

Two LORAN stations turned over to Japan

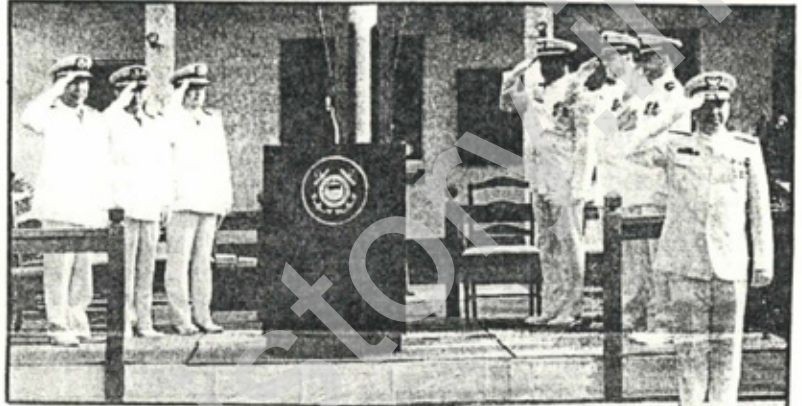
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MISAWA AIR BASE, Japan — The Long Range Aid To Navigation radio signals that crisscross this side of the ocean still sound the same to the ships and planes using them, but their source changed this week as two LORAN stations manned by U.S. Coast Guardsmen were turned over to the Japanese government.

In a Thursday ceremony, Okinawa's Gesashi LORAN station was turned over to Japan's Maritime Safety Agency, and the ritual was mirrored Friday at the Tokachibuto station on Hokkaido's southeast coast. On Wednesday, a third station was shut down on Guam.

Coast Guard officials said the moves came about mainly because of technology. Dating back to the days following World War II, land-based LORAN stations transmit radio signals, which are picked up by aircraft and ships to fix their positions. These days, American navigators are more likely to use newer devices such as the Global Positioning System, which relies on a series of special satellites.

All the same, LORAN continues to be important to a number of Japanese fishing and coastal transport craft, and for that reason, their government opted to take over the stations. Other LORAN stations at Yokota Air Base, Marcus Island and Iwo Jima will also be turned over to the Japanese by Oct. 1, said a Coast Guard spokesman.



Stephanie Clark/Special to Stripes
14th Coast Guard District Commander Rear Adm. Howard B. Gehring, front, at Okinawa's Gesashi LORAN station.

"The user won't see a difference with the changeover, even though (the station) might be run a bit differently," noted Petty Officer Scott Bernard, one of 22 Coast Guardsmen who left the Okinawa station Thursday.

At the Hokkaido station, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Al Harada said most of the 22 men assigned there came to enjoy the area's quiet lifestyle and the ties the station has enjoyed with the community since it opened in 1963.

"We get invited to all the local festivals, we include each other in sporting events and they make sure we know about all their parties," said Harada, Hokkaido's senior technical officer. "They threw a goodbye party for us, and there have been plenty of personal good-byes as well."

For 59-year-old Hiromichi Shishihara, the end of the

Americans on Hokkaido meant retirement time for him. Hired when the station opened to cook for the Coast Guardsmen, Shishihara said he got the job because of the language and culinary skills he acquired as an exchange student in California.

"I thought it would be for a short time, but I liked the job, I especially liked the Americans, and it's been 30 years since I started," Shishihara added. "I'm happy I took the job — we always took care of each other and we were friends."

Shishihara, who plans to visit Hawaii and California after retiring, estimated that nearly 50 Americans had married local girls over the years, and many of the couples often return for a visit. Harada said he's seen two marriages in his nine months in Hokkaido.

"Everyone will miss the gaijin (foreigner)," Shishihara added.

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