

Bon Odori festival celebrated on Naval Air Facility Atsugi

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FESTIVAL

NAVAL AIR FACILITY ATSUGI, Japan – According to Japanese folklore, many years ago, a devout Buddhist priest sat in deep meditation when he was suddenly aware that his mother's spirit was suffering in a place called the Realm of Hungry Ghost. Distressed, the priest went to Buddha and asked what he must do to release his mother from such a horrible place.

Buddha advised the priest, in order to release his mother he would have to make offerings of food and beverages⁷ to the priests who had just returned from their retreat. The priest did as he was told and upon his mother's release was so overjoyed he began to dance.

Of course the folktale has variations throughout Japan, but two aspects of the story are foremost – family and dancing.

These two aspects are the basis for the Bon Odori festival which once again enveloped the country of Japan. Traditionally held near the

end of the Summer months, cities throughout Japan hold festivals celebrating family through the art of dancing and Naval Air Facility (NAF) Atsugi is no exception.

“Bon Odori is held during the Bon week which is held Aug. 13-16,” said NAF Atsugi’s Community Relations Specialist Sumie Maruyama. Bon Week is a time when ancestors are invited to visit their families in their homes. “To entertain the spirits, we dance. That is what we call Bon Odori.”

During the week long celebration, families spend time catching up with relatives, visiting and cleaning the graves of loved ones past and participating in the Bon Odori festivals. At the end of the week, the ancestral spirits return to the spiritual realm, sometimes being guided by floating lanterns launched by the living.

Opening the base to the local communities, NAF Atsugi kicked off their Bon Odori celebration with an American-style festival. This part of the celebration included American food and entertainment, as well as a burrito eating contest between major league eaters and active duty service members and live musical performances with Edwin McCain as the headline performer.

“We look forward to our open-base events every year because it’s our chance to showcase what the Navy base is about and to highlight the people that we have on the base,” said Capt. Steven Wieman, commanding officer of NAF Atsugi. “Most of the Japanese see

our uniforms coming and going in town, they see our aircraft flying, our building from afar but this is a chance to truly interact with our Sailors and families.”

With the sun setting, the installation’s Bon Odori festival began.

In the spirit of creating friendships and understanding through cultural differences, member of the NAF Atsugi community and command staff participated in performing the traditional dance and taiko routines alongside the local community throughout the festival.

“I think [the Japanese] do appreciate the fact that we are honoring their traditions,” said Wieman. “Obviously it’s a very spiritual time for them. A chance for them to reflect and look on their ancestry and to make sure that they know where they come from and that will help them know where they are going. I think they really do appreciate the fact that we’re paying tribute, in an understanding way, to what makes them who they are.”

Dance groups from the local communities surrounding the base were invited to perform the traditional Japanese dances at the event. Also performing the traditional dances were ladies from the NAF Atsugi community.

Ladies from the Atsugi Enlisted Spouses’ Association, Atsugi Officer Spouses’ Association, and a few service members practiced

countless hours throughout the summer months to make sure the dances were performed just right.

“Hopefully, [the Japanese community] will see that we appreciate their dancing and want to learn about their culture,” said Felicia Fullbright, one of the NAF Atsugi Bon Odori dancers.

Throughout Japan, each region and town has its own dance. To recognize the many different local communities, the ladies performed 13 different dances to their respective songs. They even performed the dance Yokohama Ondo as Mako Yuki, the original singer, performed.

After the Bon Odori dancing, NAF Atsugi’s leadership performed Chidori-ren Awa Odori alongside the leadership of Japan Maritime Self Defense Force which topped the events of the evening.

“[I hope to convey to the Japanese] that we are partners in this alliance,” said Wieman. “We can’t do our jobs without their support. We truly do want to be good neighbors, good citizens, and good friends both in disaster preparedness and community relations.”

As the hour became late, attendants and dancers began to make their way elsewhere, the week of Bon finally ended.

“In Bon Odori everyone is welcome to participate in dancing,” said Maruyama. “The people who left their hometowns visit their parents and relatives and it’s more like a reunion of the community itself. And we always welcome everybody who is visiting the area to entertain.”

The Bon Odori Season is about remembering and honoring families and their ancestors. The spirits may be gone for another year, but the NAF Atsugi community will be ready to welcome them back next year with food, music, and above all, dancing.