CHAPTER 10

FREEBOOTERS OF THE SKY – 1947

While waiting for Lisbon and London to approve a schedule service to Macau, Cathay Pacific Airways decided to accept temporary non-schedule status. On January 5, Cathay's Chief Pilot *Pinky* Wawn approached the tiny grass field at Macau. Captain Syd deKantzow was his co-pilot and their plane was Dakota VR-HDA *Nikki*. A few seconds before they crossed the retaining wall of the Reservatorio de Aqua an observer scrambled back to the cabin. Standing at the flight-deck door his nerve broke with the flatness of the approach. His action upset the delicate balance and the undercarriage clipped the retaining wall. *Nikki* continued to skid across the grass with the propellers tearing up divots and stopped – perfectly aligned with a red-carpet.

The sheepish crew emerged to a trumpet proclamation and applause from the crowd. The Macanese officials continued with their ceremony of welcome as if nothing untoward had happened!

The accident to *Nikki*, the company's plush aircraft, was a serious revenue loss. *Hokum* Harris, Neil Norquay, and *Pouch* Williams took several months to get it serviceable. *Pinky* Wawn and radio-officer Bill Carew flew it back to Kai Tak.

Cathay temporarily abandoned its thoughts of a land-operated service to the Portuguese Enclave of Macau.

On January 25, a Philippine Airlines Dakota PI-C12 lost radio contact with Kai Tak. The weather had deteriorated rapidly and visibility was down to a minimum. Darkness fell with the belief that the plane had crashed in pirate-infested waters outside the harbour. Destroyers and launches spent the night scouring the sea.

The next morning an aerial search found PI-C12 strewn over Devil's Peak on Mt. Parker. A grisly exhibit gave the exact time of the crash. At 1503 hours the impact stopped Captain O. T. Weymouth's watch. This they learned when they pried his severed hand from the control column.

The plane carried a crew of four and 50 boxes containing gold coins and bars valued at HK$15,000,000. When Police Inspector W. Kinlock got to the site he found the bullion spewed over a quarter-of-a-mile area.

COMMUNIST GROUND FIRE HITS FEFTS PLANE AT MACAU

On 13 April, 1947, while on a training flight, ground fire hit a Far East Flying Training School's plane, in Portuguese air space. Aboard were Sel Halls, the School's CFI, and Cathay Pacific's Public Relations Officer, Bill Dobson. At Macau, an angry Sel poses before his damaged Stinson L-5. (Photo: Carl Myatt, SCMP Archives)

Although the police threw a cordon around the site and searched those leaving the scene a million dollars of bullion escaped detection. The cunning peasants buried their booty and returned to their cache days later. It is very difficult to outsmart a Chinese!

Although the BOAC management was not having things their way they continued to press their claim for Hong Kong regional rights. Throughout February and March, they intrigued with Jardine Matheson & Company to form Hong Kong Airways Limited. This company was to operate feeder services connecting the main Chinese centres with the BOAC trunk route at Hong Kong.

On March 4, with a capital of HK$1,200,00 and a newly framed Certificate of Incorporation it opened for business. Its office was in the Jardine Matheson & Company building at 18 Pedder Street. Arthur Donald *Don* Bennett, Manager, Far East Area, BOAC, sat luxuriously ensconced in that office. It mattered little that he lacked both aeroplanes or pilots.

When Chinese troops opened fire on a Hong Kong plane the Far East Flying Training School made the headlines. A few seconds after 0915 hours on April 13, the Chief Instructor Sel Halls left Kai Tak in a Stinson L5 on a training flight to Macau. His pupil was Cathay Pacific's public-relations officer Bill Dobson.

At 400 feet on final approach to the Macau landing field their plane seemed to back-fire yet there was no power loss. Then they saw wicked flicks from a Nationalist Chinese machine-gun post and small holes appearing in the starboard wing. The firing continued until they touched-down in Portuguese territory.

The British Consul in Macau arrived on the scene to be greeted by the enraged pilots. Mr Hill Murray assured them he would be in immediate touch with the Home Office. The newspapers joined in calling for action, but both the Hong Kong and Macau governments quietly dropped the matter.

THE SEA-WALL TERMINAL BUILDING

In June 1947, the Civil Aviation Department occupied a substantial building adjacent to the sea-wall. It replaced the tent-city.
(Photo: Fred Lillywhite)

Drama of a different kind occurred later that month. On the 27, a BOAC flying boat arrived overhead with visibility below the company's minima. The Hong Kong authorities diverted it to Hainan Island.

In fading light the flying boat landed in the open sea, some 25 miles from the seadrome at Hoihow. It spent the night wallowing in a gentle swell and at first-light slowly taxied to Hoihow. The Chinese authorities held it for two days then allowed it to refuel and go to the Colony. Even with the Chinese Ambassador to Poland aboard bureaucracy had moved with the rapidity of glacial creep!

In June the airport's terminal building opened for business. It had a restaurant, a friendly though Spartan bar, and the usual areas for processing arriving and departing travellers. The Royal Navy got back its tents, and although the tents had formed an admirable stop-gap nobody missed them.

A vital addition was the new service road that obviated passing through the RAF area. The one remaining source of irritation was the Royal Navy. The planes of HMS *Flycatcher,* the former HMS *Nabcatcher,* still *shared* the tarmac terminal apron.

That month *Papa* Moss became Director of Civil Aviation, a more realistic title for the position.

On 23 June, BOAC began weekly Poole, Augusta, Cairo, Bahrein, Karachi, Calcutta, Rangoon, Bangkok, Hong Kong schedules. BOAC supplemented their Hythes with the Short Plymouth class Sandringham flying-boats.

The Colony's navigational aids continued to be up-graded. There was a high and very high frequency (VHF) direction finder. Combined with a medium frequency, a beam approach and radar beacons the aids were comparable to other South East Asian airports. The radar aids mainly benefited BOAC for only they had the equipment for its use.

The difficult approaches restricted night operation at the Airport. There was emergency lighting available and it got a work-out on 3 July.

A U.S. Navy air-sea rescue Consolidated *Privateer* left Okinawa at 1100 hours. It was to search South China waters for a missing ship. At dusk, Lieutenant Barker arrived overhead with intermittent radio reception and limited fuel reserves.

Pat Armstrong assumed command of the RAF Control Tower and impressed the station's lorries and jeeps into service to supplement the airport's emergency lighting. For two hours the four-engined plane circled trying to make radio contact. Finally Lieutenant Barker abandoned these attempts and used Morse Code with his signalling lamp. With emergency lighting, vehicular headlights and a friendly moon the skipper made a skilful landing.

The next morning Lieutenant Barker looked around Kai Tak. He stated that had he known the airport's terrain he would have thought twice before choosing to land there. Although he liked the place never again would he arrive after dark! His crew of six vigorously nodded their agreement.

A British delegation had gone to Nanking on 5 February to discuss an air agreement between the governments of His Britannic Majesty and China. The leader was a senior official from the Ministry of Civil Aviation, London. He had admirable support from Hong Kong's knowledgeable Director of Air Services A. J. R. Moss. A BOAC representative went along to grind the corporation's axe.

On July 19, China and the United Kingdom signed a bi-lateral agreement. Under the agreement, His Majesty's Government could nominate British airlines' passenger route-rights to and from four Chinese airports. These were Kunming, Canton, Shanghai and Tientsin. Chinese aircraft got reciprocal rights with Hong Kong.

The two British nominees were BOAC and Hong Kong Airways. The Chinese companies were the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC) and the Central Air Transport Corporation (CATC) that had evolved from Eurasia.

A similar agreement was in train with the Philippines. The negotiators initialled it in Manila during December and confirmed it on January 7, 1948.

Hong Kong Airways Limited got schedule routes to Shanghai and Canton. The company's first two Dakotas (C47/DC3) appeared on the Hong Kong Register on 9 October. They were VR-HDN and VR-HDP. On December 2, with seconded BOAC pilots, the first British scheduled service to China arrived in Shanghai.

On September 1, Squadron Leader Heinbush's 88 Squadron came to Kai Tak. His Sunderland 1V flying boats worked beside the Dakotas of 110 Squadron. Heinbushe's planes provided bi-weekly flights to Iwakuni.

An early flight carried several Japanese war criminals to Japan for trial, with Gurkha troops forming the guard. The Gurkhas presented the Sunderland crew with kukris when they returned to Kai Tak. With the kukri practically a religious artifact this was a signal honour.

The Sunderlands gradually replaced the Dakotas until in April 1948 just one Dakota remained on station. The station reserved this plane for the Governor's use.

Following the disbandment of 110 Squadron Pat Armstrong accepted a local discharge. He joined Cathay Pacific Airways on April 6, 1948. Meanwhile the reduction of the British Army of Occupation in Japan halted the Sunderland bi-weekly Iwakuni flights.

A PanAm Clipper flying-boat skimmed the waters of Kowloon Bay on 28 October. PanAm had come back! It returned to find a worthy challenger in the BOAC Hythe. PanAm soon realised its once monopolistic hold on flying-boat service had died with British equipment advances made during the war.

Even before Cathay Pacific's aircraft engineering aspirations the Jardine *Hong* saw such a need. On October 3, the Jardine Aircraft Maintenance Company Limited (JAMCO)

JARDINE AIRCRAFT MAINTENANCE COMPANY LIMITED – JAMCO

On October 3, 1947, JAMCO was incorporated. It would be established on land vacated by H.M.S. Flycatcher. *The above photograph was taken in 1949 and shows how the company has extended its presence.* (Photo: Harry Smith, HAECO Archives)

became a reality. With a Certificate of Incorporation and a registered office at 18 Pedder Street they became an aircraft engineering force of note. The directors, David Fortune Landale and Robert Gordon, had HK$10,000,000 to spend and they did this with astuteness and business acumen.

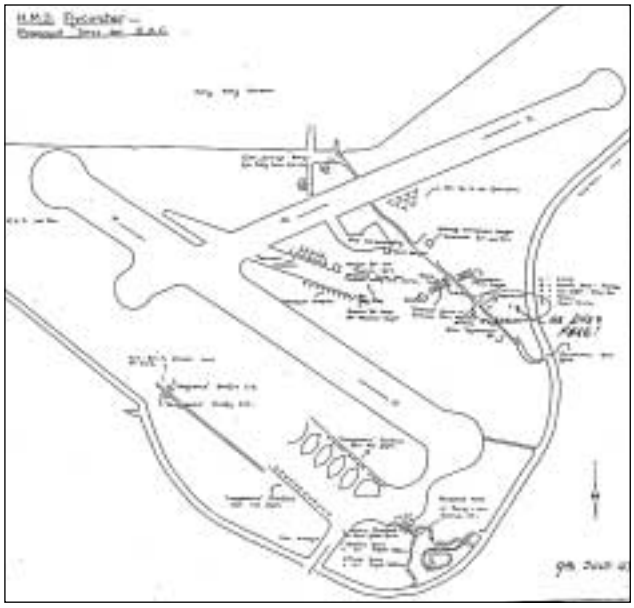
During the latter part of the year Air Traffic Control Services remained under the control of the Royal Air Force. The Government Telecommunication Department continued to be maintained and jointly operated by the Aeradio Services and the Royal Air Force.

On October 10, Ernest Sunley *Ben* Hewson arrived as Air Traffic Control Officer, Grade 1. With charm he evicted Pat Armstrong from the Control Tower and installed himself. A few days later George S. R. Cannon took control of Aeradio Services and on December 6, Roy Evans Downing, Air Traffic Control Officer, Class II, arrived to help Ben Hewson.

The control of the airport was in splendid hands.

Meanwhile the vagaries of Hong Kong's weather claimed another victim. On November 12, a Far Eastern Air Transport Skymaster, the *Miss Luzon,* circled over Hung Hum. She had a crew of 12 commanded by Captain Noel Worley. The flight originated from Shanghai with 28 of the 30 passengers to disembark at Kai Tak.

The weather showed no signs of improving and the *Miss Luzon* diverted to Laoag, on northern Luzon. Later Aeradio intercepted a distress message of the *Miss Luzon* ditching about 80 miles short of Laoag.



H.M.S. FLYCATCHER SITE – JULY 9, 1947

(Courtesy A. W. Alex Hill, FAA)

THE KAI TAK PANORAMA – 1947

A view of Clearwater Bay Road winding around the threshold of Runway 13 with Runway 07/25 in the middle distance.

(Photo: Sir Denys Roberts)

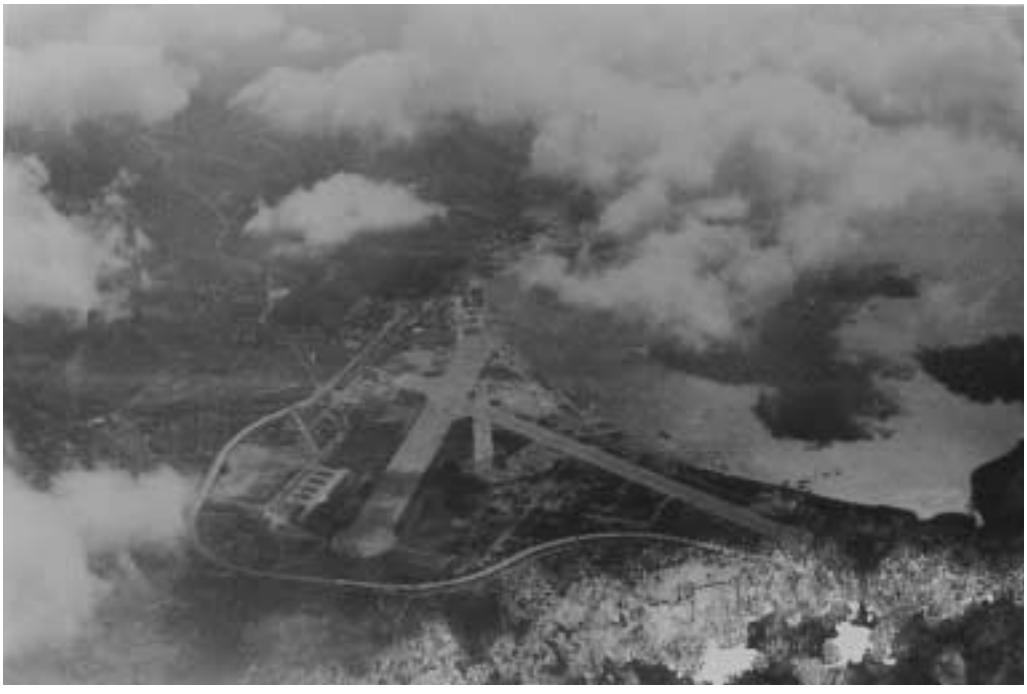
A FAA Tiger Moth on base-leg for Runway 07.

KAI TAK AIRPORT – 1947

Looking east along Runway 07. The access road from Kowloon City alleviated passing through the RAF installation. Cathay Pacific's engineering complex sprawls in the right foreground. The complex lies roughly at the threshold of the current runway. The Sacred Hill crests about 50 yards to starboard. (Photo: Author)

KAI TAK – JULY 1947

On base-leg for Runway 13. Runway 07/25 is just under the starboard wing. (Photo: A. W. Alex Hill, FAA)



How the field looks from 6,000 feet through broken cumulus clouds. (Photo: A. W. Alex Hill, FAA)

An air-sea rescue plane sighted five life rafts and directed the USS *General Collins* to the area. The ship picked up 36 survivors, but reported six missing – presumed dead.

The Hong Kong air fares were high when compared with Europe and America but competition brought discounts. A trip to Manila that cost $800 became $300. The Shanghai sector sold at $380, a saving of $320 on the January fare.

Kai Tak Airport was host to six scheduled carriers. BOAC, PanAm and Air France were the international operators. Hong Kong Airways Limited, CATC and CNAC flew into China with Curtiss Commandos, Skymasters and Dakotas. The CATC and CNAC handled 63 per cent of the Colony's traffic.

There were seven carriers operating non-scheduled and charter flights. Cathay Pacific Airways used Dakotas and Skyways (UK) Limited a Lancastrian. The Philippine Air Lines Incorporated (PAL) operated Dakotas and Skymasters, while Trans-Asiatic Airlines Inc. (TAA) and Commercial Air Lines Inc. (CALI) used Dakotas. Braathens SAFE Airtransport A/S (Norwegian) and Trans-Asiatic Airlines (Siam) Limited were the other Kai Tak users.

By the end of the year the Airport had become a busy place – a precursor of the future! The Department of Civil Aviation recorded 5,486 aircraft movements during the year carrying 81,815 passengers. The operators moved 1,036 tons of mail and freight compared with 236 tons the previous year.

Airport fees remained at the same level as in 1937!