

Island force keeps ‘southern gate’ safe

A small group of police officers is charged with ensuring the safety of a collection of outcrops, islands and reefs in the South China Sea. **Zhang Zhihao** reports from Sansha, Hainan province.

With palm trees, warm breezes and skies as blue as the sea, Sansha — a collection of islands, reefs and areas of ocean in the South China Sea which form China's southernmost prefecture-level city — seems like a tropical paradise.

Appearances can be deceptive, though, and for outsiders trouble and danger can emerge from the most unlikely places, even the water supply.

In 2014, two years after he arrived, Li Mingjian, a 34-year-old frontier guard on Yongxing Island — which acts as Sansha's administrative center — felt a sharp pain in his abdomen. When Li consulted a doctor, he was told that a kidney stone had become stuck in his ureter. The condition is a common one as a result of the high levels of salt in the local water, so the doctor advised Li to “drink plenty of bottled water and jump up and down to dislodge the stone”.

The lack of fresh drinking water has long been a challenge for the frontier guards of the Chinese People's Armed Police on Yongxing, which covers about 3 square kilometers, making it the largest island in the Xisha archipelago.

“Sansha's islands share four highs: temperature, humidity, salinity and solar radiation, as well as a lack of soil and fresh water. But we have one thing in abundance: typhoons,” said Huang Qingze, the political commissar for the PAP Sansha frontier defense division. “These are islands that try men's souls.”

Founded in November 1959 as the Xisha Yongxing Police Force, the division adopted its current name in 2012, when Sansha was established. Now, the force polices more than 400 islands in the Xisha, Nansha and Zhongsha archipelagoes in the South China Sea, covering 2 million sq km of ocean, Huang said.

Since 2012, the division has inspected the travel documents of more than 16,000 people every year, and prevented more than 600 illegal visits.

The force has also deterred and investigated 142 illegal foreign fishing vessels and 1,350 fishermen, and has confiscated 4,860 kilograms of explosives, 1,000 primers and 560 meters of fuse, according to the division's records office.

The division's main duties are maintaining sovereignty and stability, protecting the environment and the local people, and assisting with the development of the local economy, according to Huang. “We are the Great Wall of the South China Sea,” he said.

This year marks the fifth anniversary of the founding of Sansha. “In the future, we will work even more closely with the locals and carry out our duties meticulously to build a sovereign, beautiful and happy Sansha,” he added.

Childhood dream

One morning in January 2015, Ma Kunrong, 28, was cleaning the police stele on Jingqing Island, a 0.21-sq-km outcrop in the Xisha archipelago. “You only need to take 2,200 steps to walk around it,” said Ma, who was the senior of the two frontier guards stationed on the

island, protecting about 30 people.

His subordinate, an officer surnamed Gao, complained about him wiping the stone tablet every day. “Nobody is going to check in this forsaken place, not even the birds fly here,” he said.

Gao's words broke Ma's heart — it had been his childhood dream and “greatest honor” to guard the “nation's southern gate.” He was so enthusiastic that he applied four times to be transferred from his post in Hainan Island, China's most southerly province.

“My father, who served in the South China Sea, told me: ‘This is our ancestral land, every drop of sea is blood and every grain of sand is treasure, so guard them with your life’, so this is more than a tablet with our insignia and contact details. It represents our sovereignty and our duty to keep our people safe,” he told Gao.

The two remained at their posts for two months before they were relieved. When they returned to Yongxing, both had long hair, darkened skin and they reeked of sweat and dead fish, “We looked like savages,” Ma said. “But I loved it so much that I signed up for more.”

According to Wang Xinghai, the division's political instructor, Sansha's miniscule population means the crime rate is very low— there have only been 15 criminal cases in the five years since the city was founded — so guarding the islands can appear tedious.

“But, given the significance of Sansha, any minor trouble, if mishandled, could escalate into a diplomatic incident. So, officers have to stay alert even during their daily tasks,” the 33-year-old said.

Wu Chen, a 29-year-old guard, said the tasks include conducting patrols, reporting unidentified ships and cleaning beachheads, but the most satisfying work is helping the local people.

In October, when Typhoon Sarika was heading toward Yongxing, Wu and two colleagues rushed to the fishermen's pier at 11 pm to ensure that the vessels were securely tied down.

“The wind blew, the rain poured and waves as high as 2 meters smashed down on our heads,” he said. “Even our divisional director, who is built like a brick wall, had trouble standing upright.”

The three men worked from 11 pm to 6 am, and by the time the typhoon made landfall, they had ensured the safety of about 20 boats.

“Every boat saved means a family's livelihood is secure,” Wu said. His comrades, including Ma, spent their time reinforcing people's homes and escorting residents to safe areas.

“Whenever there is trouble, we are the first to help,” said Ma.

Resource scarcity

January 26, a few days before the Spring Festival holiday, was a sad day for the young guards at Sansha. As they were carrying crates of vegetables into a freezer chamber, they discovered Dian Dian — a stray white pug with brown spots — lying dead next to the entrance. She had died after biting a rat that had been poisoned.

The guards buried the dog next to the room, poured white sand over



Frontier guards from the Chinese People's Armed Police collect seaborne debris on a beach on Yongxing Island, Hainan province, for treatment at the island's recycling plant. LI MINGJIAN / FOR CHINA DAILY



A guard cleans a stone map on Yongxing Island that indicates the locations of various districts of Sansha city, Hainan. WEI TAOZE / FOR CHINA DAILY

“We value everything in Sansha — from a pet dog to green vegetables to clear cellphone signals. We take nothing for granted, because everything is scarce.”

Liu Mengxiang, a police officer in Sansha

the grave to match her fur, erected a metal bar to mark the spot and then bid farewell to the pug. “She followed the regiment during jogs and kept us company during night patrol,” said Liu Mengxiang, 19, who arrived in 2015.

“We value everything in Sansha — from a pet dog to green vegetables to clear cellphone signals. We take nothing for granted, because everything is scarce,” he said.

According to Yang Xiaolong, 33, the division's deputy director, the “most desired, but least available” resource is “family time.”

Yang and his wife, Huang Zili, have been married for seven years and have a 5-year-old son. This year was the first time that the family had celebrated Chinese New Year together, Huang and the boy having

traveled to Sansha from their home on Hainan Island.

Yang was not at home for his son's birth, but he knows that “it was a terrifying night”.

Huang recalled how she had been at home alone when she went in to labor prematurely: “I struggled step by step to the outskirts of our village and hitched a ride to the nearest hospital on a motorcycle before passing out. All along the way, I cried out my husband's name for help. After reaching the hospital, the doctor was furious and cursed my husband for being an irresponsible ...”

Yang interjected: “Oh please, I have been apologizing ever since”, prompting them to burst into peals of laughter.

Yang's work means that the task of raising the boy fell solely on his wife's shoulders.

“I can only return home for a month or two every year,” he said. “In the past five years, I have probably spent eight months at most with my son. It's no wonder he doesn't recognize me as his father. I owe them both so much.”

Huang laughed. “It's OK. We are used to it by now,” she said.

On January 27, Lunar New Year's Eve, Yang, Huang and three other couples made dumplings for the guards. Huang folded her dumplings to resemble gold ingots to cheer up the young guards.

She said she wanted to bring good luck and fortune to everyone. “Since my husband can't leave his post to visit his family, I just had to bring the family to him,” she said.

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Fishing for a family atmosphere

By ZHANG ZHIHAO

Lin Youhui is revered as the “barefoot Santa” by members of the Chinese People's Armed Police frontier defense division in Sansha, Yongxing Island.

The 70-something fisherman regularly wades waist-deep and barefoot into the coastal waters to catch sea creatures, from oysters to lobsters, with his bare hands.

He loads his catch, usually eight to 10 kilograms, onto his three-wheeler and sells it to the division “for next to nothing,” said Yang Xiaolong, 33, the division's deputy director.

“Some of his catch, such as grouper fish, could easily fetch thousands in upscale restaurants,” he said. “But Lin sells his catch so cheaply that it's practically free — and he only sells to us.”

Lin has been supplying the division with fresh seafood for the last decade. “The reason is simple,” said Feng Mingfang, 53, the community director for Yongxing residents. “The residents and the guards are one big family.”

Feng, who has lived on the island for 27 years, has seen how the standard of living has improved “dramatically” over the years.

“We used to be scared of typhoons, because they could tear the roofs off our wooden homes and destroy our fishing boats,” he said. “Now, the frontier guards help us to reinforce our homes and boats, so we have nothing to fear.”

The guards also hold seminars and provide the local people with classes designed to keep them safe, according to Feng: “Last year, we even had a class on how to identify telemarketing scams. It was very helpful, especially now that we have cellphones and internet on the island.”

In addition to providing security services, the guards also distribute books and medicine, and movies are screened outdoors every week. In return, the fishermen provide food as well as keeping the division informed about changes on the ocean and sightings of ships.

“The relation is mutually beneficial,” Yang said. “Helping the locals gives us a sense of human warmth so rarely felt in this harsh environment. It keeps us focused and down to earth.”

Building a garden in the ocean

By ZHANG ZHIHAO

At the end of every Spring Festival holiday, people returning to work often carry goods ranging from festive clothing to hometown delicacies.

However, the frontier guards of the Chinese People's Armed Police stationed in Sansha — China's most southerly prefecture-level city — on Yongxing Island in the South China Sea, want nothing more than soil and seeds to transform their coral outcrop.

Fu Chuanbiao, 30, has been serving in the city since 2012. Every time he takes a boat to return from his home in a different part of Hainan province, he hides a bag of soil in a bag of rice to ensure that the ship's security will not toss it out like garbage.

The soil is for the vegetable garden on Yongxing, the guards' only source of fresh vegetables apart from supply shipments, which are often disrupted by bad weather.

“It is a luxury to eat fresh vegetables,” Fu said, adding that without the plants, the locals would be prey to constipation and skin rashes, and have low immunity from disease.

“The vegetable garden has been a life saver and everybody loves it because it benefits us all,” he said.

Fu and his comrade Li Zhenbao first began experimenting with a small garden in 2012. Soon, other guards began to help too. Xu Zheng, 30, brought a bag of cucumber seeds, but many were skeptical of success, including his wife Jiang Minghua, who asked: “Is it even possible to grow food on coral, with no soil or fresh water?”

It was possible. The guards used soil from construction sites and their home areas, one bag at a time, to lay the foundations of the garden. They also collected droplets of water from air conditioners and dripped them onto the saplings.

“By 2013, I had two lines of

cucumbers,” Xu said. Unfortunately for him, Typhoon Wutip hit the island in late September of the same year, destroying everything.

Li Mingjian, a 34-year-old frontier guard said the garden was just a small casualty. “The whole island's ecosystem was a shambles. Neither birds nor bugs could pollinate the plants. We couldn't even find a single coconut in the following two years,” he said.

The catastrophe turned out to be a blessing in disguise — the entire division was determined to support the garden. “Like the wind-resistant tung tree, once frontier guards plant their roots, we are unshakeable,” Li added.

The guards brought soil from their home areas and last year expanded the garden and divided it into 18 sections, growing lettuces, green onions, parsley and other vegetables and herbs. Fresh water is now more readily available because supply ships visit more



Guards water their division's vegetable garden on Yongxing Island, Sansha. ZHANG ZHIHAO / CHINA DAILY

frequently.

On January 29, the guards harvested their first batch of vegetables for the team's twice-yearly hot pot party.

“It was like Chinese New Year's Day all over again, knowing that our homeland's soil can still nurture us out here in the distant sea. It makes the vegetables even tastier,” said Ma

Kunrong, a 28-year-old guard.

During the dinner, Han Chuanguang, 38, picked up a string of parsley by the roots and dipped the leaves into the pot for a few seconds before putting the herb in his bowl.

“No sauce and no overcooking,” he said. “Everybody knows how hard it is to grow these plants, so we respect their freshness.”