

CHAPTER 21

KAI TAK TAKEN FOR GRANTED 1974-1975

1974

Mr H. M. Johnston accepted the position of Airport Management Advisor effective 28 February. He brought a wealth of experience from his former post – General Manager of Edinburgh Airport.

The runway extension became operational on 1 June. Coincident with this was the commissioning of a new Instrument Landing System (ILS) and a modified Visual Approach Slope Indicators (VASI) for Runway 31.

Two more nose-in parking bays were opened for operational use in September. These had the Burroughs Optical Lens Docking System – the *state-of-the-art*.

In March, after much soul searching, Cathay Pacific Airways ordered two Lockheed L-1011 Super TriStar planes costing HK\$500 million. Their power came from British-built Rolls-Royce engines. Cathay had chosen the L1011 over the Douglas DC-10.

In 1972, Cathay had eliminated the A300B European Airbus – it lacked the range to operate Hong Kong to Tokyo. Japan provided 40 per cent of Cathay's traffic and was a petroleum-based economy. They also eliminated the 747 – it was too big at that stage.

Why did Cathay choose the L-1011? Was it because of its *quietest jet* reputation? Was it the British Rolls-Royce engines? Was it the recent DC-10 accident that claimed the lives of 346 people near Paris?

A Cathay spokesman shrugged off these possibilities. He did concede the Company's concern with the noise pollution within the Kai Tak flight-path. His fundamental reasoning was strictly financial – harnessed to the then fuel crisis. The TriStar obtained the same operation usage with just three engines. He went on: Cathay started its re-equipment exercise with fuel accounting for 14 per cent of its costs. At decision time it was 24 per cent – a dramatic increase.

Cathay's pre-crisis annual fuel bill was HK\$48 million. Of the increased HK\$72 million only a small proportion was retrieved. This was because the price of fuel rose 46 per cent on October 1, 1973, and there was no fare increase until the end of January 1974. And

within a week of this fare increase, the price of fuel went up again by 50 per cent of the new price.

Cathay also had learned the value of a flight simulator – its training insurance had reduced dramatically. The preliminary proposal for a L-1011 simulator came from CAE Electronics Limited of Montreal, Canada, at a cost of HK\$15 million. The Canadian simulator, unlike the *mockup* Convair one, had a visual system.

Cathay's next incursion into equipment *expansion* lacked fuel operating problems. On 15 November two Cathay crew members, Captain Geoff Green and Flight Engineer Ron Taaffe, flew Cathay's hot-air balloon at the Sek Kong Air Show. The 77,000-cubic-foot balloon, made in England for Cathay, registered G-BCNS, rose majestically resplendent in our distinctive livery.

Accidents, regrettably, were never far away. On 13 April, a Piper Cherokee of the Aero Club was involved in a minor mishap near the northern end of the runway. There were no casualties.

A second Kai Tak emergency within 30 hours occurred on 2 April. In failing light a Cathay Boeing 707 left for Manila. It carried 114 passengers and a crew of 12. Forty-five minutes into the flight the hydraulic system failed. The skipper dumped fuel in the designated area and landed without further trouble.

It was the emergency that occurred 30 hours earlier that concerned me. An Air India Boeing 707 landing on Runway 13 in heavy, squally rain began to aquaplane. The plane skidded on to the grass verge collapsing one leg of the undercarriage – thankfully all aboard escaped without a scratch. The CAD closed the runway.

Meanwhile, I commanded a Cathay Boeing 707 VR-HHD ferry flight that left Minneapolis on 29 March. Just after day-break on April Fool's Day we left Honolulu direct for Kai Tak. Our take-off weight was 316,000 pounds. Aboard were the Colony's first two Security Check Canopies.

About 100 miles out of Kai Tak I received instructions to divert to Taipei. We arrived in the Taipei circuit in heavy rain, low visibility, and the fuel needles bouncing on the red lines. After shut-down our fuel dip showed we had burned off 142,500 pounds of fuel. The flight time was 12 hours and 23 minutes. Navigator Ray Broadhead calculated we had flown non-stop for 5250 nautical miles – about a quarter of the distance round the earth. Now, that would scarcely raise an eyebrow – then it was a minor achievement.

In November, HAEC was back in the news. They had won an overhaul contract for three Viscount 843s owned by the China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation (Machimpex).

The bad weather continued into December and records show 87 planes diverted to alternate airports during the year. On 3 December the fury of Typhoon *Irma* drove thousands of seagulls to seek refuge on the puddled surface of Kai Tak's runway. A PanAm *Jumbo* from Guam landed in a flurry of feathers yet the plane suffered no damage – the invaders took heavy casualties. The CAD officials drove trucks among the *squatters* discharging shot-guns but it was over an hour before the runway could reopen.

We pilots know the seriousness of bird strikes. Many fatal plane accidents have resulted from encounters with our feathered friends. I was involved with many bird incidents, some causing expensive damage to the airframe. I also survived ingesting a large hawk, late in the take-off run, at Taipei in 1965. The size of the bird collapsed the number two engine of my Convair jet as one would crush tin-foil. Most of these incidents are beyond recall except one detail common to all – the appalling stench that pervaded the area of the strike.

The total number of civil international aircraft movements was 53,026 – a decrease of 2.1% compared with the preceding year. The Hong Kong Air International Limited suspended scheduled operation in May. This reduced to 5,140 civil helicopter movements

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON



THE RUNWAY EXTENSION – 1974

The extension, started on 22 October, 1970, is getting its finishing touches. It was opened for traffic in June 1974.

(Photo: Peter Lok, DCA)



HONG KONG AIRCRAFT ENGINEERING COMPANY LIMITED – 1974

The extensive HAEC complex, that boasted the largest hangar in the Far East, is dwarfed by Lion Rock – the most distinctive of Kowloon's Nine Dragons.

(Photo: Peter Onions, HAEC)

between the airport and the Harcourt Road Heliport. The increase in passenger traffic of 0.01% over the previous year saw by far the smallest increase in 23 years.

1975

This was a year mainly of consolidation. The airport building programme continued with site clearance and piling for the eastern extension to the Terminal Building. Mr H. Worthington became Senior Divisional Commander (Air) on 25 February. He replaced Mr H. L. Elsworth, who returned to Fire Services Headquarters. Mr M. *Mike* Jenvey, Air Traffic Control Officer I, earned a promotion to Chief Operations Officer with effect from 1 March.

A few minutes of excitement occurred on 15 February when a Singapore Airlines Boeing 707 made an emergency landing. The front portion of its No. 3 engine had disintegrated. As the passengers evacuated the plane the fire service neutralised a potentially dangerous fuel leak from the ruined engine.

Probably the main event that caused interest was the death on 5 April of President Chiang Kai-shek. The *Gimo* had ruled Nationalist China for 50 years. And to a lesser degree was the arrival of Cathay's Super TriStar L-1011 on 2 September. Captain E. B. *Bernie* Smith the Director of Flight Operations, who commanded, called VR-HHK the most *intelligent* plane he had flown.

Unfortunately, I did not get my hands on the L-1011 or its simulator. My use-by date arrived on 2 August!



CATHAY PACIFIC'S SUPER TRISTAR L-1011 – VR-HHK

Cathay's first TriStar touched down 2 September, 1975 under the command of the Company's Director of Flight Operations, Captain E. B. Bernie Smith. The Gurkha band escort the graceful plane to the HAEC hangar.

(Photo: Author)

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON



A 1975 AERIAL VIEW OF RESTLESS KAI TAK

This picture shows the realigned Clearwater Bay Road. Skyscrapers stand on land once the threshold of Runway 13. Extensive reclamation continues at the right-lower side, the site of the Hong Kong Air Cargo Terminals Limited. The HACTL complex was commenced in February 1974 and was officially opened on 12 May, 1976. The Fuel Farm (lower left border), where once stood the RAF Airmen's 1927 Mess, is a hive of activity. Several of Cathay's superseded Convairs are podded, waiting for a buyer.

(Photo: Reg Thatcher, CPA)

KAI TAK TAKEN FOR GRANTED – 1974-1975



1992 VIEW FROM 15,000 FEET LOOKING NORTH-EAST

The Miracle Strip points to Lei Yue Mun Pass. Does the Pass look friendlier? Perhaps it is my imagination!

(Photo: Peter Lok, DCA)



1993

Colonial Secretary Black's 1954 unintended prophecy is approaching fulfilment – Eastern Kowloon Bay is virtually reclaimed. This photograph captures an arriving jet on the link taxiway. The exit of the airport tunnel is clearly visible. Even from 12,000 feet one can feel the vibrancy of the area.

(Photo: Peter Lok, DCA)