CHAPTER 20

THE DAYS OF ADVENTURE DECLINE – 1968-1973

Another day, another day,
And yet another, glides away!
The Bridal of Triermain
Sir Walter Scott.

1968

The Kai Tak aviation scene was more tranquil than the preceding year. The HK$5 departure tax was rumoured to increase by a contentious 100 per cent – it got the thumbs-down but happened anyway! The authorities also increased landing fees. To offset an uproar the Government advised that a scheme was under consideration to lengthen the runway, with users bearing the capital costs! The airlines accepted the landing-fee increase with little more than token resistance.

March was a good month for the private flying enthusiast. The Hong Kong Flying Club bought a single-engine Beechcraft Musketeer and the Aero Club of Hong Kong's new plane arrived. This was a Piper Cherokee-140 flown from Singapore through Borneo and the Philippines. Mike Gotfried and Brian Lewis, of Cathay Pacific, took turns at the controls.

On 31 August, a Bell 47G-5 helicopter owned by Dragonfly Helicopters Limited made its fourth trip of the day. Hired by Hong Kong Television Broadcasts Limited (HK-TVB) it brought the rest of the equipment for a relay station on Golden Hill. The helicopter, registered VR-HGD, hovering above the 1,300-foot site suddenly flipped and crashed on the verge of the hill.

The rotor splintered into a hundred razor-sharp fragments. A large piece decapitated Choi Tin, a labourer, and the construction foreman, Chung Chi-fat, had his leg badly gashed – doctors amputated it. A TVB cameraman, Henry K. Wong, filming the project for a newsreel, lost four fingers. The pilot, R. T. St John Fischer, escaped with slight injuries to his hands and face.

The Bell 47G-5 was a commercial helicopter that had cost HK$360,000. HAEC mechanics assembled the machine from the enclosed specifications. The pilot had 11 years

DRAGONFLY HELICOPTERS LTD's VR-HGD

On 31 August, 1968, a Bell 47G-5 helicopter crashed on Golden Hill. The rotor splintered – killing one and injuring others.

(Photo: DCA Archives)

experience of flying commercial helicopters overseas. The company's general manager was Mr R. S. Kilburn and a partner was Buji Dhabher, a cricketing mate.

An investigation found Mr Fischer had lost control because of abnormal turbulence around Golden Hill. The insurers withheld payment for several months. They claimed that the pilot had misrepresented his experience. They finally paid but the crash spelt the end of Buji's incursion into aviation. With better luck the partners would have established themselves and probably made a fortune – Dragonfly Helicopter Limited was the first to tap that market.

Yet, an accident that occurred six months earlier was the aviation highlight of the year. The world media covered it minutely because of the legal ramification to the professional pilot.

On 16 February, a Civil Air Transport (CAT) Boeing 727 left Kai Tak for Taipei with 52 passengers. In command of a crew of 11 was Captain Stuart E. Dew.

The pilot descended through thick cloud with frequent squally rain. About six minutes flying from Taipei, the plane sank below the flight path and crashed into a tea plantation. Twenty-one people perished including Gloria Hicks – the wife of Captain Hicks.

The SCMP of 5 February published the result of the investigation. Colonel Lai Hsun-yen, Director of the Civil Aviation Administration, determined that Mr Hicks did not efficiently control the altitude of the plane when it flew over Linkou, 12 miles northwest of Taipei. He stated that Hicks had ignored a red warning light when the plane was below 350 feet. His report further charged that Captain Dew had illegally handed over command to Captain Hicks. This was a report castigating the two men and found their actions the sole cause of the crash.

That day the Taipei District Court charged the pilots with manslaughter. Under the Taiwan Criminal Code a charge of manslaughter through negligence the penalty was imprisonment for not more than two years or a fine not exceeding Taiwan $6,000. On the charge of manslaughter through *occupational* negligence the penalty was imprisonment up to five years or a fine of Taiwan $9,000. Captain Hicks faced the former charge and Captain Dew the more serious one. On 25 March, Judge Huang Chao-hsi at the Taipei District Court heard the pilots plead not guilty.

A month later began a trial with the potential for sweeping changes. *No country in the world had ever brought a commercial pilot to trial following an accident.* Joseph K. Twan-muh, their Chinese counsel, argued that the case against Dew and Hicks lacked precedent and asked for acquittal. When the judges refused his submission he focused on the crew's qualifications. He established that Captain Hicks' name did appear on the crew manifest. He insisted that Captain Dew did not act irresponsibly by handing over command to his superior. Captain Hicks had an endorsement with recent flight experience on the type. He made his strongest point by charging that the instrument landing system (ILS) at Taipei Airport malfunctioned on the night in question.

On 21 May the trial ended. Judge Huang advised the Court he and his two colleagues would hand down their judgment on the 27th. Meanwhile Jan Bartelski, President of the International Airlines Pilots Association (IALPA), threatened to *boycott* Taipei if the Court convicted the men of manslaughter. The IALPA then petitioned Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek to suspend the court proceedings and reopen investigation by civil aviation authorities.

The Court, convening on the 27th, heard a barely audible Judge Huang advise the packed courtroom – *We will reopen more hearings.* He then turned and slowly left his Court.

The trial of the two pilots reconvened in October with Judge Huang still presiding. A witness for the defence told the Court he believed the Taipei Airport's ILS system was not functioning properly on the night of the crash. Mr William Ruh was an authority on

instrument landing systems from the Federal Electric Company of New Jersey. He delivered his testimony in the quiet voice that contrasts the expert from the quasi – his demeanour swayed the Court.

On January 21, 1969, this long-drawn-out trial ended in acquittal for Captains Dew and Hicks. This not only ended their torment but ended the passenger division of the colourful airline started by General Claire Chennault.

1969

During the year the Department of Civil Aviation lost some splendid advocates. On 30 June, Mervyn Jackson Muspratt-Williams died in Malta. He was 57. The once chief telecommunications officer Philip Wood died on 13 December.

Their deaths did little to curb the progress of the airport they had guided in its formative years.

The current facilities efficiently handled over 1,000 passengers each hour, but the *Jumbo* would double this by 1972. The ancillary work of nose-in parking baggage conveyor belts and more kerb space for cars would cost HK$15 million. The runway extension of 2,500 feet awaited a decision – it involved an estimated cost of HK$90 million.

On March 29, an associate company of the Hutchison International Group contracted for aircraft-to-terminal carriageways. The contract, worth HK$3 million, called for the supply and installation of six hydraulically-operated bridges. They could serve two floor levels with the same bridge – a system never used before. The contractor, Gordon, Woodroff and Company (Far East) Limited, completed the work in March 1970.

On March 27, foundation work began on the largest hangar in the Far East. HAEC's General Manager, *Tony* Wakeford, told the *Sunday Post-Herald* the structure measured 200 feet in depth and 48 feet from floor-to-ceiling girders. It had an unsupported internal span

RUNWAY EXTENSION TO 11,130 FEET

Work began on the extension of Runway 13/31 on 22 October, 1970. By the end of 1971 reclamation had swallowed Channel Rock. Then bad weather plagued the project. A revised completion date was estimated for late 1974.

(Photo: DCA Archives)

of 400 feet and a total ground area of 116,500 square feet. The hangar could house five Convair 880Ms or three DC8-63s, but not the 63 foot 6 inch tail of the *Jumbo*.

This was a massive structure when compared with the old PAMAS hangar they sold to the Shaw Brothers in 1962. To the best of my knowledge the studio is still making films in it on Clearwater Bay Road.

A pioneer Hong Kong aviator retired from BOAC on 24 May. Captain A. D. Bennett first landed at Kai Tak on March 24, 1929. He was a RAF pilot flying a Fleet Air Arm single-seater plane. Shortly after the end of World War II he returned to reopen BOAC's operations – becoming Manager, Orient. *Don* Bennett served on many committees associated with Kai Tak's formative years. This courteous man remained in the Colony as Far East Adviser for International Air Radio.

Aircraft accidents continued to attract media attention. A RAF Whirlwind *chopper,* on May 16, crashed into the sea.

On October 4, a Hong Kong Flying Club Musketeer, VR-HFU, suffered a nose-wheel failure while landing on Runway 31. The pilot, A. D. van der Sluis of HAEC, escaped injury. The plane suffered extensive damage to the nose-wheel unit and engine mount.

Alan bore our boorish jokes with good humour – we figured he received a *spotter's* commission from HAEC. Airport Commandant Fred Lillywhite saw no humour at all – the accident closed his runway for a time at its busiest!

An incident on October 9 caught my imagination. That day RAF Kai Tak received a call for helicopter help in rescuing people from a 15-storey building in San Po Kong. A fire had started on the 11th floor of a plastics factory. The heat and smoke had choked the stairs to the street and driven three men on to the roof. Squadron Leader J. Canning, the Squadron's Commanding Officer, lowered the Whirlwind until one wheel rested on the roof's edge. His crew dragged the men on board just as licking flames swept the roof.

Later that month the RAF lost a Whirlwind and two crew members. On patrol near the border the *chopper* struck a power cable above a reservoir. It crashed and burned 3,000 metres east of Fanling.

1970

A yellow blip *painted* Roger Chan's long-range radar-scope. Roger beckoned to his senior controller Vic Clarke with the words *There she is!* Roger's radio transmission accepted the PanAm plane into Hong Kong airspace at *Yellowtail.* This is an imaginary point 175 miles east of Kai Tak where Taipei hands control over to Hong Kong. As the blip became a blob Roger Chan transferred *Clipper One* to the heavily bearded Approach Controller Vic Reynard.

Watched by a vast crowd the Boeing 747 appeared out of a light drizzle to a perfect landing. This historic date was 11 January. One wag remarked that *she resembles a flying warehouse with all the doors and windows open*. The era of the *Jumbo* jet had come to Kai Tak.

The next morning the *SCMP* published a delightful photograph. It showed the 48-year-old Captain William Saulsberry, a veteran of 22,000 hours, accepting a scroll from a diminutive Chinese lady. The 86-year-old *Sampan Annie* had befriended PanAm's Juan Trippe many years ago.

In February the Government decided to proceed with the long-delayed runway extension. The promontory extension of 2,525 feet would provide a paved surface of 11,130 feet. The costing amounted to HK$181 million and included additional taxiways, high-speed turn-offs, by-pass areas and a fire sub-station.

The contract called for a completion date of 2½ years, with work beginning on 22 October. The Director closed Kai Tak Airport to all traffic from midnight to 0800 hours daily, effective from 21 October.

THE JUMBO ERA COMES TO HONG KONG

On 11 January, 1970, PanAm's Captain Saulsberry landed his Boeing 747 at Kai Tak Airport. (Photo: Norm Latham, CAD)

In November the Department took advantage of the closure hours by grooving selected portions of the runway. This gave improved friction and helped overcome aquaplaning in heavy rain.

The existing runway construction did not please everybody! Several pilots, through our association, questioned the distance between the runway and taxiway. We maintained that in strong cross-winds this was a border-line operation and compromised safety.

The pilots association produced evidence that Kai Tak's clearance fell short of the minimum safe distance recommended by the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA). This was by 50 feet for the Boeing 707 and considerably more for the Jumbo.

Acrimony began between pilots and the Department. Three airlines prohibited its pilots to backtrack when a plane landed in the opposite direction. The airlines had effectively told their pilots to disobey instructions from the operating authority. Later our wonderful *esprit de corps* returned when this became accepted practice in wet crosswind conditions.

On 23 July, Hong Kong Air International applied to the Department for a licence to operate non-scheduled commercial helicopter services. The Company proposed using two Alouette 111 helicopters.

This introduced a colourful character who sported a Jimmy Edwards RAF handle-bar moustache and a Van Dyke beard. These when combined with flashing eyes and a perpetual lear produced the most erogenous countenance I had ever seen. Captain Tony Clarke was the chief pilot of Hong Kong Air International. It seems this charismatic fly-boy ran up against the staid Department's licensing authority.

The Company began services between the Airport and Harcourt Road heliport on 15 December. Captain Tony (*I'm always smiling, folks!*) Clarke was not part of the team.

1971

The Government gave financial approval for the next phase of the Airport Terminal's development. Called *Stage IV,* it increased the passenger processing to 3,200 per hour.

This was a timely decision for the previous year 48,973 civil planes had operated through Kai Tak. The records showed 2,369,704 passengers had used the Terminal's facilities. The freight division handled 75,464 metric tons of cargo, an increase of 25.6 per cent.

Hong Kong Air International Limited carried 36,705 passengers. The Company's fleet had expanded to a 13-seat twin-engine Bell 212 and a Bell 47. These helicopters complemented the two six-seat Alouette 111s.

To compete with PanAm, Japan Airlines, Lufthansa and BOAC introduced the Boeing 747 to their schedules. China Airlines added the Caravelle to the B-727 and B-707 fleet. United Arab Airlines changed its stationery to Egyptair. The local airline, Cathay Pacific, who lacked a rich corporate brother, successfully competed with *hand-me-down* Boeing 707s.

On March 30, 45 people boarded a Philippine Airlines' plane at Manila. The BAC 1-11 left on schedule for Davao City on Mindanao Island. Reaching cruising level six hijackers ordered the captain to fly to Canton, China.

With almost empty tanks the Hong Kong authorities cleared the captain to land at Kai Tak. During refuelling officials negotiated the release of 19 adults and one child. The plane then left for Canton where the hijackers gained political asylum.

The following day the Chinese released the plane and the remaining passengers. The BAC 1-11 returned to Kai Tak – refuelled and left for Manila.

A joke circulated at the time. A man thrust himself on to a flight deck brandishing a pistol and screaming – *Take me to Havana.* The dazed pilot replied – *Sir! Our schedule is to land there.* This type of *black humour* amused few pilots whose association supported the death penalty for hijackers, or skyjackers, their original name.

On 4 June, Flying Officer R. Forsythe answered a routine casualty call from Lantau Island. He was to bring an epileptic suspect to Queen Elizabeth Hospital. They abandoned the epileptic diagnosis when the woman gave birth to a seven-pound daughter during the flight. Was this the first birth to take place on a helicopter? It was for RAF 28 Squadron! The hospital staff admitted its youngest miracle with her whole life ahead.

This contrasted starkly with an event on 18 July. Shum Ching-wing worked in the wheel-well of a Cathay Convair 880. In heavy rain a HAEC colleague coupled a tractor and towed the plane. The hapless Shum dropped out of the wheel-well and fell under the wheels. The Queen Elizabeth Hospital staff found the 30-year-old mechanic dead on arrival.

Meanwhile, the Department fenced off a portion of the northern end of Runway 13 for a road tunnel. The tunnel passed under the airport linking Kowloon City and Kwun Tong.

Progress on the runway extension fell behind schedule. Adverse weather and rough seas contributed to its slow progress. The contractors revised the operational date to late 1974.

Every improvement in the weather brought a work continuation with grim determination. By the end of the year the above-water reclamation had swallowed Channel Rock, some 1,450 feet from the old runway threshold. Many pilots had used the *Rock* to check position in reduced visibility. I did!

On 21 January, a Kai Tak icon proceeded on pre-retirement leave. *Fred* Lillywhite spent his early working life in the newspaper industry in England. He volunteered for the RAF at the outbreak of war and qualified in radio navigation. He left the Colony on 14 May, 1971,

one day before his 55th birthday, having *logged* 23 years at the airport he loved. In retirement, with wife Mei, they established several shops in a hotel at London Airport.

Frederick Richard John Lillywhite died a wealthy man in September 1990.

1972

The Department lost another good friend with the death of W. J. Morgan. *Bill* had replaced Fred Lillywhite as Airport General Manager effective 15 February, 1971.

The Malaysia-Singapore Airlines dissolved their affiliation in September. Two separate companies arose from this erstwhile unworkable association. The Malaysian Airline System and the Singapore Airlines Limited commenced scheduled services to Hong Kong on 1 October.

At Kai Tak Airport the building of several projects came to a halt. Work had started on 26 September on a new link taxiway and in November on the airport tunnel road. These splendid additions connected a fast turn-off from Runway 31 to the apron with the tunnel giving rapid access to Kwun Tong.

Difficulties arose with subsoil conditions where the airport tunnel road crossed under the link taxiway. Was this a further legacy of the POW *builders*? The contractors amended the completion date to October 1973.

A precautionary landing to Chin Yew Keen's Campbell Cricket autogyro (VR-HGV) needed Cyril Wray's attention. The Cricket lost power on 7 April and landed on reclaimed ground beside the runway. The pilot escaped unscathed but the gyroplane suffered extensive damage.

This proved child's play for the likable surveyor, but the accident that followed taxed his skills to the limit.

On 15 June, Cathay Pacific lost a Convair 880M (VR-HFZ) near Pleiku in Vietnam. This was the result of the detonation of a high-explosive device in the cabin.

Captain Henry Neil Morison, Flight Captain of the Convair fleet, had left Bangkok with a crew of nine and 71 passengers. No one survived the blast and crash.

Mr R. J. *Remy* Cheong-Leen, the Acting Assistant Director of Civil Aviation (Operations), went to Saigon. He was to visit the crash site and report to the Director. He returned to Hong Kong on the 20th a chastened man.

On 2 September, the Thai authorities charged Lieutenant Somchai Chaiyasut with mass murder. The Court alleged he handed a package to his common-law wife, Somwang Promprin, just before the plane left for Hong Kong. The Lieutenant's eight-year-old daughter accompanied her. Somchai had insured their lives for HK$3 million.

A year elapsed before Lieutenant Somchai's trial began. Defended by his retired lawyer father Somchai pleaded not guilty. His defence was a heavily overloaded plane flying too fast and too high. Somchai's team proved more than a match for Foi Malikhao, who headed the prosecution.

Cyril Wray appeared as a witness for the Thai authorities. Throughout the 11-months trial Somchai showed his contempt by frequently falling asleep. On May 30, 1974, the three-judge panel retired to consider their verdict. Later that day they delivered a verdict of *not guilty* stating circumstantial evidence alone did not warrant convicting.

The prosecution immediately appealed. The Court upheld the not guilty verdict. The brilliant Foi Malikhao, who had never lost a trial, had met his match!

On December 22, 1976, Somchai won his final *victory*. The Court directed the insurance company to pay his claim. I know that my late Cathay colleagues and their passengers sleep with more composure than Lieutenant Somchai Chaiyasut!

CATHAY PACIFIC'S CONVAIR 880M – VR-HFZ

On 15 June, 1972 VR-HFZ was lost over Vietnam when a bomb exploded in the cabin. There were no survivors.

(Photo: Author & Cyril Wray, ARB)

1973

On 2 May, in the Year of the Ox, Roy Evans Downing became Director of Civil Aviation. His appointment coincided with the wettest year ever recorded in Hong Kong. The total rainfall of 3,100.4 mm. was 40 per cent above the annual average. The heavy downpours of July through September had *Dinger* Bell's meteorologists recording rainfall 70 per cent above average. Missed approaches and diversions reached worrying proportions.

They highlighted the weakness of the approach procedure. For a landing over the Kowloon peninsula the pilot depended entirely on maintaining visual reference for the last 12 miles. It was a difficult requirement and worst for pilots unfamiliar with the terrain.

This led to the introduction of an Instrument Guidance System for Runway 13. The IGS had a uniquely *curved* procedure that required exhaustive checks before being declared fully operational. Technically commissioned in August it became operational in January 1974. Backed by the Precision Approach Radar diversions and missed approaches became a rare occurrence.

Other matters had Cyril Wray, and his colleague, spending lengthy periods away, and the senior surveyor of West Malaysia filled-in.

On 29 June, a China Air Lines Boeing 707 overran the runway landing on Runway 13. The accident tore the starboard nose-wheel tyre to shreds. HAEC replaced the tyre – made several static retractions of the undercarriage – and soon had the plane back in service.

A HKAAF Musketeer, on 9 September, crashed into a densely wooded area. The location was 1½ miles north-east of Ting Kok (near Plover Cove). The sole occupant escaped uninjured.

Kai Tak was *host* to another Philippine Air Lines BAC 1-11 hijack on 11 October. The PAL plane had left Bacolod on Negros to continue its island-hopping milk-run. After take-off several hijackers took control, forcing it to divert to the capital. At Manila they exchanged the passengers for the Chairman of PAL and another hostage and took off across

the China Sea. At Kai Tak negotiators and hijackers agreed on terms! The hijackers surrendered their arms and they and the plane returned to Manila as guests of PAL. I have no further details of this bizarre episode.

Director Roy Downing's annual report disclosed some interesting statistics. The helicopter cross-harbour service had suffered a 10.56 per cent fall in revenue, the result of the cross-harbour tunnel opened by HRH Princess Alexandra the previous October.

Thirty airlines operated 992 scheduled services a week to and from Kai Tak. Their equipment linked Hong Kong to 65 major world cities – non-stop to 29 of these. The non-scheduled carriers operated an average of 80 services a week.

The worldwide air-transport industry operating in the depressed economy, resulting from the fuel crisis and consequent fare increases, showed a reduction in passenger travel. This trend seemed to have bypassed the Colony.

Kai Tak's passenger traffic maintained the high growth of the last two decades – doubling every fourth year. Air cargo traffic also attained a surprisingly high growth rate in the face of the cut-back on non-scheduled operations.

Roy Downing concluded with an astonishing forecast for 1974. The number of passengers expected through Kai Tak *would exceed Hong Kong's total population*.

AERIAL PICTURE OF KAI TAK AIRPORT – 1973

Shows progress on the airport tunnel under Runway 13/31 and the link taxiway. The tunnel would accelerate road traffic between Kowloon City and Kwun Tong. The link taxiway was to expedite plane movements by separating arriving and departing planes. Work began on the link taxiway in September 1972 and on the tunnel two months later.

(Photo: Norm Latham, CAD)