

Defending the Peace Constitution in the Midst of the SDF Training Area

Nobumasa Tanaka

Defending the Peace Constitution in the Midst of the SDF Training Area

by Tanaka Nobumasa

The severe rainstorm from last night has stopped. The sunshine is bright for early winter. The leaves on the trees have not yet turned a vivid color. Although the gusts of wind blowing in Yausubetsu located on the Konsen Plateau are not as cold as expected, they are powerful enough to sway me. November 5th, before noon, Mr. Kawase Hanji, age 78, took me to his land (35.5 hectares). This is a vacant lot where people organize events in the summer. The area is so large that I can hardly believe I am standing in the middle of the Japan Ground Self Defense Forces (SDF) Training Area. However, every once in a while, I hear the boom of live-fire training sessions.

"It's ground forces against air," said Kawase. "The bullets' target is over there," he continued, pointing his finger towards the west far into the primeval forest.



The Changes in the SDF

The total number of training days in Yausubetsu is more than three hundred a year. The total number of live-firings is 20,000 to 30,000, fired from weapons such as 155mm and 202 mm howitzers. Furthermore, there is the summer annual special training of the SDF's Northern Operation involving 3,000 to 4,000 participants (which started in 1997 and is said to end this year in 2004), and there is also the training that has been held since 1997 following the transfer of U.S. Marines' live-fire training exercises from Okinawa to Hokkaido. "We receive the announcement [of training] a week before the live-fire training starts, but the time of day is not stated. When I'm outside, suddenly I hear the 'boom,' and I still can't get used to it."

The Yausubetsu Training Area is 17,000 square hectares. The east-west distance is 10 km and

the area is oval shaped. The area amounts to 70 percent of Osaka city. The relationship between the Yausubetsu Training Area and Kawase goes back more than forty years ago to 1963 when the SDF started using Yausubetsu. Kawase had moved to the area ten years prior to this date. Although the training area surrounds his private land, it must be an annoyance for the SDF to have to practice in an area seemingly divided into parts. The SDF posts a Keep Out sign on the borderland, but there have been some "small changes" that has been bothering him a little. "This year in June, the wording of the Keep Out sign changed. It now says that anyone who enters the area without just cause will be subject to detention and a fine. We've finally come to that point, I guess. In the past, even if we entered the training territory, nobody said anything, but if you have a signboard that says, 'detention' and 'pay a fine,' we won't be able to do that anymore. I'm thinking that this might have something to do with the transfer of the U.S. Marines."

Kawase was invited to speak at the citizens' rally, "Article 9, Over Hokkaido," on November 3rd. There, he spoke of the small "changes." Ever since the SDF has been dispatched overseas, they have assumed an overbearing attitude toward ordinary citizens, and this is reflected in the wording of the notice boards.

"Look, there's the new Keep Out signboard," says Kawase while driving back to his home in Yausubetsu. Indeed, the new signboard uses terms such as "detention" and "fines," even adding a note at the end, "Petty Crime Law, Article 1, Paragraph 32."

Kawase's long-term relationship with the SDF makes it possible for him to intuitively detect the "change." "I think the SDF was more relaxed in the past. Not that I want to coexist with the SDF, but I've known these guys for a long time, so I just know it."

"For example, in the past, when a new person

assumed the post of administrative commander in the Bekkai Army Post which manages the Yausubetsu Training Area, he would call on me to introduce himself. These days, they don't bother to show up at all, not that I want them to visit me." Kawase also added, "I cannot stop thinking that whenever the U.S. Military arrives, the SDF becomes lively." What Kawase means by "lively" is synonymous with "aggressive," and perhaps this is rooted in the historical relationship of the U.S. to the establishment of the SDF.

However, these changes had already started when the first U.S.-Japan Joint Training Exercises began in Yausubetsu in 1984, as Japan began moving toward the right. For instance, until then, there were no signs leading to the exercise field, but Kawase soon found signs in eight areas. Having an acute sense of detecting changes is extremely important these days, when uniformed people are demanding more voice and attempting to form "a state machine of violence."

The Constitution Dances Wildly in the Middle of the Training Area

Kawase has been voicing his message from the heart of the Training Area. On the side roads that lead to his land, you can find numerous signboards that overpower even those put up by the SDF: "Land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized. / Excerpts from the Constitution." The signboard is equivalent to the size of two tatamis. "Probably, it was the SDF, but when there were holes made in the signboard, I remade them immediately." The wordings in the new signboards are taken from phrases used in well-known stories from the Edo period, or jidaigeki. "Silence! Can't you see this?" and Article 9 follows. Another reads, "Your heads are too high! [Don't be so arrogant]. Stop the military exercise immediately!" Kawase, who is fond of jidaigeki, says, "I just happen to be

watching Mito Komon on television, so I took the phrase from the show. I like fooling around," he shyly tells me. There is another signboard next to it. Here, it says, "Let's protect freedom of expression!" Targeting the behavior of creating holes in his signboards, he writes, for example, "If you have a counterargument, use words to say it." "Since then, they stopped making holes." He is using the Constitution freely.

The most powerful message Kawase put up can be found on the D-shaped house, which he built near his home. It says, "SDF is violating the Constitution." The characters, 2.1 meters high and 1.8 meters wide, are clearly visible so everyone can see and read them. They are well proportioned and their impact might be more powerful if seen from above. It took a month for him to complete the sign. "I wrote this when the Gulf War began in May, 1991. At that time, dispatching the SDF was said to be against the Constitution, but before that, my point is that the existence of SDF itself is against the Constitution. I just wanted to make that clear in my own way, so here it is. I wanted to write something that stands out. I had been telling everyone on different occasions about the legality of SDF, but spoken words disappear."

There is another D-shaped house. On it, in addition to Article 9, Article 12 is written out: "The freedoms and rights guaranteed to the people by this Constitution shall be maintained by the constant endeavor of the people." All of these are messages sent from Kawase to the SDF. Among all 72 Ground SDF Training Areas, only here in Yausubetsu can Article 9 be seen. This is possible because Kawase lives here. Once he was asked to remove the Constitution message boards from the "military town" of Bekkaicho. This was when the Defense Agency Director-General was scheduled to observe the Yausubetsu Training Area. Kawase strongly objected, but the plan was altered and the visit itself was cancelled. Kawase was disappointed, but it can easily be imagined that the town and

the SDF were relieved.



Five feet three inches tall, he does not stand out in a crowd. However, living alone in the middle of the training area, facing the SDF, and embracing the Constitution, he is a "symbol of the peace movement." Thus, he reflects the image of a warrior, one who holds steadfastly to his idea.

The Beginning: Five Years after the End of the War

Mr. Kawase was born in August 1926 in Hashima county, Gifu prefecture as the sixth son of a farmer. Soon after finishing higher-elementary school, he got a job at the Army Air Kakamigahara Station in Gifu. For the next three years, he learned the technology of how to lathe. "I couldn't stand the oil that got into my pores." As the war was about to end, on August 1st, 1945, the young boy was called up into the armed forces.

He was placed in a regiment stationed in an elementary school located in Hashima county, and the only supplies he received were a military uniform, puttees, a blanket, but no guns. "Without any notice, I was asked to write my last will and testament. Was I ready to go to the war zone? Of course not. I wasn't a military boy nor did I worship the emperor."

"Two weeks after I entered the military, the war ended in defeat. Was I shocked? No, it wasn't anything like that, but I did like the atmosphere of the loss of confidence in the air. I somehow felt like saying 'it serves you right.'"

We hear about people becoming despondent, feeling liberated, or being totally at a loss, but rarely about people feeling, "it serves you right." Kawase added, "You know, with the defeat in the war, social values completely changed. But as for me, not much has changed."

However, five years after the war ended, Kawase was unable to find a world where he could live in peace. He got jobs such as a construction worker and carpenter, and attended construction and carpentry schools, none of which suited him well, nor lasted long. "I just idled away my time, without doing anything. My uncle asked me what I was going to do. By then, all of my friends had steady jobs, so I was ashamed of myself and felt anxious."

"One day, five years after the war ended, when I was reading the local Chubu Nihon Shimbun (today's Chunichi Newspaper), I saw this advertisement and I knew this was it." The location was Hokkaido. "If I were going to leave anyway, I thought I might as well head to a warmer place in the south, but it turned out to be the opposite. That advertisement brought me here," Kawase, in his late seventies, says with a faint smile that reflects the experience of having lived in, and borne, reproach and ignominy in his early twenties.

"It was in the spring of 1951 when I arrived in the north. I felt as if I was escaping my hometown when I left. Until fall, I received practical training as a settler in Teshikaga, and learned how to breed and raise cows and horses." In those days, Yausubetsu was advertised as a promising base for large dairy farming. "I somehow decided to settle there." It was spring 1952. He started off as a new settler in Hokkaido with just one horse. The land was barren, and potatoes were the only crops that grew on his land.

"People who settled in the area before I arrived

took me in, but there was no water or electricity, only the light from the lamp. No clocks, calendar, newspaper, or radio. All I could tell was whether it was daytime or nighttime. Everyday, we ate nothing but potatoes or parts of radishes. "But I never felt I was going through a hard time. When I thought about the shameful five years spent in my hometown, this was no big deal."

The woodland Kawase had to cultivate was 16 hectares. In five years, the inspectors evaluate whether more than 80 percent of the land has been cultivated. If completed, one can purchase the land for only 100 yen a hectare. Kawase did not reach the 80 percent requirement, but under the condition that he would "make an effort," he passed the evaluation and earned the land.

Four years after he started the cultivation process, he married Fumiko (born in 1927) from Fukushima prefecture. About that time, the agricultural policy was changed, and Yausubetsu's plan to become a large-scale dairy farming base was now turned into becoming pastureland. Kawase started raising chicken, sheep, and horses, as well as taking small odd jobs in carpentry.

There were eighty-four families that settled in District Three in Yausubetsu. Just around the time when things were finally going well, there was news that the area was going to become a training area for the SDF. "I didn't think much of it, didn't even hear anybody expressing any opposition, either. I wasn't interested in it, you know. I knew well that having wars was prohibited, but I didn't know anything about the SDF."

The settlers nearby all began to accept the buyout of land and left. At first, he was offered 1,700,000 yen, but did not sell his land. Immediately, the price went up to 2,500,000, but he still did not take the offer. This was not because the price was low or because he was

against the SDF. "The first thing that came to mind was that I didn't know what I was going to do if I left this place. I'm so lazy, idle, and sloppy. It's not that I persevered; I had no choice but to stay here. The shameful five years of experience at my hometown made me stay here. That's what I think, and I still feel that way."

By the time the SDF began using the land to train their troops, Kawase and one other family were the only ones left. In 1977, the neighbor that lived 1.5 km away also left, so that only the three members of the Kawase family remained. "I don't have any reason to leave, and I somehow want to stay here. It's just that I didn't have the courage to leave." Kawase does not look like a warrior who absolutely refuses to allow procurement of the land. Rather, he looks like one who just naturally stays here.

A Person of Peace

Kawase's encounter with Article 9 was at a gate of a nearby elementary school. The entire Article 9 was written on a sheet of plywood, used as a signboard. "Probably, a teacher wrote it." This was around 1960, before the area was turned into a training area.

In November 1966, recommended by a professor in Kushiro city, Kawase participated in a nationwide peace rally held in Osaka. There, he first learned about the Eniwa Incident. "I learned about Hokkaido in Osaka."

The incident involves two sons of Nozaki Kennosuke who were operating a ranch near the Ground SDF Training Area. Their cows stopped producing any milk due to the live-fire training, so in act of protest, they cut the telephone line (December 11, 1962) that was used during the training. The two were indicted for violating the SDF Law, and for the first time, the incident brought up the issue as to whether the SDF itself was unconstitutional. "Nozaki Kennosuke was also participating in

the Peace rally, and was sitting along side me on the platform. Nozaki clearly said that the existence of the SDF was against the Constitution. I was impressed by him as it had never occurred to me to go against our government."

On the way back from Osaka, I met farmers from Ibaragi prefecture who were challenging the court on the legality of Air SDF, Hyakuri Base. Here, too, the pillar was Article 9. "Since then, I started to face the SDF and insist that the Constitution be observed."

"I was at the Osaka Peace Rally when I read the reprint of 'The New Story of the Constitution' published in 1947." Since then, he has always carried the book. The winning verdict of the Naganuma Naiki Base in Hokkaido encouraged him. This is how Kawase's numerous "Constitution" signboards came into existence in his vast land.

Perhaps the issues of SDF, Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, and the Japanese Constitution have reached its critical state. Under the present Compulsory Land Purchase Law, the national government cannot touch his land. However, now that we have the legal framework for war contingencies, there is no telling what might happen in the future. Kawase has not squared his shoulders or raised a fist in the air to hang onto his land. However, he straightens himself up and says, "If the time comes, I have decided to take the route of non-violent civil disobedience." "I haven't changed, nor has the Constitution. I cannot bend, because it's the national government that is wrong."

In 1996, his wife Fumiko who lived with him on the plains of Yausubetsu for forty years, passed away due to brain hemorrhage. His only daughter, Mikuko married and left Yausubetsu. Kawase will soon be in his eighties.

Yet, he is doing well. Believing that it is best for the U.S. Marine Corps to return to their

homeland, and not come here, Kawase has formulated a plan to turn the land into a peace park. He has begun building lodgings, and collected donations from supporters of the plan. "To tell you the truth, I want to dig a hot spring here. Experts tell me that there's one here for sure, but it will cost one hundred million yen," and he sighs unexpectedly. What a great plan -- a peace park and a hot spring in the middle of the SDF Training Area. His favorite phrase, "lazy, idle, and sloppy" is at the core of his peace murmur. His choice to live a life his own way has lasted for the last half century.

A resident of Yausubetsu, Kawase -- and his narrative -- is laid back, and like the limitless expanse of landscape itself.

This article appeared in Shukan Kinyobi, December 10, 2004, pp. 14-17. Tanaka Nobumasa is a non-fiction writer and author of the prize-winning book The People Who Recover the Constitution.

Translated for Japan Focus by Julie Higashi, professor at Ritsumeikan University, College of Social Sciences. Her current research interest is war and immigrant museums built on historic sites.