

## Lt. Col. Dyer's CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE HELPS Military In a Crisis

Stephen Dyer (JD '85) learned Japanese to save his University of Notre Dame scholarship. He enhanced his knowledge during a two-year Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship to Japan between his first and second years of law school.

His combination of Japanese culture, language and experience, together with his presence in Honolulu, turned out to be an advantageous mix 10 years ago when a fatal ship accident could have escalated into international discord.

On Feb. 9, 2001, the Ehime Maru, a Japanese fishing trawler owned by the government of Ehime Prefecture, was in the midst of a 74-day training mission for high school students interested in becoming fishermen. The 191-foot-long ship, which had docked at Honolulu the day before, was carrying 35 people.

Also on that date, the USS Greenville, a U.S. Navy submarine, was in the midst of a demonstration for civilian visitors there to see the submarine's capabilities.

Shortly before 2 p.m. on that hazy Friday afternoon about nine nautical miles off the coast of Oahu, the USS Greenville collided with the Ehime Maru while demonstrating an emergency rapid-ascent maneuver. The submarine's rudder sliced the Japanese ship, which almost immediately began to sink. The Greenville was too large to get close enough to help those who had been tossed overboard. In the end, nine people died including four high school students.

That Friday night, Dyer, an attorney at the Honolulu firm of Ayabe Chong Nishimoto Sia & Nakamura, was getting ready to take clients to dinner when the JAG office at U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) called asking for his assistance. They wanted him to meet with the Japanese survivors, find out their needs, and express regret but not apologize, as the details of what happened were unclear at that point.

Dyer, a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves, recommended he accompany a higher-level officer to meet with



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the Ehime Maru captain and crew to show PACOM's level of concern and respect. They visited the crew late that evening at the U.S. Coast Guard facility where they had been taken after rescue. The crew were all wearing prisoner jumpsuits, as all their belongings had been lost. The captain was at first startled that the 6-foot-2-inch, green-eyed American was speaking Japanese to him. But then, Dyer believes, the captain drew some comfort from being able to communicate in his native language.

“The captain was shell-shocked and perhaps embarrassed to have survived,” Dyer said. “But then he opened up, and told us what his needs were.”

In Japanese culture, the importance of doing the right thing cannot be overstated, Dyer said.

“In this situation, doing the right thing was doing it the Japanese way, or at least understanding Japanese customs and meeting their loss with compassion and understanding on their terms,” he said.

Dyer set about arranging for basic necessities for the survivors, communicating information from the continued search for the nine missing Japanese and from the investigation into the accident, and assisting both the crew and their families, as well as advising PACOM leadership, in the immediate aftermath.

During those efforts, understanding Japanese culture was a way to avoid missteps that could make the situation worse. Dyer knew, for example, that rather than hand a check to the captain to purchase clothing and supplies for his crew, Japanese custom dictated that each man receive an envelope with his name inscribed in Kanji with crisp new cash inside.

By the following day, the facts had been sorted out and Dyer was authorized to make a formal apology to the Ehime Maru captain and crew when he delivered the envelopes. Dyer had earned a black belt in the martial art of Iaido (the way of the samurai sword), where he learned the movements for ritual apology, and he employed those in delivering the official apology on behalf of the United States government.

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“If my efforts had any effect, it was that things could have turned out much worse if we hadn’t approached things in the right way,” Dyer said. “I think it was the start of our making lemonade out of lemons.”

Dyer was invited to a memorial service in Honolulu earlier this year, marking the 10-year anniversary of the accident.

He seems to downplay his role, but the U.S. military has a different sense of his efforts. PACOM awarded Dyer the Joint Service Achievement Medal for his actions, noting that he was called in on short notice “to assist with the urgent handling of

international issues” and that his efforts were “invaluable to reaching an amicable resolution.”

Professor Robert “Gil” Johnston, who taught Dyer when he was a student at John Marshall, said that Dyer acted admirably.

“He is credited with defusing an extremely embarrassing incident for the U.S.,” Johnston said, “and avoiding what was rapidly mounting into a major international incident.”

Says Dyer, “I was just doing my job, but I’m thinking I was the right guy in the right place at the right time.”

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