

# ***Beyond the Clouds***

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





The overcast swallows us a few seconds after takeoff and we are instantly in the middle of an apparently infinite bleached translucence. Tendrils of cloud snatch at the canopy as we thrust upward, their ghostly fingers dissolving as they touch the hard clear plastic that arches over my head. The sun is up there, cold and white and dim and distant, hanging veiled in the pale murk.

There is no dramatic orchestral crescendo as we burst through the top of the overcast and into a world of brilliant flawless flaming blue. No Hollywood touches are needed here. The view itself is enough.

The cloud, now a clean soft white, stretches away from each direction to every other, broken only in a few small places with the shadowed green-brown of the Hokkaido landscape peeking through. But that blue above . . . it is so blue; it is every blue. It is more blue than the word can possibly convey.

My perch for all this is the rear seat of a Japanese F-15 jet fighter. Its mission is to participate in a joint U.S.-Japan air defense exercise over Hokkaido and the northern part of Honshu. My own part in it is to document the exercise for an upcoming book about the U.S. forces in Japan and their relationship with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. It is quite an education, both for myself and for the Japanese with whom I am flying. There was no precedent for a non-Japanese journalist to fly in a Japanese combat-rated aircraft. But we worked together and made one. Eyebrows were raised, shoulders were shrugged, but here I am.

Today we tangle with some U.S. fighters in a simulated air-combat exercise far out over the Sea of Japan. We roll and turn and zoom and dive through the crystal-bright air and cot-

ton-white clouds. This is no ride for the faint of heart; up and down and right and left become mere words instead of points of reference for the mind and body. It is a special freedom, wonderful and strange and frightening and stressful.

With the radio call—in English—“Knock it off, knock it off,” the combat finishes and the F-15s join up in formation as we turn back toward the base at Chitose, which is jointly used as a fighter base and as the civil airport for Hokkaido’s largest city, Sapporo.

The overcast has moved on, leaving only a few scraggly clouds to linger and cast their long shadows over the patchwork of fields and roads below. Two airliners are in the landing pattern and we circle the airport a few times until they have touched down and are safely berthed at their terminals. Then we circle once again, lower this time, with the fighters in a crisp echelon formation. And just at the right time, each pilot banks sharply in turn into the final curve. This is the ‘break,’ which puts them directly in line with the runway for the final approach and touchdown. The sun is low and the air is clear and the land is beautiful in its subdued autumn tints. Our wheels touch. We roll for a few seconds with the aircraft’s nose high, and then we can feel the slight shimmy as the nosewheel comes to earth. We brake and turn and taxi at a slow pace; the ground has got us again. I look up at the sky, at the blue vault from which we have just descended. The spell of the flight is disappearing like the last lingering, wavering note of a sweet song of the heart’s freedom.

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