

# Teaching 'Round The World



Betty Bernos sits in her Misawa apartment with objects she's collected.

By Betsy Petersen

She was only going overseas for a year, but it's been seven years now and Betty Bernos still has the wanderlust.

The petite, bespectacled brunette had been teaching 11 years at New Orleans' Gentilly Terrace School when she invited a colleague who'd spent a year teaching in France to talk to her fifth graders. The children were interested, and so was Miss Bernos—a year later she joined the Department of Defense Overseas Schools program.

"I asked for a year's leave of absence," she said; but she never came back, except to visit.

She spent a year in Germany, two in Turkey, and for the past four years she has served as a school principal in Japan—first in Tokyo and then at Misawa Air Force Base in northern Japan. "It's a marvelous opportunity to learn about the people we call foreigners," she said. "The more I travel the more impressed I am with the likenesses of the various peoples of the world, as opposed to their differences." The Japanese people, she said, "desire the same things we do: to achieve, to accomplish, to give their children more than they had."

Although Misawa is not considered a desirable assignment because of its isolated location, Miss Bernos has signed up for another year there. So have a dozen of the school's 60 teachers. "Before, they didn't come back," she said. "But starting last year we could get space-available (free) flights to Tokyo on weekends and holidays, and one space-available flight a year to Hong Kong."

THE air base at Misawa, which functions both as a fighter base and a reconnaissance base, "is just like a small American community," she said, with its general store (commissary), department store (base exchange), bakery and other stores and services. The base command provides sailboats, speedboats, rowboats and water skis at an on-base lake; there's also a golf course, tennis court, bowling alley, indoor swimming pool. In winter, when there's plenty of snow, Americans can ski at a slope right on the base.

With 10,000 Americans, Misawa Air Force Base is about the size of Westwego, La. The Japanese town of Misawa is bigger, about the size of Houma. "There's quite an opportunity for a friendly exchange," Miss Bernos said. "Many of the teachers teach (after school hours) at the English school right off the base, whose mission is to teach English to people who will be hired to work on the base. The Japanese are interested in Americans. We're invited to their homes, go on ski trips with them."

Three Japanese culture teachers teach the elementary school children about Japan, "its history, its festivals," she

said. "They take them on field trips, to local industries, to national monuments. They took a sixth grade class to Expo '70 this year."

Japanese language instruction is not given to elementary school students—it was offered as an elective in the high school for the first time last year—"but the children catch on to the language rather easily," Miss Bernos said. Track and field days and music exchange programs with Japanese schools provide opportunities for the American children to meet their Japanese contemporaries, "and Japanese children often spend their holidays with Americans."

SOLLARS Elementary School in Misawa has 1,800 students; it's one of the biggest in the Department of Defense system, and is big by stateside standards, too. "The D.O.D. schools are operated just like a local school district," Miss Bernos said. With about 100,000 students worldwide, the overseas "district" is about the same size as the Washington, D. C., school district, she explained. All D.O.D. schools have the same curriculum.

Administration differs from that of stateside schools, though. "I really have three bosses," Miss Bernos said. She's responsible to the Superintendent for Japan, based in Tokyo, for academic matters; to the base commander for "logistic support" like building maintenance; and to the civilian personnel office near Tokyo for things like salary and transportation orders.

"Communication is great," she said. "If I want to talk to my superintendent in Tokyo, all I have to do is pick up the phone, and if there's any problem, he can get on a plane."

SHE said she doesn't feel isolated from American life. "We get replays of stateside programs, and we saw the moon shot at the same time everybody else did. Whenever the President addresses the nation we get a direct broadcast. And we get the Stars and Stripes (the armed forces newspaper, published daily in the Far East), so we don't really feel cut off.

"We miss home, as a group, around the holidays," she said. "But we can call home in 5-15 minutes; this helps morale."

Anyway, the life she leads overseas more than makes up for occasional homesickness: "I've personally grown because I'm able to see more than my small home and community. And this is how I feel about our American children: Wherever I teach them, we're exposed to other people and their customs, the things they value in their lives, and the more we're exposed the more sensitive we become to other people's needs and desires.

"I feel I've become quite a citizen of the world."