

Oliver Stone on Okinawa - The Untold Story オリバー・ストーンと沖縄という秘話

Jon Mitchell

Japanese translation [available](#)

On August 13, a dozen anti-base demonstrators scuffled with police outside the gates of Futenma Air Station in Ginowan City, Okinawa, as U.S. marines watched from behind the fence cracking jokes and laughing. Such scenes occur daily on Okinawa - saddled with roughly 70% of U.S. bases in Japan - and are usually ignored by the national media¹. But on this day, Tokyo TV stations had dispatched so many reporters they outnumbered the protesters.



Oliver Stone, Satoko Oka Norimatsu and Peter Kuznick watch protests outside MCAS Futenma. Picture by Tobaru Isao.

The journalists had come to interview U.S. movie director, Oliver Stone, who'd just arrived on the island and was standing on a hilltop overlooking the Futenma base. Although the reporters bombarded Stone with questions about his reaction to the U.S. presence on Okinawa, he declined to give any statements and soon ducked into his van to escape the camera scrum.

"What do they want me to say? Okinawa is pinned between the United States and Japan. The bases have been here for 68 years and it seems they always will be," he told me.

It was not a promising start to his trip to Okinawa.

In less than 36 hours, he was scheduled to give a talk to 1500 people about U.S. bases on the island but now he just looked hot, irritated and ready to go home.

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Stone's visit to Okinawa came at the end of a 12-day tour of Japan - which included stops in Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Tokyo - accompanied by Satoko Oka Norimatsu, co-author of "Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States", and Peter Kuznick, associate professor at American University, Washington D.C. The tour was arranged to promote "The Untold History of The United States", the book Stone had written with Kuznick - and the 10-hour TV series of the same name.



Satoko Oka Norimatsu and Oliver Stone on the rooftop of Sakima Museum, Ginowan City.

Designed to “challenge the basic narrative of U.S. history that most Americans have been taught,”² it focuses on the needless barbarity of the atomic bombings of Japan and subsequent ill-fated Pentagon interventions around the world including Vietnam, Afghanistan and, most recently, Iraq.

Stone has not always held such progressive views. Growing up in a conservative family, at the age of 20, he volunteered to fight communism firsthand in Vietnam; during his 15-months there, he was wounded twice. He wove these experiences of combat into “Platoon” - the 1986 movie which won him an Academy Award for Best Director. Stone followed “Platoon” with a string of blockbuster hits - including “Wall Street”, “JFK” and “Natural Born Killers” - which stirred public debate and confirmed his place as one of Hollywood’s most influential directors.

Stone’s decision to write “Untold History” came in 2008 - sparked by frustration with the direction the U.S. was heading after 8 years of George W. Bush’s presidency. Writing the book and TV series took 4 years and proved to be the toughest project of his career but also, he said,

the most satisfying.

“I’m not the same person I was at 19, 25 or 40. I have evolved. I have deepened my views of the world,” he told me. “Life is always a learning experience.”



Obama is a snake.” Stone at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan, Tokyo.

During talks in Tokyo prior to his visit to Okinawa, Stone had grabbed press headlines by calling Obama “a snake” and voicing his support of Russian President Vladimir Putin for offering asylum to whistleblower Edward Snowden.³ Stone’s scorn was not reserved for the U.S. government - he also decried Japan’s lack of education on its wartime atrocities. Throughout his talks on the Japanese mainland, Stone showed that he was well-versed in the politics of the atomic bomb - the justification for the use of which he calls “the founding myth of the United States” - and the U.S. escalation of Cold War tensions with the Soviets.

However, this was Stone’s first visit to Okinawa and “Untold History” deals only briefly with the island’s past. Shaking his head, he looked

outside at the cramped houses squeezed against Futenma's fence-line. "It looks just like any other base town. Run down and depressing."

If these initial reactions to Okinawa were anything to go by, it was clear his learning curve here would need to be precipitously steep.

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Early the next day, Stone headed to Itoman City in the south of the island - scene of some of the most brutal fighting of the 1945 Battle of Okinawa. Trapped between the clash of a combined 300,000 Japanese and U.S. troops, Okinawa civilians sought refuge wherever they could; one of these places was a cave named Todoroki no Gou.

Accompanied by Ishihara Masaie - professor emeritus at Okinawa International University - Stone hiked through dense jungle and climbed down into the deep crevice. Ishihara explained how more than a quarter of the island's civilian population, over 100,000 people, were killed in the battle - not only victims of crossfire but forced into mass suicides by Imperial Army forces.⁴ The guide pointed to where the Japanese soldiers, who were supposed to protect Okinawa civilians, instead forbade them from surrendering to U.S. forces.

Wiping sweat and spider webs from his face, Stone muttered that the cave reminded him of the tunnels of Vietnam. "War is terrible," he said.

The next stop reinforced the horrific scale of the Battle of Okinawa: Peace Memorial Park - the prefectural monument that inscribes the names of those killed on all sides of the battle and including Americans, British, Japanese, Koreans, Japanese and Okinawans. Stone paced through the rows of black granite slabs inscribed with the names of the dead, looking drained by the number of those who had lost

their lives.



Stone at the Peace Memorial Park in southern Okinawa.

In the adjoining Peace Memorial Museum, he stopped to read each description of the Japanese forces' pre-war militarization of Okinawa - and he heard how, in the 1990s, the authorities had attempted to interfere with the museum's displays so as to play down Imperial Army aggression.⁵ Then he squeezed himself among a row of schoolchildren to watch a short documentary about the battle.

Everywhere Stone went, Okinawa residents explained what World War Two meant to them - the Japanese military bases here hadn't protected civilians, they had made them into a target. After 1945, U.S. bases seamlessly replaced those seized from the Japanese, bringing with them accidents and crimes, and hobbling the island's economy. Okinawans' anti-militarism is not directed solely against the U.S. - given their bitter history, many oppose *any* military presence on the island.⁶

Urashima Etsuko, an Okinawan resident and a writer who organizes a weekly candle-lit vigil outside USMC Camp Schwab in northern Okinawa, said, "People don't know about

Okinawan issues. I hope his visit will make these problems better known to the world - especially in the United States.”

The word “Hope” recurred again and again in Okinawa residents’ comments about Stone’s visit - and it reflects a real dearth of optimism on the island today. Last autumn, a 100,000 person rally in Ginowan City failed to stop the deployment of Osprey aircraft to the island. In January, a visit by more than 40 Okinawa municipal leaders to Tokyo to protest the Osprey deployment was largely-ignored by the government and picketed by hundreds of fascists lining the streets of the glitzy Ginza shopping district.⁷

Stone’s visit coincided with the nine-year anniversary of the crash of a USMC CH-53D onto the campus of Okinawa International University⁸ - and, in the previous week, the crash of a military HH-60 helicopter on August 5.⁹

People here feel that they’ve run out of options in protesting the U.S. military presence on their island - and their voices are being ignored.

Nowhere is this feeling more evident than Stone’s next stop after the museum: the northern city of Nago. Here in Henoko Bay, Washington and Tokyo want to build a vast new U.S. military base. One of the key obstacles standing in the way of their plans is Nago’s current mayor, Inamine Susumu. A staunch opponent of the new installation, Inamine faces re-election in January and his rivals - including local supporters of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and companies likely to profit from the construction project - have already embarked upon a campaign to topple him. Rumours abound of voters being relocated to Nago to swing the election - as well as financial offers to buy ballots.¹⁰

Meeting the embattled mayor in his office, Stone described his impressions of Okinawa, “I

walked the caves and museums and I learned a lot. In Okinawa I feel the great tragedy of the war.”



Stone at the offices of Nago Mayor Inamine Susumu.

Stone listened to Inamine explain about the new base which, if built, will bury Henoko Bay in 2 kilometers of concrete, devastating one of Japan’s most naturally-rich regions. Among the rare species living in the area are the dugong - a relative of the Florida manatee and once a sacred mammal for Okinawans; according to some estimates, the number of dugong has been reduced to less than 20.

“But do they taste delicious?” Stone asked.

The joke was one of several he tossed out in formal meetings throughout the day and, while Inamine took it in his stride, Stone’s unpredictability seemed to unsettle those accompanying him. With his public talk now less than 6 hours away, they looked nervous about what would come out of his mouth when he took to the stage.

Following the meeting with Mayor Inamine, Stone headed by boat to Henoko Bay to talk with local residents who, for the past 17 years, have maintained a sit-in protest on the

shoreline.¹¹

Beneath their white canvas tent, the most remarkable moment of Stone's trip to Okinawa unfolded; a scene which took everyone - even the organizers - by surprise.

Approaching Muneyoshi Kayo, an elderly Henoko resident, Stone asked if he was a military veteran. The man nodded then pointed to a long scar on his leg that was the result of a bullet wound.



Muneyoshi Kayo, the Japanese military veteran wounded in Vietnam who Stone called "a warrior for peace."

"Where were you shot?" asked Stone.

"Vietnam - when it was under Japanese occupation in 1945."

Call it what you may - kismet, karma, coincidence - but when Stone and Muneyoshi clasped hands, the gesture brought history full circle. Both men were wounded veterans of Vietnam - survivors of lost wars the histories of which their governments today are trying to conceal to keep the true brutality of empire from the new generation.

For Stone, the meeting suddenly appeared to cement everything he had seen during the day. This was a chance for him not only to write history but to help to shape the future.



Jon Mitchell and Oliver Stone at Sakima Museum. Picture by Sunao.

"Okinawa is a sacred island and it has great meaning to many people - as well as to the world. I am against the development of this beautiful landscape for another military base. The war ended here 68 years ago - there's no reason to have bases still fighting the Cold War," Stone told those in the tent.

As the demonstrators applauded, he kept talking.

"I support Mayor Inamine for Nago in 2014 against the LDP and the forces of Abe who want to turn this into another military site."

Only 24 hours previously such a speech would have seemed inconceivable but now the turnaround left the protesters - and some of the Okinawa camera crews - in tears.

Later, Stone explained to me how much the meeting with Muneyoshi had affected him. "The man had lost the ability to walk - he was wounded but he didn't give up. Now he is a warrior for peace."

Stone rode this wave of angry defiance through to his final talk in Ginowan Conference Center that night. At the event, held to mark the 120-year anniversary of the founding of the Ryukyu Shimpo newspaper, Stone began by describing his view of the region's past.¹²

"This is a very strange history - how the U.S. has controlled much of the Far East since 1945. The war never really ended... All of us - Americans, Japanese, Okinawans - we are victims of the mindset that drove that war."

In a comment that appeared to link to his first impression of Okinawa, he said, "Having been a GI in Vietnam and seen what the U.S. military does when it comes to a country, it trashes the place. The culture changes."

Stone then proceeded to discuss how he has been transformed during his life.

"As a young man [in Vietnam] I was shocked and alienated and numbed by the war. I didn't fully understand the reasons for it - until later when I talked to people who enlightened me over the years... [This] gives me a hope that the rest of humanity will learn from the lessons of life and the experience of brutality and cruelty - and always seek the direction of the light."

Over the next 90 minutes, Stone stressed the need for schools to teach the truth about their nations' pasts and he reiterated his opposition to the plan to build a new base at Henoko Bay. He also voiced his support, once more, for Mayor Inamine; "I was most impressed with the

Mayor. He is a fighter."

He ended his talk with a call for people of all nations to protest against the injustices that governments attempt to impose on them.

"We need regional powers to speak out and resist. We need Japan to resist... We need resistance!"

Well before the interpreter finished translating, the audience had erupted into loud applause. Here was someone who backed their struggle against Japan and the U.S. - two of the most powerful nations in the world. Here was a message of hope to hold close during the difficult days ahead.

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After the talk, in a rundown Naha bar once popular with U.S. troops during the Vietnam War years, Stone spoke to me about the evolution he'd undergone on Okinawa.

"The people in the protests really changed my view - being surrounded by high consciousness people opened my eyes. They enlightened me."

Taking a drink of iced *awamori* liquor, he explained how he felt it was necessary for people not to focus too much on the military accidents which all-too-often occur on Okinawa.

"True they're a terrible part of occupation. But it's important to look at the bigger picture of cruelty. What bothers me most is the lack of logic of being here more than 60 years after the war. It's the Emperor's new clothes. American citizens aren't picking up on it because they don't want to."

Stone returned to the subject with which he has devoted himself for the past 4 years.

"Both Japan and the U.S. have been deprived of their history. They are uneducated orphans of the war. So where does that leave Okinawa? People seem to know their history here."

Before he left the bar, Stone drew upon a quote from Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses" to offer his final thoughts on the people he'd met during his visit.

"Okinawans have been made weak by time and fate - as Tennyson says. But they are strong in will."

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This is a revised and expanded version of an article which first appeared in The Japan Times on August 21 titled "[Oliver Stone warmed to Okinawans, fired up base foes.](#)"

Notes

¹ For more on how the Japanese mainland media neglect and discriminate against Okinawa see Jon Mitchell, "What happens in Okinawa..." FCCJ Number 1 Shimbun, July 2013. Available [here](#).

² Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2012. Foreword.

³ For example, see [here](#).

⁴ For an in-depth exploration of the Battle of Okinawa, see Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2012. Chapter 2.

⁵ Miyume Tanji, *Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa*, Routledge, London, 2006. 48 - 51.

⁶ For a discussion of Okinawa pacifism - specifically related to the northern Yambaru area of the island - see [here](#).

⁷ For an account of the march of Okinawan

leaders on Tokyo - and the fascist reception they received - see [here](#).

⁸ Details of the Okinawa International University helicopter crash are available [here](#).

⁹ "U.S. chopper crashes in Okinawa; no residents injured," The Japan Times, August 5, 2013. Available [here](#).

¹⁰ For an exploration of the debates surrounding previous Nago Mayoral elections see McCormack and Norimatsu, 144-149.

¹¹ For example see Ryukyu Asahi Broadcasting and Satoko Norimatsu, "Assault on the Sea: A 50-Year U.S. Plan to Build a Military Port on Oura Bay, Okinawa," The Asia-Pacific Journal, 27-1-10, July 5, 2010. Available [here](#).

¹² To watch Oliver Stone's full talk go [here](#).

Jon Mitchell is a Welsh-born writer based in Japan. He has written widely on Okinawan social issues for the Japanese and American press. A selection of his writings can be found [here](#). Currently, he teaches at Tokyo Institute of Technology and Meiji Gakuin University.

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