

Kai Tak Remember





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By Bob Bluffield

A decade has already passed since the former Hong Kong International Airport at Kai Tak closed for business on July 6 1998 to be replaced by the superb new facility built on reclaimed land at Chek Lap Kok on Lantau Island.

The two airports are like chalk and cheese; one futuristic, the other was long past its sell by date; but there are still plenty who mourn the demise of the old place. Many are pilots who readily recall the adrenalin rush as they guided their aircraft along the instrument guidance system (IGS) just a few hundred feet above densely populated Kowloon tenements towards the infamous orange and white painted chequer board. When this was in view and the aircraft correctly aligned at a height of just 675 feet (206 metres), a sharp 47 degree turn was required that took the aircraft through a sweeping curve before levelling out 150 feet (46 metres) from the runway threshold.

At night, a unique lighting system set precisely at 400-foot intervals on rooftops and specially built gantries guided pilots along the runway centre line. As final approach was imminent the spacing between the lights decreased to 200 feet. Because of the need to use lights to guide pilots in this way, this forced a ban on flashing neon signs throughout Hong Kong to avoid distracting inbound pilots. The weather was often bad; typhoons, microbursts and severe crosswinds added to the problems and in many respects Kai Tak was a major accident waiting to happen. A few errant aircraft ended in the shallow waters of Kowloon Bay and it was perhaps fortuitous that no commercial airliners ever came down on the crammed dwellings of Kowloon or missed the turn to end up ploughing into Lion Rock. This was due mainly to extremely good aviation skills, excellent air traffic control and, more specifically in the early days, a certain element of luck. The airport certainly had its share of incidents and many aviation enthusiasts will have seen the video on 'You Tube' that shows how close a Korean Air Boeing 747 came to disaster during an extreme weather landing.

I too have fond memories of Kai Tak. My first encounter was during a stop-over en-route to Bali in 1979. During the next nine years I landed and departed from the single runway 13/31 more than 30 times and spent many hours viewing activities on the floodlit apron through the panoramic windows of the Marco Polo Club lounge before boarding CX251 bound for London; one of the last departures before the midnight to 06.15 curfew. Apart



from a solitary return flight on a Garuda Airbus A320; on all other occasions I placed my trust in the confident hands of the Cathay Pacific crews who knew Kai Tak like the backs of their hands. In those bountiful days before the unforgivable events of 911 as a regular flyer I was fortunate to have been given a seat on the flight deck during several landings and a take off, the latter as a guest of Kim Sharman the senior captain ultimately selected by Cathay to make the last commercial passenger departure (CX251 to London Heathrow) just prior to midnight on 6 July 1998. The final flight was also Sharman's swan song as a Cathay pilot that he celebrated with his retirement. I would have loved to have been aboard that final flight simply for old time's sake. The night the airport closed gave way to unprecedented and emotional scenes as thousands of local people and aviation enthusiasts clung to every conceivable viewpoint to witness the final moments as aircraft were ferried on the short hop between the old and the new airports. Low flying jet aircraft had become a way of life; a love affair shared by many Kowloon residents.

Mr Kai and Mr Tack

The story of the airport dates back to the 1920s when two businessmen, Sir Ho Kai (a trained medical doctor) and Mr Au Tack* (owner of a photographic business) formed the Kai Tack Land Investment Company Ltd to reclaim land they intended to use to build new homes. The project failed mainly because few people desired to live on land that was still infested by mosquitoes. The reclaimed area was left vacant until it was taken over by the government. In November 1924 HMS Pegasus arrived in Victoria Harbour carrying four Fairey IIID seaplanes

that were used to conduct aerial photography. These were flown on aerial reconnaissance missions over Mires and Hias Bays, the known haunts of notorious pirates that plundered shipping on the South China Sea. Sir Reginald Stubbs flew in one of these aircraft and in so doing became the first Governor of Hong Kong to survey his territory from a seaplane.

There was obviously the need for a military facility within Hong Kong but under the 1021 Washington Agreement the British were not permitted to establish a base east of Singapore. The British Government candidly found a solution by building an airfield for civil use on the site that could also be used by visiting Fleet Air Arm aircraft. In January 1925 American dare devil Harry W Abbott, was granted permission to start a flying school on the airport site that he called Kowloon City Field. On Lunar New Year Day he announced the inauguration of his school by taking off in a Curtiss Jenny with fire crackers attached to his rudder. But the fireworks failed to ignite and this was considered bad fung shui by the watching spectators. His colleague, the Chinese-American pilot Henry Yee Young, performed a series of aerobatics before Abbott returned to the air with Richard Earnshaw aboard who made a parachute decent. Things went wrong and Earnshaw landed in the harbour and got tangled in his parachute and drowned. A series of incidents continued to court Abbott and by August he was broke and forced to sell his aircraft.

The RAF took over the airfield on March 10 1927 and apart from the Japanese occupation during the War remained in some form until 1993. The posting was not popular at first because

of the pungent odours emitting from the local nullah (open drain) that competed with the smell of lard from a factory situated close by. The pungent nullah continued to greet passengers aboard arriving aircraft right up to the final days of the airport.

On November 18 1928 a flight of Shorts Southampton flying-boats touched down in the harbour and were tied to special moorings in Kowloon Bay. This was the famous Far East flight of Group Captain Cave-Brown-Cave that was being flown from Singapore to Australia that later evolved as 205 Squadron. In order to haul the aircraft from the water a concrete slipway had to be built and a steam crane was used to hoist the planes onto dry land. Things had started to develop and the Legislative Council set money aside for improvements and maintenance at the facility. By 1930 the runway had been levelled and re-turfed and a metal hanger was completed to replace the matting structures that had previously been regularly prone to catch fire. In September Mr A J R Moss arrived from London to take up the position of Aerodrome Superintendent followed by his assistant Erik Nelson five years later to influence the development of the airfield.

The Imperial Link

In 1932 the flying club members became embroiled in a disagreement that forced its closure. Vaughan Fowler, the prominent manager of the Far East Aviation Company, suggested reforming the club and it became the Far Eastern Flying School with a fleet of aircraft consisting of one Avro Avian and three Avro Cadets. The business employed a staff of ten Chinese personnel, ten English and had forty two engineering students; an indication of how interest in aviation had progressed. Two years later the airfield was further developed with the addition of a sea wall, a surrounding fence and a ramp for sea planes. Work was also completed on accommodation for the RAF on the eastern side of the old runway where buildings were erected on a dirt track that led to the fishing village of Lei Yut Mun. These had a commanding view over a sandy beach and stood 30 metres above the airfield on land where blocks of high rise flats would later dominate the backdrop on the eastern side of the airport. There were also plans to tarmac the runway.

In 1928 the British and Hong Kong governments promised to spend £200,000 to convert Kai Tak into a modern facility. In London the Colony was still given only secondary consideration and it took until 1935 for a civilian control tower and offices to be built and for the first fire engine to be acquired. On March 25 1929 the long awaited first commercial flight arrived as the de Havilland DH 86 G-ACWD Diana Class 'Dorado' of Imperial Airways touched down. This had operated the inaugural feeder service from Penang and Saigon that had connected with the delayed UK to Australia (Empire Route) flight that had departed from London on March 14. The experienced Imperial Airways pilot, Capt J Lock was at the controls and as he neared the Colony he reported seeing three sharks basking in the waters of the South China Sea below his aircraft. As he swept through an area known as Magazine Gap at around 11.30am the magnificent vista of Victoria Harbour opened before him and he was escorted on his approach by a squadron of aircraft from HMS Hermes. Awaiting the flight was the Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Andrew Caldecott and 200 VIPs who expected to greet just the crew when the aircraft came to a halt. There was an element of surprise when the first commercial passenger ever to land at Kai Tak

emerged from the plane. Ong Ee-Lim, a keen amateur pilot had squeezed between 16 bags of Her Majesty's mail after flying his own aircraft from Kuala Lumpur to Penang specifically to be on the flight.

The Imperial Airways DH 86 had visited the Colony before when Capt Armstrong had flown the aircraft in a series of proving flights the previous year. The people of Hong Kong had followed the progress of these flights for some considerable time and when poor weather threatened the first of these, Armstrong decided that he wasn't prepared to let the people down or risk losing the precious mail contract. On September 16 he flew 1852 miles (2980 kms) from Penang in a single day. When the route opened to regular traffic it cut the 34 day sea journey between England and Hong Kong to ten days by air. Later, when agreement was reached with Siam (now Thailand) the shorter route via Bangkok cut a further day and a half from the journey. By the time Imperial Airways had started operating C Class flying-boats to Singapore, the 15,000 mile (24,140 kms) route had been cut to 5½ days with the DH 86 providing the final link between Singapore and Kai Tak. Today, due to the progress made in establishing over-flying rights, shorter routes over Russia, Siberia and China have substantially reduced the distance to around 6,000 miles (9,856 kms) that modern jets can cover non-stop in less than twelve hours.

Between the Wars Kai Tak had featured in the flights of many famous long distance and round the world record breaking pioneers even though regular commercial services were slow to commence. During 1932 the Compagnie Française Air Orient intended to connect Hong Kong with their Marseilles – Saigon



service but plans were dropped. Two years earlier the Sino-Deutsche Luft Hansa owned Eurasian Aviation Corporation also planned to fly mail between Kai Tak and Europe but this idea fell by the wayside, but it later extended its Peiping (Beijing) – Canton service to Hong Kong on June 29 1937 using the versatile Junkers JU-52. Then, on August 10 1938 Air France arrived from Paris in their Dewoitine 338 tri-motor F-AQBF 'City of Vientiane' in six days and then set a new record between Hanoi and Hong Kong in 3 hours 20 minutes.

In February 1930 Juan Trippe's Pan American Airways staked a 45 per cent share to form the Chinese National Aviation Corporation (CNAC) in collaboration with the Chinese Ministry of Communication. On October 8 they opened a flying-boat service linking Shanghai, Wenchow, Foochow, Amoy, Swatow and Canton with Hong Kong using Sikorsky S-38s. Two years later they flew the route twice-weekly using Douglas Dolphin amphibians, later introducing the Douglas DC-3 as passenger traffic increased.

Pan Am had been keen to add Hong Kong to their trans-Pacific operations and on April 28 1937 this was achieved with the arrival of the Sikorsky S042B flying boat (NC16734) 'Hong Kong Clipper' on the extended service from San Francisco and Manila. By then the Japanese were already overrunning parts of China and by July Peking had fallen. As a result commercial flights over China became inherently dangerous and regularly came under fire from the Japanese. CNAC courageously continued to fly and in 1938 a Douglas DC-2 of the company was shot down near Macau killing all 14 on board. Amazingly the aircraft was returned to Kai Tak by barge, repaired and put back into service. In October 1940 and May 1941 two more DC 2s were shot down with fatalities while flying the Chungking – Kunming – Hong Kong route. The airline's final pre-war flight departed from Kai Tak on December 12 1941 just as the Japanese prepared to bomb the airport. The British military had already declared Hong Kong indefensible and when the Japanese invasion commenced on Monday December 8 1941 the RAF had only three Vickers Wildebeests based at Kai Tak and two Supermarine Walrus amphibians tethered offshore. The airport continued to be strafed destroying six parked airliners and Pan Am's 'Hong Kong Clipper' that was at anchor. Four more airliners miraculously survived a bomb that went through the roof of their hanger but failed to explode. Over the next two days CNAC aircraft relentlessly evacuated airport personnel to China while the RAF detachment moved to Hong Kong Island before the British surrendered the territory on Christmas Day. The Japanese took Kai Tak for military use but flights operated by Greater Japan Air Lines that had served the airport before the invasion continued. Two tarmac runways of around 4,266 feet (1,300 metres) in length were constructed by prisoners of war. Kai Tak was bombed on many occasions between 1942-45 by the Americans with considerable success but it was deemed impractical to mount any prolonged effort to remove the occupying forces.

Japan surrendered on August 15 1945 and the British re-established their presence. Although Fleet Air Arm Grumman Hellcats and Avengers flew into the airport on August 29 the runways were still littered with bomb craters and the debris of wrecked enemy aircraft. By mid-September the RAF had started to re-establish a presence with a squadron of Supermarine

Spitfires and by Christmas four squadrons had become operational. Short Sunderland flying-boats and Douglas DC-3 Dakotas were added to the mix of aircraft and British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) expressed their intention to establish their flying-boat services from Hythe to the Colony that had been postponed at the outbreak of war. BOAC services commenced on August 24 1946 using the Hythe Class Short Sunderland. During the same year a major typhoon hit the area wrecking several parked aircraft, followed in quick succession by a Douglas Dakota military aircraft crashing onto Kowloon Tong after take off.

RAF squadrons came and went throughout most of the post war period bringing with them an assortment of aircraft including de Havilland Venoms, Hawker Hunters and various helicopter types that were used for a range of duties including search and rescue. The British military also deterred a threat from Chinese Communist forces in the Pearl River Delta in the late 1940s and played a role in helping to quell the Hong Kong riots of 1967. From 1993 onwards the airport was home to the Royal Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force, the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps Air unit and later the Government Flying Service. The Hong Kong Aviation Club also had their facility at a corner of the airport close to the threshold of runway 13 that in later years provided an interesting viewpoint for enthusiasts.

Cathay Pacific and Post War Developments

In October 1945 a former CNAC pilot, Roy Farrell, who had flown the infamous eastern Himalayas 'Hump' between China and Burma during the war bought an ageing Douglas C-47 that he had converted for civilian use as a DC-3. He flew the aircraft from the USA via a roundabout route to Shanghai where he met

his old pal, the former Australian war ace, Syd de Kantzow. The friends formed an airline that in February 1946 started operating cargo flights out of Shanghai. The aircraft was registered VR-HAD and named 'Betsy' and the name they adopted the company, Cathay Pacific Airways, became a legend. A second DC-3 (VR-HDB) was bought and named 'Nikki' and the enterprise quickly became extremely profitable causing trepidation among their Chinese rivals. The situation was not exactly 'healthy' in the old Chinese city and Farrell and de Kantzow saw the wisdom of moving their operation to British controlled Hong Kong. After advertising for air hostesses Cathay soon started to make trial passenger flights to Manila, Bangkok and Singapore. A year later five more DC-3s and two Consolidated Catalina PB5A amphibians were bought second hand as more destinations were added. Catalina, VR-HDT 'Miss Macao' made history when it arguably became the first aircraft to be subjected to air piracy. On July 17 1948 four Chinese attempted to take control of the aircraft between Macau and Hong Kong in the belief that gold bullion was being transported. One of the hijackers was said to have had a basic knowledge of flying the aircraft type but things went wrong when a struggle ensued and the Captain, Dale Cramer was shot in the head. The aircraft went out of control and crashed into the Pearl River Delta with a crew of three and 23 passengers aboard. One of the hijackers was the only survivor. On June 15 1972 a further incident occurred when a bomb aboard one of the company's Convair 880s destroyed the aircraft over Vietnam.

In 1948 one of the 'noble' British trading companies, John Swire and Sons invested in Cathay Pacific. Although Farrell sold

his stake in the airline to return to Texas in 1948 and de Kantzow resigned in 1951, the airline grew substantially to become one of the world's foremost operators. Swire's main rivals, Jardine Matheson owned Hong Kong Airways that also operated from Kai Tak. BOAC had invested in this airline to link Chinese cities to its international routes, but in 1959 the airline merged with Cathay. The airline also established a highly reputable maintenance facility, the Hong Kong Aviation Engineering Company (HAECO) that was based at Kai Tak and in more recent years it became a major shareholder in the two other Hong Kong based airlines; Dragonair and Air Hong Kong.

Since the War the structure of Kai Tak continued to change to meet the rapid requirements of an ever changing airline industry. During the 1950s the airport witnessed a massive increase in regional and international operations. Many international carriers including BOAC, Pan American Airways, Qantas, Air India and Canadian Pacific added Hong Kong to their schedules. Douglas DC-4s and DC-6s, Boeing B-377 Stratocruisers, Bristol Britannias and Lockheed Constellations became regular visitors and with the turbo-props came the need for a longer runway. In 1958 a new 8,340 feet (2,542 metres) x 200 feet (60.96 metres) runway was opened on reclaimed land at an elevation of 16 feet (4.87 metres) above Kowloon Bay with overrun areas of 750 feet (228.60 metres) at the northwest end and 300 feet (91.44 metres) at the water facing end. Over 3,000 workmen toiled on the project that commenced in January 1956 but completed on time for the arrival of the first flight on August 31 1958. A parallel taxi way, and a new passenger terminal building were also added. At the official opening of the runway

on September 12th a Comet 4 of BOAC specifically flown to Hong Kong from Hatfield became the first jet airliner ever to land at the airport. By the end of 1958 4,773 aircraft had arrived and 19 airlines operated 184 flights a week to Kai Tak. On July 17 1959 a Cathay Pacific DC-3 officially opened night operations into the airport after additional lighting had been installed.

In 1960 Pan Am flew the first B-707 into Kai Tak followed in the same year by the first DC-8 operated by Japan Air Lines. A milestone arrived when the first B-747, Pan Am 'Clipper One' touched down on April 11 1970 witnessed by a vast crowd. The wide bodied era brought additional pressure to further increase the runway length. By 1974 an extension had increased this to 11,130 feet (3,390 metres) and extra taxiways, turn-off and parking areas and a new fire station had been added. Traffic had increased to such an extent that by 1995-96 the 61 airlines using Kai Tak had contributed 2,850 passenger and cargo flights and there were also 230 non-scheduled flights operating weekly, 78 per cent of these flights were wide bodied aircraft and this had increased the number of passengers passing through the airport to 28 million. The facility had also become the world's second busiest cargo airport handling 1.48 million tonnes. With 31 scheduled movements per hour Kai Tak had reached maximum capacity and hundreds of extra requests for landing slots had to be refused. It was obvious that the new airport was essential and when it opened for business at 6.20am with the arrival of Cathay Pacific CX889 direct from New York it was not before time.

**For some reason the 'c' was dropped from the airport name although it did appear as Kai Tack on the original gates.*