

CHAPTER 8

UNDER THE CONQUEROR'S HEEL – 1942-1945

1942

The Japanese interned the civilian expatriates primarily in Stanley camp. Among them were *Papa* Moss and *Hammy* Hamilton. They caged the defenders at various locations throughout the Colony. The Japanese held most of the Royal Air Force survivors at the Sham Shui Po camp.

The Sham Shui Po camp commandant made *Dolly* Gray (now a Flying Officer) responsible for the Kai Tak work-parties. Tony Weller, a 17-year-old volunteer siege gunner, remembers those days.

"An old Star ferry picked us up from Sham Shui Po camp and took us to Kai Tak. At first we fetched and carried, cutting grass and moving bricks. Then in July we began to build a runway. We worked from pre-dawn to dusk levelling a hill at San Po Kong – it was hard *yakka!*

"We had four-wheeled bogies to carry the rubble. Being young and foolish we would jump on the load and ride to the bottom. One day it hurled out of control and jumped the track. Geoff Sloss, son of the Hong Kong University's vice-chancellor, and I escaped without a scratch but one of our mates broke his leg. That ended our *horsing-around*, the Japanese guards saw to that. Other prisoners hauled stone and rubble taken from Kowloon's Walled City.

"As concrete runway builders we were a total loss. The first runway we built had a compass direction of 13/31. It wasn't much good, we badly tamped the foundation and the mix of cement to sand and rubble was a joke. We even kept loaded wheelbarrows off it. Yet, this was the idea. Even the destruction of one Japanese plane would be a victory!

"Endless day followed endless day with our main diversion hurling ourselves into ditches to escape strafing attacks from Allied planes. American high-level bombers also took an interest in our work but we escaped injury."



THE JAPANESE RADAR SITE ON TAI MO SHAN – 1942-43

Built by prisoner of war labour, the site, on Hong Kong's highest mountain, provided admirable coverage. The receiving heads were near the mountain's crest. The operators occupied well-concealed barracks. Lion Rock, in left background, seems to dwarf all!

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

1943

The Japanese also used POWs to prepare the site for a radar station on Tai Mo Shan, but the Kai Tak expansion remained their priority. The decision to add an east-west runway (07/25) involved the provision of a safe flight path. This required the demolition of tenements and *Papa Moss's* civil aviation complex. The rubble from these sources, even when combined with that from Diamond Hill, was not sufficient. They turned their attention to the nearby Sacred Hill.

The superstitious Japanese, careful not to insult the resident spirits, brought 50 white-clad monks to appease them. This exorcism, beginning on 9 January, lasted for three days. An added incentive to *depart peacefully* came from bribes of rice, pork, and sweetmeats. Convinced their monks knew their catechism the Japanese went ahead with their demolition.

A blasting charge broke the great Sung rock into three but one part retained the original inscription intact. What a bizarre scene – modern bulldozers scurrying between mediaeval robed monks busy expelling ghosts.

The war's end prevented the complete removal of the Sung Emperor's Terrace and the Sacred Hill. That epilogue came during the construction of Kai Tak's water-tongued miracle.

1944

This year speeded Japan's down-slide. Their dream of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was in tatters, with American forces advancing towards their home islands. The

14th USAAF had isolated their armies in Southern China and controlled their supply ports. The defeats inflicted on their once invincible German ally added to their despondency.

The Japanese still had one desperate card to play – the kamikaze (*Divine Wind*) suicide pilots. On October 25, 1944, the first kamikaze attack took place. At dawn six planes left Davao, in the southern Philippines, and damaged three escort carriers.

To the very end the *Divine Wind* wrought severe damage to Allied shipping.

Hong Kong experienced its first concentrated air bombing in December. The bombers of the 118th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron hammered shipping, harbour installations – and Kai Tak.

A week of bad weather brought the Japanese some respite, but on the 19th the 118th returned in great strength. That day 45 Japanese fighters climbed from Kai Tak to battle them. The Americans lost eight Mustangs but the Japanese lost many more. The next day's strafing accounted for many Oscars and Zeros scattered around the field. Although the Americans continued their raids they encountered no further fighter opposition.

They had bombed Kai Tak out of commission.

1945

This would be a year of historical moment. A year that would defeat psychopaths bent on enslavement, and the emergence of the atomic bomb – the ultimate weapon of horror. Yet the year began *normally* – waging traditional techniques of destruction and slaughter.

The American bombers kept up their attacks preventing any useful repair work on the airport. With things going badly for Japan the USAAF were careful in their choice of targets. Unnecessary damage to civilian property was a top priority.

Throughout their strikes the Americans had avoided Macau. Yet, PanAm's store of oil and fuel there must not fall into the hands of a now resource-starved enemy.



THE KOWLOON DOCKS GET WORKED OVER BY USAAF BOMBERS – 1945

Smoke billows from exploding "eggs" laid by China-based United States bombers. A Japanese Zeke screams to the attack above the Peninsula Hotel. Just west of the Kowloon Peninsula enemy ships burn while near North Point a tanker streams an oil slick. The Kai Tak complex is clearly visible showing the extensive demolition of private property and the civil hangar that extended the airfield.

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



THE SURRENDER FORCE ARRIVES – 30 AUGUST, 1945

HMS Swiftsure abeam of North Point after entering the harbour to take the Japanese surrender. Rear-Admiral C. J. Harcourt (Sir Cecil) landed from *Swiftsure* at the naval dockyard in central Victoria. The Japanese Memorial is visible on Mount Cameron.

(Photo: Ian Diamond, Hong Kong Archivist)

On January 16, ignoring Portuguese neutrality, American bombers *targeted* the depot. PanAm's last base on mainland China became a site of desolation.

On the diplomatic scene, Generalissimo Chiang pressed for new negotiations over the Colony's future. Churchill had been unable to get Roosevelt to support Britain's claim – Roosevelt was loath to restore a Colonial power on the China coast. The best Churchill could expect was an international body to control Hong Kong.

On August 14, President Harry S. Truman, who had replaced the dead Roosevelt, announced Japan's capitulation. Yet, Hong Kong's future remained in limbo. Prime Minister Attlee managed to get Truman's tentative support for Hong Kong's return to the British Crown. This was a coup for Truman held Chiang Kai-shek in high regard but suspected deep-rooted corruption among his advisers. A suspicion that became reality in the years ahead.

Finally, Truman gave Attlee his unqualified agreement. This cleared Rear Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt's squadron to approach Hong Kong.

On August 29, a flight of Hellcats and an Avenger approached Kai Tak. The Avenger was to bring senior Japanese officers back to the HMS *Indomitable* for surrender talks. The Avenger made a heavy landing and burst a tyre.

On August 30, a fortnight after Japan's capitulation, Harcourt's ships inched through the mine-suspected waters of Lei Yue Mun Pass to accept the Japanese surrender. On September 1, the 3rd Royal Marine Commando formally reoccupied Kai Tak and hoisted the White Ensign. Four days later Wing Commander R. C. Haine took command of RAF Station Kai Tak.

The Royal Navy followed by establishing a repair depot for its Corsair planes – HMS *Nabcatcher*. This location was west of the runways' intersection – roughly the current site of the vast HAEC complex.



KAI TAK – NOVEMBER 10, 1945

A rare aerial photograph taken by the RAF from 20,000 feet shows the erstwhile Japanese establishment. The worn track from the Kowloon Hills that crosses the San Po Kong nullah and Kwun Tong Road to the turning-pan of runway 13 was used by the British prisoners of war to haul the mined rubble for the runways.

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

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

On September 7, a DC3 arrived from Kunming. It was to repatriate British prisoners-of-war to India. Later that month, Spitfires of 132 (Bombay) Squadron arrived at Kai Tak from the aircraft carrier HMS *Smiler*.

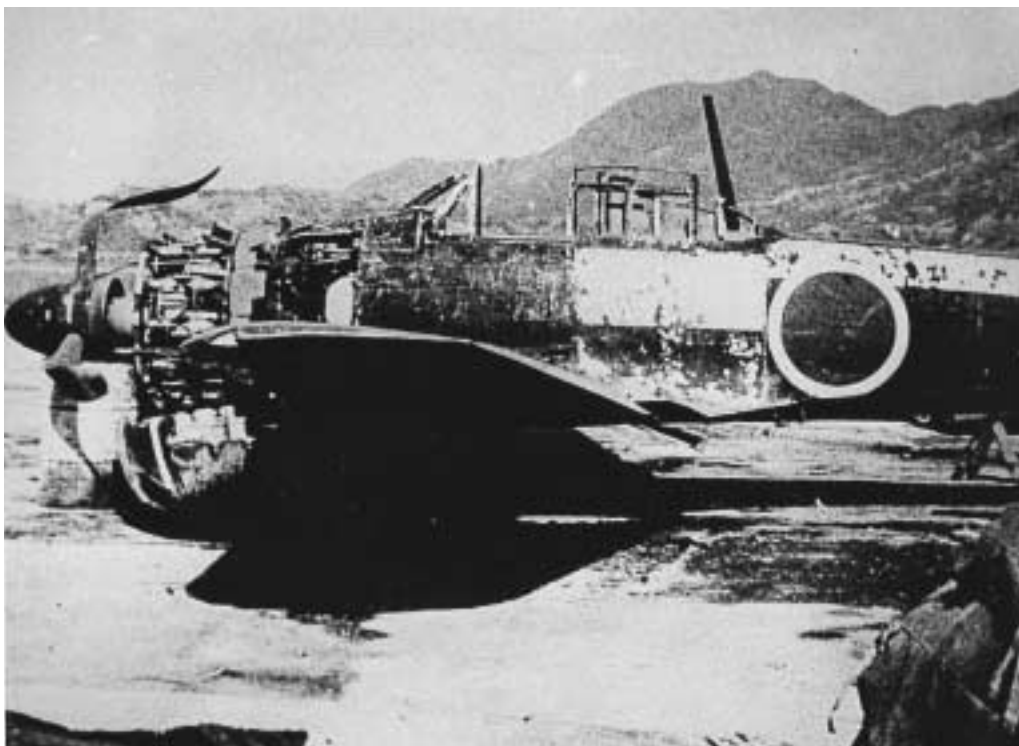
The local Japanese commanders surrendered to Sir Cecil on 15 September. This formal ceremony took place in Government House.

On October 9, Spitfires of 132 Squadron celebrated Victory Day with a fly-past in *good formation*. Spitfires of 681 should have taken part but the squadron could only muster one plane!

By December, Kai Tak had two fully operational Spitfire squadrons, three Sunderland flying boats and several DC3s of 219 Squadron RAF Transport Command. The Transport Command's passengers checked in at the Peninsula Hotel in downtown Tsim Sha Tsui. At Kai Tak they boarded their plane from a hut near the southern water perimeter of the RAF installation.

Corsairs and Spitfires began anti-piracy patrols. The Station increased the sweeps when more pilots arriving by the S.S. *Monarch*.

A combined Spitfire and Royal Naval operation captured a fleet of pirate junks in Deep Bay. A newspaper report of this incident brought relief to its readers. The emergence of the pirate scourge meant that their life style was gradually returning to a semblance of normality.



A DOWNED ZEKE AT KAI TAK – DECEMBER 1944

Probably a A6M5 Model 52 Zero-Sen with the stronger non-folding wings and ejector-stack exhausts. The Zero was a single-seat carrier-based fighter. Mitsubishi Jukogyo KK built models A6M1 to A6M8c. Nakajima Hikoki KK built models A6M2-N.

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