

Life in the Base Town Sasebo

Japan's incremental rearmament had the strongest impact on the municipalities in which military facilities were located. Those communities were a microcosm of defeated Japan as a country, and their fortunes were directly linked to the economies of the bases. The small towns had no choice but to follow orders from the Occupation troops, and when the threat of war abroad intensified, plans for the future were put on hold while civic life returned to wartime routines. The military port city of Sasebo, in Nagasaki Prefecture, is a representative example of these communities.

Ever since the Japanese Imperial Navy established the Third Naval District Naval Station in Sasebo over a century ago, in 1889, the fortunes of the town have been tied to the fortunes of the navy. The greatest event during that period was, of course, the Japanese defeat in World War II. Six weeks after B-29 bombing raids had burned the entire city to the ground, Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Allied forces. The United States marines who came to occupy the country in September ordered the fortieth, and last, Naval Station commander, Vice Admiral Rokuzo Sugiyama, to provide housing facilities for three hundred officers and fifty thousand soldiers, and to pro-

vide three hundred thousand square feet of hospital facilities, thirty passenger cars, and eighty cargo trucks. This was Sasebo's first order under Occupation.

Under Occupation rule, the people of Sasebo wanted to convert their town to a civilian port. It was believed that the appropriate manner for a "war crimes city" to make its way in the new Japan was to take its good port and Imperial Navy factories and convert them to a trading port for peaceful purposes. In January 1950, the City Council unanimously adopted a declaration of peace:

The naval port, which required vast national expenditure and sixty years of labor to construct, has been dedicated solely to the pursuit of war. Our nation constructed enormous munitions factories in Sasebo and the port developed into a military city with a population of three hundred thousand. Now, the recent great war has brought Japan to the brink of utter destruction. The civilian populace, which has set down roots here for generations, has nowhere to live, no ancestral villages to return to, and passes its days in unemployed misery. As we look on the mountains of scrap from ship dismantling and the piles of rubble from half-destroyed buildings, we sense the enormous cruelty and futility of war.

As all Japan and all the world now know, Japan has adopted a Constitution that proclaims it to be a demilitarized nation.

Sasebo hereby pledges this day of January 13, 1950, to undertake a 180-degree turn, dedicating what imperial military assets remain to an eternal future of prosperity for humanity so that it may become quickly a city of peaceful industry and a port of international trade.

Elections to enact the Imperial Naval Port Conversion Act that would convert former military facilities to civilian uses in not only Sasebo, but in the other military ports of Yokosuka, Kure, and Maizuru as well, were held on June 4. In Sasebo, the measure passed, with 97.31% of the population voting to convert to a peaceful industrial port city. Three weeks later, war broke out in Korea, on the other side of the Goto and Tsushima Straits.

Sasebo's plans for derequisitioning its military facilities came to an immediate halt when the town became the point of shipment for troops and matériel to Korea. United Nations troop trains arrived at Sasebo National Railway Station twice daily, in the morning and in the evening. To prevent enemy submarines from entering the harbor, the United States Navy strung submarine nets across its nine-hundred-meter mouth. Ships were not permitted to enter without special permission; consequently, trade and fishing activities ceased. On the night before the Inchon landing, the battleship Missouri, carrying United Nations commander General MacArthur, secretly set sail from Sasebo.

The repaired imperial naval factories became the hub of round-the-clock activity as workers replaced naval gun barrels burnt and blistered from naval shelling. Oilers of ten thousand tons anchored at the oil storage facility. The dream of a peaceful port city seemed increasingly distant. Changes within the city were even more extreme. *The City History of Sasebo* describes the period: "At this time an event occurred that completely transformed Sasebo—the June 1950 outbreak of the Korean War. Sasebo, which had just begun its transition to a city of peaceful industry, became a base for United Nations troops. Ships, men, and war material jammed the port. On the commercial strip from Matsuura-cho down the main street, new curio stores, cafés, cabarets, and dance halls sprouted like mushrooms after a rain to entertain and serve the United Nations troops. Pedicabs jammed the streets."⁵⁰

The United Nations troops spent in excess of ¥600 million each month, and people from around Japan poured into Sasebo to get their share of the wealth as the town recovered rapidly amid exploding prosperity. A modern city arose from the ashes, where seven years earlier not even a shadow could be seen.

Cabaret owners made so much money that they filled orange crates to overflowing with ¥100 bills. Sasebo's economic boom has been referred to as a blood-soaked gold rush. Over

ten thousand prostitutes rushed in from around Japan to fill Sasebo's 597 brothels. Sasebo's bars and liquor stores sold more beer than those in any other city in Japan.

After the war had breathed economic life back into Sasebo, the Police Reserve entered. In the seven days between September 2 and 10, 1950, eight detachments totaling 1,116 troops arrived at the American camp that had been the old Hario marine base. Their main duty was to guard the American base and the port facilities. Later this battalion moved to the Ainoura District, which would become the initial training ground for recruits to the Ground Self-Defense Force.

The Sasebo City Council continued to petition throughout the Occupation and the Korean War for derequisition of its port facilities and conversion to a commercial port. When Japan signed the peace treaty and the United States–Japan Security Treaty, their hopes for a purely civilian port were shattered. The government announced its intention to continue to make Sasebo's moorings, docks, and repair facilities available to the American military and set aside the majority of the port waters for the United States Navy. The port would remain out of the hands of townspeople. Sasebo had to revise its long-term plan of becoming a port for international trade.

The one section of the former Imperial Navy facilities that was kept from the American navy was the Kurashima District, where the city began to build a fishing industry base with the assistance of the Ministry of Transport's Ports and Harbors Bureau. Although the city officials had devoted their full energies to this construction, they were informed by the national government that the Maritime Security Force was considering locating its headquarters there. The Sasebo authorities were not enthusiastic about this plan, since the Kurashima District was the only section of the port that could be converted to peaceful, commercial purposes. The townspeople were ambivalent about the plan as well. Some felt that they should welcome the Mari-

time Security Force, but should attempt at the same time to proceed with the original plan for a commercial port. Others felt that Sasebo's geographic location and the presence of an American base meant that there was little or no hope for Sasebo's development as a trade port, and so it would be in the town's interest to welcome Maritime Security Force. Many of the townspeople felt a certain nostalgia for the bustling days of the naval port of the past, and so decided to bet their futures on the new navy.

In the end, the town welcomed the new headquarters:

The people of Sasebo express their full approval of the siting of the headquarters of the Maritime Security Force at Sasebo, and having asked for favors many times in the past, we now ask again that the headquarters be sited here.

As the base of the old Imperial Navy, Sasebo is in both name and reality the best port in the Orient and has been the object of enormous investments on the part of the Japanese nation. Sasebo has an excellent sea wall that Maritime Security Force ships can use for anchorage, as well as older fortifications, including buildings, that the Maritime Security Force would naturally desire to use.

For that reason, the Sasebo City Council considers it fitting that should the Maritime Security Force build a base in Sasebo, it would make use of these fortifications, and we would welcome it to do so. Having reached this conclusion, the entire city hereby strongly requests that the Security Force headquarters be located here.

The City Council's pledge "to renew itself as an international trade port" was replaced by the more servile language, "having asked for favors many times," and its request was successful. The Sasebo Fairway Safety Office opened as part of the Security Board's Security Force on August 1, 1952. In September of the next year, the office was upgraded to a Regional District Headquarters. Its first commander was Security Force director (later admiral and Maritime Self-Defense Force chief of staff) Sadayoshi Nakayama, a former staff member of the Naval Academy.

When the Maritime Self-Defense Force was launched in 1954, it home ported its Second Escort Flotilla at Sasebo and assigned the patrol frigates Momi, Tsuge, Kaede, and Buna, (all 1,450 tons displacement) to the flotilla. The Maritime Self-Defense Force decided to use the same naval ensign flag that once flew over the imperial Grand Fleet. The sight of the old imperial flag flying over ships received from the Americans aroused a variety of feelings in the citizenry of the town.

Ichizo Tsuji, who was at that time chairman of the Sasebo City Council, and became mayor of Sasebo during the 1960s and 1970s, recalled the era in *The Silent Port*:

Eighty years previously, Sasebo had been chosen as a naval port as part of national policy, and most of the town's folk had welcomed it happily. After the end of the war, the citizens chose to have a peaceful commercial port, but this was not permitted. Instead, again through a national decision, a base for the Americans, and then for the Maritime Self-Defense Force, was established so that now Sasebo is a mix of military and commercial ports. The period from its birth as a military port to today has lasted for over eighty years. If they wanted to make Sasebo a home port for nuclear submarines and nuclear aircraft carriers, they should not have been surprised that this aroused anguish in many people. It is hard to avoid the feeling that this is Sasebo's fate.⁵¹

The real power that convulsed Sasebo was the Cold War. Within that context, if Shigeru Yoshida was unable to resist a partial peace treaty or the United States–Japan Security Treaty, how could Tsuji, a single local politician, be expected to sail against the wind? With the Cold War and national policy behind it, the port city of Sasebo could not resist again becoming a naval town.