

# At the End of the Game

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

All eyes are fixed on the pitcher. He signals to the catcher, winds up, and lets fly with an underhand pitch. The batter's raised left foot twitches nervously. He knows that if he strikes out on this pitch, the game is over. His team will have lost. The pressure is on as the ball speeds toward him. He can't miss.

Tonight's TV news will not likely feature the results of this "international" game. Although one of a long ongoing series of "transpacific" softball confrontations at this particular venue, it is of interest only to its participants. No one else even knows that these games have gone on for a quarter of a century in this obscure place, and that they will soon end.

The site of this game is the farthest-flung inhabited fragment of Japan, Minamitorishima. It is usually labeled as Marcus Island on English-language maps. You can find it about 1,600 kilometers southeast of Tokyo. This lonely place, which is in fact one of the world's most isolated inhabited bits of land, graced no one's charts until it was discovered in 1864. The Japanese government claimed it, a claim that it had to reinforce with a detachment of marines in 1902 after an American captain, using outdated charts that led him to believe that he had discovered the island, landed in order to develop a guano-mining enterprise to exploit the rich and odoriferous deposits left by countless generations of seabirds. That same year, a Japanese settlement of 58 souls was established; it succumbed to the difficulties of distance and was abandoned in 1933.

The Second World War saw the tiny (about 1 square kilometer) island fortified by Japan, and although it was attacked by naval forces, it was not invaded. Its 2,000-strong garrison left after the cessation of hostilities in 1945. From that year until 1968, when the island was restored to Japanese sovereignty, it was under U.S. administration, and during those years, a weather observation station and long-range navigation (LORAN) transmitting facility were established. In 1968, Japanese contingents from the

Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Japanese Meteorological Agency took up residence. The average number of Marcus inhabitants would hover around 56, evenly divided between the Japanese personnel and members of the United States Coast Guard.

The LORAN system is a matrix of broadcast beacons that covers the globe; its transmitting stations are scattered around the world, usually in out-of-the-way locations. Until recently, all were manned and maintained by the U.S. Coast Guard. But the four stations on Japanese territory have been scheduled to be handed over to the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency this year; those in Hokkaido and Okinawa made the switch at the end of July and the stations on Iwo Jima (of World War Two fame) and here on Marcus Island will do so at the end of September.

This last transfer brings an end to 25 years of international softball games and bilingual beach barbecues at this distant outpost. Although the two distinctly different little communities have coexisted a couple of hundred meters apart, there has always been a remarkably open friendliness between them. Marcus has a strange and compelling atmosphere of tranquility; perhaps crusty politicians and hard-line trade negotiators should be exiled here. They might even eventually get together for a softball game, since there's really not much else to do ...

The game is over. The batter swung, and missed, giving the Coast Guard a 47-2 victory. After putting away the balls and bats and gloves, both sides retire to a spot above the beach that looks out over the narrow mirror-surfaced lagoon. Potato salad and *chirashi-zushi* rest near tubs of cold beer with labels of Budweiser and Miller and Kirin and Sapporo. Toasts are exchanged as the sun slides into a darkening sea. It is the end of a little era, a happy time in a peaceful place known to only a few. JTI

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