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Tacit farmers return to their roots at air base

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9/10/2009 - **KADENA AIR BASE, Japan** -- Life in Okinawa was difficult in the aftermath of World War II. For one Okinawan, recalling a single good memory from his childhood is a challenge.

At the age of 13, Chosei Hamamoto was a boy with the skills of a soldier and little knowledge of books; in school, he learned to disable tanks. His father went to the War, leaving behind his life as a farmer, a wife and eight kids with little income for support.

As an adult, Mr. Hamamoto worked for the Base Exchange at Kadena Air Base. When his father passed away, he and his wife, Tsuiko, made a change that they say has been for the best: they returned to their roots, to what's considered the essence of life in Okinawa - they went back to farming, this time on Kadena Air Base itself.

At Kadena and several other military bases on Okinawa, U.S. military officials and local town mayors permit farmers to grow crops on land leased from local landowners by the Government of Japan for use by the U.S. military, an arrangement known as "tacit farming."

Kadena's munitions storage area is host to nearly 700 tacit farmers from Kadena Town, Chatan Town and Yomitan. They work 90 acres of land surrounded by hills and a captivating view of a well-preserved past. Some of the products grown on the installation include limes, tangerines, mangos, papayas, goya, toga and hechima vegetables, potatoes, green tea, pineapples and sugarcane. As it happens, Kadena is the third largest producer of sugarcane in Okinawa.

Mr. Hamamoto and his wife began farming in 1971; he was 40 and she a few years younger. They remember Kadena's munitions area without fences. Though guarded by military police, crops still disappeared from time to time. Things have changed in the intervening years. The munitions area is now fenced-in and well-guarded. Today, the Hamamotos need a pass to be allowed to farm on the land, and they prefer it this way.

"I like the strict security measures to prevent any opportunity to steal our crops," said Mrs. Hamamoto. They both agreed that it makes them feel safe to work there.

One might be surprised by the existence of this harmonious relationship between farmers and an overseas military base, but it just seems to work at Kadena.

"Most of the farmers here are given permission by private landowners to grow their crops and profit from it," said Floyd Higa, 18th Munitions Squadron chief of manual labor contractor. In some cases, landowners farm portions of their own land; others sublet to a tacit farmer, thereby earning additional income from the property.

"We provide them access to the munitions storage area by using Gate 26 (Farmers' Gate) for a few days and up to six months, depending on what they need to do out here," said Tech. Sgt. Jerry Torrez, 18th Munitions Squadron security manager. "We also have a local operational instruction for farmers to comply with when working in the area."

To the tacit farmer laboring in the munitions area, this kind of work not only brings a livable income, but encourages a healthy lifestyle. For one farmer, Kyoshi Miyata, farming provides a sense of well-being. Retired from the 400th Munitions Maintenance Squadron - now known as the 18th Munitions Squadron - after 40 years, Mr. Miyata has been farming in the munitions storage area in the 20 years since his retirement.

"After retirement I took up farming as an employment opportunity to work my way to a healthy lifestyle," Mr.



A tacit farmer couple takes a brief moment to rest from the summer heat and humidity after working in the sugarcane field. Soon the day will end and tomorrow they'll begin where they left off, devoting themselves to the cultivation of their crops in an area fenced-in and well-guarded. (U.S. Air Force photo/Tech. Sgt. Rey Ramon)

Miyata said. "That's one of the benefits I see for the older generation."

Like Mr. Miyata and Mr. Hamamoto, most tacit farmers are from an older generation, one that's experienced hardship and social disruptions in the past. They use simple machinery and "kamas," sickles used for reaping. The summer brings hot winds and the farmers' clothes are stained with sweat and the red earth. Their faces are dark from constant exposure to the sun, but full of vigor from their labor in the fields. They work and work, seemingly oblivious to the sounds of military aircraft flying overhead or the sight of those in military uniform passing by from time to time.

When the sun begins to set, their work ceases and they begin their familiar drive home past the towering fence line that divides two worlds. For the farmers that live beyond the fence, their minds can rest knowing that their crops are secured on Kadena. Tomorrow they'll begin where they left off, devoting themselves to the cultivation of their crops, perhaps the reason for their own vitality.