

1950s: U.S. bases in Japan trained personnel in waging nuclear war

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U.S. bases in Japan trained personnel in waging nuclear war: TV documentary

The operations of United States military bases in Japan that trained personnel in waging nuclear war will be revealed by a television documentary set to air on Aug. 13.

Tatsuo Sekiguchi, 61, who covered atomic bombs and nuclear issues for many years as a reporter with Nagasaki Broadcasting Co. (NBC), produced the feature before his retirement in March this year. It will be aired on a Tokyo Broadcasting System Television (TBS) program titled "Hodo Tokushu," starting at 5:30 p.m. on Aug. 13.

According to Sekiguchi, Japan used to host a U.S. Army school specializing in nuclear, biological and chemical weapons that had been set up at Camp Gifu in 1951 — a year after the outbreak of the Korean War — to teach basic knowledge about nuclear weapons and how to deal with them. Since the base was returned to Japan in 1958 and was converted into the Japan Air Self-Defense Force's Gifu base, the school's existence had long been unknown.

The TV program uncovers the realities of U.S. nuclear training in Gifu and across Japan through testimonies from former U.S. servicemen, as well as documents discovered by a researcher at Nagasaki University.

Among the witnesses who appear in the program is a former U.S. soldier who was exposed to radiation during a secret nuclear weapons drill at a base in Okinawa Prefecture during the Vietnam War. The man, who was exposed to 79 millisieverts of radiation, suffers from respiratory and cardiac disorders and must have an oxygen tank with him at all times.

The U.S. conducted training in Japan in how to drop nuclear bombs, maintain weapons and load munitions to prepare for nuclear attacks in accordance with ever-changing global affairs. Such training continued even into the 1990s, according to the TV program, taking place at U.S. bases in Okinawa, Misawa in Aomori Prefecture, Itazuke in Fukuoka Prefecture, Yokota in Tokyo and Iwakuni in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

After joining NBC in 1974 and initially serving as a news cameraman, Sekiguchi eventually became a reporter and covered issues related to the atomic bombings and peace for 23 years. His coverage included the conditions of victims, support for A-bomb survivors, those who were exposed to radiation overseas and the abolition of nuclear weapons.

"Those issues are hard to fully cover, even in the 23 years that I spent on them," Sekiguchi said.

About 10 years ago, a researcher at Nagasaki University discovered documents that revealed training involving nuclear weapons had been conducted at the U.S. base in Sasebo, Nagasaki Prefecture, during the Korean War. It was also revealed that the Camp Gifu school instructed soldiers who conducted the training at the Sasebo base.

“Without relevant testimonies and documents, the discovery would end up being straight news,” Sekiguchi thought. He subsequently decided to make a program on the issue before his retirement.

Covering the story, however, was not easy. It took him two years to find the former U.S. soldier exposed to radiation during training in Japan, as Sekiguchi did not even know how to spell his name.

After the revision to the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty in 1960, the U.S. was required to consult Japan before introducing nuclear weapons into the country. However, Japan secretly allowed port calls by U.S. vessels carrying nuclear weapons, a custom passed down to successive prime ministers and foreign ministers until Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu’s Cabinet in 1989.

Sekiguchi also interviewed reporters with the Okinawa Times and the Too Nippo in Aomori Prefecture, as well as researchers in Tokyo and Nagasaki who have pursued nuclear issues.

“Reporters are given to pursuing their own scoops, but there’s no way to cover highly confidential issues such as U.S. military strategies without cooperating with like-minded peers,” Sekiguchi stressed.

At the very end of the 40-minute program, we are posed a question: “Twenty years have passed since the end of the Cold War, and the world is less likely to use nuclear weapons. But isn’t there a possibility that Japan may once more shoulder the role of a nuclear shield in times of emergency?”

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