

Christopher Metts

In the early days of the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program, Fellows traveled to Japan in mid-August and only had a couple of weeks to acclimate to Japan, to overcome jetlag and to settle into the culture and living arrangements. The program staff in Tokyo and Washington did all that they could to make certain that everything was in order and that the transition to life in Japan was smooth, but who can really prepare ahead of time for life in Japan? What an amazing experience for me and for my family. One can be told of Japan's beauty, its amazing food, culture and overwhelmingly warm and gracious people, but until you actually experience it, I suggest it's impossible to understand.

My family was unique to the program and to Japan. My wife and I have seven children. That's right, seven. We, therefore, were often the object of great interest on the part of our Japanese neighbors and friends. Also, because of the size of our family, our housing was further away from Kasumigaseki than most everyone else in the program. We lived in Mitaka, near one of the most fascinating areas of Tokyo, Kichijoji, so I feel that our experience in suburban Tokyo may be a bit different than that of my colleagues in the program, but more in line with my colleagues at the Japan Civil Aviation Bureau (JCAB), where I spent most of my Fellowship. For us, the Fellowship was truly a family experience, one never to be forgotten, for which we will be forever grateful to the people of Japan.

My Fellowship placement was in the Ministry of Transportation (MOT), specifically in the JCAB. The timing of my placement was the period of preparation for and then the realization of Y-2K, and global concerns that at the turn of the century important computer systems would experience major complications. Rightly so, the JCAB took this threat very seriously and spent appropriate resources in ensuring the safety of aviation interests through this stressful period. The JCAB also played a leadership role in the international aviation community during this period, offering insights and Japanese best practices on their activities at numerous global harmonization meetings and accepting the same from their global partners. New Year's Eve of Y2K was spent monitoring nationwide air traffic systems as they transitioned to the new century without incident.

My time in Japan was also spent in support of Japan's launch and deployment of its Multi-Function Satellite (MTSAT). The government of Japan had opened its contract door to a U.S. company, which then encountered various difficulties in meeting their schedules and milestones. I was called upon to assist in offering U.S. assistance to find a resolution in these matters and in the eventual successful deployment of the system.

JCAB was very receptive to my placement. JCAB staff took advantage of the strong relationship that they have with the FAA and were gracious enough to insert me into a variety of activities and ask my input related to their air traffic and aviation-related policies. My assigned office also took me with them to Hakone for their annual "retreat" (a topic for a future paper), sharing this unique aspect of life in Japan. They paid for me to be a member of their team at bilateral U.S.-Japan discussions in Hawaii and sent me to Okinawa to assist with the air traffic issues and coordination associated with the G-8 Economic Summit in June of 2000, where President Bill Clinton led a strong U.S. delegation.

The experience has benefited my career since returning and the amazing relationships that were developed have remained long after my departure. As for my career, two years after returning to the FAA, I was selected to serve as the Senior FAA Representative to Japan, where I served U.S. Ambassadors Howard Baker and Thomas Schieffer as U.S. transportation attaché, continuing to work on important U.S.-Japan aviation matters, but this time from the U.S. side. At the conclusion of my tour, I was asked to move to China as the senior FAA representative, bringing the skills, knowledge and experience enhanced by my Fellowship opportunity to the important aviation issues affecting China and to assist in their preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics. I was then selected to serve as the director of the FAA's Asia Pacific International Office located in Singapore, with broad responsibilities for aviation safety and harmonization throughout the entire region.

As powerful as these opportunities have been, the relationships have been even more meaningful. Following my return to FAA headquarters, my position included responsibility for air traffic procedures used throughout the U.S. National Airspace System. As a result, I was heavily involved in all that was required in addressing the airspace issues associated with the events of 9/11. One such responsibility included coordinating the movement of high ranking government officials from Osaka to the U.S. during the period that no flights were being permitted into our airspace. I was able to call my former colleagues at JCAB and in other government of Japan positions and assure them that we would accept this aircraft. They released the aircraft based on this relationship.

I have had many other opportunities to coordinate important U.S.-Japan aviation activities, but none more important than facilitating U.S. understanding and aviation assistance in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake and tsunami in the Tohoku region, where, once again, the relationship made the difference in trust and reassurance. I feel privileged to share these important relationships. The success of my Fellowship was also evident in that the JCAB has accepted six additional Fellows.

I am grateful for my time as a Fellow and found it well worth the effort for me, my agency and, in my opinion, the JCAB.

Christopher Metts participated in the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program as a representative of the U.S. Department of Transportation from 1998–2000. During his Fellowship year in Japan, he served full-time placements in Japan’s Ministry of Transport and in the office of the Honorable Shinya Izumi, LDP Member, House of Councillors. He currently is vice president of the Air Traffic Organization at the Federal Aviation Administration.