

THE TSUNAMI AND THE RECOVERY

When I registered for the 2013 Grassroots Summit in Shimane Prefecture, Japan, I also registered for the post-summit trip to Sendai. This city is in Miyagi Prefecture, where I had visited in 2009, and I was eager to revisit old friends and to see the damage done by the tsunami that struck the area on March 11, 2011. After the disaster I tried to contact my 2009 host family, Kou and Kazue Sato, in Matsuyama. It took 3 weeks before I learned they were okay. They were fortunate, as they lived inland from the disaster area and just lost electric power, as did approximately 4.4 million households in Japan. The 9.0 magnitude earthquake that caused the tsunami occurred 43 miles east of Tohoku, Japan, and 19 miles under the water. It caused tsunami waves that were as tall as 130 feet in some sea areas and the wave surge had travelled up to 6 miles inland in the Sendai area. The power of the earthquake was so great that it actually moved Honshu, the main island in Japan, eight feet to the east.

Mr. Sato knew of my arrival from previous emails I had had with him and it was great to see him when I arrived in Sendai. He had attended a funeral that day, but found time in his schedule to briefly visit with me and even brought a nice present, which is a common courtesy in Japan. After a short visit with him, I met my new homestay host family, Masataka and Akiko Tatsuda. This nice couple, about my age, was very friendly and made my stay in the Sendai area very enjoyable and provided some delectable meals.



Akiko and Masa Tatsuda in Sendai on my arrival



An enjoyable dinner of raw seafood (sashimi)

In the morning our tour group visited the coastline area of Sendai where the tsunami had gone 5 miles inland from the coast. Several thousand persons had been killed in this area and many were the elderly and the very young. We were told that most of the older children were in school and their parents were working in the city, so only the youngest children and the grandparents were home and bore the brunt of the tragedy. Many seniors that had survived the wave destruction died subsequently from hypothermia due to the absence of electric heat to keep them warm in the cold March weather. Other survivors, who made it to shelters, subsequently died due to the loss of their medicines when the wave tore their homes away. In one area we visited, only the elementary school was standing amidst the concrete foundations of hundreds of homes that were destroyed. Survivors, who had received warnings and had made it to the rooftop of the elementary school, could only watch as homes were destroyed.

Numerous volunteers have come to the area to help in the cleanup and reclaim the land. Many of the house lots have not been claimed by relatives as in many cases whole families perished in the disaster. Much of the coastline will revert to agricultural areas, but a problem is that at present the water in the ground has high salt content. It might take years before fresh water in the water table is restored to normal for drinking and agriculture.



Elementary school that survived the tsunami



Foundations of homes devastated by tsunami

A high berm is being built along the coast that might reduce future waves and discussions are ongoing on how to mitigate future damage to property and human life. Because this area had been devastated in the past there was a berm about 2 miles inland with stairs for an escape route, which did lessen some of the damage and loss of life.

A Buddhist monument has been constructed along the coastal dune area that was funded by a private individual. A Shinto torii also was constructed near the monument. We were told it is common in Japan to have recognition and remembrances of a tragedy by both religions in the same area.



Only a few homes were standing after the tsunami.
Trees in distant horizon are on the coastal dune.



Shinto torii with statue of Goddess of Mercy in rear.
The dark stone wall has names of victims.



Coastal area near Sendai before tsunami



Coastal area near Sendai after tsunami

Several weeks after I returned to the USA from my Japanese trip, I received an email from Ms. Masae Coomber, who had been my translator for my Yokohama lecture. I had told her about my trip to Sendai and the tsunami damage that we had seen and she informed me that during the rescue and recovery operation that the USNS Matthew Perry (T-AKE-9) had been one of the ships that had assisted the Japanese. The “T” in the ship’s designation indicates it is manned by civilians as part of the Military Sealift Command. I had knowledge about the Navy’s role in the response, but did not know that the ship named for my ancestor was one of the ships.

The USNS Matthew Perry is a supply ship that was built in San Diego and was launched and christened on August 16, 2009. The ship was sponsored by Hester Evans, a great-great-great granddaughter of Commodore Perry. The ship participated in disaster relief after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and subsequent tsunami. During the 21 days of operations, the USNS Matthew Perry completed 17 separate replenishment events. The ship transported relief supplies and delivered more than 1.5 million gallons of fuel to needy areas of Japan. The relief effort was appropriately called Operation Tomodachi, which means friendship.



USNS Matthew Perry (T-AKE-9) with helicopter departing with supplies to Japan During tsunami relief efforts



USNS Matthew Perry in Hawaii