



Beggars' Belief: The Farmers' Resistance Movement on Iejima Island, Okinawa

Jon Mitchell

The first American invasion of Iejima occurred on April 16th, 1945. U.S. Army accounts chronicle in meticulous detail the vicious battle for this small island, situated three miles west of Okinawa's main island (hontou). One thousand troops aboard eighty landing craft stormed Iejima's eastern beaches, meeting heavy resistance from dug-in Japanese defenders. In the following five days of bloodshed, two thousand Imperial Army soldiers were killed, together with fifteen hundred civilians. As was the case throughout much of Okinawa, not all of these civilians were killed by the Americans.



Clothes of an infant bayoneted by Japanese forces on Iejima, April 16, 1945

In Yunapachiku, Ahashagama and other caves across Iejima, Imperial Army soldiers gathered together families and assigned each of them a hand grenade. They were reminded of the torture and rape they'd suffer should they be captured alive; those who attempted to surrender were shot. Even civilians who succeeded in turning themselves over to the Americans were not safe from the Japanese military's determination that the entire population must shatter like glorious jewels rather than surrender. Survivors tell of five Iejima women who, after surrendering, were killed by Japanese troops when they returned to retrieve some abandoned belongings from a cave, while six youngsters, who'd been moved by American forces to internment camps on the Kerama Islands, were killed by Imperial Army officers when they encouraged others to surrender. Although U.S. fatalities were relatively light compared to those of the Japanese, by the end of the fighting, three hundred American had lost their lives, including Ernie Pyle - the correspondent famous for putting a human face to enlisted men in World War Two.

The second U.S. invasion of Iejima occurred a decade later. It has barely been noted by American historians, but the inhabitants of Iejima are still suffering from its repercussions today. On March 11th, 1955, with Okinawa a military colony of the United States, landing craft came ashore once again on the eastern beaches. Their mission: to expropriate two-thirds of the island in order to construct an air-to-surface bombing range. This time, the Army only brought three hundred soldiers - their new foes being but the island's unarmed peanut and tobacco farmers.

The Americans had prepared for this second assault with all the thoroughness with which they'd planned the first. In July 1953, the military had sent a team to the island on the pretense of conducting a land survey. Having recruited some of Iejima's residents to help, after finishing their work, the Americans asked the Okinawans to affix their hanko seals to some English documents. The Americans told them these were receipts for payment for their assistance but, in fact, the islanders would later learn that they had stamped their own voluntary evacuation papers. After discovering the deception, a handful of residents, fearful of antagonizing their new master, agreed to move. Witnessing this, the Americans assumed further land seizures would proceed just as smoothly. The following 50 years of struggle would prove just how much they'd underestimated the farmers.

Initially, on the first day of the March 1955 invasion, the Americans made quick progress across the south of the island. Dragging families from their houses, they burned the buildings and bulldozed the smoldering ruins. Those who protested were arrested, then sent to the regional capital, Naha, for prosecution. When one family pled that their home be spared because their six-year old daughter was seriously-ill in bed, soldiers carried the terrified child from the house and dumped her outside the doors of the island clinic. A herd of goats that impeded the Americans' advance was slaughtered by rifle fire. After the entire village had been leveled, Army officers veneered the invasion with a thin layer of legitimacy - at gun-point, they forced fistfuls of military scrip into the hands of the farmers, then twisted their faces towards a camera and took pictures to send to Headquarters as proof of the islanders' acquiescence.

"The Americans weren't the only ones taking photographs that day," explains Jahana Shoko, "The farmers realized that if they wanted the world to understand what they were going through, they needed proof, too." Jahana is a white-haired woman in her late sixties with a smile that instantly wipes twenty years from her full-moon face. She is the caretaker of the *Nuchidou Takara no Ie* ("The House of 'Life is a Treasure'") - the Iejima museum dedicated to the farmers' ongoing struggle to retrieve their land from the American military and named after a famous Ryukyuan song. The museum consists of a pair of ramshackle buildings located close to the shore where the Americans landed in 1955. Now the beach is home to a Japanese resort, and as we speak, our conversation is punctuated by the shouts of Tokyo holidaymakers, the slap and drone of jet skis.

Jahana shows me the farmers' photographs of the destruction from March 1955 - empty monochrome scenes of charred land and blackened bricks of coral. Some of the pictures are blurred as though the camera is trying to focus on where the houses once were. "Ahagon Shoko was one of the farmers whose home was destroyed that day. He went on to organize the islanders in their struggle against the bombing range. People call him the Gandhi of Okinawa.

Jahana points to a large color photograph on the wall. A sun-wrinkled man smiles serenely from beneath the brim of a straw hat. Think of a slimmer Cesar Chavez with thickly-hooded eyes that glimmer with intelligent compassion. Ahagon was 52 years old when the Americans came ashore for the second time. Born into a poor - but educated - family, as a young man, he'd converted to Christianity before travelling to Cuba and Peru to seek his fortune. Things didn't work out according to plan - in the Americas he could barely make enough money to live. Upon returning a virtual pauper, Ahagon worked hard to buy some farmland on Iejima. In the years prior to the war, he launched a temperance campaign on the island, while entertaining his neighbors with home-made *kami-shibai* performances. This streak of morality, interwoven with the talents of a natural-born raconteur, would prepare Ahagon well for the lectures on the farmers' movement which he gave to visiting parties of schoolchildren right up until his death in 2002. He was 101 years old.

As Jahana speaks, there's a gentle knock on the door and an elderly woman enters, carrying a small convenience store bag. When she sees that Jahana is busy talking to me, she bows and sets the bag carefully on the side of her desk. It's full of earthy cylinders pushing against the white plastic and I remember,

earlier at the port, seeing the island's famous peanuts for sale, alongside dusty bricks of black sugar and tangles of bright pink dragon fruit.

"Ahagon-sensei established the Treasure House in 1984," Jahana continues, "He wanted to create a permanent exhibit of what went on here after the Americans came ashore in 1955. I'll ask my assistant to show you around the main museum." A younger woman in her forties comes in. Jahana lifts the plastic bag from the desk, but when she passes it to her assistant, its sides split open. A dozen rusty bullets clatter to the floor. I jump but neither woman bats an eyelid as they bend and scoop them back up.

The assistant walks me from the reception to the exhibition hall at the rear of the property. When she slides open the doors, I'm struck by a hot blast of air, the smell of second-hand clothes mixed with that of used bookstores. Inside, the museum is a mélange of memorabilia from the past fifty years. American parachutes hang next to musty protest banners. Old newspaper articles line the walls alongside dozens of photographs taken by the farmers to record their struggle. Just in front of the doorway, there's a massive mound of rusting metal—shell casings and missile fins, grenades and rockets. The assistant kneels down and adds the bullets to the heap. Her action wakes a small white gecko and it scuttles across the deadly pile, finding shelter in a half-blown mortar round.



"Within days of leveling the farmers' houses, the Americans had completed construction of their bombing range. They marked huge bull's eye targets with white sand trucked in from the beaches. The explosions went on day and night. Those shells are just a selection of the things they fired. Farmers still come across them now and bring them here for our collection."

When I ask her what happened to the displaced villagers, she points to a photo of a row of tents. "The Americans had promised them building materials and they were good to their word." She gives me a sad smile. "The cement they gave had already hardened to concrete in its bags. The boards were rotten and the nails long corroded spikes that couldn't be used for anything." One picture shows a family of fifteen packed into a small, open-sided tent. "The villagers quickly fell sick with dehydration, sunstroke and skin diseases."

Along with the poor-quality building supplies, the American Army offered the farmers financial compensation. Realizing that acceptance of the money would be interpreted as assent to the seizure of their land, they refused. The farmers maintained that the actions of the American military were illegal, and they insisted upon the right to continue farming their original fields rather than the barren ones upon which the Americans had forced them to establish camp. Throughout May, 1955, the farmers crossed onto the Air Force range and tilled their land. Ignoring the large flags which they raised to alert the Americans of their presence, the military continued its practice bombings. As the shells fell around them, the farmers tended their crops—compelled by a fierce sense of injustice coupled with a pressing need to feed themselves and their families.

The Iejima islanders continued to work on their fields until June 13th. On this day, soldiers arrested eighty farmers and confiscated their tools. Military courts summarily sentenced thirty-two of the men to punishments ranging from three months in prison to year-long suspended sentences. As soon as those who'd been released arrived back on Iejima, they headed straight to their fields. The American military's response was merciless - it sprayed three hundred acres of fields with gasoline and reduced the farmers' potato, melon and tobacco crops to ash.

With no other means to support themselves, Ahagon and the villagers decided to throw themselves on the mercy of their fellow Okinawans. She shows me a letter they wrote to explain their actions. "There is no way for [us] to live except to beg. Begging is shameful, to be sure, but taking land by military force and causing us to beg is especially shameful."

On July 21st 1955, the villagers boarded a ferry to Okinawa hontou. Calling themselves the "March of Beggars", over the next seven months, they made their way from Kunigami in the north to Itoman almost seventy miles to the south. In every town they passed, the villagers met with local people and told them of their struggle. Throughout their walk, they were greeted with warm welcomes and sympathy. Even the poorest villages gave them food and shelter for the night. The assistant shows me the photos the farmers exchanged as thanks to the people who supported them. The men stare proudly at the camera - their trousers are patched and threadbare, but their shirts are starched clean white. The women try to hold their smiles while stopping the children from squirming from their knees.

The reception of the authorities stood in stark contrast to the hospitality encountered from ordinary people. Both Okinawan politicians and intellectuals alike ignored Iejima's farmers' pleas for assistance. When the islanders confronted the U.S. High Commission, General James Moore played the Red card, proclaiming that the farmers were uneducated dupes who were being manipulated by communist agitators. An Air Force spokesman called the problem "a petty dispute" - inconsequential in light of the practice bombings which ensured security "both for the Free World and for [Okinawan] people."

After seven months on the road, the March of Beggars returned home to Iejima in February, 1956. They found their situation no better than when they had left; the leaking tents still stood and they continued to be denied access to the fields which they'd depended on for their livelihood. Bombings and jet plane strafings went on day and night, wearing down frayed nerves and making rest impossible.

"When the farmers attempted to send word of their predicament to the main Japanese islands, their letters were intercepted by the American military," explains the assistant. "They didn't want the world to know what they were doing here." Some letters, however, did make it through the cordon of censors, and when the Japanese media reported news of the farmers' struggle, people of the main islands rallied to support them. Students, homemakers and businessmen sent care packages to Iejima. They flooded the islanders with powdered milk and sugar, rice and canned fish, notebooks, textbooks and pens. The boxes are on display at the museum. Many of them are addressed simply "To the brave farmers of Iejima."

No matter how small the parcel, each one was rewarded with a handwritten banner of appreciation and a photograph from the islanders. Upon receiving a huge package from far-off Hokkaido, the entire village gathered to witness the opening of the thirty-one crates. As the mayor distributed the shoes and clothes contained in the boxes, even the sick and elderly got out of bed to shed their worn-out clothes and try on the gifts from the snowbound northern island. The sign the villagers penned still hangs in the museum today: "To the coal miners of Kushiro, We who live in this southern country thank you very warmly."

These packages, though substantial, were hardly enough to sustain the villagers. As the 1950s progressed, with no financial aid from the government or the military, many of the islanders were desperate. Where once they harvested tobacco and sweet potatoes, now they scavenged the fringes of the bombing



Protest banners written by Iejima villagers

range for scraps of military metal. They collected chunks of shrapnel and bullet casings, and sold them to traders for a pittance. From time to time, they'd come across a whole bomb that had failed to explode. The farmers would drag it away and defuse it themselves with a plumber's wrench and a length of steel pipe. In this manner, they taught themselves to become bomb disposal technicians. But for these men - like their professional counterparts - sometimes their luck ran out. Between 1956 and 1963, a dozen islanders were killed or wounded while collecting or dismantling American ordnance. Among them were three teenagers who were hit by shells from a fighter plane, and twenty-year old Ryofuku Heianzan, struck by an overshot bomb while cutting grass outside the range. Photos on the walls show these farmers with their arms torn off and their faces sheered away—combat pictures from an island purportedly at peace.

"In the early 1960s," says the assistant walking me down the room, "one of the farmers stumbled across a piece of scrap far too precious to sell." She gestures towards a long white tube with four tell-tale fins. "He found it sticking out of his field one day. He hid it in his shed while the Americans searched high and low."

I can well understand the military's eagerness to retrieve this particular missile. I recognize it almost immediately from another story I've been covering about Okinawa. In December 1965, some hundred and fifty miles north of Iejima, the USS Ticonderoga ran into rough seas. A Sky Hawk jet that was on the ship's deck slipped its cables and tumbled into the ocean. The accident would not have been particularly newsworthy if it hadn't been for the payload it was carrying: a one megaton atomic bomb. The Japanese government prohibits nuclear weapons in its waters, and it was only when the device started to leak in 1989, that a nervous Pentagon confessed to Tokyo about the missing bomb.

The assistant must have noticed the panic on my face. "Don't worry, it's just a dummy they used for practice runs." It looks so real that this does little to allay my fears. Nearby a cicada ticks Geiger-like. "You can touch it if you want," she offers. I take two steps back and she laughs.

Back in the reception area, Jahana tells me of the successes achieved by Ahagon and the farmers. In 1966, the American military attempted to station two surface-to-air missile batteries on Iejima, but after a concerted campaign by the islanders, they were forced to withdraw them after only three days. Demonstrations such as these, combined with a concerted publicity campaign (including three books and a documentary), would force the military to stop the bombings and close down the range. Many of the farmers were able to recover the fields that were stolen in 1955.

Jahana takes a map of Iejima from her desk drawer. The western portion is marked off by a red dotted line. "Today, the American military controls a third of the island. The Marines have a training area where they still conduct parachute drops. A few years ago, some of their jumpers went astray and landed in a tobacco field. They wondered why the farmer was so angry. They'd only crushed a few tobacco plants - perhaps a carton of cigarettes' worth. They don't know what these people have had to put up with over the past fifty years. They have no idea of the sufferings they've been through."

Before I head back to the port, I ask Jahana if she's hopeful the Americans will change their policy and return the rest of the land. She smiles wryly. "Ahagon-sensei had a saying he often repeated. 'Even the most evil beasts and

devils are not beyond redemption. They might become human one day. All they need is to be shown the error of their ways.' Ahagon-sensei believed this very strongly. That's why he built this museum and that's why it will be here until the day the farmers get back their land."

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This is an edited and expanded version of an article which first appeared in Counterpunch.

See the accompanying article by Ahagon Shoko and C. Douglas Lummis: [I Lost My Only Son in the War: Prelude to the Okinawan Anti-Base Movement](#)

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