

# Alpha Aviation takes the Alpha Position

Helicopter **Life** visits  
Whirly Girl Shizuka Saito  
to see how her school in  
Japan has developed  
against considerable odds

Georgina Hunter-Jones reports

Shizuka Saito was the second woman in Japan to fly helicopters. Learning to fly in the early 1980s, she started her flying school and helicopter business in 1984. "The Japanese," she says, "are still very traditional in their thinking, men and women have set roles. In the 1980s there were still only a few pilots. World War II pilots had a monopoly of the skies and they didn't want women to fly." Shizuka learnt to fly in the United States, fixed wing flying. She says, "I met many helpful people who suggested I should think about starting

my own aviation business in Japan. I also met many sour ones whose bad attitude made me very determined to succeed." In Japan it is very rare to find businesses run by women and even more unusual in the world of aviation. She was given the name of a man in Arizona who had a flight school and was looking to encourage Japanese students to come and learn to fly there. Shizuka suggested that if he was prepared to train helicopter pilots, then she would be interested. He could and after much negotiation gave her the money to start the

Japanese end of the business. However, since the cost of living was so much higher in Japan than in the USA, it was initially quite difficult to find office space in a sensible area at a good price. Luckily Shizuka knew how to use the Japanese system and she used her contacts and her husband's contacts to find an office in a good area. Her office was, and still is, on several floors of an office block in Minato-ku, near the Tokyo Tower, which she was allowed to rent at a good price. Shizuka arranged for all the ground school to be done in Japan, usually in her office, and when that was com-

pleted she took the students over to Arizona for training. Each year more and more students wanted to learn to fly helicopters and, again thanks to the GDP imbalance between the USA and Japan, the price was very much in their favour. From 1988 to 1992 there was massive economic growth in Japan, Shizuka says, "things were so good people started to get crazy. Everybody thought it would last forever. In 1990 we sent over ninety students to Arizona." The school was not the only part of Shizuka's business. During this time she also secured the Robinson deal

