

CHAPTER 13

AN UNEASY BRITISH COLONY – 1950

The Hong Kong supporters of Peking and Taipei decided to probe the resolve of the British authorities. Demonstration followed demonstration, each becoming more impudent.

Meanwhile both ideological *camp*s declared the detained planes, the offices and plant belonged to their respective governments. They picketed selective aeroplanes and occupied offices of CNAC in Gloucester Building and CATC in Shell House. The British authorities had armed police guarding the premises and planes but still the *patriots* evaded their net. They made sorties under cover of darkness, erasing or painting flags on the fuselage and wings of many planes.

The Nationalists (the term Kuomintang had become unfashionable) proceeded to sack the Peking-appointed directors and replaced them with its appointees. PanAm sold its interest in CNAC to the National Government for \$1,250,000, the exact amount held by CNAC in American banks. The *Gimo* transferred this interest to General Chennault and his CAT co-proprietor Whiting Willauer.

Chennault then brought a legal action for ownership of the detained planes. Major-General William *Wild Bill* Donovan arrived in Hong Kong to head Chennault's legal assault. *Wild Bill* was the war-time head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and directed a thriving New York law company.

The Governor, Sir Alexander Grantham, stated only full diplomatic recognition by Britain would release the planes to the Communist regime. This was a courageous statement for on 6 January Britain formalised relations with Maoist China. Meanwhile litigation made the matter subjudice.

The British Government's recognition of Communist China enraged the Nationalists on Formosa. British aeroplanes diverting to Taipei because of adverse weather at Kai Tak got a cool reception. I was on one diversion where authorities kept us aboard with drawn curtains and armed soldiers patrolling the aisle. They denied us sandwiches and water. Only the flight-engineer, under heavy guard, left the plane to refuel.

In this flash-point atmosphere Cathay Pacific Airways managed to retain its equilibrium. On January 10, it opened a new air link to Sandakan.

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

The agreement between Hong Kong Airways (HKA) and Cathay Pacific of May 11, 1949, clearly defined their operational areas. Cathay could exploit the area south of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Airways areas North. Any incursion by one company into the area of the other was by agreement on a reciprocal or other agreed basis. Macau was an exception where HKA already held the franchise. The other exception was Manila where both companies held equal rights. The Colonial Office and Ministry of Civil Aviation approved the document two days later.

On March 22, 1950, the Hong Kong Licensing Committee granted franchises to both companies. The main winner was Cathay, for Mao's control of the mainland negated most of HKA's expected routes.

At 0530 hours on April 2, Eric Aylward woke to a strident telephone and an explosion. He lived near the airport in College Road and was a staff engineer with PAMAS. *Hokum* Harris, his boss, screeched *they* were blowing up the detained planes. As *Hokum* ordered Eric to conduct a search of the remaining planes another bomb exploded. Eric told *Hokum* to go himself. *Hokum* screamed he was too busy – Eric hung-up and went back to sleep. The bombs, placed in empennage and engine cowls, destroyed seven planes. The Communists blamed the Nationals, the Nationals blamed the Communists – and both blamed the Hong Kong Government!

On April 23, the last Nationalist stronghold fell to the Communist forces. Generalissimo Chiang ordered the evacuation of the island of Hainan.

On May 5, a Communist battery on Hainan Island fired on a Cathay plane. The Dakota carried the Hong Kong registration VRHDI and was under the command of John Furley.

The uncertainty created by the detained aeroplanes did not affect the running of the airport. The air defence radar, at the old Japanese site on Tai Mo Shan, had unacceptable limitations especially in the high winds of a typhoon. This prompted the authorities to move the radar equipment to Mount Davis on Hong Kong Island.

In October 1949 the RAF requisitioned several workshops vacated by H.M.S. *Flycatcher*. The CAD gave permission for the RAF to use its hangar. The Government Surveyor checked the height of several buildings around the airport. Those that affected the flight path lost their top storey.

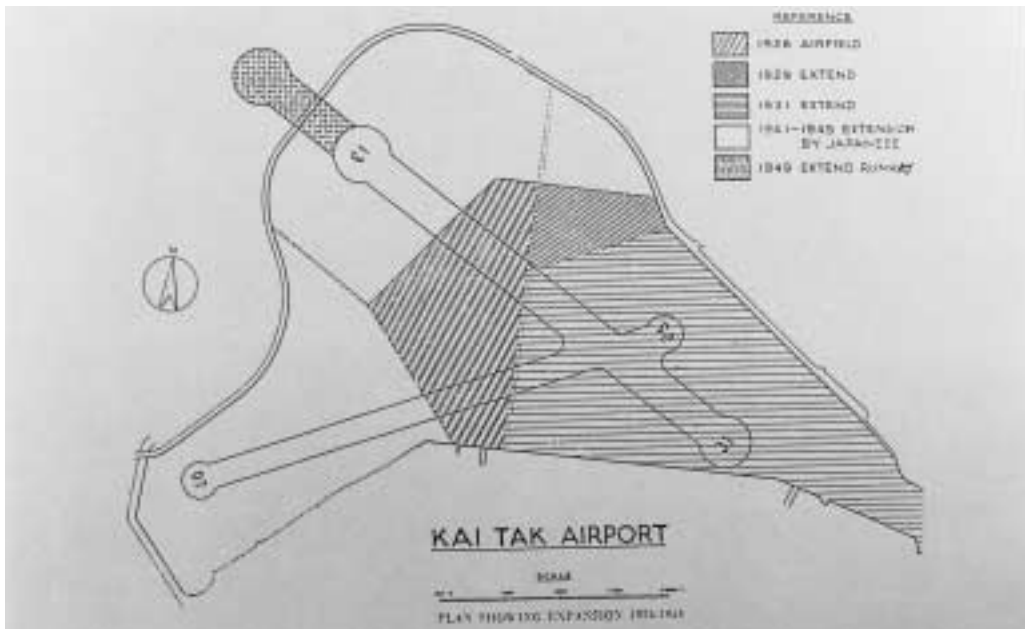
The Police Commissioner established a station in a former Japanese block-house at Kai Tak. With the airport becoming a police responsibility the CAD retrenched the security guards.



THE EXTENSION TO RUNWAY 13

An additional 608 feet was gained by reclaiming land north of Clearwater Bay Road. The extension was fitted with gates that stopped traffic when a plane was about to land.

(Photo: Sir Denys Roberts)



KAI TAK AIRPORT EXPANSION PLAN

The expansion marked 1949 was not operational until October 1950.

(Photo: Courtesy DCA, Hong Kong)

In late 1950, Max Oxford transferred to Malaya as Director General of Civil Aviation. This appointment was a just reward for a splendid man but came at an inopportune time for Papa Moss.

The October change that impressed the pilots was the 608 feet that lengthened Runway 13. The Department gleaned that valuable addition by crossing the Clearwater Bay Road. To the West of the runway two police guards manned a small post. The clanging of a bell was their signal to press a switch that started two heavy metal gates moving on a recessed rail. The gate operation – taking 60 seconds – gave pedestrians time to complete their crossing. The bus and taxi drivers knew the operation time and many stretched their luck to the limit.

Roy Downing recalls pressing the bell as a long funeral procession wended its unhurried way across the extension. Suddenly the gates began to move. The solemnity of the occasion changed to one of bedlam. The pallbearers began to run and taxis, skidding between the mourners, added to the panic. As the gates narrowed the coffin swayed and the rear pallbearers abandoned their charge and scrambled back the way they had come. The bearers in front, realising ahead was the shortest route, sprinted with the rear of the coffin bumping and grinding. They scrambled through just as the gates clanged shut.

On another occasion I approached for a landing to find a *honey-truck* stalled on the intersection with the crew and guards trying to push it. Hearing my engines they abandoned their effort – considering the type of obstruction I over-shot!

In those days, especially in the New Territories, large black tankers collected night-soil in *honey-pots*. The drivers, careful to avoid a crumbling verge, drove down the centre of the road. A continuous horn-blast had them reluctantly move aside. Then the experienced road-user took a deep breath before passing. That *aroma* once experienced stayed in the memory forever!

In addition the Tower controlled lights that stopped traffic on Tam Kung Road which passed a few yards from the threshold of Runway 07. The Public Works Department

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

installed them when pilots complained that buses and trucks caused a landing hazard. That light switch also controlled traffic using the Airport Terminal road.

In June a newspaper snippet advised the release of pirate Wong Yu. He left Macau for the interior of China; officially we never heard of him again.

The Chinese intervention in Korea and Britain's heavy military support against Communist North Korea was a time of unease for the Colony. A threatened invasion of Formosa combined with the CNAC and CATC bickering and the *hubris* of the Chinese troops massed on the border had the Hong Kong Government treading a tricky path.

On July 4, a Hong Kong Airways Dakota approached Swatow en route to Taipei. Captain Mike Harvey, F/O *Lawrie G. King* (later of Cathay Pacific), R/O Cowley and Hostess M. L. Wong were the crew.

Without warning one of two strange aeroplanes with stranger markings fired on their plane. The crew thought the attacker had the fuselage of a Thunderbolt and the wings of a Panther. Their markings conformed to no known country; half circles of blue and white on the fuselage and blue-white-blue stripes on the tail. They were uncertain if they were propeller-driven or jet – the attack happened too fast! The fighters had certain *Zero* characteristics of those the Russians captured in Manchuria when Japan capitulated. Whatever the type, was this the precursor of a Communist invasion of the Colony?

August at Kai Tak brought its quota of accidents. On 21, a privately-owned Tiger Moth making an emergency landing on a Lantao beach rolled over. Mr R. Cavill and his lady passenger, Mrs Stevenson, escaped injury. The water police brought the chastened pair back to Kai Tak.

A more serious accident befell a Catalina on a post major overhaul test flight. On the 29th, at 1630 hours, PK-AKR, owned by the Netherlands New Guinea Petroleum



HONG KONG AIRCRAFT ENGINEERING COMPANY – HAEC

HAEC came from merging *JAMCo* and *PAMCo* – their popular names. The *SCMP* reported these companies merged on 1 November, 1950, yet the Certificate of Incorporation is dated 23 November 1950. The *JAMCo* name is distinguishable beneath the over-paint, on the large right hangar, and plainly on the workshop group behind the hangar. This aerial photograph was taken in 1954. Just east of the old *JAMCo* hangar several wing-less refugee *CNAC* & *CATC* planes are visible. *MATCo*'s service area was located behind the black-painted *HAEC* hangar.

(Photo: Harry Smith, HAEC Archives)

Company, took to the air. Captain Lee Murray checked the rate of descent, the hull feathered the water of Kowloon Bay, and the plane disintegrated.

A misalignment of the nose-wheel doors left them partly open. The bucking rudder pedals trapped one of Lee's feet and severed it. The left side of engineer Geoff Holland's face hit the bulkhead and caved-in. Of the remaining three crew members, two had superficial injuries and severe shock. George Cattnach, the other engineer, escaped without a scratch – his day of destiny lay four years in the future.

Julian Howe's team got them aboard the rescue launch and within half-an-hour they were in Kowloon Hospital. Leo Callaghan rushed to casualty to find Geoff, covered in blood, lying unattended on a stretcher. He grabbed the nurse and demanded why he was not in surgery only to be told he was dead. Leo angrily cried – *bullshit, he's alive!* The confusion brought the Chief Surgeon out of casualty. Leo demanded that Mr Cook should take another look. Australian Geoff Holland, other than a scar on his left forehead, made a full recovery. He lives in retirement near Sydney.

In October the Kai Tak RAF pulled out all stops to celebrate the Battle of Britain. Their hidden agenda had the ulterior motive of *showing the flag* by putting 28 Spitfires aloft. The two resident squadrons, 28 and 80, were the only squadrons left in the RAF with operational Spitfires.

PAMAS and JAMCO amalgamated on 1 November. The main change was a shuffling of the top executive and busy painters stencilling the hangar roofs with HAEC.

The year ended on a note of adventure, mystery and drama. At 0640 hours on the morning of December 15, Kai Tak Control copied this message:

Hello! Hong Kong approach. This is Catalina VR-HEV. My aircraft is sinking rapidly. Am being taken aboard a Communist gunboat. All crew safe.

The Catalina's flight-plan lodged at Chittagong, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), had it departing at 0228 hours Hong Kong time. The skipper estimated the direct flight to Kai Tak would be 13 hours. The tanks held sufficient fuel for 23 hours of flight endurance.

They encountered unexpectedly strong tail winds that brought the plane over Hong Kong *five hours* ahead of schedule. It circled over the Colony establishing contact on its auxiliary as the main transmitter had failed. Hong Kong Control accepted responsibility for its welfare. The skipper advised he would circle overhead until he had sufficient light to land.

The radio officer made periodic transmissions until his signal began to fade. The next signal received was the dramatic 0640 hours transmission. A RAF Sunderland scouting the area saw a Chinese gunboat towing the Catalina towards the Communist-controlled Wang Kam Island near Macau.

The background of this intriguing plot is worthy of the great Ian Fleming. Captain Ross Sandford Bohm, a pilot with MATCO, radio officer William Michael *Bill* James of Cathay Pacific Airways, and a MATCO flight engineer, John Francis *Dick* Richmond, formed the operating crew. A Mr Sun Chung-liang had bought the Catalina from MATCO and was aboard as supercargo.

The crew had agreed to make three flights to check fuel consumption graphs. They were to be paid £10,000 Australian for the first flight, then £12,000 Australian and £14,000 Australian for the remaining two. This seemed generous for work already documented world wide!

Following Hong Kong Control's acceptance the Catalina mysteriously left Hong Kong airspace and landing in the open sea damaged the hull. Ross managed to get it airborne again and landed in the sheltered waters of a bay. Soon after a gunboat sped around the bay's headland. Rumours circulated that as the gunboat approached the plane some fishermen saw people dumping bags over the side. Another rumour spread that sea-soaked opium could be bought in the criminal Chung-San area of Macau at discount rates.

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON



THE END OF CATALINA PB5A . . . VR-HEV

On December 15, 1950, VR-HEV was landed at sea. She was taken under tow by a Chinese Communist gunboat to forever vanish behind the Curtain of Bamboo.

(Photo: Author)



VR-HEV'S CREW RELEASED

After 20 months of imprisonment her crew were pushed across the Hong Kong Border. L/R: Bill James, radio officer; Ross Bohm, captain; John Richmond, flight engineer.

(Photo: SCMP, HKG)

The Chinese authorities took the crew to Skekki, a town near the Macau border, and placed them under house arrest. Certain Nationalist sympathisers planned a rescue bid, but the Communists got wind of it, and moved the airmen further inland to Canton.

Held in frightful conditions for 20 months their captors released them after they signed statements of smuggling prohibited drugs. The statements obtained under duress mentioned 40,000 taels (1260 kilograms) of opium loaded from an abandoned airstrip in Northern Burma.

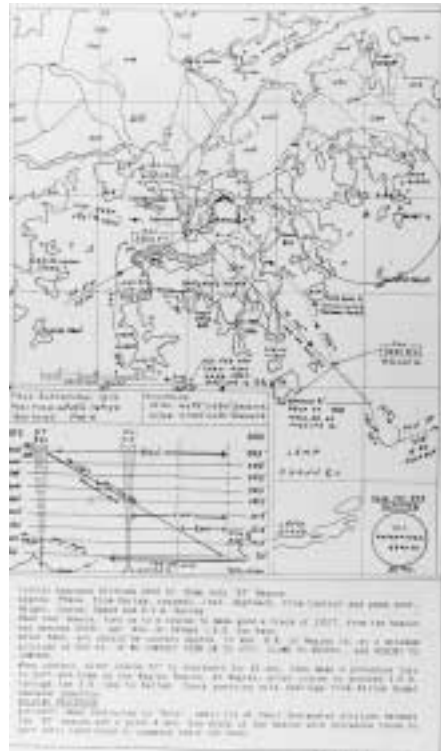
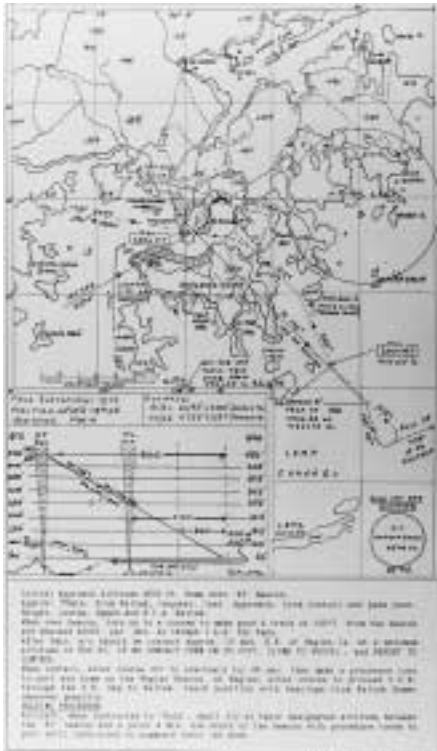
As they pushed them across the Hong Kong border at Lo Wu, Bill James bid the Communist guards au revoir with that graceful Aussie two-fingered gesture. Although not broken in spirit they were in bad physical shape. They remained in the Queen Mary Hospital until they were strong enough to be *tossed* to the media piranhas.

Besides drug smuggling other imaginative theories surfaced. One had them transporting Nationalist spies to locations where they could infiltrate Communist China using the legendary Burma Road. I lean to this theory. Why would the Nationalists plan a rescue mission for drug smugglers?

I knew each of these men and dope trafficking was not a characteristic. In freedom neither did they admit that charge, nor did the Hong Kong police pursue that line of enquiry.

Will we ever learn the real story? Ross Bohm died still a young man, in April 1978. I traced Dick Richmond in 1982 but the privations of detention still lined his features. I understood his reluctance to talk of those days. Bill James worked in a sports shop in Sydney then slipped from sight. I have no idea the whereabouts of this likable man.

The *bamboo curtain* closed forever on Catalina VR-HEV. Perhaps the same happened to Mr Sun Chung-liang. I know nothing of his fate – whatever it was I wager it wasn't pleasant!



CATHAY PACIFIC AIRWAYS – APPROACH CHARTS

January 1, 1950.

(Photos: Operations Manual issued to Author)