuka,
the naval port near Tokyo, for four weeks of training which ended a