

CMSgt T. Wayne Babb was with the U.S. Air Force for 30 years. He went around the world three times, to two Texas State Fairs, and a goat roping. He just about saw it all. Some of his experiences were funny, some not-so-funny, and some were downright tragic. You'll find them all in **WAR STORIES: Looking Back at a 30-Year Military Career.**

WAR STORIES

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WAR STORIES

LOOKING BACK AT A 30-YEAR
MILITARY CAREER



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ISBN 978-1-60910-577-8

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This manuscript has undergone a security classification review and was released (as amended) for publication by The Department of Defense Directorate for Security.

Printed in the United States of America.

The events in this book, and *most* of the characters in it, are factual; however, characters who are portrayed in a negative light in this text have been given fictitious names.

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2010

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**6920th Security Wing
Misawa Air Base, Japan
February 1966 - March 1969**

INTRODUCTION

Misawa, Japan, located on northern Honshu in Aomori Prefecture (State), has a longstanding connection with the military. It dates back to the nineteenth century when the Emperor of Japan chose the lush pastures surrounding Misawa to establish stables to breed fine horses for the royal family, high ranking government officials, and military generals. The cavalry was assigned to garrison the stables and, over time, a cavalry post evolved around the stables.

In 1931, the operational cavalry was pulled out of Misawa to fight in China, but the post remained active as a cavalry training base. The remainder of the cavalry pulled out of Misawa when the Japanese Army constructed the first runway there, turning it into an Air Force Base for long range bombers in 1938.

Lake Ogawara, which lies just west of the airfield, has a depth very similar to the waters of Pearl Harbor. In the spring of 1941, the Japanese military fashioned dirt hills near the shore of the lake to resemble the shapes of battleships and cruisers that were anchored in Pearl Harbor.

This provided for a realistic view for their pilots from the air. The pilots conducted low level bombing runs, dropping torpedoes into the shallow depths of Lake Ogawara. This practice developed and refined the method to attack Pearl Harbor.

Shortly thereafter, in 1942, the 22nd Imperial Navy Air Wing assumed control of the base and the mission changed to research and development. Some of that research and development involved Kamikaze training.

Toward the end of World War II, the village of Misawa and the base suffered heavy damage from American fighters and bombers. The base was 90 percent destroyed, so when occupation troops

arrived, there wasn't much to work with. Nevertheless, construction to restore the base to operational condition began immediately.

By June 25, 1950 when the North Koreans attacked their brethren to the south, Misawa Air Base was up and running. MiG-15s were wreaking havoc on South Korean and U.S. ground forces, but the F-80s stationed at Misawa lacked the combat radius to engage the enemy fighters.

Two innovative Air Force lieutenants[♥] modified the fuel tank on an F-80, increasing its capacity by 100 gallons, but it still wasn't enough to allow for a flight to Korea and return to Misawa. Wing tanks were added to the aircraft. The tanks rendered the fighter slightly unstable and the wind drag and extra weight slowed it. Nevertheless, it was able to reach Korea, drop the tanks, engage in combat operations for a short time, and return.

There was opposition from several quarters within the Air Force, but the Commander of 5th Air Force ignored the naysayers. He ordered all the F-80s modified and they began flying combat sorties from Misawa.

The 1st Radio Squadron (Mobile) in southern Japan was having its own problems providing intelligence support to the war effort; radio signals emanating from North Korea and the Soviet Union were difficult to hear from their location. They decided to move, but to where? Several teams of Morse intercept operators were dispatched to locations in Northern Japan and a few islands off its coast to conduct "hearability studies". One of those locations was Misawa Air Base.

Radio reception from Misawa was excellent, so operators equipped with mobile equipment in vans were sent on temporary duty to establish Detachment 11 of 1st RSM. They would intercept and distribute intelligence from there until the entire unit could be moved. To reduce the possibility of radio interference, the operators set up the temporary facilities on a plateau adjacent to Lake Ogawara about five miles from the base. The plateau soon became known as "The Hill".

[♥] See Appendix 1 for a complete rundown of the officer and enlisted rank structure.

When the entire unit did move, The Hill had no permanent facilities for the men to live and work in, so they lived and worked in tents. Conditions were Spartan, especially that first winter.



Photograph contributed by Royce Lloyd

Tents housing members of the 1st RSM their first winter at Misawa.

Within a year, the tents were replaced by permanent living quarters and Operations Building. Life for the troops improved dramatically and continued to improve over the years. By the time I arrived at Misawa the first time in January, 1962, The Hill was a very comfortable place to live and work.

Life on Main Base wasn't bad either. It was a large installation that featured an 18 hole golf course; a ski slope; a beach on Lake Ogawara; an Olympic size, indoor swimming pool; a basketball court; large bowling alley; and softball, baseball, and football fields. Additionally, the base had a large, well stocked commissary; a Base Exchange featuring U.S. goods; TV and radio stations; movie theater showing first run American movies; bus and taxi service; a large library; a modern hospital; dependant schools with grades K – 12; and Airman, NCO, and Officers Clubs featuring first rate restaurants with live entertainment in the ballrooms on weekends. In other words, Misawa Air Base was a small American city with jet noise.



Photograph contributed by Harold Amburn

The Richard Bong Theater showing “The Guns of Naverone” at the time this photograph was taken.

When you stepped off the base, you left Little America behind and entered the Orient. There were scores of Chinese and Japanese restaurants serving delicious food; all manner of shops selling a wide variety of goods; movie theaters showing both Japanese movies and American film with Japanese subtitles; and even a department store. These were things one might expect to find in any Japanese town, but most of the business establishments catered to an American clientele from the base.

Given Misawa’s long history of having a military base in their back yard, they had mastered the art of supplying what the men on them wanted most—wine, women, and song. There were literally hundreds of alcohol dispensing establishments in town, ranging from tiny three-stool sake bars, to a couple of large cabarets with live entertainment. The majority of the watering holes, however, were medium sized bars that played current American Top 10 hits on expensive stereo gear. They dispensed excellent Japanese beer, not so excellent Japanese whiskey, and were stocked with bar girls who drew in young G.I.s in droves.



Photograph contributed by Tom Roach

Bar girls lounging outside one of Misawa's many bars.

This type bar could be found all over Misawa, but most were concentrated in a little side street just outside the gate the GIs dubbed A.P. Alley. The area derived its name from the regular patrols conducted by Air Policemen from the base who maintained law and order.

During my first Misawa tour, I was a fervent denizen of A.P. Alley who enjoyed all its pleasures as a wild, 21 year old, young buck. My second tour at Misawa was a whole 'nuther matter. That time, I was a 26 year old newlywed who led the domestic life with his new bride.

I worked from seven to four, came home to my cozy home, ate supper, drank a few beers while I watched the boob tube, then went to bed. We participated in mixed doubles bowling leagues, went to house parties at friends' homes, attended intramural sports events, and went out for dinner and a movie. On weekends, we traveled around Northern Honshu occasionally, or I worked in the yard, or

we went to the Airman's Club for an evening of partying. The ultimate in the happily married lifestyle.

I liked Misawa, both the town and the base, or I would never have gone back for that second tour. The work was interesting, there were plenty of fun things to do off duty, and the cost of living made it possible for us to live well. That being said, Misawa did have its drawbacks.

The first was earthquakes. Misawa had a lot of them. No matter how minor they might be, they scared the be-Jesus out of me. Houses are not supposed to shake; utility poles are not supposed to sway; the ground is not supposed to undulate. When they did, I would sometimes lose my equilibrium, which would cause my stomach to flip, which would cause me to toss my lunch. Earthquakes were a bad thing.

Right behind the earthquakes was the weather. The summers were short and mild and the winters were long and vicious. An annual snowfall in excess of 100 inches was not unusual. Snow storms rarely produced fatalities like earthquakes could, but they proved to be a major league pain in the ka-toosh.

The locals, who had been dealing with monstrous accumulations of snow for generations piled upon generations, knew how to handle the inconvenience. They all but ignored it. When a big one hit, they would clear the main street where most of the businesses were, but ignored side streets and alleys. For those areas, the only snow removal device was sunshine.

The base had a little better handle on the situation. They imported giant snowplows from the States and they did a marvelous job. But since the mission of the base was to keep the fighters flying, the runways took priority over everything else. The plows would barrel down a runway at a high rate of speed, staggered in a line four abreast, throwing snow sixty feet into the air. When the runways were ready for flight operations, the plows turned their attention to the base's streets and soon, things were back to normal—until the next “big one” hit.

It did not happen often, but every two or three years, a snowstorm would envelop the base that even the sophisticated snow removal equipment could not handle. When that happened, all you could do was hunker down where you were and wait for the cavalry to arrive.



Photograph contributed by Jim Kaus

A.P. Alley after a particularly awesome snowstorm.

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