

## CHAPTER 3

# THE LONG-RANGE PIONEERS 1924-1929

An airfield, airport, aerodrome, waterdrome, call it what you will, attracts the public as iron-fillings to a magnet. One sure draw-card is an air carnival and the associated display of classical planes with a sprinkling of modern giants.

In earlier days it was the arrival or departure of the long-distance flyer. For these were the men and women whose courage surpasses the norm, knowing and accepting the odds stacked against them. They were the true heroes of the formative years of airline operation.

Several pioneer aviators visited the Colony during 1924. These were from the American and the British *round-the-world* flights. The Portuguese airmen Sarmiento, de Beires and a mechanic, the Frenchman Lieutenant d'Oisy and Argentina's Major Zanni.

The air forces of the United States and Britain, ever the friendly rivals, determined their country would be first round-the-world. The Americans chose to fly east to west while the British west to east. Their plan was to meet at Hong Kong and compare route details. This was not to be!

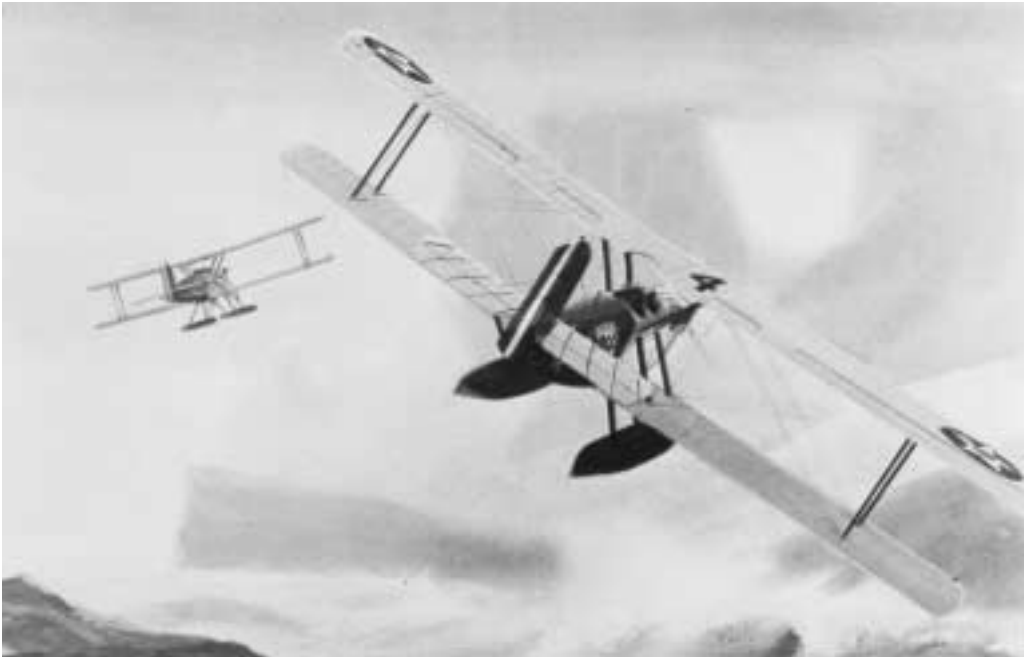
Under the leadership of Major Frederick L. Martin, four *Douglas World Cruisers* (DWC) left Santa Monica, California, on 17 March. Squadron Leader MacLaren, commanding a crew of two, left Calshot (Southampton Water) on 25 March. MacLaren's plane was a Vickers-Napier *Vulture* amphibian.

A few minutes after noon, on June 8, three DWC's flew through Lei Yue Mun Pass and touched down in Kowloon Harbour, Hong Kong. On 25 June, while refuelling at the Burmese airfield of Akyab, MacLaren saw the American planes passing overhead.

The British plane touched down in Kowloon Harbour at 1700 hours on 30 June. The following day, Squadron Leader MacLaren and his crew, Flying Officer Plenderleith and Flight Sergeant Andrews, lunched with the Members of the Hong Kong Club. That evening they dined with Governor Sir Reginald Stubbs KCMG, and Georges Pelletier d'Oisy (now Capitaine). This distinguished French aviator had, on 9 June, captured the record from Paris to Tokyo.

In April, three Portuguese Air Force Officers left Sines (150 kms south of Lisbon) to secure the record from Lisbon to Macau. They were de Beires (Brito) Pais, Sarmiento de Pais (pilots), and Manuel Gouveia (mechanic). Their plane, a Breguet 14 bomber baptised *Patria*,

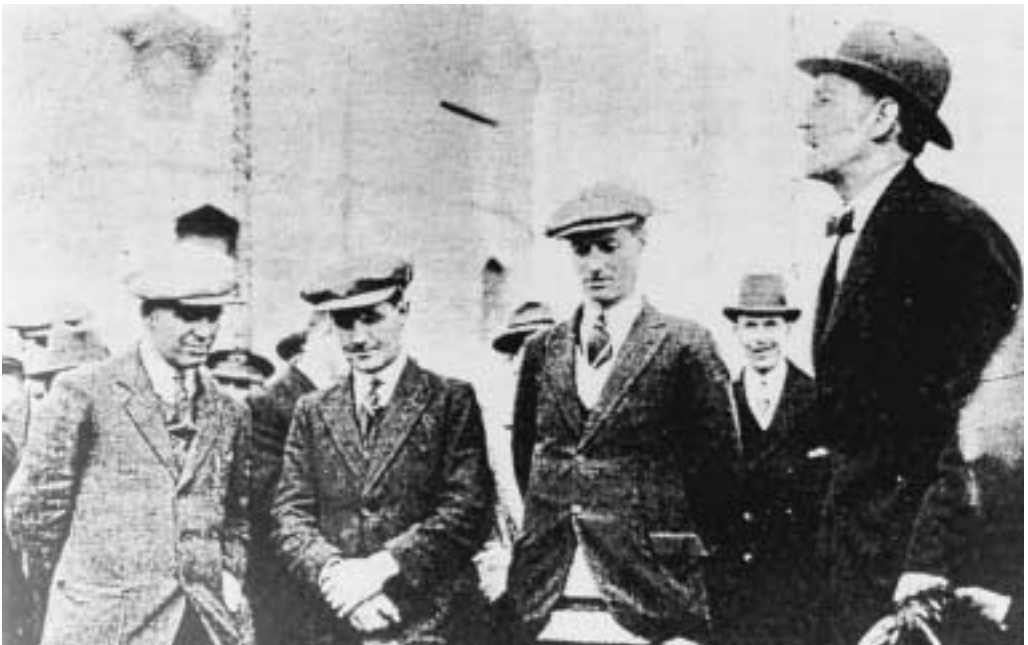
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**THE AMERICAN ROUND-THE-WORLD FLIGHT (Arrived in Hong Kong – June 8, 1924)**

*A painting of the two World Cruisers that completed the round-the-world flight. The Chicago (Number 2) was flown by Lieutenant Smith. The Number 4 DWC New Orleans flown by Lieutenant Nelson fills the foreground. The World Flight badge, painted on the fuselage of each plane, is visible on New Orleans.*

(Painting: US Air Force Central Museum, Ohio)



**THE BRITISH ROUND-THE-WORLD FLIGHT (Arrived in Hong Kong – June 30, 1924)**

*Lord Thomson, the Air Minister, wishes the British crew good luck. Right to Left: Flight Sergeant Andrews, Flying Officer Plenderleith and Squadron Leader MacLaren.*

(Painting: Royal Air Force Museum)

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crashed in India after an adventurous journey. The replacement plane was a two-seater deHavilland 9A, the *Patria II* – the mechanic finished the voyage by land.

During the night of July 20 they approached Macau in very bad weather. Unable to land they diverted to Hong Kong where the weather was marginally better and finally crash landed near the Kowloon railway. Their plane was a write-off but they miraculously escaped injury.

In September 1924, the Argentine airman Major Pedro Zanni landed in Hong Kong on his flight round the world. Unable to get permission to land in Shanghai the Major kicked-his-heels around the Colony until the Chinese relented and he left on 27 September.

On November 3, 1924, the seaplane carrier HMS *Pegasus* steamed into Hong Kong's harbour. A part of her company was a RAF contingent with four Fairey 111 D seaplanes powered by 450hp Napier Lion engines. The planes – equipped with vertical air cameras – provided the first aerial survey of the Colony.

The following day Flight Lieutenant G. Gerry E. Livock DFC AFC, a noted cricketer, taxied plane N9634 through the dirty waters of Kowloon Bay. His take-off was nerve-racking for the Bay swarmed with junks. He made several landings and take-offs then reported the Bay too hazardous for seaplane operation. They accepted his recommendation to use Tolo Harbour and completed the aerial survey from there.



**RAF FIRST AIR SURVEY FLIGHT – HONG KONG, NOVEMBER 4, 1924**

*Pilots of the special 'air survey flight' that made the first RAF flights into Hong Kong. Photographed on board the seaplane carrier HMS Pegasus. L to R: Flt Lt (later Gp Capt) G. E. Livock DFC, AFC; Fg Off (later Air Cdre) A. J. Rankin AFC, Sqn Ldr (later Gp Capt) E. L. Tomkinson; Fg Off (later Wg Cdr) F. H. Isaac DFC and Flt Lt (later Gp Capt) E. P. M. Davis AFC, AM. The aircraft is the Fairey 111D No. N9634 that made the first flight – Flt Lt Livock pilot.*

(Photo: Gau Lung – RAF 50th Anniversary Souvenir Booklet – 1977)

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Then the Governor, Sir Reginald Stubbs (1919-1925), requested a reconnaissance of pirate hide-outs in Mirs Bay and Taya Wan (Bias Bay). This expedition was illegal for they had no permission from the Chinese Government to fly in its airspace. The patrol disclosed vital information of pirate infestation throughout the area. Sir Reginald was the first Governor to fly in a seaplane around his domain.

In December 1924, HMS *Pegasus* steamed out of Hong Kong Harbour arriving at Singapore in January 1925. Four years later Flight Lieutenant (now Squadron Leader) Livock, who had made the first RAF flight in the Colony's skies, would return to these waters.

Within a month of the *Pegasus* departure, an aerodrome at Kowloon opened. Yet it would be two years before the RAF established a permanent base there. This was the result of the 1921-22 Treaties of Washington. The Conference resulted in seven agreements. The first, and the one that concerns us, was a pact between the USA, the British Empire, France and Japan, restricting Great Britain from building a military base east of Singapore. The British Government overcame this by designating Kai Tak a civilian aerodrome. As a civilian aerodrome there would be no restriction on any aircraft, service or otherwise, using its facilities. This flimsy ruse met with no objection from the other signatories, so the British established an aerodrome at Kai Tak.

The Spanish Government decided their Air Force should join other nations in long-range flights (raids). On 5 April 1926, three Breguet X1X bombers left Madrid (Cuatro Vientos) bound for faraway Manila. The pilots were Esteve, Gallarza and Loriga – their mechanics were Arozamen, Calvo and Perez.

Although the flight did not enter Hong Kong air-space the Colony had a role in the expedition's success.

On 1 May, two Breguets left Hanoi for Macau. (Esteve and Calvo had withdrawn from the raid after force-landing in the desert.) Loriga landed at Macau on a tree-enclosed football field with a seized motor. Gallarza overshot the field and finished in the branches of a tree. The Macanese gave the Spanish airmen unfettered use of their workshops but their engineers lacked aeronautical experience. The British Army dispatched Lieutenant Maud, with two ex-RAF mechanics, in the Hong Kong mail boat. They could do little with Loriga's useless engine but repaired Gallarza's plane.

A single Breguet X1X commanded by Gallarza, with Loriga his observer, left Macau on 11 May. They landed in Manila two days later. They had flown 17,100km, at an average speed of 161km/hr, in 106 flying hours.

In 1927, the first Service aircraft flew into Kai Tak aerodrome. They were Fairey 111D, Fairey 111F, and Fairey Flycatcher types. The formal commissioning of RAF Base Kai Tak occurred on March 10, 1927. Its strength was 24 officers from three flights of the Fleet Air Arm and one accountant officer. Of the three flights, only No. 442 Fleet Fighter Flight was to be based at Kai Tak and equipped with Fairey 111D aircraft. One week later Squadron Leader R. B. Munday, the first CO, arrived – he held this position for eight days. Squadron Leader C. E. MacPherson succeeded him.

The RAF base began as a complex of matshed buildings on the western perimeter of the airfield. (The site is now the aircraft movement area fronting HAEC.) The Officers' and Sergeants' Messes formed part of that complex. The Airmen's quarters were in a rickety building, an old rope factory, about a mile away in Ma Tau Kok.

At the rear of the matsheds a nullah flowed into Kowloon Bay from San Po Kong. A crane, near to the nullah's discharge point, lifted seaplanes out of the water. Other matsheds housed a maintenance section strategically placed near the crane. Traffic crossed the nullah on concrete-slabs to narrow streets that separated weathered stone buildings.

During August a typhoon played havoc with the matsheds. Falling debris destroyed several aeroplanes. With his base in shambles, the CO arranged temporary quarters in the unfinished shell of The Peninsula Hotel.

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11 MARCH 1926

*The three Spanish Captains at Heliopolis. L to R. Esteve, Gallarza and Loriga.*

(Photo: Aad Neeven)



A VICIOUS VISITOR . . . AUGUST 1927

*A typhoon plays havoc with the matsbed bangars.*

(Photo: Hong Kong Airport. DCA booklet.)



THE AFTERMATH OF A VICIOUS VISITOR – AUGUST 1927

*As the wind unroofed the matsbed bangars, falling debris damaged several planes.*

(Photo: FI/Lt Noel Hitching, RAF Kai Tak)

The airmen returned to a sturdy building just across the nullah. It was in the fourth street from the water's edge. (That street is the current site of the airport's fuel farm.) The Officers' Mess moved across the airfield to a turreted house on the eastern perimeter.

The contamination of the nullah had not become the problem of later years, but a nauseating stench came from the lard factory nearby. This, when added to the humidity of summer, made Kai Tak less than a salubrious posting!

Two American aviators, William Brock and Edward Schlee, honoured Hong Kong by dropping in at 3:25 p.m. on September 9, 1927. Their *Pride of Detroit* was a high-wing monoplane built by Eddie Stinson and designated the SM-1 Detroit. The adventurers were on the downhill part of a flight that began on August 22 from Detroit's Ford Airport. Their flight had taken them across the Atlantic Ocean to England through the near East and the sub-continent of India.

In faraway England another great adventure was beginning. On October 17, 1927, four RAF Southampton flying-boats left Plymouth Sound. The commander of this, the Far East Flight, was Group Captain H. M. Cave-Brown-Cave DSO DFC. His second-in-command was Squadron Leader Gerry Livock DFC AFC. Cave-Brown-Cave's mandate was to open an air route to Australia and the Far East.

Fourteen months later Southamptons had shown the flag over 43,450km (27,000 miles) of the world. They proved that air travel was not only feasible but reliable. Their splash-down in Kowloon Bay on November 18, 1928, seemed to belie this for the residents' reception was lukewarm.

Although the Hong Kong public showed little interest the authorities did! This interest led to the Government taking control of airport operations and upkeep in 1930. Meanwhile, in 1928, the Government made plans to reclaim more of Kowloon Bay's foreshore. The cost of this operation was too great to be borne out of revenue so they



FLEET AIR ARM (FAA) FAIREY 3F ON CRANE.

(Photo: Hong Kong Airport. DCA booklet.)

floated a six per cent loan issued at a premium of three per cent. The public instantly over-subscribed the loan. This reclamation, filled to a height of two feet below formation level, came from harbour dredgings. A sea-wall stabilised the fill. On June 7, 1929, a concrete slipway replaced the tedious method of lifting float-planes ashore by steam crane.

Hong Kong in the spring of 1929 experienced extreme drought. A radical therapy had the RAF bombing the clouds with silver nitrate dust. An Australian engineer claimed the procedure had brought rain relief during a Queensland big-dry. Squadron Leader Freeman dropped the bombs with the same result as another attempt by the Far East Flying Training School in 1948. Both sorties failed and Nature continued with her timetable.

Hong Kong was slow to emulate the enthusiasm for heavier-than-air flight then sweeping Europe. Far-sighted pioneers spoke of flying Hong Kong to London in about eight days but they were few. Civil aviation at Kai Tak, historically, began its growth with the Hong Kong Flying Club's formation.

In mid-1929, Wing Commander R. Vaughan Fowler rented part of the reclamation from the Government. He was a man with a single-purpose drive and strong views. His intransigence would lead to controversy in the months ahead.

The Hong Kong Flying Club shared the diminutive field with the petite RAF establishment. They shared a cluster of matsheds built beside the nullah that drained into

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### THE HONG KONG FLYING CLUB – 1929

*The founders – Mr F. C. Smith and Wing Commander R. Vaughan Fowler.*



### KAI TAK AIRFIELD – 1930

*The airfield showing the matsbed buildings alongside the nullab. The crane in the bottom left-hand corner lifted seaplanes out of the water. The white building at the far right is the officers' mess that stood roughly where the airmen's married quarters now stand. The aircraft are probably Fairy Flycatchers of the Fleet Air Arm. (Photo: Gau Lung – RAF 50th Anniversary Souvenir Booklet – 1977)*



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Kowloon Bay from San Po Kong. The thriving lard business across the nullah let one's olfactory organ fix the wind direction.

The club started with two Avro Avian 594 MK 1V/M planes. They held the Colony's initial registrations. The Department of Civil Aviation list VR-HAA as first registered March 10, 1930, and de-registered on September 11, 1930. The other Avian became VR-HAB, first registered on August 19, 1930, and de-registered December 10, 1931.

Club membership was steady without being spectacular. This changed when Governor Sir Cecil Clementi became an active supporter. He rarely missed an opportunity to urge people to join the Club. His intervention became so vocal that in 1930 the Legislative Council voted the club \$60,000 and an annual subsidy of \$30,000. These sums were more than generous for the times.

In October of 1929, the RAF received a reminder of its mortality. During a routine patrol Flight Lieutenant A. R. Ward of 442 Flight lost his life. His Fairey 3D disintegrated as it crashed into Victoria Harbour.

When 1929 drew to its close Kai Tak had a total aerodrome area of 205 acres. An impressive achievement on the 25 acres (400 yards by 300 yards) that existed five years previously.

Kai Tak had tasted the explosive expansion that lay ahead.



*The Argentine Air Service's Major Pedro Zanni began a round-the-world flight on July 26, 1924. On 24 September, 1924, he landed his Fokker biplane (450hp Napier Lion engine) in Kowloon Harbour.* (Photo: Courtesy Royal Air Force Museum)

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*Mijnbeer Anthony Fokker poses between Major Pedro Zanni and his engineer, Mr Beltrame, just before they left Amsterdam. Paradoxically, the Argentine Air Service chose a Dutch machine, powered by a British engine, to carry their flag.*

(Photo: Courtesy Royal Air Force Museum)



**THE PRIDE OF DETROIT CREW**

(Arrived in Hong Kong – September 9, 1927)

*William Brock (left) and Edward Schlee at Croydon on 28/8/27. Pose before the Stinson monoplane they flew from Newfoundland to Tokyo.*

(Photo: Fred Lillywhite)



*Group Captain Cave-Brown-Cave, leader of the Far East Flight.*

(Photo: Royal Air Force Museum)



THE RAF FAR EAST FLIGHT (Arrived in Hong Kong – November 18, 1928)

*Supermarine Southamptons of the Far East Flight.*

(Photo: Royal Air Force Museum)