

Now she's 'mother of the ship'

Flower Mound: Japanese company asked woman to christen vessel

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By JEREMY ROEBUCK / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News



With three grown children, eight grandchildren and volunteering commitments at her church, Judy Swenson had plenty to keep her occupied during retirement.

So when a Japanese shipping company invited the 63-year-old Flower Mound homemaker to launch its newest freighter, the offer took a few minutes to register.

"I didn't know what to think. I'm just a housewife and grandmother," she said. "It was such an unusual request."

But the invitation intrigued her. And in late June, Mrs. Swenson and her husband, Ron, toured Korea and Japan, traveled to shipyards and dined with Asian business officials.

"No one could believe it," she said. "One of my friends said, 'I don't mean to be rude, but how did you get chosen to do something like this?'"

The invitation came from Tom Kessery, a Chicago-based vice president at "K" Line America, a subsidiary of Japanese shipping company Kawasaki Kisen Kaisha Ltd. Mr. Swenson had worked with the company during years spent as a shipping consultant.

"I've known Ron for 10 years and through three businesses," Mr. Kessery said. "But it's customary for a woman to launch the boat, so we invited Judy."

Although her husband had often traveled to Asia on business, Mrs. Swenson had accompanied him only once. She didn't know much about Asian culture but knew that christening a ship there would involve more than smashing a bottle of champagne against the hull.

The couple arrived in Tokyo in the last week of June for a two-day tour of Buddhist and Shinto shrines and



meetings with Kawasaki Kisen's top management. The day before the ceremony, they flew to Ulsan, South Korea. Photographers and a protocol assistant greeted them on the runway.

Mrs. Swenson would have to take the lead throughout the ceremony, the assistant said. The woman chosen to become the "mother of the ship" not only names the vessel but also must participate in an elaborate ceremony preparing the boat for its tour of duty.

The next morning, a limousine and police escort took the Swensons to the shipyard, where they caught their first glimpse of Hull No. 1669, a numerical designation given to the boat before its official naming.

After a series of speeches, Mrs. Swenson officially dubbed the freighter Guangdong Bridge, after the link between Hong Kong and Macao over China's Pearl River. Kawasaki Kisen has named all of its ships after famous bridges, Mr. Kessery said.



Mrs. Swenson smashed a bottle of champagne against the hull and boarded for a tour.

"Naming the ship is like naming the baby," Mr. Swenson said. "Cutting the ribbon is like cutting the umbilical cord, and blowing the horn is like letting the baby cry. So when they call Judy the 'mother of the ship,' they mean it."

The boat, which has a capacity of 5,600 20-foot containers, will travel between Tokyo and the Netherlands and eventually add stops in Tacoma, Wash. It measures about 940 feet long and 130 feet wide. Its service speed is 25 knots.

"When it comes in [to Tacoma], we're definitely going to meet it," Mrs. Swenson said. "It's my child."

Within a week, the couple had returned to Flower Mound, unsure of what to make of their trip.

"I watch the video, and I still get goose bumps," Mr. Swenson said. "It's like an out-of-body experience."

"Yeah," his wife agreed. "It's still like ... how did this happen to us?"

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