Yokosuka Sailors, families explore Japan through AOB/ICR

Story and photo by MCSN Charles Oki, Navy Public Affairs Support Element Japan

When Electrician's Mate 1st Class (SW) Jeff Muse and his wife Brandie packed their belongings, they wondered what their move to Japan was going to bring. Would they be able to get around? Would they be able to eat out in town? How bad would the language barrier be?

On Feb. 26, they purchased train tickets, navigated the railways and explored the shrines and temples of Kamakura, Japan, on their own, thanks to the Area Orientation Brief/ Intercultural Relations (AOB/ICR) class provided by the Fleet and Family Support Center (FFSC) at their new duty station - Fleet Activities Yokosuka.

Muse spent his entire career stateside, prior to his recent permanent change of station. With the exception of deployments, he had only travelled abroad with his wife on vacation. A new series of challenges presented themselves when the decision was made to cross the Pacific and become a part of the U.S. Navy's forward-deployed naval forces.

"We only had a general idea of what to expect," said Jeff. "The only thing we knew for sure was that it was going to be a great experience."

Jeff, who is originally from Houston, had only experienced a small fraction of Japanese culture through his Navy experience. Everything he saw after moving to Japan has been a new and refreshing experience. For Brandie, who is fourth-generation Japanese and was raised in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, the transition was more subtle, but the language barrier still presented a challenge.

"Being fourth-generation, I only know a small amount of Japanese," said Brandie. "Despite that, it has been very easy to get around because people do their very best to understand you."

The couple has experienced many facets of Japan and its citizens, even though they've only lived here for two weeks. The kindness of the locals has made a large impact on Jeff and how he sees the people of Japan.

"While we were in a Japanese grocery store, we were looking for teriyaki sauce," said Jeff. "We didn't really have an idea of what to look for, because a majority of the labels are in Japanese. So we asked an employee, and she helped us find what we were looking for, but she came back several times within a five minute period to show us different items with the word teriyaki on it just to make sure we weren't looking for that product."

Brandie Muse looks at various charms for sale at the Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu shrine in Kamakura, Japan, during "tour day" of the AOB/ICR class conducted at CFAY Feb. 26. AOB/ICR introduces Sailors and family members to Japanese culture, through lectures and outside the base gates experiences provided courtesy of FFSC and Sailor-volunteers.

"It absolutely amazes me to see how kind the people of this country are," he added.

During the AOB/ICR class, FFSC representatives teach Sailors and their family members what to expect during their transition to duty in Yokosuka, as well as what to anticipate when they pass through the gates of the base and discover Japanese culture.

The class culminates in a "tour day," when participants use the knowledge they've learned in class, to navigate the trains and streets outside the base gates, and immerse themselves in the sites and flavors Japan has to offer.

FFSC representatives recommend several popular locations for Sailors to visit like Tokyo, Yokohama, and Kamakura. They also pass out instructions on how to get to each destination and what there is to see and do.

The Muse's wanted to see some of Japan's historical landmarks, so they opted to go to Kamakura, which is approximately 20 minutes away by train. Formerly the political capital of Japan during the Kamakura shogunate, which ran from 1185 to 1333, Kamakura is the home for many temples and shrines to visit and explore.

The couple's first destination was the Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu shrine, the largest Shinto shrine in the majority Buddhist Kamakura. The shrine was built in the 1100s and is a popular destination for Japanese citizens, who gather here to witness the first sunrise of the New Year. Twice a year, people can also see traditional horseback archery with performers in full samurai armor.

The Muse family enjoyed all the shrine had to offer, including reading their fortunes, praying for good luck and health as well as taking in the striking beauty of the shrine and its pristine grounds.

After the shrine, the couple hopped onto another train and found there way to the Kotokuin temple, home to the Great Buddha, or Daibutsu. The statue measures 13.35 m (43.79 ft) tall and is cast out of copper. It is said to have been created in 1252 and was originally housed inside a giant temple, but the entire building was washed away during a tidal wave in 1498. The Daibutsu has remained outdoors ever since.

For Jeff, seeing the Great Buddha was definitely a highlight of the day.

"It was amazing to be near something so massive," said Jeff. "We also went inside and saw how the entire statue was constructed from 30 different pieces. It was pretty cool to see how something so big could be made."

After leaving the Great Buddha courtyard, the couple walked to a souvenir shop nearby, where they shopped for souvenirs. While paying for their items, the elderly employees did their best to use English to help the payment process easier for the couple. This further influenced the couple's view that the kindness of the locals is out of the ordinary.

"With all the kindness that we receive, I believe it is up to us Sailors to be the best ambassadors possible," said Jeff. "We should be the best representatives we can to show our appreciation for their kindness."

Far East students take role as delegates for model UN in Yokosuka

By Emma Gallimore, Seahawk Contributor

High school students from Japan, Guam, Okinawa and Korea gathered at Yokosuka Middle School for the Far East Model United Nations (MUN), held March 2-4.

The event allows students to step into the roles of United Nations delegates. They debate and work toward resolution on some of the world's major international conflicts.

"It gives students a chance to realize there's a whole entire world out there," said Niles C. Kinnick High School (KHS) English Teacher and MUN club sponsor John Taylor. The Kinnick MUN club has been preparing for the event since October.

"These kids have pretty much become ambassadors from that country," Taylor said.

Delegates from each country sit on one of four councils: economic and social, general assembly, human rights and security. Students spend months researching the stance their country has taken on pre-released topics.

In addition to delegates, KHS also provided staff for the event. Pages run messages for delegates to help them keep in contact with other delegations.

Students in the press took pictures, wrote news pieces and editorials and updated the event's wiki (a Web page designed to enable anyone who accesses it to contribute or modify content) at http://munfe2009.pbwiki.com.

"Being press you get to see everything instead of being stuck in one room," said Kinnick ninth-grader Lajoie Bradley. Even so, she looks forward to being a delegate next year.

Kinnick and E.J. King High School ninth-graders discuss their response to a debate in the economic and social council during the Far East Model United Nations at Yokosuka Middle School March 2-4.

Photo by Erin Burke

Finally, council chairs keep debate running smoothly. Senior Adrienne Santos acted as both secretary general and co-chair of the general assembly. She got the job because she's a natural leader.

"When Adrienne talks," Taylor said. "Everybody listens."

Sometimes even council chairs need help so, now and then, Santos would leave the general assembly to help out other councils.

On the last day of the MUN, Marc Rogers, a senior from Yokota, and several other members of the economic and social council had requested an un-moderated caucus to finish editing a resolution, the delegations involved left the room to discuss.

"In the time we were gone they called a closed session." Rogers said. "They shut us out."

The delegates were exploiting a loophole. "Now that the secretary general is here it's getting better," Rogers said.

Event Director Denel MacWhyte, a math teacher at Kinnick expected some tricky politics. "These issues mirror the issues that real delegates have," he said. "There's a lot of opportunity for intrigue."

Students also get the opportunity to socialize and network. "This is the really cool part, just meeting other people," Taylor said.

Joel Lane, a senior from Osan Air Base, Republic of Korea, said, "It's a nice break from school, even though you're still doing something productive."