Navy legal community bids longtime Japanese advisor farewell

Region Legal Service Office Japan Commanding Officer Capt. Robert F. Johnson presents a command plaque to Mari Okamoto at her retirement ceremony June 22. Okamoto worked as an interpreter and legal assistant for the U.S. Navy for 29 years.

By LTJG Nicholas Inns, RLSO Japan

In May 1983, Mari Okamoto, née Terao, began work as an interpreter and legal assistant for the United States Navy. She celebrated her retirement after twenty-nine years of service with a ceremony at the Officer's Club onboard Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka June 22.

Okamoto, Mari-san to her friends, was joined by just a small sample of the countless service members and civilians – Japanese and American alike – whose lives she touched.

During her nearly three decades of service, Okamoto worked in four different legal offices: Commander, Fleet Activities Yokosuka, Office of the Staff Judge Advocate; Navy Legal Service Office Northwest Pacific, Trial Service Office Pacific Detachment; and Region Legal Service Office (RLSO) Japan. In each of these positions, she served as an invaluable liaison between the Navy's Judge Advocate General's Corps and Japanese legal, law enforcement, and defense officials, establishing and maintaining the strong relationship of friendship and trust enjoyed by our two countries. The diversity and excellence of her service produced an outpouring of appreciation. She received Letters of Commendation from Commander, Navy Legal Service Command; Commander, Naval Forces Japan; the Chief Prosecutor of Yokohama; and the South Kanto Defense Bureau.

"Twenty-nine years of service is, rightly, a source of pride. But, in the case of Mari-san, we celebrate her remarkable success in performing difficult tasks, under difficult circumstances, over a remarkable span of time," said Captain Robert F. Johnson, Commanding Officer of RLSO Japan. "Mari-san's accomplishments and service are all the more remarkable when examined in the historical context. From the Cold War to Operation Tomodachi, Mari-san has faithfully supported the unique and special United States-Japan Alliance, one constant and reliable partnership in an ever-changing and complex world."

Not all of Okamoto's work involved government officials. As the Japanese legal assistant to RLSO Japan's Military Justice Department, she worked closely with all Japanese victims and witnesses to explain the court-martial system and guide them through the often long and painful process. Her grace, dignity, and compassion touched the lives of each of these individuals and had a lasting impact on people she encountered.

Outside work, she spent countless hours serving the U.S. and Japanese legal communities, generously donating her time and effort to Kaifu Gakuen, an institution for severely disabled persons, and donating her legal assistance to widows of SOFA members. "To describe her personality and character, I cannot think of her without the words altruistic and philanthropic," commented Koichi Sekizawa, who has worked alongside Okamoto throughout her entire career. "The stories of her kindness and generosity circulate quickly among people. They came to seek her help, and she is a person who cannot ignore others in trouble."

June 29, marked Okamoto's final day of work at RLSO Japan, and July 2 was the first day the Navy legal community started its work day without her.

"I consider myself lucky to have had the opportunity to work with such a quality individual," said RLSO Japan Administrative Officer Gerald Sauls. "Her constant display of kindness reminded me of how people should treat each other. She was the heart and soul of this command and will be sorely missed."

National Safety Council estimates motor-vehicle fatalities up

From CFAY Traffic Safety Office

Speed is involved in about one out of three fatal crashes, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). It is the third leading contributing factor to traffic crashes. But, while injuries and fatalities due to other dangerous behaviors, such as driving while impaired and not wearing seatbelts, have been significantly reduced, speeding is still a challenge.

Surveys find that although people name speeding as a threat to their safety when other drivers around them are speeding, the majority say they also speed when driving.

According to the Statistics Department National Safety Council: Motor-vehicle deaths up 11percent in first four months of 2012.

Motor-vehicle deaths through April of 2012 totaled 11,030.

This figure is up 11percent from the corresponding 4-month period in 2011. The April figure for 2012 was up 9 percent from the 2010 figure.

The April total for 2011 was 9,970, a 2 percent decrease from 2010. The 2010 figure was 9 percent lower than 2009.

The estimated annual population death rate is 12.3 deaths per 100,000 population, an increase of 10 percent from the preliminary 2011 rate. The estimated annual mileage death rate is 1.3 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, an increase of 8 percent from the preliminary 2011 rate.

Medically consulted motor-vehicle injuries for the first four months of 2012 are estimated to be about 1.1 million, an increase of 17 percent from 2011.

Medically consulted injuries are not comparable to previous disabling injury estimates.

The estimated cost of motor-vehicle deaths, injuries, and property damage through April was $80.3 billion, a 21 percent increase from 2011.

The costs include wage and productivity losses, medical expenses, administrative expenses, employer costs, and property damage.

Local Kanagawa statistics show a 50 percent increase in fatality accidents in 2012.

As we get into the summer months, more people are moving and what was once familiar is now new again. Drivers are learning local roads and highways which make it more challenging for everyone on the roads as well as things such as driving on the left side of the road, driving from the right side of the vehicle, new signs, etcetera.

It's important for people to learn their surroundings and drive safely.