

## CHAPTER 16

# KAI TAK AIRPORT MARKS TIME – 1956-1957

1956

The spate of accidents to non-civilian aeroplanes continued to worry the Director. In January an Army observation Auster ditched in Tolo Harbour. The frigate H.M.S. *Comus* patrolling the area rescued the two occupants.

On February 1, a Taiwan-based Sabre landed at Kai Tak with engine trouble. Major Lee Shun-ling stepped from his silvery jet to find it surrounded by security guards. HAEC made the necessary adjustments and the 31-year-old pilot returned to Taiwan the following morning.

That day a RAF Vampire landing on Runway 13 had brake failure. The pilot, realising he could not stop in time, retracted the undercarriage. The jet came to rest in the overrun area with the nose protruding over the water. An uninjured but shaken pilot climbed out.

The following month another Vampire crashed three miles NE of Sek Kong. The impact killed the pilot.

Later that month two Royal Navy Sea Hawks struck fog-shrouded Devil's Peak. The crash tore the planes to fragments killing the pilots and an elderly Chinese lady.

On May 20, a HKAAF Harvard crashed on Aplichau Island. The pilot died.

On a less distressing note June allowed a sliver of light through the *Bamboo Curtain*. On the first the People's Republic of China resumed sending weather radio broadcasts. This was a welcome gesture after a silence of seven years. Any thoughts of increased goodwill lost momentum by events in mid-October.

On 6 October the RAF gave its annual flying display. The programme followed the usual pattern and, as usual, was a success. During the interval Mr E. B. David, the Officer Administering the Government, flew in and out by helicopter from the aircraft carrier *US Lexington*. This departure from the norm proved a splendid PR stratagem.

The festivities continued into the following day when several local operators made their planes available for sight-seeing. Seven hundred people each paid HK\$20 to see their Colony from the air. Every cent collected went to the RAF Benevolent Fund.

## AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

The Department of Civil Aviation recorded a marked increase in charter flights. In the main, they carried Chinese seamen joining and leaving ships trapped either side of the Suez Canal.

On October 29, Israel had invaded Egypt. Two days later Great Britain and France attacked Egypt to restore international control of the waterway. United Nations action ended the fighting on November 6. The Canal remained closed until March 1957 when it reopened under Egyptian management.

Bill Dudman's Far East Flying Training School continued to fulfil a worthy need. His Link Trainer A13/28 proved a signal success. Often I worked in its claustrophobic sauna-like entrails under the indifferent guidance of Captain Tony *Pontius the Pilot* Rignall – a Cathay colleague. Each of Tony's debriefings was an anti-climax of brevity. I never learned if he thought me efficient or beyond improvement. I suspect the latter for he seemed relieved when I departed – allowing him to *wash his hands!*

The Department kept airport work to a minimum. The main addition was a VIP lounge decorated and furnished in contemporary style. Mr Horace Kadoorie, OBE, donated a carpet, locally woven, carrying the Colony's Coat-of-Arms. On November 18, Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, was the first to use the facilities.

Several staff appointments strengthened the Department's staff albeit the loss of a dedicated man. Mr G. S. R. *George Cannon*, Chief Signals Officer, resigned after serving nine years. As usual other splendid men waited an opportunity to show their mettle. Phil Wood and R. G. *Reg Heron* both moved up a notch in the Signals Division.

Mr J. H. D. Bell, Assistant Airport Fire Officer, took over when Steve Henderson, Airport Fire Officer, enjoyed a vacation. Mr R. K. K. Yuen competently handled the duties of Assistant Airport Fire Officer.

The two unfilled Briefing Office posts brought Mr R. J. *Ron Capern* in mid-April and Mr J. T. *Trev Thorpe* in early August. The vacant Air Traffic Control Officer Grade II post attracted Mr D. Falgate DFC, in May.

The total establishment of the Department stood at 18 expatriates and 249 locally domiciled officers. This showed an increase of four officers over the previous year.

Among this last group was 20-year-old Peter Lok. Peter joined as a Traffic Control Officer Cadet. He would become the first Chinese to hold the office of Director of Civil Aviation.

### 1957

In the space of five weeks the airport authorities faced two civil plane emergencies. Each had the potential for disaster.

On the last day of 1956 a Thai Airways DC-4 advised the Tower of a total loss of hydraulics. The plane would have to make a landing without flaps, the undercarriage lowered by *free-fall*, and emergency braking used. The airport came to full alert with a FEFTS training plane ordered to land immediately.

The DC-4 came into sight over Stonecutters Island with wheels extended. As the pilot lined up on Runway 13 he applied full power and thundered through Lie Yue Mun Pass. The pilot told the Tower he suspected the port undercarriage had not locked safely. He advised he would climb to 4000 feet then dive to lock the wheel down *pulling G force*. His plan was a success.

The pilot made an excellent landing but emergency braking burst all four tyres. HAEC engineers *pinned* the undercarriage and after changing the wheels towed the plane away.

On 5 February, an Air Laos passenger DC-3 left Kai Tak. About 20 minutes into the flight the pilot reported a severe fire in the port engine and was returning. The crew followed the emergency drill – as the prop feathered they used the CO<sub>2</sub> charge. The flames

resisted for a moment then went out. The plane landed on one engine. An inspection showed the engine a ruined mess with extensive scorching around the oil tank . . .!

In both incidents the crews showed their professionalism – nobody suffered a scratch.

On March 1, Thomas Russell Thomson joined the Department of Civil Aviation as Airport Commandant. He had a RAF background in East Africa and was Chief of Kenyan Air Navigational Services from 1952 to 1957. He replaced Mr Muspratt-Williams as Director on August 28, 1966. Mr Thomson, OBE, went on pre-retirement leave on May 2, 1973.

In late April, Cathay's DC-4 (VR-HFF) completed her HAEC overhaul. From February to May a dry-chartered DC-4 from Korean National Airways flew its schedules. My log book records my first flight on HL-108 was April 22 – my final flight in her was 4 May.

Saturday, April 27, North West Airlines proudly showed the first DC-7C to land at Kai Tak. A large crowd thronged the viewing enclosure at the Terminal Building.

The jet-prop Vickers Viscount 760 made its maiden flight early in December 1956. Her power came from a Rolls-Royce Dart gas turbine engine that drove a propeller. Each engine developed 1,780 equivalent horse-power on take-off. The plane seated 44 passengers and cruised at 325 mph at 20,000 feet and had a range of 2,250 miles. She was a superb piece of machinery even with a price tag of £350,000 Sterling.

On 10 February, the first (VR-HFI) touched down at Kai Tak with a second (VR-HFJ) following on 8 March. The planes arrived to considerable public interest – they heralded the remodelled Hong Kong Airways (HKA).

The Chief Pilot was Walter Burman. His support came from Captains John Fawdon and David Lampard – a long-time Hong Kong aviation identity. The First Officers were John Muir and Neville Hall. Nev Hall would make his mark in Cathay Pacific Airways.

The Viscount's introduction broke trip records between several cities. The most impressive was Captain Lampard's flight from Hong Kong to Seoul. *Dave* covered the 1,600 miles in five hours 20 minutes at an average speed of 300 miles-per-hour. Normal scheduled time for the flight was nine hours.

Cathay Pacific found no joy in their return. They considered BOAC and Jardine Matheson & Company Limited had formed a Regional Company under the *cloak* of HKA. Their argument – the paid-up ordinary capital of HKA appeared to be only HK\$3,200,000 subscribed equally by BOAC and HKA. The purchase of the two Viscounts must have come entirely from BOAC coffers!



APRIL 27, 1957

Northwest Orient Airlines displays a Douglas DC-7C, its newest plane at Kai Tak Airport.

(Photo: Leon Callaghan)

## AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

With Hong Kong Airways reactivating its franchises North West Airlines (NWA) began making waves. NWA showed unwillingness to cancel the 1951 arrangement where it operated between Taipei and Tokyo under HKA colours. The Hong Kong Government decided the arrangement was a commercial one between the two companies and instructed NWA to withdraw.

In July an irritated Mr Benceter, vice-president for NWA in the Far East, approached Cathay Pacific. His suggestion was to permit him to hang a Cathay charter plate on his DC-6B aircraft between Manila and Hong Kong, giving him a through service from the States. Cathay's violent criticism of HKA when they played the same game between Taipei and Hong Kong would not allow them to do the same between Manila and Hong Kong. The plans of North West Airlines came to nothing.

Then Civil Air Transport (CAT) tried its hand at the franchise intrigue. The Company submitted an application to play the old HKA game between Taipei and Hong Kong. Their hidden agenda was an extension to the Hong Kong – Bangkok route. The Hong Kong Licensing Committee turned down their application.

With *Merdeka* (Independence), BOAC bought a controlling interest in Malayan Airways (MAL). Cathay saw this as an additional danger to its regional trades and realised the choice of future aircraft was a vital priority.

Therefore, Cathay's Captain Ken Steele, Captain Dave Smith and Engineering Director Jack Gething went to London. There they joined Bill Knowles the Butterfield & Swire (B&S) Managing Director who was on leave. They carried out trials on the de Havilland Comet 1VB and assessed the future Vickers Vanguard. Cathay decided that no British built aeroplane suited their trade but the superb Lockheed Electra L188, costing HK\$11,546,657, fulfilled every requirement. In April 1959, VR-HFO entered CX service and in June VR-HFN joined her.

Meanwhile, Jardines continued to make full use of their nuisance value by harassing Cathay to join in a Regional Company. Cathay's Managing Director *Bill Knowles* rejected this move as *incipient suicide*.

At the spring 1958 Annual General Meeting, BOAC's accounts showed losses of over half-a-million pounds for their associated and subsidiary companies. In respect of Hong Kong Airways its loss was £167,000 Sterling. These losses perturbed the Board of BOAC who decided their Regional Companies should be managed locally and operate with outside finance. BOAC would retain as much influence as possible by retaining a seat on their respective Boards.

BOAC's Lord Rennell found his corporate machinations matched by the guile of *Jock Swire*. In July 1958 he approached Swire with the plan that BOAC would buy the Jardine portion of Hong Kong Airways. Then merge Hong Kong Airways with Cathay and take a substantial shareholding themselves. He asked if Cathay would buy HKA with payment by a share issue to BOAC. Swire told Lord Rennell that Cathay considered HKA *not only worthless but a liability*, but agreed to consider the matter.

Lord Rennell left London for a tour of the Far East in October 1958. *Jock Swire* decided to be in Hong Kong during his Lordship's visit. This was a wise move for in the relaxed atmosphere they agreed. They returned to London and signed a Letter of Intent that did not include the Viscounts and that BOAC assumed responsibility for the HKA staff.

With this agreement Cathay formed a new Company *Cathay Holdings Limited*. This called for a complicated share manipulation. *Holdings* bought the current Cathay from the existing shareholders giving them one share in *Holdings* for every Cathay share. Cathay then made a bonus issue of 1,500 shares to *Holdings* and bought the entire share capital of HKA from BOAC with Cathay ordinary shares.

Meanwhile *Jock Swire* received a letter from Mr Hugh Barton, Chairman of Jardines. His letter proposed he offer Jardines a token holding and a seat on its Board. Barton further

undertook that after three years Jardines would resign from the Board and sell back the shares to *Holdings* at the same price, if so requested. After discussion with Lord Rennell, Swire offered Jardines 500 shares at HK\$167 per HK\$100 share and a seat on the B&S Board on the stipulations given in Barton's letter.

To give a smooth hand-over Cathay also undertook to manage HKA for the account of BOAC from February 1, 1959, until 30 June, on a flat fee basis. With the expected arrival of the Cathay Electras this made good sense. The astute Swire also had nullified the possibility of HKA and Malayan Airways forming an alliance – a risk Cathay could not afford to take!

Jock Swire's guile had retained the Cathay name, kept the Company under Butterfield & Swire control, and eliminated its regional competitor. This ended *the Battle of Hong Kong Airways* – a battle that had lasted for eight years.

Not all the intrigue radiated from board-rooms. On April 24, the front page of the *South China Morning Post* told a stirring tale.

DARING RESCUE REVEALED  
*Americans Fly Into China To Save Boy*  
EIGHT-HOUR ADVENTURE IN HUNAN PROVINCE  
PLANNED IN H.K.

American Henry Peter Bush was a pilot on leave from the Government-owned Venezuelan Airline, Linea Aeropostal Venezolana. The report described him as a 42-year-old mild-spoken greying man with 19 years' flying experience. Captain Bush told the *Post* how he and another American flew deep into Red China's Hunan Province and rescued a 12-year-old boy.

The other American, who he refused to identify, was in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, when a well-dressed Chinese offered him US\$10,000 to fly a rescue mission. He produced a plane ticket to Hong Kong and hotel reservations. If the project interested the American further details waited him in a certain Chinese restaurant near Kai Tak Airport. The American took the ticket and went!

In the negotiations a beautiful Chinese girl was the intermediary. She impressed the American with her sincerity. Returning to his hotel he bumped into Henry Bush, a long-time friend. The American took Bush to meet the girl who repeated how a servant kidnapped a boy as the Red Army overran the country. How for six years the father had paid the kidnapers monthly sums of money. She said the servant held the boy near an abandoned air-strip 350 miles North of Macau. Bush could barely conceal his scepticism but, like his companion, the girl's sincerity swayed him.

The following day she produced a detailed flight plan with maps and a comprehensive weather report. She accompanied the two men to Macau, took them to a Catalina bobbing off the Portuguese Enclave, and the men took-off at dawn.

The rest of the story is something of an anti-climax. Hugging the terrain they landed on the strip, took the boy aboard, and returned to Portuguese waters where a Chinese junk took the boy to Hong Kong. The girl, waiting in another junk, returned them to Macau where they all left with correct departure visas.

The Macau Government quickly denied that any plane had used Portuguese territory that day. MATCO, who operated Catalinas, through Captain Len Cosgrove, denied any involvement. The only other Catalina in the region belonged to the Netherlands-New Guinea Petroleum Company – a Shell associate. It was on jacks in the HAEC workshop! Captain Bush, to support his story, produced his passport that showed a Macau entry and exit visa for the period involved.

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The SCMP's follow-up made other revelations. A Briton said he had accompanied Henry Bush. Mike Sullivan, a former British prize-fighter and prisoner-of-war of the Japanese, made his home in Thailand after the war. He married a Thai, and was an authority on ancient ruins in that part of the world. He was the then manager for Thai Airways sales.

Both men stated they refused the cash but accepted gold watches from a man they presumed was the boy's father – whose identity they never learned. Bush also stated he accepted a sapphire ring and some boxes and art objects. Bush refused the cash, the most negotiable of possessions, because he didn't want to get into any disputes with *Uncle Sam* and anyhow it was a *mission of mercy*. Yet, those other gifts would have attracted greater attention from the United States' authorities.

A story as bizarre as this has to be true!