



# **VFA-115 Officers Guide: Moving to Japan**

*Updated SEP 2011*



I've divided this guide into two major sections. A "Pre-Move" section, detailing things to do before getting here and a "We're Here" section that discusses what to do after arriving in Atsugi. Throughout the process, **patience is important** – plan on everything taking longer than you expect. Remember, it's the government and nothing happens quickly or without the correct paperwork done in the correct order. Now let's get started...

## **Pre-Move**

### **ESTABLISHING CONTACT**

Ideally, your sponsor should get in touch with you even before your orders hit the message boards. Barring that, someone from the command should contact you as soon as your orders post. If for whatever reason that does not happen and they cannot contact you, inbound folks can contact us. Check out the VFA-115 Web site. It has some good info along with useful Points of Contact.

VFA-115 Duty Desk Phone Commercial from the States: 011-81-467-63-3595

Mailing Address: VFA-115  
Unit 25396  
FPO AP 96601-6228  
United States

<https://www.cnic.navy.mil/Atsugi/CVW-5/VFA-115/ContactUs/index.htm>

<https://www.cnic.navy.mil/Atsugi/index.htm>

[https://www.cnic.navy.mil/navycni/groups/public/documents/document/cnicp\\_a136856.pdf](https://www.cnic.navy.mil/navycni/groups/public/documents/document/cnicp_a136856.pdf)

### **ORDERS**

**You can't do anything until you have orders.** Make sure PERS cuts your orders as quickly as possible and that they have your ultimate command in Japan. Orders that end with an I-Stop or FRS won't help.

Throughout the entire process, your PSD rep should help with questions and guide you through the transition. Get to know them well and stop by at least weekly to provide updates on your progress.

### **SPONSOR**

Get in touch with your sponsor early. A good sponsor will make all the difference in explaining how things work and easing your transition. We've all been through it so we know what a PITA the process can be. Here's what to expect from your sponsor (I'll cover each in detail later):

1. Be a liaison for housing.
2. Help get a PO Box / Mailing address set up before you arrive (Requires Special POA and you can only get a PO Box if you have a Dependent Entry Approval)
3. Sign you up for the mandatory driving class, (DSN: 264-264-2983).
4. Sign you up for the AOB/ICR orientation brief that is five days long (mandatory prior to getting your permanent driver's license).
5. Help with the Child Development Center (AKA Daycare) for your kids while you are in classes (DSN 264-3524).
6. Should help drive you around.
7. Should help find a car to buy.

Also, ask them to send you a copy of the "Atsugi Insider". It's a great resource and full of useful info for both pre- and post-arrival.

### **DEPENDENT ENTRY APPROVAL (DEA)**

If you have dependents who will accompany you to Japan, you must have a Dependent Entry Approval message to get'em in the country. You need this for customs and for multiple places on base. In order to get the DEA you need to do the following:

1. Get No-Fee military dependent passports (these are separate from the regular tourist passports).
  - a. If your dependents are moving within two months you must have a "letter to expedite" in order to get the passport in time. PSD at your detaching command will facilitate this.
2. Get Dependent Military IDs (Not required for kids under 10 years of age).
3. Get the overseas screening complete. This is easier said than done. Here's the process:
  - a. Get all of your dependents' medical and dental records
  - b. Get all of your dependents' shot records
  - c. Get all of your dependents' school physical screening records
  - d. Before dragging the family into medical, have your corpsman at the overseas screening desk audit their records and tell you what needs to be done.
  - e. After meeting with your corpsman, make the required appointments with:
    - i. Dental
    - ii. Vaccinations
    - iii. The overseas screening consult Officer. (The person that signs off on the bottom line.)
  - f. Bring all your dependents to Dental.
  - g. Get all the required vaccinations.
  - h. Finish up any other medically required items.
  - i. Go back and meet with the Overseas screening for your final screening.
4. Compile all the paperwork that Medical/Dental/PSD, etc. gives you, take a copy of your orders and go to your "detaching" command's Admin/Personnel office.
5. Ensure they update your overseas suitability in BUPERS Online.
6. Next, follow up with your Admin/Personnel office for release of the Dependent Entry Approval message. A common mistake made by many of the stateside Admin/Personnel offices and PSDs is that they send the request to PSD Yokosuka instead of PSD Atsugi.

Throughout the entire process, your PSD rep should be helping you and making sure you don't miss a step. Use them as a resource and ask questions to make sure you've got your ducks in a row before wasting time driving around.

### **RECOMMENDED THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE STATES**

1. If you have "old stuff" and want new items, this is a perfect time to upgrade. TVs, grills, or other large household items are easy to purchase here in Japan. So donate or sell your old stuff, take the tax write off and get new items after getting settled.
2. Before canceling the cell phone you've had for years, get a Vonage box and have your "old" phone number transferred to a Vonage account. Once you get Internet access your Vonage number will essentially be free (minus the Vonage monthly fee) for your friends and family in the states to call you just like making a local call. Also contact your cell phone provider as many companies offer a Military Deployment "suspension" program.
3. Call your credit card company and let them know you're moving to Japan. If you don't, it's likely your credit card will be suspended multiple times for "suspicious overseas activity". Also, it's important to know that for "out-in-town purchases" there is a 1 percent foreign credit charge. This is normally waived for deployed military, so just talk with your credit card company to learn the details.
4. Make sure your stateside driver's license will not expire while you are in Japan. Consider going to AAA to get an international driver's license. If you have one, upon arriving you can rent a car for on-base driving right away.
5. Reserve a room at the Navy Lodge, NAF Atsugi (DSN 264-6880/6881/6883). Ensure they know this will be an extended stay until you move into housing.
6. You are entitled to store one car on the government's dime while in Japan. There are multiple government storage facilities in the U.S. If you choose to store your car at a family member's or friend's house and not one of the government facilities, then the Navy won't pay to route you through that location to pick up your car when your tour in Japan ends. If you use the government system, they will either PCS you to the location where your car is stored or transport your car to the facility nearest your next duty station in the U.S.
7. Your first big purchase in Japan will likely be a car. The dealers do accept American currency. Ensure you have quick access to the money required to purchase a vehicle. If you already have an account with NFCU or Community Bank you are fine (both are on base). Work-arounds: Take a loan out from either bank mentioned above and have your bank authorize max ATM transactions. Vehicle prices are discussed later.

### **WHEN SHOULD I ARRIVE?**

If you're an incoming Officer, plan on spending two weeks working through the administrative check-in process and attending the required classes. Yep, that seems crazy – but it's true. Try to finish all the required classes and the check-in process before actually going to "work". It's best if you can arrive on a Sunday, Monday or Tuesday. You are going to want to be in the FIRST AVAILABLE driver's class and they are held each Wednesday. Upon completion, you can get a 30-day driver's license that allows on-base driving privileges (Note: Once you complete the AOB-ICR class you will be eligible for the regular

driver's license). If you show up later in the week, you'll be walking or begging for rides from your sponsor for at least a week. Bottom line, plan on spending 10-14 days for check-in before you do any real squadron work or flying.

### **HOW TO MOVE YOUR STUFF, WHAT TO BRING & WHAT TO DO BEFORE PACKING:**

There are three separate moves:

1. Household goods (HHG) move: Big stuff, furniture items, etc.
2. Express shipment move: **The Express Shipment is 1000 lbs. plus 200 lbs. (JFTR states 2000 lbs.)** of professional gear good for uniforms, clothes, bedding, pots, pans, dishes, utensils, etc. It is highly recommended to include a bike in this shipment. If you live on base everything is within biking distance. More often than not, many families only purchase one vehicle and rely on a bike to get to and from work.
3. "Non-Temporary" Storage: Long-term storage for stuff you want to leave in the U.S.

To get the ball rolling you'll need to go to [WWW.MOVE.MIL](http://WWW.MOVE.MIL). Follow the steps and magically someone will call to confirm and movers will show up at your door.

**Things to keep in mind:** It takes six to eight WEEKS for both the express move (don't let the name fool you) and HHG move to reach Japan. When deciding on your move dates, be sure to build in enough lead-time so your things are already here when you get a house. If you get a house before your goods arrive, you can get temporary furniture (AKA stick furniture) in the interim. Don't be surprised if your Express Shipment arrives after your HHG or if your HHG arrives earlier than advertised.

**What to Bring:** If you live in a 3000 square foot house in the U.S., you'll be downsizing. Check the housing Web site for floor plans:

<http://www.housing.navy.mil/onestop/hqd/?bid=3>

In general, your on-base house will be no larger than 1400 square feet. So bring about half your stuff. A king-size bed will fit in the master bedroom but there won't be much room left over. Measure your stuff and see how it fits. Floor coverings are hardwood, carpet (in the renovated townhomes), or linoleum. Bring area rugs to cover the floors. Houses have all the appliances you need and include a washer and dryer but do not include a microwave. Storage is an issue. If you have a lot of "big toys" you might not have a place to keep them. CO/XO houses do have detached storage so it's less of a problem. The NEX also offers storage units for rent.

The Self-Help Office keeps a supply of donated HAZMAT (house cleaners, paint, etc.). These items are free. It is worth the visit before purchasing new materials. They also stock lawn mowers, weed eaters, rakes, steam cleaners, vacuums and much more.

The "Second Fiddle", a second-hand store located next to NFCU, is another great place to find items needed to help you get by until your HHG shipment arrives.

Below is a list of documents that you should hand-carry on the airplane:

### **RECOMMENDED DOCS TO HAND-CARRY**

\$200-300 USD Cash  
Passports  
Marriage/Birth Certificates  
Current PCS Orders  
Shipment Papers  
Tax Records  
Homeowner Documents  
Social Security Cards  
Children's School Records  
Medical Records/Shot Records  
Credit Card Information

Insurance Policies  
Wills/Legal Documents/Divorce Decree  
State Driver's License\*  
(Make sure it is good for your entire tour)  
Vehicle Title/Registration  
Bank Statements/Account Info  
SF-50s, Personnel Actions  
Employment/Resume Info  
Leave & Earning Statements

### **FLYING INTO JAPAN:**

Try to travel commercial. It saves you a ton of time and **you get frequent flyer miles!** Get a direct flight if you can. American Airlines has two flights per day out of Dallas that fly direct to Narita. Though it's a long flight, it saves a lot of time with all those bags. Check your orders and with the airlines for baggage restrictions but as a rule of thumb: Max out your bags allowed. You'll be living out of a suitcase for several weeks, possibly months. If you have kids, bring strollers, car seats, etc. (check with the airline first). Orders may allow for an extra bag for uniforms. Use it! **With orders and PO box set up you can mail stuff to yourself ahead of time, with a SPOA for you, your sponsor can pick up stuff and store for you if required.**

If you are traveling with pets be very careful about your flight plans. Most PSD personnel and travel offices are not smart on the pet restrictions and travel times. As a rule of thumb they will not allow pets on flights that are longer than 12 hours. Outside air temperature restrictions and kennel size restrictions can also be an issue. It's recommended that you talk directly to airlines to make sure they are good to go.

There is only one Narita shuttle that goes to Atsugi and it leaves at 1830. If you land earlier in the day you will have to hang out at the airport until the shuttle leaves. PCS rules don't allow you to hire a driver to pick you up from Narita unless you have a pet that you are transporting back (pets are not allowed on the Narita Shuttle).

**If you fly the armed forces flight plan on a long 10 hour flight from Seattle to Yakota. Multiple flights to get to Seattle, and a 2 hour ride from Yakota to Atsugi. It will take close to 30 hours start to finish.**

Expect to live in the Navy Lodge with dependent(s). You will live in the BOQ if you are a bachelor or if you are unaccompanied. When your dependent(s) arrive you will relocate to the Navy Lodge. If you have children you will have adjoining rooms. Rooms have a kitchenette, cable and Internet.

## **We're (I'm) Here!!! – Now What?**

Welcome to Japan!! Whether you arrive on a commercial carrier at Narita International Airport or via a freedom flight at Yakota, assuming the squadron is in town, your sponsor should be there to meet you, or at least set up ground transportation to get you from the airport to the Navy Lodge or BOQ. Your sponsor or the transportation agent should have a sign with your name on it. They should be waiting for you once you clear customs. (If they

are not meeting you at the airport, an agent will be at the DoD counter in Terminal 1, if you land in Terminal 2 you need to catch a shuttle bus to Terminal 1 from Bus Stop 8 or 18) Narita has a military help desk and Yakota is an Air Force Base, so if anything doesn't go as planned you will have DoD folks there to help and both Narita and Yakota have a military shuttle bus that will take you right to Navy Lodging.

After arriving on base, plan on not getting any good sleep for a few days. Jet lag is a real issue, and it'll take a few days, if not a week, to fully acclimate. The best way to work through the jet lag is to just "power through". Stay awake when the sun is up and go to sleep two or three hours after sunset.

After you get your first night's sleep, you're going to want to start the check-in process. Just like the "pre-move" period, after you arrive in Atsugi, **patience is important**. Nothing happens quickly or without the correct paperwork done in the correct order. Most of the civilians on base are Japanese nationals. They are very polite and try to be helpful but they are also FANATICAL about proper paperwork. If your paperwork isn't in order you WILL NOT get things done. Also, TARDINESS is not tolerated. If you show up late to a required class, don't plan on being allowed to attend. Being late to a class might cost you an extra week of pain...

As for the rest of the check-in process, honestly, it's even worse than in the U.S. Everything takes about two to three times longer than you'd expect. There are a lot of places to check in, forms to fill out, stamps to get, etc., before you can do anything. **If the service member isn't available and the spouse does the check-in process alone, he or she MUST have a GENERAL POWER OF ATTORNEY to get anything done (Special POA's if you want to get specific). Bring the POA, copies of your sponsor's orders, and your dependent entry approval to everything you do without your sponsor.** With that said, it's easier for Officers in uniform to take care of the check-in. It's unfortunate but spouses don't get as much "traction" as an Officer, so keep that in mind.

### **THINGS TO KNOW RIGHT OFF THE BAT**

If you haven't already heard, Atsugi is a "fishbowl". You will live, work, eat and play in close proximity to a very small group of people. Just be aware that, like it or not, privacy is somewhat curtailed and everyone usually knows everyone else's business.

### **CHECK IN WITH YOUR SQUADRON AND PSD**

This is simple and pretty straight forward. Check in with your gaining command and PSD. Get your orders stamped and begin the paperwork for your travel claim and Temporary Lodging Allowance payments (TLA). Admin and PSD will give you a check-in sheet that will guide you through the rest of the process.

### **CHECK IN WITH TRICARE AND MEDICAL**

If you have dependents, you'll need to start with Tricare. Get your wife and kids updated with Tricare. Tricare is located in the building behind the branch medical clinic. Next, take your medical/dental records to the branch clinic and check in. If you have dependents, make sure to bring all of their records, too.

### **DRIVER'S LICENSE CLASS**

Get the **driver's class done ASAP** after getting here. It's held every Wednesday. After that, you can get a temporary 30-day "on base" driver's license so you can buy a car and not have to walk everywhere or beg for rides.

### **BUYING A CAR**

You'll need the following before you can purchase a vehicle:

1. A valid U.S. Military/DoD civilian dependent ID card
2. A valid U.S. state driver's license
3. A U.S. Forces Japan (temporary or permanent) driver's license
4. PCS orders

Once you've met all the above requirements you can buy a car. Cars are relatively cheap and folks who are leaving are required to get rid of their cars before they check out. Talk with your squadron mates about what's best for you. Cars can be purchased from \$500 to \$4000 (for a nice low-mile van or sedan). Wellchams is the car dealer a lot of people use. The owner is a man named John. He speaks perfect English and has two car lots – one on-base and one off-base by the front gate. He has a good reputation for selling decent cars and he handles a lot of the paperwork with the local city government. His cars are probably a few hundred dollars more than other lots around, but it's worth the extra money not having to deal with Atsugi City Hall.

Buying is the easy part ... registering it on base is not easy or fun. But here's how you do it:

1. Find a car you like and buy it. You will need to put down a small deposit for the dealer to hold the vehicle.
2. The dealer should give you a copy of the title.
3. Go to City Hall to get a temporary plate.
4. Take your title copy and go to the insurance office and buy insurance. You must buy 3 months minimum liability insurance.
5. Go to the VRO with your insurance, and title copy. Get a Temp Pass and LTO paperwork.
6. Go back to the dealer with the temp tags & temp base pass. Pay for the car and receive the title.
7. Bring the car on base and get it inspected at the NEX Autoport.
8. Go back to VRO and have a "runner" go out in town to handle LTO.
  - a. Register out in town
  - b. Get a permanent plate
  - c. Pay the road tax
  - d. Pay the weight tax
9. A runner will return your temporary plates to City Hall.
10. Go back to VRO with all your paperwork (orders, title, inspection, proof of insurance, JCI paperwork, registration, insurance and temporary pass) and get your on-base sticker.

Note: If you use Wellchams most of the back-and-forth paperwork drill is done for you. But of course you'll pay a little extra for the convenience.

### **AREA ORIENTATION BRIEF & INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS CLASS (AOB / ICR).**

This is a required class for all service members, spouses, and anyone who wants off-base driving privileges. The class lasts Monday through Friday. It has some good information, especially for first timers to Japan. For Officers, remember the classes are designed to inform "everyone" E-1 and up. Even though some of it might be "painfully obvious", take it in stride and learn as much as you can. You need an AOB/ICR completion certificate to get your permanent driver's license. There's no way out of it; the Japanese are fanatical about attendance and take roll two or three times each day.

## **SCHOOLS**

The military offers one free ticket per year, round trip, for dependents to attend college stateside. This ticket only originates from Japan, thus the dependent must travel with you during your PCS move to take advantage of this perk. Consult the Admin department for further details.

<https://www.cnic.navy.mil/Atsugi/CommunitySupport/Education/index.htm>

Shirley Lanham Elementary School (<http://www.lanham-es.pac.dodea.edu/>) receives high marks. The middle and high schools are mixed bags – some good, some bad. The elementary school is on base and within walking distance from the Navy Lodge. School starts at 0800. Camp Zama Middle/High School (<http://www.zama-hs.pac.dodea.edu/>) is on Camp Zama (30 minutes north by bus). The school bus picks up around 0640 from the Lodge if you have kids in middle or high school.

## **HOUSING ON ATSUGI / TLA**

<https://www.cnic.navy.mil/Atsugi/Departments/Housing/index.htm>

Phone # - DSN: 264-3237 / commercial from states: 011-81-467-63-3237

The housing office can be frustrating. With that caveat, they have good counselors to help guide you through the process. Most folks with children want to live on base. Getting "on-base housing" can be a challenge and an exercise in patience. Wait times for units to become available can be significant. Plan on living in the BOQ or Navy Lodge for up to eight weeks. If you are staying at the Navy Lodge and have children, you are authorized **TWO ADJOINING ROOMS**. Often the wait isn't that long, but be prepared. The Navy Lodge isn't too bad and everyone goes through it... (Navy Lodge DSN 264-6880) While you're staying in the Navy Lodge you'll receive Temporary Lodging Allowance (TLA). It's an allowance that pays for your room(s) and additional expenses. The Admin department will assist you getting the TLA payments. You'll need to bring your Navy Lodge room receipt(s) to the housing office first and get them to stamp it. Once you have the receipt with a housing office stamp, bring it to Admin for processing. The money should post to your account in a few days.

Prior to arriving, contact Jeff Baulknight (housing manager) [[Charles.Baulknight@fe.navy.mil](mailto:Charles.Baulknight@fe.navy.mil)] and make sure he knows you're coming. He should be able to assist you and assign a counselor to help you before you arrive. Your sponsor should be able to help with that as well.

The best way to circumvent the delays is to provide your sponsor with a Special Power of Attorney so he can go to housing with a copy of your orders and get all the paperwork completed before you arrive.

## **SHOPPING ON BASE (NEX AND COMMISSARY)**

Both the Exchange and Commissary are pretty good and have ample supplies of things you wish to purchase. With that said, the selection isn't as good as you're accustomed to in the U.S.; some items are hard to find and when they are in stock, they sell out quickly. A good rule to remember is that if you want it, pack it in your HHG shipment. While it's not impossible to find nice things once you get here, it might be challenging.

The Commissary is excellent. Food items are exactly what you're used to in the U.S. and the selection is great. Prices are very reasonable when compared to food costs out in town.

Other places to shop are Camp Zama Army Air Force Exchange (20 minutes away) and Fleet Activities, Yokosuka NEX (40 minutes away) with Toll roads (\$24 round trip).

## **CELL PHONES**

Softbank is the on-base cell phone provider and is located inside the NEX food court. Their service is good and the prices here are the same as in the U.S. Plans are different so ask your sponsor which one is best. Additionally, it is illegal to talk on your phone in the car while driving. As for phones, I highly recommend getting the latest and greatest **Apple iPhone** product. The iPhone is less a telephone and more a survival tool. Get it, you'll love it. There are multiple iPhone APPs that are great and will make your time in Japan much easier. Here's a short list of my recs:

1. Metro (Japan train schedules and directions)
2. Jibbig-Jp (talk to translate English to Japanese and vice/versa)
3. Hyperdia (train travel)
4. Travel Talk for Japan (cheap English to Japanese translator)
5. iCurrencyPad (quickly computes \$ to Yen and vice/versa)
6. Compass
7. Moving Map with GPS functionality. You will need this in Japan!
8. Skype so you can make calls on the 3G network and wifi
9. Textplus (allows you to text stateside cell phone numbers for free)

## **BANKING**

There are two banks on base: Navy Federal and Community Bank. The only drawback with Navy Federal is that getting Yen from them is expensive. Part of the deal they had to sign to get a branch on base was to be less competitive than the Community Bank when exchanging dollars to Yen. (Non-compete clause). Other than the non-compete clause, Navy Federal here works just like in the U.S. and is the way to go. If you sign up for Navy Federal's active duty checking all of your ATM fees at Community Bank are refunded.

## **MOVERS IN JAPAN:**

When you finally get a house, plan on the movers being prompt and not wearing shoes in your house. If they say 8:00 a.m., they will be there at 7:45 am. The movers will unpack all your boxes if you want them to or just ones that you specify. Beds will be set up and any major furniture. They will take a break at 10:00 a.m., a quick lunch break, and another break in the afternoon. One person in the crew should speak English.

Tipping is offensive in Japan. In exchange, Japanese movers love American food and drinks like Oreos, Coke, and hot tea if the weather is cold. Our movers only wanted strong American coffee. If you are on base, Taco Bell or something like that is appreciated. Just ask. Do not tip.

### **OTHERS**

1. In the lobby of the Base Admin building and at the BOQ front desk there are directions to numerous locations around Japan (from Costco to the U.S. Embassy). These are gouge when trying to get around Japan.
2. The NEX Auto Port offers rental vehicles that include toll passes.

### **SAVED ROUNDS**

Packing up and moving halfway around the world is hard. Make sure you and your spouse have copies of all the required paperwork and that you use the resources mentioned in the gouge. Engage early with the command and with your sponsor. We've all been through it, know what it's like, and want to help.