

WAR ON THE TOKAIDO

Christopher P. Hood

The history of the Tokaido goes back over 1200 years. The original 'road' (in reality not much more than a path) linked Heijokyo (modern-day Nara) with provinces in the East of Japan. The main competition for those who plied their trade along the route came in the form of boats along Japan's Pacific coast. With the advent of railways in the Meiji Period, the Tokaido Line became one of the first main lines. The route linked Tokyo with Kobe, rather than Kyoto which had become the end of the Tokaido during the Heian Period. There was now a three-way competition. It was one that railways began to win convincingly.

After the Pacific War, greater motorization meant that newer, bigger roads were needed to link Japan's major cities. But this development lagged behind that in Europe and America. The airline industry was also taking off in Japan, meaning that there were four forms of transport battling for the passenger and freight market along the Tokaido. Whilst road and sea transport was generally limited to specialist markets (over-night bus transport and freight), air travel and the railways fought for the passenger market.

The railways benefited from a new weapon in its battle with the airline industry in the shape of the shinkansen in 1964. However, the overriding story for the next two decades was the sheer growth of the transport market along the Tokaido. Whilst revenue from the Tokaido Shinkansen was critical for the continued running of JNR trains, so the Haneda-Itami route grew to become the third busiest sector in the world.

The 1990s brought a new era. JNR had been broken-up and JR Tokai was now responsible for the Tokaido Shinkansen. With around 90% of its income coming from the shinkansen, it was inevitable that its efforts would be concentrated on not only maintaining its market-share, but also looking to increase it. This has been a challenge. The airline industry appears to have been quite well protected by the government. Consequently the airline industry had seen continued growth since 1986 (sales having dropped in 1985 following the JL123 crash).

The first step for JR Tokai to attempt to stop the decline in its share of the market – which had peaked at around 90%, but which was dropping towards 80% – was the introduction of the 300-series *nozomi*. This was followed by the withdrawal of all 100-series shinkansen earlier than planned, the introduction of the 700-series and the opening of the new Shinagawa shinkansen station, which allowed for a greater number of trains to operate along the route.

By now, it was nip and tuck which means was best to use. In terms of price, there was hardly any difference. In terms of time estimates suggested that there was about 1 minute's difference on a journey between central Tokyo and central Osaka! However, the airlines suggested they were winning by the one minute, whilst most other commentators suggested it was the shinkansen that had the upper hand (Note that comparisons were never made on the basis of terminal to terminal times... something which Ryan Air was recently reprimanded for in the UK).

With discussions continuing about a possible relaxing of the airline routes, so that planes would be able to use the shortest possible route rather than flying between fixed points (such as above other airports and radar stations), JR Tokai realized that it had to find a way of further increasing the shinkansen's advantage. With the limitations being placed on it by the old railway line itself, attention turned to how to develop a train which could cope with the biggest challenge presented by the line's design – the curves.

The answer was the N700, the first shinkansen which could tilt. Not only does this mean that the need to reduce its speed is done away with, it has further enhanced the shinkansen's reputation as a comfortable environment for business people (which make up around 80% of the passengers on the Tokaido Shinkansen) to work.

With the introduction of the N700, the shinkansen appears to be ahead in the trench warfare for the Tokaido market. The war may not be finally won, however, until airline fares reflect environmental costs or JR Tokai gets the go-ahead for the construction of the Chuo Shinkansen.

Published as 'War on the Tokaido', *Japanese Railway Society Bulletin*, Issue 65 (Spring 2008) 11.