SRF-JRMC proud of its bicycle fleet

Story and photo by Keiichi Adachi, CFAY Public Affairs

The highly skilled and exceptionally dedicated workforce employed at U. S. Naval Ship Repair Facility and Japan Regional Maintenance Center (SRF-JRMC) have many important tools they use as they go about their business of repairing the ships of the U.S. 7th Fleet. Among the most valuable tools that SRF-JRMC workers use is something very common, a bicycle. Everyday of the week SRF-JRMC craftsman can be seen navigating their bicycles onboard Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY), especially while moving in between and about the numerous SRF-JRMC facilities.

Since 1947 when SRF-JRMC was established as the U. S. Naval Ship Repair Facility Yokosuka, the number of bicycles has grown ever more prevalent. In the early years, there were only three or four bicycles available for use for each shop, with foremans and shop heads allowed the use of a bicycle.

If you look, you can still see various older models of bicycles that are known as "practical use bicycles." These bicycles were popular when the conditions of Japan's roads were not as well suited for vehicles, so in many cases, bicycles were used to deliver or move heavy items.

Although some of SRF-JRMC bicycles are old, they are well maintained and their usefulness remains invaluable because they allow workers to transport tools, parts, materials or equipment related to their jobs, or just for traveling between a shop and a work site. In most cases, vehicles are not allowed on piers and dry dock areas, so a bicycle is a convenient mode of transportation, with the added benefit of eliminating the amount of air pollution that would be caused if workers were using gasoline powered vehicles for their tasks.

According to Minoru Ootake, SRF-JRMC Central Tool Shop head, the SRF-JRMC fleet of bicycles now numbers more than 1,500, with new bicycles costing approximately $550. The Central Tool Shop performs repairs on bicycles assigned to codes, while bicycles assigned to shops are repaired by the shop that has custody.

An SRF-JRMC Japanese employee said that the bicycles are designed for heavy duty use. "When I first started to ride one, my legs felt heavy, but as I continued to ride my bike, my legs became stronger and I realized that a heavier bicycle is more stable even on windy days. Bicycles sold off base might be lighter, but they rust easier and are not as stable to ride, even on a day with no wind," the employee said.

Skilled repairmen from SRF-JRMC ride their bicycles to a dry dock to begin work aboard *USS Blue Ridge* (LCC 19).
号ドックに停泊するUSSブルーリッジ上の作業に来たSRF-JRMCの熟練職人の自転車。

When interviewed for this story, SRF-JRMC Commanding Officer Capt. Steven Stancy, fondly recalled his first experience with the SRF-JRMC bicycle fleet.

"It was 1985 during my midshipman summer cruise onboard *USS Long Beach* (CGN 9). We pulled into Yokosuka for a few days of liberty and some voyage repairs, and even before the first mooring lines were over, dozens of workers on bicycles were arriving at the pier and setting up to go to work," Stancy said. "It was one of the most impressive things I'd ever seen in the short time I'd been part of the U.S. Navy!

Hidekazu Shibuya of the Shop Division has been working at SRF-JRMC for almost 30 years. When Shibuya became a foreman, his senior foreman gave him the bicycle he had used. That bicycle was assigned to Shibuya in 1985 and the cost was $90.

"I have used my bicycle for 25 years. I do not know how long my senior foreman had used it prior to that, but I think my bike is more than 30 years old. People say 'get a new one,' but I am too attached to my bicycle and it's still usable. I can't easily get rid of it. Some parts for my bicycle are no longer available because the company is now out of business. I will use my bicycle as long as I can keep it repaired and ready to ride," said Shibuya.

SRF-JRMCが誇る自転車艦隊、今日も現場へ赴く

文・写真:安達慶一、CFAY広報課

艦船修理廠及び日本地区造修統括本部(SRF-JRMC)の献身的且つ高度な技術力を備えた従業員は、第七艦隊の艦船修理業務のための道具を大切に扱うことにも長けている。彼らにとっては、自転車もまた重要な道具の一つだ。横須賀基地内では毎日、SRF-JRMC職人が自転車で行来する姿を目にするが、特にSRF-JRMC施設内の移動には自転車の利用がこと多いようだ。

SRF-JRMCが設立された1947年以来、自転車の台数は増加の一途を辿る。その当時は工場毎に3～4台の自転車が割り当てられ、フォアマンA、フォアマンB、工場長など限られた役職で自転車の使用が制限されていた。

その自転車を見れば、古いモデルでデザイン重視ではないが実用的なのが一目瞭然だ。日本の道路事情から、自転車は自家用車では不便な場所での荷物の配達や重い物の持ち運びに、重宝されてきた。

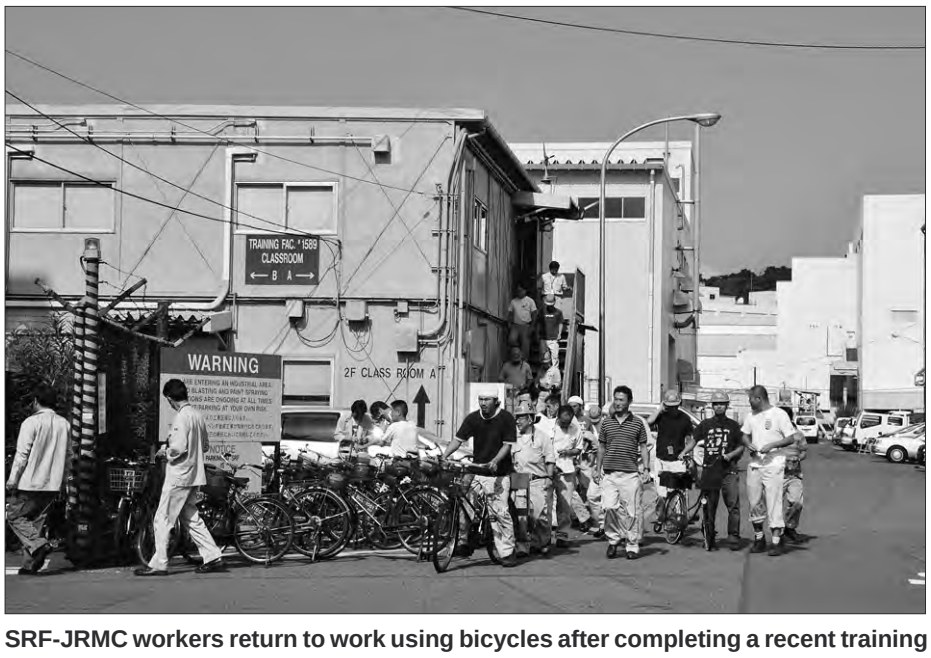
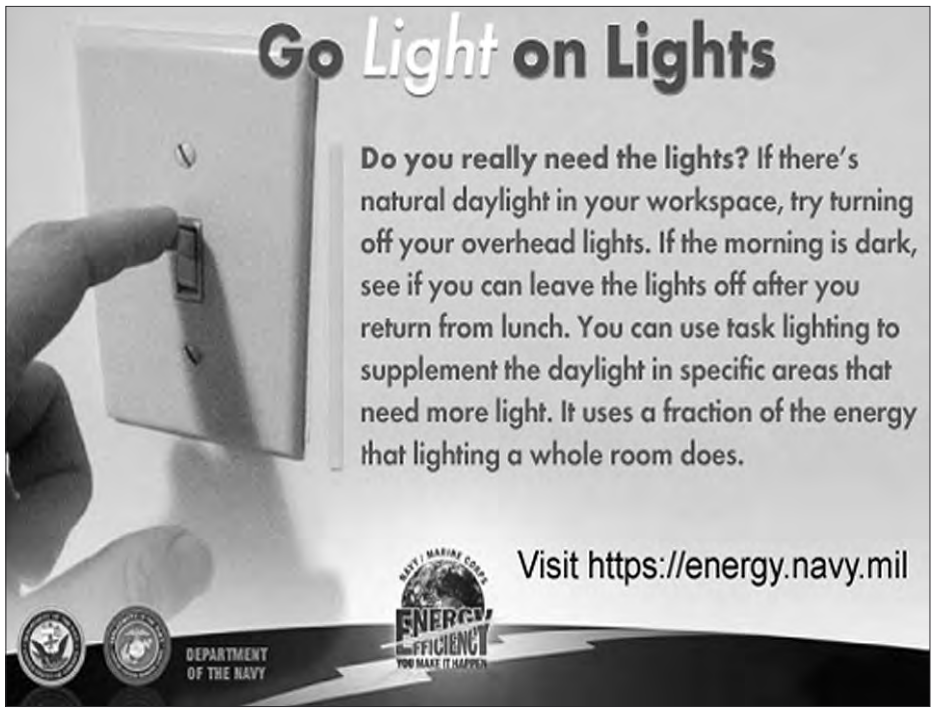
古い自転車といえども整備がよくされていて、職人が道具、部品、資材もしくは作業に関連する装置などの運搬や各自の部署と現場の行き来に重宝され、その利便性は図り切れない。ほとんどの桟橋やドック周辺への自動車乗り入れが禁止されているSRF-JRMCで、自転車は移動手段として便利なだけでなく、ガソリン燃料で生じる空気汚染を防ぐ利点も兼ね備えている。

SRF-JRMCの自転車の総数は1,500台以上、新品自転車は一台約55,000円する。セントラルツール工場では主に事務職の従業員が乗る自転車の修理を引き受けていて、工場にある自転車の修理は各工場で行なわれているとセントラルツール工場長の大竹実さんは言う。

ある日本人従業員は、自分の乗る自転車は耐久性に優れているという。また、重い自転車のため、乗り始めた頃はペダルを重く感じたが次第にその負担にも慣れ、今では風のある日も安定したバランスで走れるという。「基地の外で販売されている自転車はもっと軽量かもしれませんが、サビ易く、風がない日でもバランスを崩し易いです。」

SRF-JRMC司令官スティーブン・スタンシー大佐がSRF-JRMC自転車艦隊との初めての遭遇を快く回想してくれた。「それは1985年、海軍兵学校生徒としてUSSロングビーチ(CGN 9)に乗船し夏の航海中のことです。数日の休息と修理の為に横須賀に寄港することになりました。係留の最初の舫い取りが終わる前に、自転車に乗った数十人の職人が桟橋に乗りつけ、作業の準備を始めました。その頃の私は米海軍の一員としてまだ新米でしたが、その光景は今でも鮮明に覚えています。」

30年近く工場管理部で働く渋谷秀一さんは1985年にフォアマンAに昇格した際、先輩から自転車を譲り受けた。その当時90ドルした自転車について渋谷さんは「この自転車に乗って25年ほどになります。それ以前にどれほど先輩が使用したかは分かりませんが、30年以上経つ自転車です。周囲から新しい自転車を勧められますが、この自転車にとても愛着があり、まだ乗れるのでそう簡単には手放せないです。メーカーも生産を中止しているので自転車の部品も手に入りませんが、修理が出来、乗れる限りは大事に使います」と照れくさそうに笑いながら話してくれた。



SRF-JRMC workers return to work using bicycles after completing a recent training session.
トレーニングを終えて従業員は自転車で各自現場に戻る。