

CHAPTER 9

THE FIRST YEAR OF RECOVERY – 1946

The occupation had brought dramatic changes to Kai Tak Airport. From a grass field of 171 acres the Japanese more than doubled it to 376 acres and added two concrete runways. The busiest runway – 13/31 – was the shortest, 4580 feet, but widest with 321 feet. The 07/25 runway was 4730 feet long by 221 feet wide.

The runways had a maximum calculated load factor of 70,000lbs. The largest planes allowed were Skymasters and Lancastrians.

The prisoners-of-war scheme to sabotage the runways now *came home to roost*. No-one knew the strength of the concrete or where the weaknesses were likely to occur! Yet, there were no disasters.

With the end of hostilities the service and civil authorities took control of Kai Tak. The common flying area was 181 acres. The RAF controlled 110 acres with the Royal Navy sprawling over 52 acres. The civil aviation authority was the poor-relation with just 33 acres.

Without buildings on the civilian site it made necessary the erection of tents near the end of runway 25. The Air Services used these for administration, Customs, Immigration and radio facilities. The RAF proved co-operative by lending equipment and taking responsibility for Air Traffic Control, Aeradio and Air Traffic Handling Services.

The month of January was one of changes and accidents. It began with 681 Squadron's posting to Malaya and ended with a return of air-mail to China.

On the 4th an Aeradio watch received a distress message. A Dakota of RAF Air Transport Command had earlier left Kai Tak for Saigon. The plane had a crew of four plus five service passengers. The plane's commander, Flight Lieutenant Handle, radioed an uncontrollable engine fire had spread to the wing. He was about to ditch near Hainan Island.

Hong Kong Search and Rescue sprang into action. Two destroyers, a frigate, three Sunderlands and two Dakotas left for the area.

The search planes returned to Hong Kong at dusk without any sighting. About 2100 hours the HMS *Tenacious*, racing to investigate red flares, found a dinghy with six survivors.

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

Three days later an American Dakota that had used Kai Tak as a check-point, crashed 140 miles north of Canton. As the plane screamed towards the ground nine parachutes blossomed from the stricken plane.

This was a service operated by the United States Army to ferry officials between Manila, Hong Kong and Canton. A similar service operated from the USS *Tangier* in Kowloon Bay that used flying boats.

The distance from Kai Tak to Canton is less than 100 miles – it's extraordinary they could have drifted 140 miles off track in 40 minutes! Perhaps they were on a covert mission.

Spitfires of 132 Squadron and a FAA Corsair, on the 10th, responded to a distress call from a Hong Kong fishing fleet near Ping Chau. The planes' strafing broke up a pirate attack. As an armed air-sea rescue launch joined the melee the pirates fled into Chinese territorial waters.

The CNAC was the first post-war civil aviation company back into the Colony. In September 1945, it revived the Chungking, Kweilin, Hong Kong service.

In January the Colony's post-master negotiated with CNAC to reopen mail flights into China. On the 29, CNAC restored the air-mail to Chungking, Canton and Shanghai. The cost was 50 cents plus a postage of 8 cents for a half-ounce letter.

April 15 saw the disbandment of 132 Squadron. Spitfire spares had become scarce as *ben's teeth* and most of its planes were grounded.

The departure of 209's Sunderlands for Seletar left RAF Kai Tak with 1000 personnel but few planes. The station's Flight totalled three Beaufighters, and two Sentinels.

The Sentinels had restrictions on usage because of a lend-lease agreement. The Beaufighters alone carried the fight to an increased piracy threat. Group Captain Horner, the current Station Commander, had few resources, but this was to change.

On May 1, the Air Services separated from the Harbour Department's control with a full-time director. Max Oxford, returning with the relieving forces, had become the Acting Director of Air Services.

A fortnight later the Air Services took over the responsibility for booking civilian priority passengers. The appointment of a Passages Officer kept things running smoothly.



THE RAF'S POST-WAR CONTROL TOWER –
1946/47

It was located on the southern seawall, slightly east of the tent city. Ben Hewson assumed civilian control of it during October 1947.

(Photo: Roy Downing, DCA)

The late Captain Pat Armstrong came to Kai Tak in April as a member of 96 Squadron. This was a squadron of 35 Dakotas formerly based at Hmawbi, a satellite field of Mingaladon, the airport of Rangoon, Burma.

Pat said the squadron linked BOAC's flying boats then terminating at Calcutta to major cities in South-East Asia. The 96 Squadron carried priority passengers from Hong Kong to Shanghai, Iwakuni and Tokyo. They also brought passengers to Saigon, Bangkok, Singapore and Calcutta.

The 96 Squadron, now the resident Kai Tak squadron, was in reality operating as a regional passenger carrier. On June 15, Pat's squadron became 110 (Hydrabad) Squadron.

Early in the morning of July 18, Pat awoke to the sinister atmosphere that predicts a typhoon. It was a feeling once

THE FIRST YEAR OF RECOVERY – 1946

TYPHOON TANTRUMS – JULY 18, 1946

In 1946, Nature spawned a vicious tiffy in the South China Sea. Her eye passed directly over Kai Tak. She treated giant planes as miniature toys and devastated the Nissen huts of HMS Nabcatcher. Her 150mph winds left Kai Tak a field of desolation.



A C 47 of the U.S. Air Force, with engines running, tried to ride-the-storm. When the undercarriage collapsed the blades of the port propeller left a gaping tear in the fuselage.

(Photo: Harry Smith, HAECO)



An unserviceable Royal Air Force Sunderland flying-boat fared no better.

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

experienced that remains in the memory. His nerves were raw, the air hung heavy yet his lungs laboured to find a breath, his body itched yet scratching brought no relief! The rain started as a slight shower, and the wind a gentle breeze.

The *killer's* approach started the evacuation of the serviceable planes. The last wobbled through Lie Yue Mun pass in severe turbulence.

Frantically, work continued on the five unserviceable Dakotas and two visiting Sunderlands. The engineer-officer decided to remove an engine from one Sunderland to get the other airworthy. The deteriorating conditions were making work on the wings hazardous. Time had run out for remaining planes. They were tied-down with heavy concrete weights and abandoned to the elements. Within minutes the showers became a downpour and the wind a fury.

By the early afternoon the 150-mph wind was flattening everything in its path. The rain was sweeping horizontally to the ground. The Nissan huts of HMS *Nabcatcher* and the Air Services' temporary structures imploded as though a giant hand had crushed them.

Without warning there came an unreal silence. The wind and rain stopped. Pat Armstrong, looking above saw a large funnel-shaped hole capped by a few wisps of cirrus clouds floating in a tranquil blue sky. Yet, an impenetrable wall of boiling clouds ringed the Colony. Hong Kong was in the eye of the typhoon!

This was when most people died. Thinking the typhoon had passed they ventured out to survey the damage. Without a second's warning the wind renewed its fury – this time from the opposite direction.

Farmers who had scurried back to shelter died in each other's arms. Their huts, weakened by a wind from one direction, could not withstand an opposite attack. Others unable to find shelter had died in the flooded paddy-fields they had tended for decades – and would need no more! The concrete-anchored planes were a mess of twisted metal. The typhoon left Kai Tak Airport a grim scene of desolation.

Pat Armstrong, while convalescing from an attack of jaundice, became Senior Air Traffic Control Officer. This appointment lasted for about six months when he returned to flying duties. His minute tower was slightly west of a line of tents that became the departure and arrival facilities.

Police Inspector Frank Indge-Buckingham remembers the *tent city* and even the site before that! The earlier site was near the end of runway 25. His *office* was a table under the verandah of the RAF Passenger and Freight office.

In June 1946, the Directorate moved from the Colonial Secretariat to a temporary structure beside the Supreme Court. The superb location compensated for the austere office accommodation, with plenty of free parking in Statue Square, and a short stroll to the Star Ferry.

Papa Moss returned thoroughly rested to become Director of Civil Aviation. His home-side briefing included the aeronautical advances that flowed from the war. *Hammy* Hamilton arrived soon after to become Max Oxford's assistant. These three splendid men faced the daunting task of reorganising civil air operations on an almost faceless airport.

Although Viscount Knollys, Chairman of BOAC, had in January announced the return of services to the Far East in the *immediate future* it was not until August that it materialised. On August 24, BOAC began a weekly schedule from the United Kingdom (Poole) to Hong Kong.

This *Dragon* service, through Bangkok, used Hythe flying-boats. The Short Brothers had converted their successful war-time Sunderland for the purpose. The journey took six days with each night comfortably spent in a top-class hotel.

The first schedule by G-AGIA *Haslemere* ended at Karachi. The *Hunter* (G-AGLA) flew the Hong Kong sector. The *Harwick* (G-AGKZ) operated the entire westbound flight.

BOAC supplemented the Hythe service with the improved Plymouth class Sandringhams. These flying-boats flew a weekly route from Poole through Augusta (Sicily) and Cairo. They continued to Bahrein, Karachi, Calcutta, Rangoon, terminating at Bangkok.

The Roy Farrell Export-Import Company (RFEIC) was the result of men seeking civilian stability from years of service flying. Roy Clinton Farrell organised men he had befriended during the *Hump* adventure. Their combined flying expertise and financial backing formed the company. The chief engineer was Bill *Hokum* Harris.

The RFEIC, advertised as *the first international Airmercandise service in the world*, established its first direct service between China (Shanghai) and Australia (Sydney) on 4 February. Roy Farrell was in command with Robert Stanley Russell his co-pilot. Their plane was a C47 with the American registration NC 58093 that they named *Betsy*.

On March 11, the RFEIC registered under the NSW Business Names Act, 1934. It operated from Rooms 21-22 in the Prudential Building, Martin Place, Sydney. The astute Harry deLeuil was the Sydney manager.

A booming business forced them to recruit more air-crew. John Aubrey *Pinky* Wawn, Neville Gerald Hemsworth and Robert Donovan joined in April. They also hired *Vic* Leslie as a co-pilot and Lyell William *Mum* Louttit as radio officer. With these men the company flew the first direct air service between Hong Kong and Australia on 12 July.

The business registration of the Roy Farrell Export-Import Company (HK) Limited was on 28 August. It began in Room 311, Prince's Building, and in November changed to Rooms 402-403 in York Building, Chater Road, Hong Kong.

The initial directors were Farrell, William Geddes Brown, Syd deKantzow, Millard Kadot Nasholds, Neil Buchanan and Robert Stanley Russell. Henry Streit and Floyd McClennan also had holdings in the company.



CATHAY PACIFIC'S FIRST AEROPLANE

The legendary Betsy (VR-HDB) parked at Kai Tak in December 1946. She arrived in Asian skies in February 1946, as NC58093, carrying the Roy Farrell Export-Import Company's logo.

(Photo: Papa Moss)

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

With ships returning to the China coast the RFEIC business was in decline. The directors saw their survival lay in regular air-line routes. The Hong Kong Government had sympathy with their aspirations but there were obstacles to overcome.

BOAC, learning of RFEIC's interest, decided its monopoly should include the Far East – an area they had mainly ignored. The Hong Kong Government saw through BOAC's sudden interest and manfully supported the company that had the faith to get in early. This was the Farrell enterprise, yet the company's composition tied the Government's hands. There were too many foreign nationals directing the company for it to get British route rights. A company with fewer foreign directors had a better chance to get governmental support.

In September a brash new company burst upon the South East Asian scene. On the 24th, Cathay Pacific Airways Limited incorporated in Hong Kong with an authorised capital of HK\$5,000,000. Its original subscribers were Roy Farrell and Syd deKantzow.

Cathay Pacific began operating from the P. J. Lobo and Company premises in Chater Road. From this location Rogerio Hyndman Lobo, the eldest son, began an association with Cathay that mutually flourished.

CPA began with two DC3s – VR-HDB *Betsy* and VR-HDA *Niki*. These were the first two planes recorded on the post-war Hong Kong Register dated 3 October.

My records suggest that *Betsy* left Hong Kong for Sydney before the official change of business name still carrying the NC 58093 registration. In Sydney a sign-writer changed the registration to VR-HDB.

The return flight left Mascot, Sydney, on 25 September under the command of Captain George Peter Hoskins, with Captain deKantzow his co-pilot and Alexander Alex William Stewart his radio-officer.

My association with Captain Hoskins came in 1943 when I was a young first-officer with Ansett Airways. He was the chief pilot.

At 0935 hours on September 25, a RAF Dakota departed Kai Tak towards the north-west on runway 31. The weather at the time gave good visibility with gusty winds blowing from the north-west. Four minutes later the plane appeared to be in difficulties. There was a screech of power then the wobbling plane crashed into foot-hills between Lion Rock and Beacon Hill. The exact point of impact was a few yards above the end of Waterloo Road, Kowloon Tong. The plane immediately burst into flames that destroyed 1,500lbs of mail and all but one wing. From the meagre evidence it seemed the plane flew into a *mountain wave* from the north-westerly wind swirling over the hills that spoiled its angle-of-attack. The roar of the engines was the pilot slamming on full power to counteract his descent but attempting to turn away from the hills had lost flying speed, stalled and crashed.

Being a service aircraft (Transport Command) and knowing that two passengers carried sensitive documents the RAF ordered heavy security. Within minutes Director of Air Services Moss and the AOC (Air Commodore Webster) arrived. The police supported by RAF personnel threw a cordon around the crash. They searched all sightseers and confiscated films from cameras. Yet these precautions were unnecessary. An urgent memo to the Hon. Colonial Secretary, from Papa Moss, stated: *The flames have caused such severe damage it is doubtful whether any further examination of the wreckage would give a possible clue to any failure that may have occurred during the flight.*

The Colony's newspapers had a field day. *Nineteen Die In Hong Kong's Worst Air Disaster*. This was the banner headline of the *China Mail* of Thursday, 26 September. In a smaller font – *Prominent Officials, Civilians Lose Their Lives in "Dakota" Crash*. The *Mail* stated – *not only the worst disaster in the history of Hong Kong aviation but also the first to involve the death of passengers at the Colony's airport.*

The five crew members were W/O A. Christie, Commander; W/O R.N. Blackmore, co-pilot; F/Sgt. J.W. Holden, navigator; F/Sgt. R.S. Bond, Wireless Operator; and F/Sgt. J.K.

THE FIRST YEAR OF RECOVERY – 1946

Hazeldean, the stand-by pilot. Of the 14 passengers – five were for Saigon with the rest going to Singapore. Among those bound for the Lion City were Colonel Cyril Wild, War Crimes Liaison Officer, and Mr. Davis, Chief British Prosecutor at the trials of the major Japanese war criminals.

An inquest held on October 21, 1946, received in evidence copy of a Gross Weight Manifest prepared by Capt. W. D. Tucker of PI-C141 Dakota. It showed the Philippine Airways plane weighed 24,755lbs when it left Kai Tak at 0830 hours the same day as the RAF plane. The PIC plane, bound for Bangkok, also used runway 31 and found no operating difficulty.

With no tangible evidence to consider the Chairman closed the hearing. The Court of Enquiry made no recommendations or apportioned blame.

Following the liberation William Forrest *Bill* Dudman moved to reactivate the Far East Flying Training School. He had to start from scratch for nothing remained of the buildings or equipment.

By November 22, his school was in business with nine students. The Hong Kong Register records the School had three Stinson L5 type planes, registered VR-HDD and -HDE and -HDF. His technical superintendent was Hew Kui Watt and his flying instructor was Robert Tai.

Late on the afternoon of December 20, 1946, I arrived in Hong Kong for the first time – a *sprog* first-officer with Cathay Pacific Airways. In command was Captain *Pinky* Wawn. We had touched down following a tropical downpour and water was draining away in torrents. Sydney deKantzow and Bill Dobson, Cathay's P.R. man, were on hand to meet VR-HDA. *Syd* to greet his partner Roy Farrell, and Bill for the story of our forced landing at Libby. This was an abandoned Japanese airstrip near Davao City on the Philippine island of Mindanao.



KAI TAK'S FIRST POST-WAR TERMINAL – DECEMBER 1946

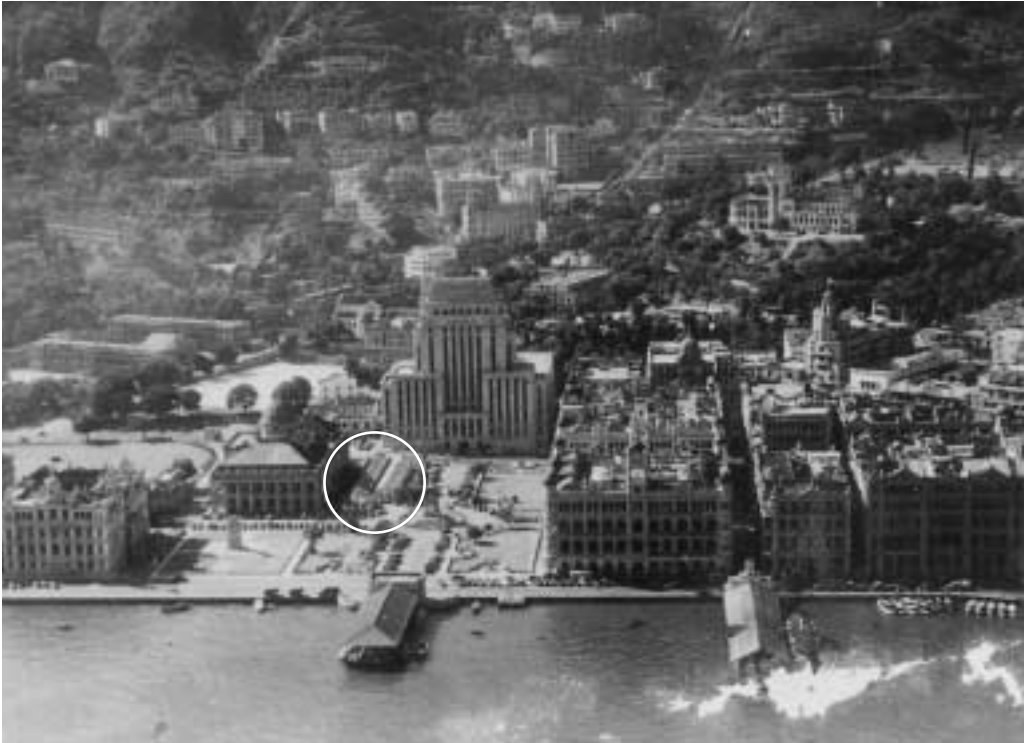
Port Health, Immigration and Customs cleared passengers through a tent-city near the south sea-wall. Inspector Frank Buck Indge-Buckingham (right) commanded the police presence.

(Photo: Buck Indge-Buckingham)

AIRPORT OF THE NINE DRAGONS, KAI TAK, KOWLOON

THE AIR SERVICES TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

In June 1946, the fledgling Air Services moved from the Colonial Secretariat to butts beside the Supreme Court in Statue Square.



A southerly aspect taken from a Fleet Air Arm Sea Otter.

(Photo: A. W. Alex Hill, FAA)



View shows the Air Services' butts in the mid-foreground.

(Photo: Courtesy Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank Archives)

Syd decided to give me a briefing on the topography of Kai Tak. He pointed out the rugged hills that encircled the field to the east and north. His finger moved to the west where the ground was lower but still presented hazards to the unwary pilot. Our eyes moved to the smoke pouring from the stack of the Green Island Cement Works at Hung Hum. He said the smoke was a problem when it mixed with drifting fog from the Western Harbour and Lei Yue Mun pass that quickly reduced visibility to a memory! He pointed at the Japanese Monument on Mount Cameron. It reflected the sun from about midday and its rays were visible from Pratas Reef, a Chinese meteorology station, 90 miles away in the China Sea. Other than on the cloudiest days it was a helpful navigation check-point.

Syd's friendly voice suddenly took a serious tone. Looking me straight in the eye he said I must never agree to a departure on 31 – the runway towards Lion Rock. A RAF Dakota, using that direction, had recently crashed after takeoff, with no survivors. His gory rendition left little to the imagination – he made his point.

Finally, it was time to complete arrival requirements. The officers of Customs, Immigration, and Port Health worked in tents loaned by the Royal Navy. This *canvas city* was a few yards from the southern seawall of Kowloon Bay. Their working environment was Spartan with duck boards randomly floating from the earlier downpour.

Neither did they spoil the passengers. A tent set aside for their use lacked electricity and plumbing. There was no catering and water had to be trucked from the RAF site in drums.

The whole set-up did nothing to raise the spirits of a new boy. I rallied when I learned that the building activity a couple of hundred yards further west, next to the flying-boat slipway, would be the new terminal facility. The building seemed small and squat but anything was better than the ordeal of the tents.

Although I was weary the excitement of new surroundings kept me alert. Syd deKantzow drove the five miles to our lodgings in as many minutes. The same trip today takes almost half-an-hour. Syd screeched to a stop outside an imposing Peninsula Hotel – that we called *the upholstered sewer*.