

CHAPTER 17

THE MIRACLE STRIP

*Those who follow the world must hurry
their footsteps. Wei Ying-Wu.*

The vibrancy of post-war Hong Kong attracted world attention. Its low flat-rate of income tax, an untapped source of cheap labour, and a lack of draconian regulations interested overseas companies.

The Western romanticism for things Eastern brought increased tourism. To live and breathe, even for a short time, the customs of an ancient land, and the closeness of the curtain of bamboo, caused exhilaration. Finally, the vast range of discounted, duty-free, name-brand products solved their holiday decision!

The problem was how to get the *time-strapped traveller* there. The ponderous ship travel of yesteryear did not fit the bustling era. The larger planes with increased passenger loading and the consequent reduction in fares solved the problem – but bigger planes needed bigger operational areas.

The existing Kai Tak Airport, surrounded by rugged terrain, prevented any worthwhile land expansions. Yet, only quick action would save Hong Kong from backwater obscurity. The Hong Kong Government had the courage to make far-sighted decisions.

* * *

The expansion limitations of Kai Tak Airport forced the RAF to seek a larger base for its four-engined planes. In September 1945, they selected a site in the Ping Shan Valley, New Territories. This site ultimately evolved into Sek Kong.

This RAF activity interested the Ministry of Civil Aviation, London. In February 1946, Ministry aerodrome surveyors checked the RAF site and found it did not meet civil requirements. A mountain-wave from the Colony's highest peak, Tai Mo Shan, affected the site.

The surveyors then proposed a civil site at Deep Bay between the villages of Lau Fau Shan and Mong Tseng Wai. Their survey showed a major airport conforming to international standards could be built there. Yet the development would be expensive, for it demolished some small coastal hills and reclaimed a section of shallow bay. The prime

advantage was the unrestricted approaches. Other than the cost the prime disadvantage was the distance from the centre of population. Thirty miles of indifferent roads was a prime consideration.

The Hong Kong Government sought a site more centrally placed. Several prospects including Stanley Bay came into contention but were abandoned in favour of Stonecutter's Island in the western harbour. The approaches were clear and the location central. The Ministry's surveyors rejected this site because of development costs and that the existing installations would attract heavy compensation.

In late 1949 the United Kingdom Government offered a loan of HK\$48 millions towards an airport construction that met ICAO standards. Their offer suggested further consideration for the Deep Bay site. The Hong Kong Government commissioned an engineering survey on Deep Bay that included some minor clearing. The reported costing proved beyond the means of the Government – they abandoned Deep Bay in 1950. With no other satisfactory site the Government decided to develop Kai Tak Airport.

In 1951, at the Government's invitation, the Ministry sent a technical mission to make proposals for upgrading Kai Tak to international standards. On June 14, 1951, the mission presented the then notable, but now mainly forgotten, *Broadbent Report*. In the broadest terms it proposed a new main runway bearing 145°/325° true, beginning roughly at the Runway 13 turning pad. It also recommended an extension towards the west for Runway 07/25. Mr R. Broadbent's report made no effort to minimise the restrictive nature of the proposals but it was the best compromise under the circumstances.

The Hong Kong Government and the Ministry of Civil Aviation accepted the Report in principle. In July 1952, the Government appointed Scott & Wilson, Kirkpatrick & Partners, consulting engineers of London. Their brief – to examine the proposed development and report on the construction problems involved.

In August they submitted findings that contained several minor modifications to the Broadbent Report. The Government and Ministry saw their reasoning and again accepted the presentation. The following month the Government instructed their consultant engineers to provide details of the work with an estimate of costs.

The consultants advised that any Kai Tak land the development freed had an equity far exceeding reclaimed land. Another minor cost reduction seemed possible when the plane builders and BOAC updated criterion for future jet transport operations. The Department realised they had over-estimated the runway length required. The Government, basking in these small gains, came down to earth with a thud. The consultants' investigative boring revealed extensive weakness in the runways. They found loosely compacted foundations – legacy of the POW builders. The consultants concluded that a new reclamation, properly compacted with selected fill, would not only be cheaper but stronger, than *repairing* existing facilities.

This resolved the Department to pursue a one-runway idea. They did this by swinging Broadbent's proposition to an orientation of 135°/315° sited entirely on reclaimed land in Kowloon Bay. The scheme allowed unfettered operation through Lei Yue Mun Pass and a curved flight technique from the opposite direction.

Approaching Runway 13 from the west a speed limit of 120 knots led into a 40° banked turn to the right. The turn had a radius of 5,090 feet followed by a straight run of 3,000 feet to the touchdown threshold. The Department had adopted the procedure from the ICAO visual approach funnel procedure for large aircraft. If airline operators would accept this curved idea, and minor diversions or delays for adverse cross-winds (20 knots), the idea seemed a reasonable compromise.

Meanwhile, the Deputy Operations Manager of BOAC visited the Colony to make an on-sight inspection. Back in England he prepared a mockup of the curved procedure at

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Blackbushe Airport and flew trials with Britannias and Comets. His favourable report brought a fillip to the stressed Director of Civil Aviation.

The initial proposals for the single-runway layout, that became *Phase 1 of Scheme D*, made provision for a 9,000-foot runway. The length suited the future jets flying long-hauls. The reclaimed promontory, 1,000 foot wide, included a parallel taxiway with a 500-foot clearance between the runway centre line and taxiway. The projected 307 reclaimed acres required 17 million cubic yards of dredging, at an average depth of 24 feet. The three million cubic yards of fill would come from hill excavation. To preserve the new runway's proposed curved operational gradient (1 in 40) some high ground and buildings faced demolition.

These were three blocks of flats owned by the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank. The ten-storey buildings, built to quarter its expanding staff, had ultra-modern facilities. There was a possibility of moving the buildings to another location but the Bank vetoed the idea. The Government agreed to demolish them and rebuild on a site of mutual agreement.

Several apartments, temporarily not required by the *Honkers and Shankers*, quartered Department of Civil Aviation staff. They found themselves evicted with the Bank's personnel – perhaps a little poetic justice!

The outcome had a different result – they removed the four top storeys of each block, preserving the flight gradient. This seemed a satisfactory compromise, but not to the occupants.

The noise generated by planes crossing Kowloon is an irritant to this day. In 1994, Peter Lok, the then Director of Civil Aviation, resolved to spend a night beneath the flight path. The next morning he appeared in his office with red sunken eyes. Had the noise pollution kept him awake? No! His lack of sleep resulted from a continuous stream of phone calls and door knocking from reporters. One with greater determination used a cherry-picker to check *he was at home*.

The runway, 17 feet higher than the mean high-water level, required 6,600 yards of sea wall to contain the fill. The estimates included a new terminal area, a RAF dispersal area, and ancillary works to support the new airport.

In June 1953 the consultants submitted their Report and a costing estimate of HK\$140 million combined Civil and RAF requirements. The consultants determined the project would require five years to complete.

When the Government studied the Report they added additional items. This raised the capital expenditure to HK\$149 million – or HK\$136 million excluding RAF requirements. These amounts fell beyond the Government's financial capacity and it directed the Department to re-examine the scheme to cut costs.

The Government appointed an Inter-Departmental Committee, charging it to examine *Scheme D's* financial and economic implications. The Committee appraised the likely commercial benefits would exceed the capital expenditure and recurrent costs. They also realised any worthwhile cost reduction must come from reducing the area of reclamation. The Chairman instructed the consultants to prepare estimates for a modified scheme. The consultants suggested a 7,200-foot runway with a promontory width of 600 feet and a reduced terminal area – costed at HK\$88 million. It would require four years to complete. Although the proposals for a regional airport resulted in a substantial cost reduction it left the Colony with two serious limitations. The shortened runway load-limited future jet transports – then called the *Lumbo*. The loss of a separate taxiway curtailed the number of operations.

In late September Mr Muspratt-Williams, the Director of Civil Aviation, flew to London. He discussed with the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, Colonial Office, Air

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Ministry, BOAC and aircraft manufacturers the suggested modifications. His presentation aroused polite enthusiasm, but he left London with less than unanimous support.

In October the Inter-Departmental Committee submitted its Report to the Government. It recommended the *modified Scheme D* for Kai Tak's development. It also recommended the Government accept the British interest-free loan of HK\$48 million. Later discussions on the promontory width and RAF requirements raised the costing to HK\$97 million.

On June 16, 1954, the Hong Kong Legislative Council met under the Presidency of His Excellency The Governor, Sir Alexander William George Herder Grantham, GCMG. The Official Report of Proceedings minuted the following resolution presented by The Honourable Mr Robert Brown Black, CMG, OBE, the Colonial Secretary:

That Council approve the scheme for the development of Kai Tak airport estimated to cost HK\$96,750,000 and based on the construction of a single runway and overrun 7,500 feet long and 700 feet in width resting upon a reclamation of Kowloon Bay.

Mr Black asked the hon. Members to make a textual amendment to the third-last word – of should read in. *We do not propose to reclaim the whole of Kowloon Bay.* Mr Black's attempt at whimsy had been prophetic. Kowloon Bay now has almost fallen to the reclamer.

The Colonial Secretary then summarised the history of the project and the Colony's expectations from the capital outlay. The modified *Scheme D* had reduced the cost by nearly HK\$40 million from that originally prepared by Scott & Wilson, Kirkpatrick & Partners. The saving came from reducing the promontory width and substituting two loops to replace the parallel taxiway. One loop was at the south-east end of the runway and the other at the half-way point. The loops allowed 9½ movements an hour – an acceptable compromise for continuous day-night operation.

The Honourable Theodore Louis Bowring, OBE, Director of Public Works, seconded the Resolution. He went on to give some engineering aspects of the project.

The runway reclamation would contain 11 million cubic yards of fill stabilised by three miles of sea walls. To reach solid foundation dredges would remove two million cubic yards of silt – earmarked for the Kung Tong reclamation. The fill was a combination of sand and decomposed granite. The land excavations would provide this granite – also boulders, split into pitching blocks – for the sea walls. The distinction of boulder stone is its working reliability – it splits more evenly than bed-rock.

The sand would come from Hung Hom Bay where a tidal sweep of 10 knots prevents the accumulation of silt. The main source of material would come from the hills around Kowloon but the *Sacred Hill*, supporting a boulder weighing over 1,000 tons, would provide the remainder.

Mr. Bowring asked the hon. Members to imagine the material spread over the entire area of the Hong Kong Cricket Club ground forming a pile 300 feet higher than the Peak. While the 300,000 square yards of concrete or bituminous paving, stressed to 400,000lbs, equated to twice the area of the roadways around the New Territories.

The project received the unanimous support of the hon. Members and the necessary financial provisions made.

There would be periods, mid-morning and mid-afternoon, when arrivals and departures would be greater than the mean. Within these time frames overloading the system was a certainty. A separate taxiway would not be the whole remedy but helpful in minimising that overload. Also, the eastern sea wall was a waste of capital expenditure if the Government had a taxiway forced on it later.

After consideration the Legislative Council realised a separate taxiway was a necessity not a luxury. They approved this addition in February 1955. The Government called for tenders on June 30, 1955 – Scott & Wilson, Kirkpatrick & Partners prepared the contracts.

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The modified promontory had a length of 8,340 feet and a width of 795 feet covering an area of 150 acres. It supported a 7,200-foot paved runway, with prepared over-runs – 300 feet at the southern end and 800 feet at the northern end. A 60-foot-wide taxiway paralleled the runway, with 365 feet between the centre lines of the runway and taxiway. The ICAO ideal was 500 feet! Throughout the work the existing airport would continue in full use.

The terminal area covered nine acres of reclamation. Maintenance and parking areas complemented the terminal building designed for 100 per cent on-going expansion without interrupting services. The initial flow control provided for 10 movements an hour for planes of 100 passenger capacity with catering for those in transit. The baggage, freight and mail received similar consideration.

The recoument of some capital expenditure remained a priority. The terminal design and the RAF's improved land usage made substantial savings inside the old airport's perimeter. These 160 acres eventually sold to private enterprise with the yield returned to consolidated revenue.

The reduced length of the runway attracted criticism. At a regional meeting of ICAO in 1955 some airline operators took the Hong Kong delegation to task. The operators claimed they needed a minimum runway of 10,000 feet for their future aircraft. The delegates present contested these views. They reminded the operators that *each extra 1000 feet of runway cost an additional HK\$10 million* – capital expenditure beyond their current resources. There could be no runway extension in the short term!

The delegates raised the proposition that modern planes generally require less length for landing than for take-off. They would support extending the landward end of the runway by 1,140 feet to a point 60 feet short of the first elevated lamp in the approach lighting. For other than landings from the north-west the extension would increase operational capability. Landings from the north-west followed a 1-in-40 gradient, with the threshold clearly marked.

At the seaward end the over-run increased from 200 to 300 feet. To increase safety over shipping and sea wall the touch-down threshold was 260 feet up the runway.

These changes provided the following lengths of paved runway:

Towards the south-east (Runway 13):

Take-off 8,340 ft

Landing 7,200 ft

Towards the north-west (Runway 31):

Take-off 8,340 ft

Landing 8,080 ft

The delegates conceded the operators faced restricted payloads for maximum-range operations. Yet the proposed revisions gave sufficient payload for the stage-lengths generally used by the then large jet airliners.

In August 1955, the Government awarded the contract to the Societe Francaise D'Enterprises De Draggage et de Travaux Publics. The French firm sub-contracted several major segments to Gammon (Malaya) Limited.

The contractors took six weeks to organise their equipment and personnel. This was a formidable achievement. They had two large bucket dredgers and a floating crane towed from France. From the United States came a grab-dredger and two small cutter-suction dredgers, also engines for the tugs and bucket dredgers. The excavators, bulldozers and other plant components came from Singapore. The United Kingdom supplied a fleet of tipping lorries – Hong Kong workmen fabricated their bodies. While others built nine tugs, 10 barges and four pontoons took shape in the Hong Kong dockyards. Finally, they purchased an additional floating crane and three flat-top barges in the Colony.

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Gammon had the task of positioning the sea wall pitching blocks, the site drainage and runway construction. Its sub-contract involved excavating several sites and stabilising the rocky outcrop we now call the *Checker-Board*. Gammon also constructed a fenced-off access route from the excavation sites through bustling Kowloon City to the reclamation. This included two vehicular bridges to relieve the traffic congestion resulting from their *switch-back* road.

In January 1956, reclamation began at the south-west corner of the airport. In March, the bucket dredging sand in Hung Hom Bay and the other dredging silt in Kowloon Bay exceeded a combined output of 200,000 cubic yards each week. Gammon averaged 2,000 lorry-loads of decomposed granite fill per day. Their workmen reduced the Sung Stone to a slab bearing the original inscription.

The once *Sacred Hill* site, now flat and dusty, became the distribution point for the sea wall's 80,000 pitching blocks. Workmen quarrying the Kowloon Hills averaged 375 blocks each day. The larger two-ton blocks formed the promontory's western wall and the one-ton blocks the eastern. The sea wall grew about 80 feet a day.

Mr A. W. C. Villiers, the project's Chief Resident Engineer, controlled his 3,000 workers from an office near the reclamation. Scott & Wilson, Kirkpatrick & Partners stayed in close contact with Villiers through Wilson's son. Gordon was a keen cricketer – we met in the *middle* of the Kowloon Cricket Club. He always made the time to show me around the development. At the quarry face, one day, he arranged I *ride the switch-back* – it terrified me!

On March 13, 1957, Mr Villiers showed Governor Sir Alexander Grantham, GCMG, around the Kai Tak Airport Development Scheme. Sir Alexander's undisguised enthusiasm boosted the spirit of the people working on the scheme. Sadly, he would not do the opening ceremony expected about August 28, 1958, the contract's completion date. This honour would go to his successor – his erstwhile Colonial Secretary.

The most charitable word to describe the 1957 weather would be shrewish. The rainfall for May exceeded 35 inches, triple the month's average. *Dinger Bell's* Royal Observatory on Mount Elgin recorded the month had only eight days free of rain. The downpours, from the 17th to the 22nd, brought widespread flooding, landslides, and havoc to the runway reclamation. The rainfall recorded at Beacon Hill, one of Kowloon's *Nine Dragons*, showed the rain's irregularity. Beacon Hill, just four miles from the Observatory and a stone's throw from Kai Tak, received 28.21 inches on the 21st – five times that recorded at the Observatory on the same day. The men working the reclamation toiled manfully through these disagreeable times.

The fine weather over the following three months allowed a substantial increase in dredging. Typhoon *Gloria* shattered this tranquillity when, on September 22, she stormed out of the China Sea. For 14 hours the Observatory's equipment recorded gale-force winds. The passage of her *eye*, 30 miles to the south, brought hurricane winds that hammered the Colony for over an hour. The gust-peak of 101 knots tore ships from their moorings, driving them ashore.

The Airport Fire Service maintained patrols throughout that terrible night. They kept a fire check on several planes that slammed into others when their tie-down ropes had broken. The RAF fire-tenders helped them warily circle two multi-engined Service planes that were riding out the typhoon with engines running. The object – to keep the plane headed into the wind – but these gusts lacked any set direction. It was a dangerous operation.

The dawn showed nine planes badly damaged and the reclamation severely battered. Yet, the vital dredgers had survived *Gloria's* wrath.

In November 1957, Gordon Wilson phoned saying I should come to the site. I found him buzzing around an ancient cannon dredged from the mud of Kowloon Bay.

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At year's end the promontory runway, and its taxiway, had a sealing of asphalt. The shoulder areas had a good grass coverage from turf taken from the old airport.

Ancillary work had kept apace with the reclamation. The contractors had positioned the runway lights, the fire mains and installed the surface drainage.

The Airport Progress Committee and the Government approved other related components.

Eric Cumine and Company produced working drawings and specification for the Airport Fire Station and offered the tender in January 1958. The contract went to Yick Lee and Company. The Government chose the same company to construct the temporary control tower – both projects to be completed by August 1958.

A complicated work programme to divert the main nullah to an open-cut, and partially realign the Clear Water Bay Road, fell to the Union Construction Company. Their contract called for three bridges, one to take airport traffic to and from the main parking and aircraft areas, the second to provide passage, across the new open-cut nullah, from runway to HAEC maintenance, and the RAF station and the third to carry public traffic on the realigned Clear Water Bay Road. I remember, with no affection, the chaos that existed on that *stretch of confusion*.

The Department's heavy planning programme had affected several routine matters. This prompted the transfer of an Air Traffic Control Officer Grade II to Headquarters. His replacement was Mr W. V. Clarke, late of the DCA, East Africa High Commission. This was a welcome appointment but still left the Department one equivalent rank short. John Kingsley Saunders accepted this vacancy on January 9, 1958. John, born in 1923, had a Royal Air Force background. He went on to become Acting Deputy Director in 1974 and retired four years later.

This was the year Hong Kong recorded its first milestone towards aviation maturity. The one-and-a-half-mile miracle strip, won at great expense from the sea, was a reality. Careful planning had gone into its opening, but fate orchestrated the proceedings.

John Wallace, who I knew well, and Timothy Birch, who I knew slightly, of Radio Hong Kong, produced a splendid programme titled *Thirteen Thirty-one*. The title alluded to the compass bearing of the new Kai Tak runway. The programme included snippets from *Hammy* Hamilton, the Airport Manager, and from Captain Len Crogrove, then flying the MATCO Catalina. Later we heard from John Henry and cricketing mate Gordon Wilson, both of Scott & Wilson, Kirkpatrick & Partners, the consultant engineers. Mr Gandy, speaking for the Chief Resident Engineer, concluded with a résumé of how they solved the reclamation's problems.

Major Harry Stanley, to become the father of the Hongkong Tourist Association, arrived in Hong Kong on 3 March. He found the Colony boasted but three worthwhile hotels, the *Gloucester*, *Peninsula* and *Miramar*. The Major operated from behind *two half-moon windows* on the mezzanine floor of the *Pen*. He retired in 1972 and returned to England.

Meanwhile, several minor events retained media interest in aviation matters. On April 7, 1958, a Taiwanese (Formosa) military plane force-landed at Kai Tak. The authorities quickly surrounded the sinister black Nationalist P4Y medium bomber and took the crew to the airport's VIP room as a protective measure. Later the commander told reporters his plane developed fuel problems while engaged on a routine patrol. His patrol extended from the southern tip of Taiwan to the Communist-held meteorology station on Pratas Island, in the South China Sea. He was at the turning point of his patrol when his problems occurred and with Kai Tak nearest he decided to land there. HAEC rectified the trouble and the plane and the 10 crew members returned to base.

On 26 May a former student of the Far East Flying Training School casually strolled out to a Stinson L-5. He calmly started VR-HFO's engine, obtained permission to taxi and off

he went *into the wild blue yonder*. After an exhilarating two-hour joy ride he returned to Kai Tak and into the arms of the waiting police. It seemed he forgot to get permission to fly!

The following month Captain Alex Wales brought Cathay Pacific's DC-6B on to Kai Tak with a perfect landing. Other members of the crew were Captain John Carrington, co-pilot, Chief Flight Engineer Bob Smith, Flight Engineer Leo Brennan, and one other. The delivery flight from Santa Monica had taken 54 flying hours, making stops at Honolulu, Wake Island, Guam and Manila. The arrival of this HK\$6,736,860 piece of modern machinery was a heady event. I could hardly wait to get my hands on her! Yet, of greater interest to me was that other man. He was the Douglas Aircraft Company's renowned test pilot Bill Bridgeman. In 1951 he tested the *Skyrocket* and later became the *fastest man on earth* by shattering the speed and altitude records. He enjoyed telling of his test flight on the hush-hush *F-D-4*, a fighter that could climb to 50,000 feet in just over two minutes. And here was this famous pilot to teach me, and others, how to fly Cathay's latest asset. VR-HFG entered CX service June 22, 1958, becoming the property of Braathens on November 29, 1962.

On August 31, USAF C-54 (Skymaster) 0-72523, commanded by Captain J. A. Quillan, left Okinawa for Hong Kong. Approaching Kai Tak the skipper asked co-pilot Lieutenant J. A. Taylor to acknowledge his clearance to land on Runway 31. The C-54's right wheel struck the sea wall, the starboard undercarriage folded. The C-54 skidded 500 yards and shuttered to a stop at the intersection of the runways. The crew of five scrambled out seconds before the plane became an inferno. Later, a reporter asked Staff Sergeant James A. Austin if anyone had panicked. With a catching grin, the 24-year-old radio-operator replied – "Panic! Of course not. We are all United States Air Force men."

This accident forced the opening of the new runway 15 hours ahead of schedule. Although this upset the plans of the Department they were fortunate in having that choice. They had planned the last take-off on the old runway and the first landing on the new for Cathay's planes.

The first plane to land on the new runway was a US Navy Amphibian UF-1 Albatross. Lieutenant J. T. Burrell touched the pristine surface at 1420 hours. Peter Lok, the immediate past Director of Civil Aviation, remarks in his Foreword – *it loitered around for about four hours until everybody else holding had to divert*. The next to land was a civilian airliner commanded by Captain Manuel Conde. This Philippine Air Line plane, with 28 passengers from Manila, touched down at 1610 hours, almost two hours after the search-and-rescue amphibian.

Meanwhile, the race began for the honour of first take-off. Soon after the Albatross landed Cathay Pacific's DC-6 taxied out – a RAF *Venom* followed. As the airliner did its pre-flight checks Flight Lieutenant B. E. Forse got permission to take off and rolled at 1440 hours. The first civilian plane off was Cathay's DC-6 – five minutes after the *Venom*.

The morning of Friday, September 12 dawned with low clouds forming a waterfall effect over the *Nine Dragons*. Rain fell at frequent intervals and the wind gusted mischievously. Would the weather spoil the official opening of Hong Kong's aviation miracle? Fifty thousand spectators and 500 official guests decided it would not! Radio Hong Kong's John Wallace made a mistake by announcing the Governor's helicopter was in sight. This was the Government's other Widgeon making final checks of the runway. Then the Westland Widgeon carrying His Excellency Sir Robert Black, KCMG, OBE, Lady Black, Miss Barbara Black, and Captain J. Bunnell, the Governor's ADC, came into sight. Their pilot, struggling against 30-knot gusts, eased between two coloured poles. At 1730 hours the helicopter's nose severed a ribbon opening the runway, followed by the traditional salvo of firecrackers.

The Director of Civil Aviation, Mr Muspratt-Williams, and his daughter, Adine, greeted the Vice-Regal party. They escorted them to the dais in front of the Airport Fire Station. In his address, His Excellency praised those involved in the *imaginatively planned and construction processes* – he then opened the runway.

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Two green flares signalled Flight Lieutenant F. J. Barrett to lead No. 60 Squadron's Venoms into the air. Halfway into the take-off the rain pelted down. John Wallace's announcement of a passing shower stayed the crowd scrambling for shelter.

The FEFTS's Tiger Moth was to lead the civil contingent but the boisterous wind caused her scratching. This honour fell to a Cathay DC-3 that took off towards a gloomy Lei Yue Mun Pass, now framed by a glorious rainbow. The Cathay DC-6B followed, then a PanAm Boeing Stratocruiser. Two Super G Constellations, one from Air India and the other QANTAS, led a Hong Kong Airways Viscount 760. Following was a Canadian Pacific Air Lines' Britannia 314, the then quietest transport in service and called the *Whispering Giant*. The star of the show was a Comet 1V owned by BOAC, the first jet airliner to land at Kai Tak. With Group Captain John Cunningham, de Havilland's chief test pilot, in command the Vice-Regal party skimmed beneath the low overcast for a circuit of the Harbour.

The Comet 1V had come from England (Hatfield) with technical landings at Bombay and Bangkok – in one day – in daylight. G-APDA covered 7,925 miles in 18 hours 22 minutes with an actual flying time of 16 hours 16 minutes – 14 hours faster than the then scheduled service.

John *Cat's Eyes* Cunningham (a nick-name he loathed) finished World War II directing No. 11 Group, a night-fighter operation. Besides three DSOs and two DFCs he wore the American Silver Star.

The Band of the Hong Kong Police Force under the direction of Mr W. B. Foster, MBE, kept the guests entertained. That historic day closed when at 1945 hours they *Beat the Retreat*.

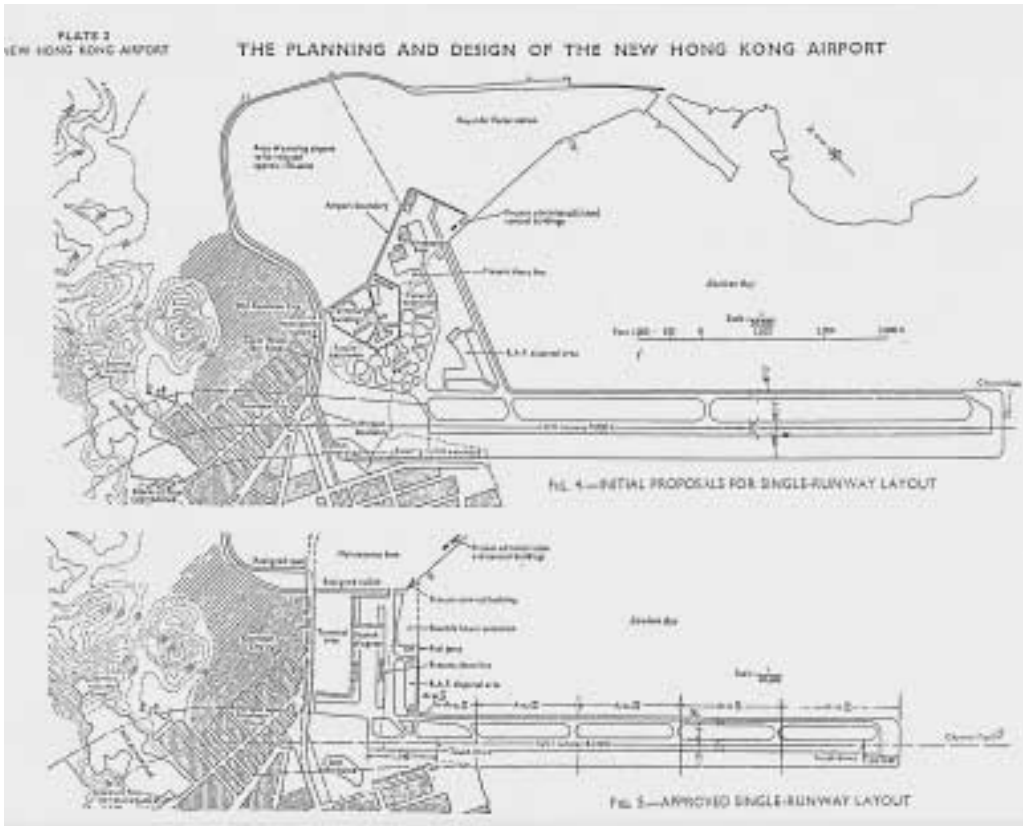


MOCK-UP OF PROPOSED RUNWAY 13/31

Model prepared by Scott & Wilson, Kirkpatrick & Partners, consulting engineers of London. View shows the north-west approach over Kowloon taken from south-east corner. Note the wall charts.

(Photo: Henley Lo)

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THE PLANNING & DESIGN OF THE NEW HONG KONG AIRPORT

The plates prepared by Scott & Wilson, Kirkpatrick & Partners, consulting engineers of London. The top plate shows the initial proposals for the single-runway layout. The bottom plate was the approved single-runway layout. (Drawings: Henley Lo)



KAI TAK AIRPORT DEVELOPMENT

This rare photograph shows the surveyor's notations of terrain and obstructions for demolition for a safe flight profile. This aspect, taken from water level in Kowloon Bay, views the proposed runway's centre line. (Photo: Henley Lo)

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KAI TAK AIRPORT DEVELOPMENT

View from the Kowloon Hills looking along the centre line of the proposed new runway. Photo was taken at an altitude of 300 feet and one mile from the proposed touch-down threshold. The inked addition shows the surveyor's overlay of the proposed reclamation. Note the remaining wall of the Kowloon Walled City, the centre line passing through the FEETS, the Sacred Hill overlapping the right perimeter of the reclamation. Just off the left border is the Air Asia establishment. (Photo: Henley Lo)



PROGRESS OF THE RECLAMATION – 1 NOVEMBER, 1956

The Sacred Hill has almost disappeared. The small garden at the left middle border, containing the Sung Wong Toi stone, is being landscaped. (Photo: Noel Hitching, RAF)

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THE SPECIAL ACCESS ROAD FROM KOWLOON HILLS – FEBRUARY 1956

Closed to all civilian traffic this road brought filling for the runway reclamation. The top photo looks west along Nga Tsin Wai Road with Kowloon City Market at right. The hump crossed Hau Wong Road. The bottom photo shows a truck tearing along the restricted road with a pedestrian overpass just ahead. A sharp right turn brought the truck into South Wall Road, another restricted road.

(Photos: Author)



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THE TERRACE OF THE SUNG DYNASTY EMPEROR

Workmen carefully drill the 1000-ton Sacred Stone. The characters are clearly discernible. The character portion was dressed and erected in a special garden near the airport.

(Photo: Henley Lo)



THE SACRED HILL UNDER DEMOLITION – 1956

The area was used as a storage point for pitching blocks that formed the reclamation's sea wall perimeter.

(Photo: Author)

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PROGRESS – 27 DECEMBER. 1956

The reclamation is becoming more clearly defined.

(Photo: Noel Hitching, RAF)



PROGRESS – JUNE 1957

(Photo: Noel Hitching, RAF)

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PROGRESS – 7 SEPTEMBER 1957

(Photo: Noel Hitching, RAF)



PROGRESS OF THE NEW RUNWAY – MAY 1958

The new runway and parallel taxiway are curing before marking. The Airport Fire Station, the low flat group, right of the runway's threshold, is getting the finishing touches. The relocated FEFTS is further right of the Fire Station. The Fire Station and the FEFTS are on Sung Wong Toi Road.

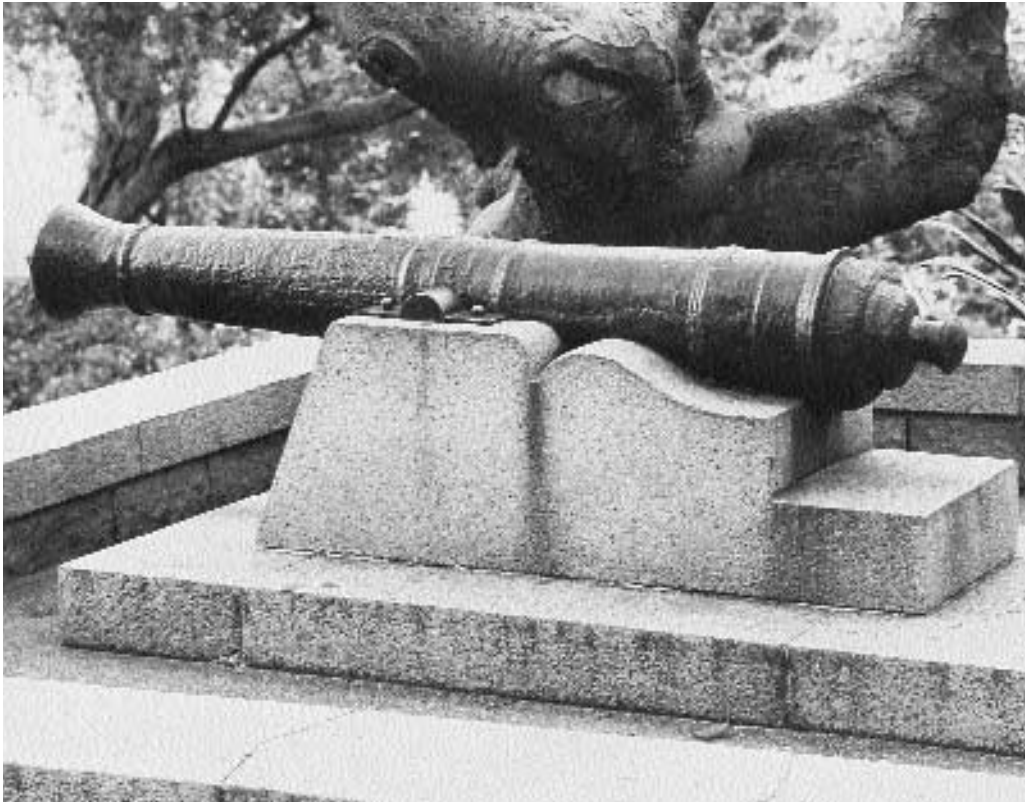
(Photo: Fred Lillywhite, CAD)

**THE ANCIENT CANNON
DREDGED FROM KOWLOON HARBOUR DURING BUILDING OF
THE KAI TAK RUNWAY – NOVEMBER 1957**

The cannon was cast in the 4th Year of the Wing Lik Reign of the Ming Dynasty, 1649 A.D. A troubled time for the Emperor – the Manchu army had him in full retreat.

In 1975, the cannon had a permanent spot in the grounds of the Colonial Secretariat. It lay in the shadow of a huge gnarled tree that looked as old as its charge. The inscription:

Commissioned by Choi Governor of Waihoi and created Ting Hoi, General by Imperial Command – To, by Imperial Command appointed Governor General of Kwangtung and Kwangsi Provinces. Fan, General Officer Commanding Kwangtung and Guardian of the Imperial Heir. Colonel Siu Lei-Yan directed the casting for Ho Hing Cheung, Commander of the Ordinance Depot, Sixth Moon of the Fourth Year of Wing Lik. Weight 500 catties. Emperor.



THE DREDGED CANNON – NOVEMBER 1975

The ancient cannon dredged from Kowloon Harbour during building of Kai Tak's runway.

(Photo: Henley Lo, Scott & Wilson, Kirkpatrick & Partners)

THE MIRACLE STRIP



THE FINISHED MIRACLE – 1958

(Photo: Fred Lillywhite)



FATE TAKES A HAND!

On August 31, 1958, USAF Skymaster 0-72523 wiped off the wheels on the sea wall of Runway 31. Sliding along the runway she stopped at the 07/25 intersection and burst into flames. There were no casualties but the Department was forced to open the new runway ahead of schedule.

(Photo: Fred Lillywhite, CAD)

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

THE OFFICIAL OPENING – 12 SEPTEMBER, 1958



The helicopter carrying His Excellency Sir Robert Black, KCMG, OBE, Lady Black and Miss Barbara Black eased into a gusty wind to sever a ribbon stretched between two barber poles.

(Photo: Fred Lillywhite, CAD)



Sir Robert declaring the runway officially opened. The dais fronted the new Fire Station.

THE MIRACLE STRIP



AN HISTORIC MOMENT

A rain-spotted lens captures a vast crowd, ankle deep in water, cheering as Flight Lieutenant Barrett led three Venom planes into overcast skies. A line of commercial planes waited, on the sea wall, to take part in the ceremony. The FEFTS's Tiger Moth, scheduled to lead the fly-past, was grounded by the boisterous wind. That honour went to a Cathay Pacific Airways DC-3. Note the checked Tower at lower right corner – it was demolished when a permanent Tower was established atop the New Terminal Building in 1962.

(Photo: Carl Myatt, SCMP)



1959 – VIEW FROM 20,000 FEET

North of the Airport the Nine Dragons protect Kowloon.

(Photo: Fred Lillywhite)