

At the Factory

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

This is not Japan. The huge hangar is one of those at the Boeing plant in Everett, Washington and the workers giving a hearty "banzai" cheer are all Americans. They have just finished painting a Boeing 767 airliner ordered by All Nippon Airways; in a few moments the gleaming new aircraft will be towed out into the bitter cold midnight darkness to be prepared for its final set of test flights. Having completed an extraordinarily difficult and time-consuming paint scheme, this last shift of workers has asked me to take a group picture of them with this special airplane. So I oblige them. But in the back of my mind, there is a sense that something is missing.

To draw public attention to the modernization of its fleet, All Nippon Airways sponsored a contest to design a special paint scheme for some of its new aircraft. Sifting through thousands upon thousands of entries, the ANA judges at last settled on an imaginative, colorful design submitted by a 12-year-old girl. She saw the airliner's fuselage as a whale and surrounded it with playful marine creatures, including a kite-flying octopus, skydiving mudskippers, and a squid in a bathing suit. Putting her complicated design onto the curves of an airplane required seven days of round-the-clock shifts; a normal paint job takes about three. The first of the two aircraft, christened "Marine Jumbos," was launched with much fanfare this last July. This second one is being completed just as winter's grip is tightening. The Boeing painters have finished painting, the ANA inspectors have finished inspecting, and it is only a few days until the eye-catching airliner will make the long flight to Japan.

As the hangar doors open and the cold air pours in, a tractor is linked to the nose-wheel undercarriage. With a blast of its horn, it slowly begins to push the big airplane out into the night. I watch from a distance, trying to calculate how to get just the right shot to impress the ANA advertising executives who have sent me here. During those moments of concentra-

tion, my mind at last clicks. I know what has been gnawing at me, I know what is missing. Enlightenment has come.

While organizing this photographic expedition, I have had to deal with personnel from both ANA and Boeing. There were conference calls, complicated meetings, frequently changed schedules, and unforgiving weather. During all of this, both sides worked together with no apparent friction. The ANA personnel at the Boeing plant all demonstrated a clear mastery of English and a comprehension of American business thought; the Boeing personnel bent great efforts to understand and meet the needs of ANA, which included a series of severe examinations by Japanese civil aviation officials before certification of the new aircraft. Through all this I sensed no misunderstanding of any point by either side. There was no conflict, no bluster. There was none of the picturesque intercultural friction played up so often in the news and entertainment (is there in fact any difference?) media both overseas and in Japan. A writer intent on turning out another *Rising Sun* or *The Coming War with Japan* or *The Japan That Can Say No* would find nothing of interest.

I would be naive to assume that misunderstandings of various magnitudes do not occur in this manufacturer-customer relationship. Moreover, I do not wish to be cast as an apologist for either ANA or Boeing, but to me this experience has sharply underscored the fact that while scary stories of underhanded methods, threat, and conflict may sell newsprint, airtime and theater tickets, there are more important goals to be considered. If we want more positive results, we first have to tune our minds to look for them and tell their stories. What was in fact missing from this experience were the comic book stereotypes we have so often come to expect. It is about time that they be discarded. ■

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.



