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On Base

We must remember the true nature of our role as members of the Self-Defense Forces, and refrain from taking part in political activities, reflect deeply on the distinguished mission bestowed on us as members of the Self-Defense Forces, and take great pride in our work. By the same token, we must devote ourselves unstintingly to training and self-discipline and, in the face of events, be prepared to discharge our duties at risk to ourselves.

From “The Ethos of Self-Defense Forces Personnel,”
adopted on June 28, 1961 (cited in *Bōichō*
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With the help of private first class Tama Keiko*, it had taken me about half an hour to get into thick cotton fatigues and boots whose leather had been hardened by the sweat of dozens of soldiers who had worn them before me. The pants needed to be stuck into the boots. Superfluous cloth had to be tightly folded back. The boots had to be evenly laced up, and the laces tucked into the boot shafts. The shirt had to be tucked into the pants so that the creases on the front and back of the shirt formed extensions of the creases on the front and back of the pants. The belt was supposed to hold everything in place, without hindering movement. All buttons had to be properly closed. The cap had to be placed on my head and pulled down to right above my eyebrows so that my eyes were protected against the bright summer sun but still could be seen by others when I looked straight ahead.¹

I had left my pleasantly air-conditioned office at the University of Tokyo and taken the bullet train for several hours and a local train for another two, arriving in the small town of Kibita at mid-morning on July 16, 2001, to spend a week of “basic training” at a GSDF base. Two uniformed men had jumped out of a Jeep to greet me at the station and drive me to the base. Entering the base through the guarded gate, the two men showed their identification cards and exchanged salutes with the service

members on guard duty. The younger of the two men was a private who did not introduce himself. The older one was Major Ono Shun*, the man in charge of the public relations office on the base. Ono had carefully prepared my visit and was in charge of arranging interviews with new recruits and their drill sergeants. In this chapter, I take a close look at the internal mechanisms of a GSDF base through the lens of a week of basic training. Narrating this experience allows me to identify and introduce some of the key sites, people, and issues that make up a base and characterize the everyday lives of Japanese service members.²

THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

This book draws from the methods of anthropology and cultural studies, including intensive interviews and participant observation, as well as the analysis of historical and present-day documents, texts, and visual materials. Between the summer of 1998 and the spring of 2004, I spent about nineteen months conducting fieldwork in Japan. I believe that these stints—the longest was for a period of eight months in 1998–99—considerably added to the credibility I had as someone interested in “understanding” (with all its ambiguities) the Self-Defense Forces. Altogether I interviewed about 195 people: officers, officer candidates, noncommissioned officers, and privates serving in the infantry, artillery, transport, communications, airborne, medical, and public relations; and international cooperation units and departments. The service members I spoke to related their motivations, experiences, and visions of their own futures and that of the Self-Defense Forces.

I encountered service members at all stages of their careers, from lieutenants to three-star generals and admirals, first- to fourth-year cadets at the NDA, and new recruits just three months into basic training. In general, these men and women were between the ages of eighteen and fifty, but my subjects also included veterans in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. Service members talked to me in the field in between training sessions, in meeting rooms of base headquarters, in their offices, in coffee shops and restaurants, and in their homes. In geographical terms, their experience ranged widely, including bases in Kyushu, Shikoku, Kansai, Tokyo, and Hokkaido in Japan, as well as foreign postings. In some cases, tours of duty had been extended for up to six months for missions to Mozambique, Cambodia, the Golan Heights, and Honduras. Japanese defense attachés could be posted abroad for as long as several years. About 90 percent of my interviewees were men. They can

roughly be categorized into members of the GSDF chief of staff (*Rikujō bakuryōchō*), officers (*shōkō kurasu no kanbu*), noncommissioned officers (*kashikan*), and enlisted service members (*rikushi*). I will refer to all of these people as “service members” throughout the book unless a more precise definition is necessary. In addition to service members, I interviewed other people with close ties to the Self-Defense Forces. Among these were academics at both the NDA and the NMDA.³ I also consulted with researchers at a number of research institutes, which are in some way affiliated with the Self-Defense Forces, the JDA, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and deal with military research. I interviewed a retired commander of the U.S. Northern Army who was at the time the CEO of a military technology corporation; a former member of the Japanese Imperial Army; a representative of the Self-Defense Forces’ veteran association, and a retired general (who was then a security consultant to Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō); and foreign defense attachés to Japan from South Korea, Italy, Germany, and the United States. Lastly, I spoke with journalists who report primarily on military matters in newspapers and magazines, ranging from the *Yomiuri Shinbun* and *Mainichi Shinbun* to *Securitarian* and *Jane’s Defense Weekly*.

Several service members and veterans allowed me to take a closer look at their personal lives by inviting me to their houses, where I talked with my (usually male) interviewee for many hours over lunch, dinner, or coffee and cake. In most cases I met their wives, who participated in the conversation, provided their views of their lives as service members’ wives, and commented on their husbands’ statements. In a few cases I also met their children, some of whom had never talked to a foreigner before.

By visiting many different military sites, I was able to trace typical service members’ careers, which take them all over Japan. As a formal visitor of base commanders, I was allowed to spend full days at various bases, including Iruma ASDF base, Nerima GSDF base, and Matsudo GSDF base. Although arrangements at each base differed, generally an aide to the base commander picked me up at the nearest station or at the entrance to the base, took me to the commander’s office, and after a polite exchange of greetings and a brief introduction of myself and my project, a guide was appointed to show me around. The guides provided me with general information about the base and introduced me to several people engaged in their respective activities. On one base I interviewed Self-Defense Forces personnel individually but in the presence of my guide. At other bases I had the chance to both interview people indi-

vidually at work or during lunch, and away from my guide in more casual, less controlled settings.

I spent time on several bases on open house days and attended military festivals. At the annual open house of the NDA, which allows, like any Japanese festival, for a great deal of playfulness despite the otherwise rigid character of the institution, some cadets showed up in Imperial Army uniforms, a few appeared in former German SS (*Schutzstaffel*) uniforms, and others had nude photographs of themselves pinned onto a board next to a brief self-introduction in the hopes of finding girlfriends among the visitors. I explored the NDA campus, ate lunch in the cafeteria, visited classrooms, and spoke to people in meeting rooms and study rooms. All of this gave me insight into what the daily life of cadets is like on the hills above Yokosuka Bay, a few minutes away from the American base, and on the very spot where, during the first half of the twentieth century, Imperial Army officers had also been trained. In addition, I visited the campuses of the NMDA and the General Staff College in Ebisu. I attended the annual parade of the GSDF base in Asaka, where then-prime minister Obuchi Keizō spoke on the need for the tough training of the Self-Defense Forces in the aftermath of the 1999 North Korean “missile incident” (a threat to Japanese territory). During a second trip to the Iruma ASDF base, along with thousands of visitors, I watched different kinds of airplanes flying overhead. There, I also closely followed a Miss ASDF Contest. A female officer introduced the participants; representatives of various companies congratulated them; and uniformed Self-Defense Forces veterans presented them with gifts. I spent an incredibly hot day in early August 1999 at the Matsushima ASDF festival watching a performance by the Blue Impulse Team, who after a round of applause, were joined by a female model for visitor photographs. Several days on two different occasions at the muddy training ground at Mt. Fuji and the Fuji Officers’ Candidate School (Fuji Gakkō) in Gotemba provided me with insights on senior cadets’ last maneuver before graduation (figure 1). They chatted with me, dug defense holes, and prepared for and went on a 30-kilometer night march, greeting me in the morning upon their arrival. I returned to the Fuji school a few years later, in 2003, for the school’s forty-ninth anniversary festival.

Some of my interviewees were wary, and some were delighted to talk with me.⁴ They often took on the role of social elder and/or military expert as they related the lessons of their lives and their hopes for the future. Against the backdrop of the Self-Defense Forces’ rather unfavorable reputation, and—in many cases—their individual socioeconomically

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

FIGURE 1. A National Defense Academy cadet takes a break during the last maneuver of his senior year at the Self-Defense Forces training ground at the foot of Mt. Fuji, July 22–23, 1998. (Photograph by the author)

disadvantaged backgrounds, many service members seemed eager to talk to me about their careers. Service members of all ranks were surprised and pleased that someone from the outside was interested in their everyday lives, their relationships, and their opinions of their work and the world in general. For some, I must have provided the first opportunity to be singled out to speak about their lives. The relative openness of many interviewees—especially of those at the end of their careers—might

also be attributed to the sense that the Self-Defense Forces are not duly recognized and appreciated. For the first time, here was their chance to tell all to somebody who was willing to listen.

Officers transfer every two or three years, and thus contacts I made were often temporary. On the one hand, it has been difficult to keep in touch and follow up on conversations I had over the years. On the other hand, these circumstances have led to new opportunities. I was able to repeatedly interview a number of officers who had transitioned from desk posts in the JDA to base commander positions in rural Japan or from international posts back to desk posts in the JDA, undergoing at least one major promotion in the process. I also had the opportunity to interview successors to various positions, thus being able to observe the considerable range of differences in personality, ambition, and vision that each individual brings to a post.

Other important contacts developed through several encounters—some formal, others almost coincidental. In one case, an official visit to the JDA was unsuccessful until I ran into the officer I was looking for at a live-firing demonstration at the foot of Mt. Fuji. He was excited about having just achieved a major promotion. He told me right then and there that he would be able to arrange a base visit for me, during which I would be able to interview ten service members who had just returned from a prestigious international mission.

Another important contact developed out of a farewell party for a foreign defense attaché in Tokyo. There, an ASDF general told me I reminded him of his son, a sociologist (who did not intend to follow in his father's footsteps). Two days later, he sent me an email and invited me to the base. Later he arranged for me to attend the annual live-fire demonstration at the Mt. Fuji Training Ground (Kita Fuji Enshūjo) and introduced me to a GSDF base commander he had been friends with since his days at the NDA. In another case, a young female GSDF veteran, who had self-published comics about her experiences in the Self-Defense Forces, not only told me about her career as a service member, but also introduced me to an officer couple and accompanied me to their house, where I was able to speak with them for an entire afternoon. I found that the more often I returned to the field, the less dependent I became on higher-ranking officers; each time I met people who knew somebody in the Self-Defense Forces or knew somebody with a connection to the Self-Defense Forces. A friend's sister-in-law, for example, turned out to be a nurse in a Self-Defense Forces' hospital, and a scholar friend's advisee was a graduate of one of the Self-Defense Forces' high schools.

Many of them were outspoken about their appreciation for and their criticism of the Self-Defense Forces.

More than most other institutions, military establishments are held together by clear-cut hierarchies of rank, specialization, and branch of service. The hierarchical structure is instilled in service members from the day they join, and it is represented on everything they see and wear: uniform chest pockets, sleeves, shoulders, caps, and unit banners in the form of colors, cherry blossoms, stripes, and a variety of other symbols. Given these fairly conservative norms in the Japanese military (and the conservative nature of the larger Japanese society), I was not sure what kind of response I could expect from service members. Furthermore, as suggested by the walls and fences around bases, the presence of guards at the entrance to bases, and the procedures required to enter bases—the need to show identification cards, and in the case of visitors, fill out visitor forms—the armed forces are, to a considerable degree, closed to outsiders.⁵ Setting aside the relative unease that many Japanese men and women feel when dealing with a foreigner, the Self-Defense Forces administration might well have suspected that I would at least inconvenience, if not unduly burden, the base authorities. I often had to be accompanied, driven, and picked up again, and thus I took up a lot of somebody's time in that regard. The number one rule of the Self-Defense Forces—safety—applied to me as well, and occasionally I had to be kept out of the way of combat and other field exercises where (fake) ammunition was used. My health and fitness also were not taken for granted. I did not carry heavy equipment when I accompanied units to their various field trainings, but dealing for hours at a time with the summer heat, high grass, and unwieldy ground meant that I had to frequently assure the drill sergeants that I was all right. And if I was the only woman present, the lack of bathrooms became an additional potential problem.

As with any institution (Douglas 1986), the military depends on a high degree of secrecy in order to monitor and control its image. This was true of the Self-Defense Forces, as well, and all the information that they produce and disseminate about themselves. Scholars who have analyzed organizations as varied as theater troops, sports teams, and confectionary factories have suggested that Japan's organizations and institutions are particularly rigid in how they close themselves off (Edwards 2003; Kondo 1990; Robertson 1998). But some concerns about secrecy are specific to the military. Commanders I spoke to felt that a base and its units are the core of their organization, and they worried that both the service members who talked to me and I myself were to some degree

beyond their control. They worried about what I would hear and see, and how I would interpret that.

My role was defined by many factors beyond my control as well. Stories that might have been told to a military professional or a man were perhaps deemed inappropriate in conversation with me, a scholar, a foreigner, and a woman. In one instance, had I been someone else, a captain might not have apologized before ranting against the integration of women because “they cannot urinate in the field and they take menstruation leaves of absence.” Perhaps those service members who had participated in combined exercises with the United States Forces, Japan (USFJ) would not have criticized their American opponents so straightforwardly if I had been an American citizen. Perhaps female service members who told me about sexual harassment cases that had brought their female subordinates to tears would not have gone into as much detail if I had been a male scholar. Perhaps the positive acceptance of homosexuals, and the almost universal conviction among individuals that they had never encountered a gay man or woman within the Self-Defense Forces, may have seemed more appropriate in interactions with a foreign woman like myself rather than with a man, who may have been uncomfortable discussing non-normative masculinity. The assumption that I must be a sympathetic outsider was established as much by my general interest in service members’ lives (rather than a specifically problematic aspect of the military) as by the general unfavorable perceptions of the military that led to constant self-monitoring and self-legitimization. Once it was established, however, that I had no interest in publishing my research findings in the Japanese tabloids, the need for caution and secrecy diminished. I came to be seen primarily as an academic, a profession that enjoys a relatively high prestige in Japan; most service members I spoke to expressed their admiration when they learned that I was affiliated with the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University, two of Japan’s elite schools.

The influence that base authorities had on the personnel selected for interviews should not be underestimated, but I did interview a variety of people with diverse views about their personal careers and the Self-Defense Forces as an organization. Some of the people I interviewed were chosen by the administration, some were spontaneously chosen by a field commander during exercises, and others were introduced through a third person outside the military. Occasionally service members were concerned that their individual experience would not be representative, and I had to convince them that it was indeed their own personal views on

life in the Self-Defense Forces that interested me. Many were highly articulate and engaging. A lieutenant colonel I interviewed while his superior was working at a desk in the same office, for example, did not hesitate to dismiss his superior's excitement about the success of a mission he had directed. Several officers of the same rank violently disagreed with one another over the benefits of sending a deployment to Iraq in order to improve the Self-Defense Forces' reputation. Just back from a peacekeeping operation, one captain detailed for me the paradox of assuming that service members refrain from having sex during the six months they were posted abroad while also supplying condoms for them on base and information about "safe brothels" in the area of deployment. Similarly, the foreign defense attaché who seemed determined to provide me with the official line on his country's view of the Self-Defense Forces and the "excellent cooperation" between them and his country's armed forces became quite agitated when we touched on Japanese officers' scandalous lack of historical knowledge. And, in the presence of his fellow Japanese officers, a Korean officer visiting the General Staff College in Tokyo did not hesitate to claim that Japanese soldiers did not measure up to their Korean counterparts. In fact, he suggested, they weren't real soldiers at all.

In sum, the discernible boundaries between the mostly male service members and me, the outsider, which put many aspects of my visit beyond my control, may have impeded my research, but my outsider status in various ways also facilitated intimate, informal, and critical statements by the service members I interviewed.

HEADQUARTERS

My first stop after changing into the uniform was the commander's office in the headquarters building. In contrast to the headquarters of the Self-Defense Forces in Ichigaya, Tokyo, which combines the charm of a postmodern, glass and concrete government facility with the look of a medieval Japanese castle, the local headquarters here were housed in a bare, square building. The entrance hall held a glass display case filled with trophies from sports competitions as well as a certificate of participation in a United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) operation. Several men from this base had participated in the Self-Defense Forces' first peacekeeping mission to Cambodia, from July 1992 through September 1993. International missions are a mark of prestige for both the individual service members and the regiment. Major Ono

explained to me that the Self-Defense Forces' ambiguous image has improved primarily because of successful peacekeeping missions and the group's role in rescue and relief missions after the Kōbe-Awaji earthquake in 1995 (despite the initial criticism that the Self-Defense Forces were slow to mobilize and otherwise inefficient).

Ono had not been involved in the disaster relief activities in the Kōbe area, but he knew from his experiences on a similar, if smaller, mission what it must have been like for those service members who were. In 1974, right after he had completed his basic training, his unit was mobilized to bring a forest fire under control. It was horrific, he said, and he had thought he might be killed. "I feared for my life then," he remembered with a shudder, "but luckily none of our troops were killed." Major Ono Shun, a man of about fifty who took his job very seriously and did not easily smile, had joined the Self-Defense Forces in 1973. He had planned to retire after a few years in order to take over his father's construction business, but he enjoyed it so much that he stayed on. His father, who was fifteen when the Asia-Pacific War (1931-45) ended, vigorously opposed his son's decision to join the new military because he equated the Self-Defense Forces with the Imperial Army. Ono's grandfather, by contrast, who had not been drafted during the war, encouraged him to join the Self-Defense Forces. It is the rhythm of life on and around a base, the outdoor field training, and the company of (mostly) men that many service members like Ono cherish about their profession. Asked about his current job as the head of the public relations office on the base, a position that he had held for over a year, Ono said that he would much rather be a platoon leader in the field again. However, as he was by his own estimation too old to keep up with the young men (and possibly women) in the field, Ono did not expect to be returning to a field assignment.

When we entered the commander's office, Colonel Katō Seigo*, a tall man in his early forties, awaited us behind a heavy wooden desk. The large office also housed a sofa and a meeting area, a glass case with memorabilia, and a red carpet that ran from the door to the desk. Colonel Katō welcomed me to the base, encouraged me to turn to Ono as I would to a father throughout my weeklong visit, and expressed his hope that I would get something out of my stint on base. I had been introduced to him through one of his former juniors at the NDA, someone I had been in touch with for the past three years and who constituted a major piece of my contact network within the armed forces. Occasionally, base commanders who allowed me on base to carry out interviews or service

members I interviewed off-base explained to me that they had felt obliged to agree to my requests because they owed my contact person a favor. In some cases, however, the support I received from service members must have been motivated by curiosity and perhaps flattery. In others, it was an act of mutual obligation among officers who had been classmates at the NDA, in the same officers' course at some point in their early career, or simply friends. One base commander barely disguised his unwillingness to comply with my contact person but felt obliged to do so for reasons that remained a mystery to me. Commander Katō, however, did not let on whether he was returning a favor or whether I was putting my contact person in his debt.

After the brief encounter with the commander, Ono accompanied me to the public relations office on the ground floor of the headquarters building. Four service members, including private first class Tama Keiko, worked there under Ono. All of them sat at desks, busy with clerical work when we entered. I had a few minutes to take a look at the newsstand where several base newspapers and magazines were available, ranging from basic facts on the three services, recruitment and public relations material, and Self-Defense Forces periodicals such as *Securitarian*, *Asagumo*, and *Sōyū*. There I also noticed videos of maneuvers, special forces' training, the annual live-fire demonstration, and other public events, which are available at base stores and large bookstores. The videos are made by Self-Defense Forces photographers and are generally shown to external sympathizers, including representatives of companies that support particular events or that send their newly recruited personnel to one-week experience and training programs on a base; representatives of schools who invite recruitment officers to instruct their middle or high school students on the Self-Defense Forces; and organizations that neighbor bases, with whom the Self-Defense Forces tries to develop and maintain good relations.

Public relations officers serve not only officers and enlisted personnel, but also the journalists and photographers who work for magazines and newspapers published by the JDA, as well as the newsletters that are produced and published by individual Self-Defense Forces bases. This division's main responsibilities are to create, manage, and control information reaching the wider public, which includes efforts to almost completely suppress information about incidents that may harm the Self-Defense Forces' image—accidents, suicides, and criminal offenses committed by service members. The public relations office on each base organizes several types of annual events, which may include the celebration

of the foundation day of the base; a cherry blossom festival; an Obon festival; and a sports festival open to the public in an effort to project an image of the Self-Defense Forces as an open, accessible (*hirakareta Jieitai*) organization.

In addition to these festivities on base, Ono and his staff spent a considerable portion of their time organizing the participation and cooperation of service members in local community events. This local regiment, he told me, was called upon frequently for what the Self-Defense Forces refer to as “activities for the collective good” that function as community outreach and are intended to contribute to the “deepening of the understanding of the Self-Defense Forces in the local population.” During the previous year alone, service members from the Kibita regiment helped out at eleven large local events that ranged from festivals to sports competitions. For the festivals, service members wore traditional costumes and participated in processions; other service members, clad in their fatigues, prepared a playing field for a sports event. The public relations apparatus in the JDA enthusiastically embraces these opportunities to show the troops at their best—that is, as an organized, friendly, and strong group of men and women. Individual service members on this and many other bases I had visited were less enthusiastic. Even though they get compensated with time off for the time they spend engaging in these community activities, Ono said, they generally dislike these tasks because they involve a commitment outside of their regular work hours, often on Saturdays and Sundays (Terada 2001; Ishikawa 1995b).

IN THE BARRACKS

The Kibita GSDF base barracks for male service members are one- to three-story buildings. One sergeant is in charge of each floor. The “head of the room” (*heya-chō*)—usually the man who has been on the base the longest—is in charge of sorting out problems among roommates. The rooms are shared by four men of the same rank. On some bases, there are bunk beds and the number of troops per room differs. On the Kibita GSDF base, the transition to four-men rooms is quite recent and was undertaken in order to make life in the Self-Defense Forces more attractive, especially for those men who are perhaps far away from a comfortable family home. The reduction of troop numbers per room is only one small way in which the Self-Defense Forces try to attract and retain more service members. The NDA, for example, had tried different kinds of models with ever-smaller numbers of cadets per room until the number

reached just two cadets per room. In addition to the quest for privacy, it was hoped that smaller numbers in each room would also undercut the instances of freshmen hazing by senior cadets. In the late 1990s, however, the NDA had to return to four cadets per room since a smaller number had led to “disciplinary problems.” Each service member at Kibita GSDF base has one iron bed and a small locker for personal belongings, some of which are piled up under the bed, on a small desk, or over a chair. “They are not supposed to have anything of value in their rooms,” the floor sergeant explained to me, but stereos and television sets are tolerated to “establish a sense of privacy and individuality.” When he joined in the 1970s, this sergeant recalled, at least ten men shared one room and no personal equipment was allowed. Instead of doors, the rooms had curtains that did not allow for any privacy at all. Outside the Kibita barracks rooms, in the hallways, uniform caps hang on wooden knobs. The walls are bare except for posters that summarize the “virtues of service members.” The linoleum floors shine. A full-length mirror covers the wall on each floor where the staircase turns.

The women’s barracks differ in important ways. On other bases, female service members have complained about being housed in the oldest, shabbiest, and most inconveniently located buildings, but here at Kibita the barracks for female service members were recently renovated in order to accommodate female troops (Fukukawa K. 1995). While gray and green are the prevailing colors in the much older barracks for male service members, bright yellow, orange, and pale pink dominate the women’s bathrooms. The floor of the common room is partly covered with straw mats and only partly with linoleum. Special common areas are designated for doing laundry and hanging up clothes to dry. A small air-conditioned room is reserved for smoking. There I had my first chat with Shōkai Rumi* and Tama, who turned out to be a crucial source of information on the intricacies of everyday life on base, particularly for women. Men used a part of the building, but the door to the women’s barracks was locked, and a sign at the entrance warned off trespassers: “The entry of men is prohibited.” Any man found in the women’s quarters would be fired, Tama noted.

Over the next hour or so our conversation touched on the two women’s motivations for joining the armed forces, their current frustrations, and their plans for the future. Both in their early twenties, they enjoyed the physical work and the opportunity to keep fit in contrast to “sitting in front of a computer all day,” which was what they imagined would have awaited them elsewhere. The question of whether they

should quit the Self-Defense Forces, they told me, was always on their minds. Private Shōkai, in only her second year of soldiering, did not plan to stay in the Self-Defense Forces forever; nor did she have other plans for her future. Tama had been in the Self-Defense Forces for four years and seemed more desperate to make a decision soon. On the one hand, Tama contemplated, she would find it difficult to quit now because she had just been promoted. On the other, she believed that only if she quit soon would she be able to train for some other career. Having joined the Self-Defense Forces right after graduation from high school, Tama regretted that she had never had the chance to experience university life. As for many service members, the Self-Defense Forces was not her primary career choice. She wanted to become a policewoman but did not pass the exam, which is more competitive than the one for the Self-Defense Forces. When she joined the Self-Defense Forces she wanted to train as a nurse or as a communication expert in order to acquire skills that would be useful later outside the military, but her preference was ignored by her superiors. She was posted to an infantry unit, a branch of service with a particularly low number of women. Tama's husband served in the same regiment. She appreciated this arrangement, which allowed them to live together, but was still frustrated by the posting. In contrast to other branches of the armed forces, Tama explained, "work in the infantry does not provide opportunities to acquire skills one could use off-base and outside the military."

Throughout a career in the Self-Defense Forces, service members frequently submit lists with several possible postings ordered by preference. The final decision, however, is made by the military administration and generally remains unclear to the person in question. Of course, postings, transfers, and promotions are based on the assessment of a service member's skills, but there are also other considerations such as age, as well as the internal logic of the armed forces. In Tama's case, for example, her posting to an infantry unit might have been affected purely by the oversupply of women in nursing units and the need to spread women more evenly throughout the armed forces.

Both female privates occasionally felt that they were wasting their time and taxpayers' money. They were sure that the public perceived them as a burden to the national budget and the ailing economy. Sometimes, Tama said, the feeling of uselessness was overbearing. It bothered her that the police were always shown on television and in films as the heroic protectors and saviors of the community, but service members who "train much harder do not ever appear on television and are not

considered heroes at all. We are not even appreciated,” Tama claimed. We’re “viewed as tax thieves,” added Shōkai. When Shōkai suggested that their bad reputation might be related to the fact that the Self-Defense Forces had never been involved in a war, Tama asked her whether she ever wanted a war. “No, of course not,” Shōkai replied. “That would be right-wing thinking,” she added. Both service members saw the Self-Defense Forces as being in a political dilemma, which Tama understood as follows: The right wants to restore the emperor to his prewar and wartime position in order to invade other countries. The left is anti-Self-Defense Forces and anti-war. In between these two extremes, it is difficult for the Self-Defense Forces to gain any solid ground. Even though the generation of service members with war experience as members of the Imperial Army have long since retired, and none of the current service members have been involved in combat, Tama notes, talk about war is common in the mountains during strenuous field exercises. “When we sat around utterly exhausted from several days of training in the forest without returning to the base once, sooner or later the conversation would turn to war. If a war broke out,” Tama claimed, “most of us, men or women, would quit.” The main reason in her view was that many young privates joined the Self-Defense Forces for the relative job security it offered in the current economic recession. While job security has always been a motivational factor for privates and sergeants, it has become ever more important for higher-ranking troops since the beginning of the recession in the early 1990s.

Tama hinted at another problem intrinsic to female service members’ experiences in the armed forces. “From the outside it looks as if there were no discrimination of women because theoretically everything is organized by rank, but in reality there is a lot of discrimination.” Already in their short military careers, the glamour of the Self-Defense Forces promised in the shiny, multicolored brochures had worn off. “I do not want to be treated like a woman,” Tama said, emphasizing that her primary motivation for joining and remaining in the Self-Defense Forces was the desire to compete with and win against men. She sounded sad when she said that perhaps that should not have been the only reason to stay on. She knew that women were not allowed on the front lines “because of the possibility of rape by the enemy.” Considering that “there is no war anyway,” she found this a rather “ridiculous excuse to slow down women’s promotions and careers.” Gender discrimination, however, pervades even the smallest of everyday acts. When Tama was dating the man to whom she is now married, she had to keep it a secret, even

though she suspected that everybody knew about their relationship. They did not talk to each other on base in order to avoid rumors that would have negatively affected both of them, as intimate relations among service members are discouraged and even prohibited among cadets at the NDA. Once she married, Tama said she never sat down next to men in the cafeteria, for example, and avoided talking to any of them privately, which could not have been easy as she was one of only a dozen women in a regiment of several hundred troops. If she did, she claimed, some of these men would start talking about her and spread the rumor that she must be having an affair. “As a woman, one sticks out so much and is under permanent observation,” she explained.

THE MESS HALL

I got a glimpse of the constant surveillance Tama was so conscious of when I had lunch with her in the huge mess hall. Upon entering I concentrated on taking off my cap and holding it under my left arm while picking up a tray and putting some of the food onto dishes on my tray: soup, rice, meat, vegetables in a thick sauce, peaches for dessert. The food—oily and salty—told its own story of military life. The view that soldiers do hard physical work and thus must eat food with a high caloric value was obviously taken to heart here. The high level of salt was meant to make up for all the sweating during the daily exercises. This kind of food, which does not cater to any particular regional cuisine or taste, is fairly cheap, so it can be prepared in large quantities and kept warm for several hours.

Tama barely looked up when she searched for an empty table. Her manner was controlled and disinterested. Gone was the young, animated woman from our earlier conversation who had seemed worried that at her young age she might already have made an irreversible mistake by joining the Self-Defense Forces. In contrast to the chat in the female barracks, when she was reflective and articulate about her experience, in the mess hall she remained decisively silent. I quickly realized that this was not a place for conversation. She was still the same short and petite young woman, but in professional mode she seemed both invisible and ready to take on anyone and anything that might cross her path. I tried to eat as fast as she did. The game show that was on at full volume on the television added to the deafening noise of moving chairs, boots, and the kitchen staff at work. Some men sat in pairs and groups; others sat and ate by themselves. Besides the two of us, I did not see a single other

woman. Some men looked up when we entered. Very few of them talked to each other. All gulped down the food in big chunks, jumped up, and left one after the other. Clearly this was not a place to linger. When we were finished, we lined up to shove the remaining food on our plates down a drain, briefly rinsed the dishes, and put them into a water basin where they soaked before being washed by the kitchen staff. Leaving the mess hall I put my cap back on and stepped out into the bright sunlight.

IN THE FIELD

The morning highlight for the rest of the week was my participation in basic training (*kyōren* and *kihon kunren*). Clad in the green fatigues that were buttoned up to my neck, I stood at attention or at ease, marched, turned 45 degrees, 90 degrees, 180 degrees, turned around, saluted with cap or helmet, saluted with bare head, bowed toward the flag, and stood still during the noon roll call in 104-degree summer heat. The orders were yelled in a staccato that made it almost impossible for me to identify simple words such as “Ki o tsuke!” (Attention!) or “Yasume!” (At ease!). The sergeant constantly corrected every move I made. I stood with my feet too far apart. I marched too stiffly or not stiffly enough. I turned too late. I pushed my chin forward too much. I turned like a dancer instead of like a soldier in a formation of soldiers. I felt silly with the helmet on my head. While hearing him yell orders and struggling to put the correct foot forward, a number of thoughts crossed my mind. Why was participant observation considered a key to understanding? Why had I left the cool of the university offices and libraries to stomp around at attention, sweat running down my spine? Worst of all, when I turned in the wrong direction for the fourth time, I cracked an embarrassed smile. The sergeant cut into my thoughts. “Promise me one thing. Do not smile as long as you are on the training ground! Never!” His warning was superfluous; my concentration distracted me from the embarrassment, but it took days before I began to do things right more often than not and escape the angry rebukes.

I spent the afternoons mostly accompanying units to different kinds of field exercises (*butai kengaku*), ranging from rifle shooting or aiming and firing mortars (figure 2) to combat training that involved firing machine guns at the troops designated as enemy units, in the woods a few miles from the base (*sentō kunren*).

Several regiments throughout the country are designated to train the bulk of new recruits. Only in March and April, when their numbers get

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

FIGURE 2. Service members of the GSDF during mortar training on Kibita GSDF base in the summer of 2001. (Photograph by the author)

too high to be completely absorbed by these regiments, is the overflow trained on bases near the recruits' hometowns. Basic training consists of two phases, three months each. During the second phase, new recruits are split up according to the specialties in which they receive special training. When the six months are over, privates resume their service in respective units on bases all over Japan, and NDA graduates move on to the GSDF officer training facility in Kurume, Kyushu.

My comrades for a week were high school and university graduates

as well as people who had held other jobs before joining the Self-Defense Forces. All of them were new recruits (*shin taiin*) three months into basic training. Female recruits are trained in all-female units at the GSDF Asaka camp about half an hour from Ikebukuro station, Tokyo, during the first three months, but they join the men during the second phase of their basic training (Bōei Kenkyūkai 1996:66–67).

According to Self-Defense Forces regulations, the goal of the first phase of basic training is to “awaken an awareness for a service member’s mission, the cultivation of the basic skills, including discipline, ethics and a strong sense of responsibility, proficiency in group life, and the training of physical strength” (Bōei Kenkyūkai 1996:46, 65–66). Subjects covered the first three months include spiritual training (*seishin kyōiku*) or mental preparation (*kokorogamae*), public service, basic knowledge across different specialties, combat and combat technique training, and sports (Bōei Kenkyūkai 1996:66).⁶ In addition to these components, service members also are encouraged to develop their “love for people” (*hito o ai shi*) and their patriotism (*kuni o ai shi*, also referred to as *aikokushin* and *sokokuai*). Patriotism, according to the regulations, brings together the “love for one’s region” (*kyōdō ai*) and the “love for one’s race/ethnic nation” (*minzoku ai*) (Bōei Kenkyūkai 1996:57–60).

At the time I encountered them, during my “training,” recruits still spoke a language quite different from their recruiters’ slogans, which I discuss in chapter 4. Every day, they said, was completely regimented, from the roll call at 6 A.M., when they assembled for an early morning run, to 10 P.M., when the lights were turned off.⁷ Basic training was “really tough” for some and “not as tough as expected” for others, but then there was the struggle of taking care of one’s uniform, being permanently away from one’s family (a first for many), the thousands of rules that needed to be followed, and never a minute of privacy. They learned the unwritten rules of NDA cadet hierarchy, where “seniors are emperors, juniors are humans, sophomores are slaves, and freshmen are garbage” (Sekizaki 1995:178). They endured the bullying of older cadets or recruits, and some looked forward to the days when they would be in the position to pass on some of the hardships to the next class. During the first few months, new recruits on bases all over Japan and cadets at the NDA cry on the phone when talking to their mothers. Some of them do not return to base or the campus from their first weekend off after three weeks of continuous training. Most of those who enter the second phase of basic training, however, will stay on for at least one two-year contract.

A major part of my time on the Kibata GSDF base was taken up with

interviewing two dozen privates, cadets, and sergeants during their breaks from field exercises—a setting that made for hurried but also more spontaneous and straightforward interviews (figure 3). While I imposed the artificiality of the interview onto the situation and had them sit down in the grass with me (out of earshot of their units), the training ground was clearly their space. The conversation—especially with sergeants and older service members—flowed so freely that I could hardly keep up with my note taking. Service members who seemed confident and content with their careers and career prospects in the Self-Defense Forces and service members who were high-ranking and older were all more comfortable about being interviewed. Service members who enjoyed their jobs cracked jokes about it more often but were more likely to speak critically of their personal experiences and of the Self-Defense Forces as an organization. Some of the privates whose fathers were veterans of the forces had never considered a different career and seemed eager to embrace the challenges of field training. Sergeants who had spent their lives in the field, training numerous cohorts of troops, did not seem to trouble themselves with the concerns of those officers who were in charge of the public relations apparatus and of managing the *esprit de corps*, troop morale, self-image, and to some degree the public representations of the armed forces. Sweat dripped from their foreheads while I asked them a range of questions about their career paths, impressions of new recruits, and how they had met their wives. Huge ants crawled up my sleeves. Sunstroke always seemed imminent.

Sergeant Sakurai Susumu* exuded the kind of confidence that came from being sure of his expertise, his role, and his place within the Self-Defense Forces. He saw his task as one of getting new recruits into shape, physically and mentally. He had trained new recruits for more than fifteen years and was sure that he had seen it all: the sweat, the tears, the quitters.⁸ “Recruits,” he was convinced, “have always been more or less the same.” But when prompted, he did seem to shake his head about the young generation. “Some have never even done their own laundry. Most are only children and are not used to functioning in a unit. Some even fight back tears,” he laughed, “just because I yell at them.” Other drill sergeants told similar stories. “Young people today have to be trained for one week just to make sure that they get rid of their long or dyed hair, that they understand that they cannot have spots on their uniforms, or leave the buttons of their pants open when they eat” (Oka 1998:212). But all too soon the interview was over. Back in the grass that reached up to my waist, and in the bushes, where a kind of hide-and-seek com-

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

FIGURE 3. A GSDF service member during an interview with the author.

bat training was in process, machine guns went off in rapid succession, and I lost sight of sergeant Sakurai and the unit under his command.

Mortar training on the base training ground was a very different affair. Four men lined up behind each mortar, which looked like a little cannon. At the command, they ran to the mortar, moved it into firing position opposite a target, adjusted the viewfinder, and a few seconds later yelled something that indicated to the sergeants clocking them that they were done. Timing and speed were everything. The men were out of breath from their efforts, and their uniforms were drenched in sweat. It took a while before the drill sergeant let them take a break so that one group could show me how the mortar worked. Trying to catch their breath, they explained mostly by gesturing and said very little. Soldiering is a fairly wordless job.

On one of the following days, I got to watch a rifle exercise. In the field, rifle training consisted of holding the rifle in different positions, and eventually lying down on one's stomach, spreading one's legs wide for balance, lifting the rifle up on one's elbows, aiming, and then shooting at a target. I could not see whether anybody actually hit the target. The privates got up, returned to their starting points, and started all over again. They repeated this for several hours. The repetitions were meant to automate a series of movements that seem impossible to perform

when your heart is pounding and your hands are trembling from exhaustion or nerves, and all the while your body is splayed on the ground in a position for maximum balance.

THE RECRUITMENT OFFICE

The recruitment office in Kibita is one of about fifty throughout Japan where all told about a thousand service members work. It is small and barely identifiable from the outside; inside it is crammed with brochures and recruitment records. I have visited more than a dozen of these offices, which typically are located in hard-to-find corners of faceless buildings, close to the main railway station of a town or a major subway stop in a city. The two main tasks of these offices are recruiting new personnel and introducing retiring service members to businesses in the region.

There are four main tracks. Students of Self-Defense Forces high schools are all male and typically enlist because of a dire socioeconomic situation at home. Most of them later join the armed forces as privates, partly because very few achieve a scholastic level that allows them to pass the entrance examination at the NDA or other universities. Cadets at the NDA and the NMDA are trained to become the elite officers of the Self-Defense Forces.⁹ Graduates of other universities also enter the officers' track after completing basic training. Enlisted soldiers enter into two-year contracts, although many stay in the Self-Defense Forces for more than ten years.

The recruitment office in Kibita is located directly next to the railway station and is directed by Major Terasaki Makoto*, a graduate of the NDA who is in his late forties and is a local resident. There are eleven high schools, one university, and one two-year college in the region. Terasaki suggested that the low number of secondary schools might be responsible for the lack of young men and women from the area who make it into the NDA.

In the early 1970s, one recruitment officer began to use direct mail and posted hundreds of recruitment posters. He won a prize for that innovative recruitment strategy, which subsequently was adopted nationwide (Sase 1980:212). Today, by contrast, Terasaki and officers like him, equipped with piles of glossy, multicolored brochures, flyers, and Self-Defense Forces gadgets, visit schools in order to talk to students about joining the Self-Defense Forces. Many schools, however, do not allow them onto the school grounds in the first place. Even when he does find a sympathetic school headmaster, Major Terasaki pointed out, recruit-

ment officers have to appear in civilian clothes rather than in their uniforms in order to “remain as low key as possible and not draw attention to themselves.” In rural areas and small towns, recruitment officers will send out recruitment material directly to families whom they know have a son who will soon be graduating from high school (Shimoyachi 2003). Despite these recruitment efforts, recruitment officers fail to fill the ranks, and the recruitment of high school graduates who are targeted for sergeant careers has become particularly problematic because of the low birth rate and the decreasing number of people who do not go on to a college or university (Bōeichō 2001b:250, Oka 1998:127–129).

The recruitment offices also handle the local distribution of recruitment posters and other public relations material and the initial screening of applicants, which consists of a conversation about the person’s motivations to join, family background and schooling, and visions of his or her future in the Self-Defense Forces. This conversation is the first opportunity for recruitment officers to talk about opportunities the Self-Defense Forces offers for acquiring, at no extra cost, special skills, such as large vehicle licenses or technical expertise, that are useful outside the armed forces. After this interview, applicants take a formal written exam that covers several high school subjects, including Japanese language, mathematics, and an essay on a subject of the applicant’s choice. Candidates who pass the exam undergo another more substantial interview at which recruitment officers try to learn more about the candidate’s motivation and personality. A physical exam, for which the basic criteria are good health, a height of at least 155 centimeters for men and 150 centimeters for women, and a weight within 20 kilograms of the norm, completes the evaluation process.

Recruitment strategies have changed considerably over the decades and recruitment has become somewhat easier during the past fifteen years because of the recession and also possibly because of some improvement in the Self-Defense Forces’ image. Recruiting for the Self-Defense Forces, however, has remained one of the less desirable jobs and most certainly a dead end for an officer who already has a stalled career. Terasaki recalled with some measure of horror the stories older service members have told of their recruitment efforts. In the 1950s and 1960s, being a recruitment officer was the most problematic. “One’s career was measured according to how many heads one was able to recruit, and at that time that seemed impossibly difficult. It was a no-win situation” (see also Sase 1980:205). The Self-Defense Forces had the greatest recruitment problems before the oil crisis in 1973. Recruitment officers were

practically ordered to recruit whomever they could find, without any regard for ability. Recruitment officers in the 1970s were so desperate to increase their figures that they resorted to approaching young men on the street (Sase 1980:206–210). One veteran recalled his own recruitment at that time. Born in a little town in Kyushu, he had gone to Tokyo in order to enter a professional school. He was studying for the entrance exam and had a job to support himself. One day as he sat on a bench in Ueno Park and watched the passers-by, a man called out to him, “Brother, you have a good body. Are you a university student?” He replied that he was just a night school student. He thought the remark a bit strange, but the man seemed sincere. The man said, “In fact there is a good job for you. Shall we go to a coffee shop and talk it over?” As it turned out, the man was from the same town in Kyushu, the student trusted him, and they went to a coffee shop. There the man identified himself as a recruiter for the Self-Defense Forces. The young man was attracted by the possibility of attending college while working in the Self-Defense Forces. He applied that same day, passed the exam, and joined on June 1, 1970 (Nezu 1995:8–9).

Recruitment in Okinawa has probably always been considerably tougher than elsewhere in Japan. One recruiter in Okinawa, for example, found the recession to be a blessing for the Self-Defense Forces. Sergeant Izumi Kenichi was prepared for a tough job when he was transferred to Okinawa, where one-fourth of the fifty-three city and town governments refused to support the recruitment efforts of the Self-Defense Forces despite laws that ostensibly forced local governments to do so. Considering Okinawa’s history, Izumi understood the lack of sympathy for the Self-Defense Forces. But after the economic bubble of the 1980s burst, the number of applicants rapidly increased, and by 1996, he and other recruiters were dealing with three times as many applicants as in 1991. Once they had accepted one in two applicants, he reported, but now they accepted only one in 3.5 applicants. This constituted quite a shift from the 1970s when demonstrators in Okinawa shouted slogans like “Self-Defense Forces go home!” or “Do not come to Okinawa a second time, Japanese military!” (Ishikawa M. 1995:236–238).

Such recruitment successes, however, obscure a demographic situation that has begun to affect all of Japan and promises to be particularly dramatic in Okinawa. The recruitment pool has begun to shrink dramatically (Oka 1998:127–129). In the 1990s, there were roughly two million eighteen-year-old men and women. More than half (1.2 million) of those young people went into professional secondary schools or col-

leges and thus were no longer candidates for a career as a private in the Self-Defense Forces.

In contrast to the often aggressive rejection in earlier decades, the most common response from students today, according to Terasaki, is their lack of interest, which in his mind is rooted in a “lack of a sense of purpose” (*mokuteki ishiki ga nai*). His assessment of local youth was mild, however. He had not forgotten that he too had found himself at the NDA and later in the Self-Defense Forces because of a number of random circumstances, including a failed entrance exam elsewhere. At the time he, too, had not had a clear goal or an understanding of or interest in national defense. His trajectory was typical for a large number of officers now in their forties and fifties. Very few had thought of the NDA as their first-choice university. Most had failed an entrance exam at a more prestigious school. What drew or pushed them to the NDA and into the Self-Defense Forces were service member fathers; an impoverished socioeconomic background; the need or desire to become independent from parental support; the hope that the NDA would straighten out their lives; and, of course, the possibility of a university education, for which they did not have to pay, with the option of resuming a civilian life after graduation. The NDA promised all of those benefits. Just like their seniors in the Self-Defense Forces, freshmen at the NDA gave all of these explanations for opting for the NDA.

Given the dire recruitment situation in his district, Terasaki knew he could not be picky about the reasons why men and women wanted to join the Self-Defense Forces, but he appreciated enthusiasm more than educational background and intelligence. He found that the opportunity to use their “real (physical) strength” (*jitsuryoku-shugi*) as service members was the strongest motivator among young men who joined in the region and hinted that these men were less likely to be disappointed with what they found in the Self-Defense Forces. Here, almost all applicants were men, and he spoke of female applicants only when I pressed him. “Of the women who are admitted into the Self-Defense Forces,” he said, “80 to 90 percent in this region quit when they have children.” This attitude of benevolent patronization, shared by many men of his generation, and one that is found across organizations, keeps many women from pursuing a career. Terasaki saw this trajectory of women’s lives as a natural outcome, though, and not as an organizational or economic problem for the Self-Defense Forces.

THE HALL OF HISTORICAL MATERIALS

Service members were hesitant to speak about the legacy of the Imperial Army during my interviews. Kibita and numerous other bases, however, have made an enormous effort to capture and exhibit the local regiment's past in base museums. The Kibita base museum opened in the 1960s. The role of the Hall of Documents, or Hall of Historical Materials, as it is also called, is to collect and preserve artifacts in such a way that they represent the history of the Self-Defense Forces and their predecessors in a simple, factual manner.¹⁰ The exhibits came together with a lot of help from local support groups—including branches of the Young People's Association (Seinenkai), the Parents' Association (Fukeikai), the OB or Veterans Association (Taiyūkai), the General Defense Association (Ippan Bōei Kyōkai)—and the Association of Bereaved Families under the guidance of the Self-Defense Forces' local public relations office. All of these organizations have their own ties to bases throughout Japan and together form a support network that connects service members to the wider population. For the Kibita base museum, local support groups sent out letters to their members and veterans of the Imperial Army in the region and received most of the exhibits from them. Thus, in depending on local families to supply artifacts, the museum represents history from a distinct local view; references to and representations of the Imperial Army beyond the local regiment are conspicuously rare.

Staff Sergeant Shimoda Hiromasa*, in charge of museum tours and one of Ono's subordinates, who was close to retirement, was delighted to give me a tour of what he seemed to think of as his museum. Occasionally the soft-spoken man guided veterans, and on rare occasions schoolchildren from the region, through the two rooms of the Hall of Historical Materials. The main audience, however, was the new recruits who were undergoing basic training on the base and had not, Shimoda was sure, "learned anything about the Imperial Army in their schools." The regiment's history did not just begin in 1951 when the National Police Reserve was renamed the Self-Defense Forces; indeed, it went back much further, as the trajectory of the building that housed the museum attested and as Shimoda was proud to point out. The building had undergone a remarkable metamorphosis, one echoed in numerous museums on other bases across the country. Originally, it had housed the headquarters of an Imperial Army infantry regiment. When the Imperial Army was formed in the 1870s, Shimoda explained, the local popu-

lation was very poor and many wanted to join the military because they imagined a better life there than on their impoverished farms (as in other parts of Japan, oldest sons typically were exempt from recruitment). The basic criteria for enlisting were good overall health and—just as in the Self-Defense Forces today—a height of at least 155 centimeters. In 1898, the new local infantry regiment was established and its headquarters moved into the building. It remained there until the end of the Asia-Pacific War in 1945. According to Shimoda, soldiers from the local regiment “were mobilized during the Russo-Japanese War [1904–5], the Manchurian Incident [1931], the China Incident [1937], and to the Philippines throughout the Asia-Pacific War. Almost 20,000 soldiers from this base died during these wars.”

After the end of the Asia-Pacific War, the building continued to be used as a headquarters but this time by the local section of the Allied occupation forces. After the Imperial Army had been dismantled and the Self-Defense Forces adapted the base, the building was “returned” to the Self-Defense Forces in the early 1950s. Thus, Shimoda proudly emphasized, his Self-Defense Forces regiment has a history of more than fifty years whereas many other bases were founded almost twenty years later. The one-story brick building had been restored several times since it was first erected. Walking up a few steps, I saw that a narrow hallway split the building into two rooms of equal size. The door to the right led into the room for the “History of the Former Army” (*Kyūgun-shi*). The door to the left led to a room designated for artifacts that ostensibly document the history of the Self-Defense Forces. At the entrance to this room, the three-foot-high *Hotei-sama*, one of the seven deities of fortune, symbolized the virtue that lies in being “content with what one has and making an effort to do better”—a modest civilian message that is decisively removed from the conventional notions of heroism, patriotism, and militarism I had expected to find.

A few undated woodblock prints depicted a decisive battle in the prefecture more than four hundred years ago, an event that marked the start of Japan’s military history in the region. The old flag, Shimoda explained to me, had eight rays that represented the chrysanthemum, the symbol for the imperial household. Originally the flag was used for all kinds of occasions; now it is used only by the MSDF except for local festivals, when the *Kibita* GSDF regiment uses it as a regimental banner (*rentaiki*). Shimoda confided that he included the emperor in his thoughts and prayers about protecting the country. He imagined the emperor as an institution “that has been there for a long time and will still be there when

[he is] dead.” The thought of the imperial household’s continuity, however comforting to him, necessitated here and elsewhere the suppression of the emperor’s war responsibility. In his opinion, “the symbol of Japan formally had been the commander in chief of the Imperial Army but in reality had no power at all.” A colored photograph of the Meiji emperor and empress was hung next to the declaration of the Sino-Japanese War. A colored photograph of the Shōwa emperor decorated a copy of the Imperial Rescript for Soldiers and Sailors. Exhibits in narrow glass cases included medals and stripes for military ranks, draft notices, letters from soldiers to their wives and families, uniforms, and boots. The items were undated, and the responsibility of explaining what they were and what they signified was left to Shimoda.

Shimoda had no illusions about the attitude of new recruits toward the museum and his lecture. He was certain that new recruits “do not care at all about the Hall of Historical Materials or anything [I have] to say about it,” but he considered it his duty as a history buff to teach them about the “necessity to protect one’s family, one’s friends, the local community, and one’s country (*kuni*).” These ties were obvious to him, but he said they “seem lofty to most of the young men and women who join the Self-Defense Forces these days.” Shimoda’s attempt to bridge the gap between the attitudes of new recruits and the ideology of their profession as proclaimed protectors of Japan echoed the first official statement about the postwar military’s purpose, allegedly given in March 1951 by Hayashi Keizō, then the first commander-in-chief of the GSDF. Hayashi envisioned the new military as driven by “the love of parents and siblings of our own blood, our wives and children, for the Japanese people and land” (Bōei Kenkyūkai 1996:49).¹¹

Shimoda framed his explanations with another officially sanctioned notion, namely that “the Self-Defense Forces is not a military force.” I had heard this proclamation countless times, repeated like a mantra across ranks, age groups, and gender. For some service members it was a source of pride. For others it constituted the main obstacle to true professionalism. Regardless, Shimoda emphasized that there is a telling difference between the Self-Defense Forces of today and the Imperial Army. In the Imperial Army, he said, soldiers were treated so badly that during battles they shot their commanders in the back. In the GSDF, by contrast, and especially in the infantry (he used both the Imperial Army term *hohei* and the Self-Defense Forces term *futsūka*), good interpersonal relations were considered the most important ingredient of a functional unit. His explanation hinted at the already numerous attempts to ac-

knowledge the problematic or horrific sides of the IJA in order to set the Self-Defense Forces apart from it.

Moving into the room for the history of the Self-Defense Forces, I saw a machine gun, several recent uniform styles, and public relations material on a blackboard—all displayed without a discernible order or explanations, indicating to me that no one had a clear idea of how the history of the Self-Defense Forces should be documented. In separate glass cases, portrait photographs of middle-aged and older women (with their names) were exhibited under the title “Honorary Mothers” (*Mazā no katagata*). During the Asia-Pacific War, these women were members of the local branch of the Patriotic Women’s Association (*Aikoku Fujinkai*),¹² so why were their photographs here rather than in the room reserved for the Imperial Army? Indeed, exhibits related to prewar and wartime women filled about a third of the exhibition space in the Self-Defense Forces’ room. I assumed these wartime representations of women had been placed in this room because of the lack of space in the first room, but it deepened my impression of the uncertainty people felt regarding how and what to tell about the Self-Defense Forces. There were no photographs of commanders, service members, or missions, and thus the story of the Self-Defense Forces remained faceless and hard to follow.

The legacy of the Imperial Army and the difficulty of creating a history of the Self-Defense Forces were problems that existed beyond the museum’s walls. On the last afternoon of my stay on the base, Tama and Sergeant First Class Ueda Tarō* took me on a sightseeing tour that turned into a trip into Japan’s military past. A small Shintō shrine was our first stop. When the priest finished with a tour group, he walked with us. “The new recruits on the local navy base come to visit the shrine every year,” the priest explained on the way around the shrine, but “the army recruits do not.” Later, Tama explained that whether new recruits visit the shrine depends on the “commander’s personality,” rather than on different views the navy and the army have about Shintoism, the state religion under Japan’s wartime regime (when all other religions were carefully repressed). The legacy of the Imperial Army as an oppressor of ordinary (Japanese) people, a perpetrator of war crimes, and—most of all—a defeated force has always affected the GSDF, which generally shies away (more so than do the MSDF and the ASDF) from public connections to the wartime regime, be it the Imperial Army or representations of state religion. Aside from individual commanders’ preferences, the MSDF’s command decision to visit the shrine can also be seen as an

expression of the marked difference in these other branches' wartime roles. Tama addressed that possibility and told me that, according to her brother, who was a service member in the MSDF, "the MSDF keep their traditions alive. The GSDF does not." He viewed the army's image as "dark" (*kurai*). "Dark" is a word that has often been used to describe the Japanese war experience, with reference not only to the darkening of rooms during air raids but also, more importantly, to a negative time darkened by meaningless hardships, as in the phrase "dark war clouds" (Buchholz 2003:298). Tama suggested that it was because of these occasional rivalries that the GSDF hardly ever trained with the MSDF, even though the GSDF frequently carried out joint maneuvers with the ASDF.

Leaving the shrine behind us, we crossed a concrete bridge built in a fake Edo style—just one of the many heavy-handed efforts to turn the town into a place with some traditional flair and a sense of community (*machi-* and *furusato-tsukuri*). Outside a tiny bicycle rental shop we sat down on a bench and had sodas. Ignoring both Tama and me, an old man at the bicycle rental shop approached Ueda and asked him whether he was a service member. Then he told him that he had been stationed in Okinawa during the Asia-Pacific War, where everybody from his unit was killed except for him. He cheered Ueda on by repeatedly calling out that "there is only one nation" (*Kokutai wa hitotsu shika nai*). Ueda vaguely nodded but did not respond. Tama grinned at him and made a face at me, dismissing the old man's words. Ueda raised his eyebrows to her as if to say, "What!?" Tama just kept grinning at him. Then, Ueda finished his cigarette, and with the uncomfortable encounter over, we returned to the base, where we passed by the museum one more time.

HONORABLE DISCHARGE

The evening before my departure a farewell barbecue was organized for me. It took place in a corner of the base where picnic tables and wooden benches had been arranged in a semicircle. Sukiyaki stoves were on the tables, and service members served beer. The appearance of Commander Katō had been carefully coordinated so that he arrived last. I sat next to the commander at a table of six. About eighteen service members were there, including the commander, the aide-de-camp, several officers, and some of the sergeants I had observed and interviewed in the field during the week. There were also four representatives, including one woman, from the local Young People's Association, whom I had interviewed earlier that day about the association's relationship and collaboration with

the bases and the Self-Defense Forces more generally. Both a Shintō priest and a veteran, now the owner of a local small business, were introduced to me as “local supporters of the Self-Defense Forces.” Ono served as the master of ceremonies. First, toasts. Individual introductions followed. Each service member introduced himself with his rank and name, place of birth, the name of the base where he had served previously, his specialty within the military, hobbies, family status, and the number of children he had. All of this information was listed very quickly and orderly and thus appeared to be a rather common exercise at occasions such as these. After the first few introductions, only the commander and I continued to listen and applaud; everybody else was already having fun talking to one another and preparing food on the stoves. Only when Commander Katō finally stood to speak did the group fall silent again, with everyone’s attention focused on him. Clearly a socially adept man, he started on a folksy note designed to both impress and bond with his troops and to overcome differences of rank in the presence of civilian outsiders, including myself. Yet he was able to also demonstrate his ability to perform his duties as commander and his skills as a man of the world.

Born in Tokyo, Commander Katō lived apart from his family, who had stayed in the city. Katō’s daughter was already in college, and his wife liked to be close to her in Tokyo. And, he added smiling, she had no interest in moving out to the country where she did not know anybody and would not get to see him much anyway. Commander Katō was a career officer, and it turned out that over the six-year span of my fieldwork, he was reassigned three times—from an office post in the old JDA in Roppongi, then to his current command, and later back to the JDA again, which in the meantime had been relocated to Ichigaya. He tried to see his family every third weekend. Even though that was not always possible, he was luckier than many men in the Self-Defense Forces. Many officers and service members live separated from their wives and families because of the sheer difficulty of moving a family every two or three years on transfers. As long as the children are little, moving is easy, but most parents shy away from repeatedly taking their children out of school once they begin middle school, afraid that the moves will affect their performance and chances to get into a good high school and university. Those who leave their families behind in remote rural areas of Shikoku, Kyushu, or Hokkaido often see their families only three or four times a year, for just a few days at a time.

Katō introduced me by mentioning a conversation we had had when

I first met him at the beginning of the week. He had asked me whether I preferred speaking English or Japanese. I replied that I would prefer speaking Japanese, given that English was not native to either of us. He pointed out how impressed he had been by my saying that. The other men muttered appreciation. I used the opportunity to express my gratitude. A Taikō performance by five service members followed.¹³ Within two hours the party was virtually over. Suddenly, the president of the Young People's Association stood in the middle of the barbeque site, and everybody stood up and turned to him. He threw his arms up and shouted "Banzai!" three times, followed by three collective shouts by everybody else. The party quickly dissolved. On the way out, one of the drill sergeants gave me his card and asked me to send him my publications on the Self-Defense Forces because he was sure that "the men told [him] different things than they had told [you]."

The commander and a few other men, including Majors Ono and Terasaki, then took me along to a second dinner off-base, the almost obligatory second gathering or *nijikai*. For the second dinner, the commander changed into a dark suit and necktie. The other men wore more casual pants and short-sleeved shirts. Service members are hardly seen in their uniforms in public places off-base, so this change of clothes was not surprising; for them it was only one of the many routines intended to help them blend in with civilian society. Service members with whom I had dinners or drinks off-base had always been in civilian clothes.

A rented bus took us up into the hills nearby where we had dinner in a Japanese-style room of a hotel with a splendid view of the valley. The hotel owner was introduced to me as yet another "supporter of the Self-Defense Forces." Considering that we were the only guests on a Friday night, I wondered whether the gesture of support was not mutual. The hotel owner led us all up a steep staircase. Sitting on cushions on a floor covered with straw mats, we had a rather extensive dinner—first sushi, then a series of other dishes, together with beer and rice wine. I sat across from the commander at a long, narrow table. The commander used this occasion to massage the egos of his sergeants, "as the men who really make a base work [while] commanders come and go and are totally dependent on their support." To my left, Major Terasaki got quite drunk and increasingly persistent with romantic propositions, to which I responded as graciously as possible. Everybody else just ignored him, although I did sense disapproval of his behavior from Ono, who sat at the other end of the table.

Eventually, the conversation turned to security matters and Japan's

position in the international arena. Like many officers with international experience, Commander Katō's thoughts on military matters in Japan and abroad were closely tied to American security policy: "The American focus on security policies has shifted from Europe and Russia to Asia, particularly China and North Korea. Both of these countries are potential future threats to Japan." China, said Katō, trained officers and privates but did not train sergeants, a shortcoming that rendered the Chinese military dysfunctional at that point. He was unsure, however, how this practice might change within the next ten years. He suggested that the improvement of diplomatic relations with China was preferable to rearmament, but later he criticized the Japanese government for providing so much economic aid to China.¹⁴ Whereas North Korea featured as an unknown element because of the unpredictability of its leader Kim Jong Il, Katō found that South Koreans were much more patriotic than the Japanese and attributed that difference to the conscription system there. The other men remained mostly silent or uttered their agreement, and I realized that the commander's speech was at least as much directed at them as it was a response to my questions. Thus it came as no surprise that, when asked about the ongoing discussion on constitutional reform, Katō favored the revision (*kaizō*) of Article 9. In recent years, the Self-Defense Forces have quietly shifted their stance toward the understanding that Article 9 is too vague to be practical or needs to be revised because the very existence of the Self-Defense Forces contradicts it. This latter position is shared by people across the political spectrum, although they have very different ideas on how to revise the document (Hook and McCormack 2001).

Katō assured the dinner party that all current members of the Self-Defense Forces "had been raised in the democratic spirit of postwar Japan and nobody wanted a war but rather the recognition of the Self-Defense Forces as a military." Consequently, all of them seemed to appreciate Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō's initiative to seriously discuss the revision of Article 9. According to Katō, "Now, the Self-Defense Forces' legal status is unclear and we are basically operating in a gray area." Katō favored the defense clauses the Germans had included in their Basic Law as an ideal solution for Japan, sharing a notion of "normalization" that Ozawa Ichirō had promoted in 1993.¹⁵ Germany looms large in the imagination of some Japanese officers (in addition to the United States, but far less prominently and only when it comes to issues of historical legacy and legislation). At a previous meeting with Commander Katō and other officers, as well as numerous times during my

fieldwork, I was told that “the German military has been so much luckier than Japan’s Self-Defense Forces.” In a somewhat twisted configuration of ideas that are tied to the wartime German-Japanese alliance, Katō and some other officers viewed the Self-Defense Forces’ situation in comparison to that of Germany as follows: The IJA—and thus by extension the Self-Defense Forces—had been blamed for the Asia-Pacific War. In Germany, the entire population had taken on the responsibility. The Self-Defense Forces still labored under this legacy. The German armed forces had fully “recovered.” The Self-Defense Forces were the only military in the world that found itself unappreciated and in a legally fragile place and thus in an overall vulnerable position in Japan and internationally. Today the German armed forces might not be extremely respected by German civilians, but their legal position was secure and comparatively clear. The Self-Defense Forces were also under an enormously strict network of civilian control. The most disturbing facet in the minds of some Self-Defense Forces officers was that the upper-level military administration had no experience in and understood very little about military matters. No one spoke, however, of the fact that the German state had taken responsibility for Nazi Germany’s wartime actions while the Japanese state had returned to an ambiguous position concerning Japan’s role during the war.¹⁶ Neither did anyone mention the broad debates about the German armed forces in the 1970s and 1980s that brought forth a major wave of reforms (Abenheim 1988; Kühne 2000; Frevert 2001).

Katō hinted at the need for the Japanese government to take a more critical stance concerning Japan’s war responsibility, but then he pointed out that “the Taiwanese have never complained about their treatment in Japanese textbooks; only the Koreans have done so,” suggesting that Korean concerns might be unjustified. This was the moment, however, when some of the other men chimed in, as if the commander had finally said something they could connect to and agree with. Asked about the reasons for this discrepancy, Katō suggested that during the Asia-Pacific War, the Taiwanese felt that the Imperial Army was not as bad as the Chinese Army. No one mentioned forced labor, sexual slavery, or war crimes. Rather, all the men at the table seemed to agree that since both of these countries had been colonies of Japan, one of them must have been misrepresenting the wartime behavior of the Imperial Army.

We eventually moved on to more pleasant small talk. The farewell upon our return to the base was loud and hearty. The following morn-

ing, I returned the uniform, the boots, the cap, and the helmet. I carried a regimental banner as a souvenir in my bag to the railway station. Ono, accompanied by the president of the Young People's Association, dropped me off at the local train station, just in time for me to get on the next train to the city and back to civilian life as I knew it.