

23 July 1954

1954 Cathay Pacific Douglas DC-4 shootdown

The Cathay Pacific Douglas DC-4 shootdown happened on 23 July 1954, when a Cathay Pacific Airways C-54 Skymaster^[4] airliner was shot down by fighter planes of the People's Republic of China. The event occurred off the coast of Hainan Island, where the plane was en route from Bangkok to Hong Kong, killing 10 of 19 passengers and crew on board.^{[1][5]}

Although the four-engined propeller-driven Douglas (registered *VR-HEU*) was a C-54 Skymaster, the incident is known as "the DC-4 shootdown" because the C-54 is the military version of the Douglas DC-4, and the aircraft was flying a commercial passenger run.^{[6][7][8][2]} The crew of six was headed by British captain Phil Blown, and included three female flight attendants. In all, one flight crew member, two cabin crew members and seven of the thirteen passengers were killed in the attack and subsequent crash of the airliner.^[1]

Flight and attack

After being delayed in Bangkok for an hour because of mechanical problems on its no. 2 engine, VR-HEU finally took off from Bangkok at 2019 GMT on 22 July, bound for Hong Kong. A previous flight had taken the plane from Singapore. For the next 4 hours and 25 minutes the routine flight proceeded as planned.^{[9][10][11]}

At 2340 GMT, when the DC-4 was cruising at 9,000 ft and roughly 10 miles east of the international air corridor line off Hainan Island and only 31 minutes from Hong Kong, two Lavochkin La-11 fighters (of the 85th Fighter Regiment, People's Liberation Army Air Force), appeared behind VR-HEU, one above it on the DC-4's starboard rear side and the other on its port side.



Lavochkin La-11 fighter

At approximately 2344 GMT, the fighters opened fire and the two outboard engines (Engine numbers 1 & 4) were hit and caught fire. The No. 4 engine's auxiliary and main fuel tank were also ablaze.

While Blown took evasive actions to avoid further damage, co-pilot Cedric Carlton issued blankets to passengers instructing them to place them on the back of their seats for protection against the bullets.

Radio operator Stephen Wong made a first distress call at 0845 HKT (2345 GMT). "Kai Tak Tower, Cathay XXX, Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! No. 1 port engine on fire, losing altitude, requesting all possible assistance."^{[7][10]} Wong made no less than 10 Mayday calls before VR-HEU ditched. Cathay Pacific engineer G. H. Cattanach, travelling as a passenger, tried to make the passengers comfortable when it became known that the plane was going to ditch.

VR-HEU began losing altitude and at 5,000 ft, its rudder control was shot off. Travelling at 350 miles per hour, Blown tried his utmost to evade incendiary bullets coming from the fighters by turning the Skymaster left and right. At 2,000 feet, the right aileron was shot off and the plane began turning right on its own initiative. The captain then countered the increasing turn by shutting down the Nos. 1 and 2 engines and fully opening No. 3. Approximately 2 minutes after the initial attack and unable to carry on a controlled levelled flight, Blown decided to carry out a ditching of his Skymaster in rough open seas that included 15 foot waves and a 25 knots wind.

The starboard wing tip was the first to make impact with the water, severing the right wing between the No. 3 and 4 engines.^[12] The impact caused the tail to break off and float off 50 yards from the main wreckage. The main fuselage now floated at an angle of 45 degrees with the rear open fuselage pointing towards the sky.^[10]

After the plane ditched into the ocean, the attacking fighters ceased firing at the Skymaster around about 1,000 feet before making a turn around the wreckage and headed towards Sanya. While nine passengers and crew were killed by bullets and the subsequent ditching, nine others survived and escaped the sinking plane. Blown and his co-pilot escaped through a broken starboard^[12] sliding window which had water coming in fast.

With all survivors floating on the water with no life vests on, co-pilot Carlton suddenly noticed that a Mrs Thorburn was hanging on to a raft still in its case. Fearing the bright yellow rubber raft might attract the attention of PLAAF fighters, it took Carlton twenty minutes to finally inflate the rubber dinghy and lift all nine passengers in. Once all were on the dinghy, concern remained that the attacking planes might return; some of the dazed, injured passengers, with their clothes in shreds, hid under a plastic sunshade covering the edges of the dinghy. Although Blown and passenger Peter Thacher kept watch, the attacking planes never returned.^{[7][9][10][11][13]}

Rescue efforts

An Air Vietnam plane en route to Hong Kong from Hanoi and which had altered its course as a result of the calls, spotted the sinking plane and a dinghy one and a half miles from the Hainan coast. It circled for 40 minutes before heading for Hong Kong. Thanks to those calls, the RAF in Hong Kong immediately redirected a Saigon-bound Vickers Valetta military transport and further dispatched a Short Sunderland flying boat, an Avro York military transport, as well as two de Havilland Hornet fighters from the 80 Squadron,^[14] from RAF Kai Tak to the reported position of the C-54. A fully armed French PB4Y-2 Privateer after intercepting the emergency radio call, also took off from Tourane (Da Nang), French Indochina (now Vietnam).

Meanwhile, the civilian-operated Manila rescue control centre in the Philippines, on picking up the SOS call from Wong, alerted the 31st Air Rescue Squadron of the USAF at the Clark Air Force Base. Captain Jack T. Woodyard, on first alert duty that day, about to depart on a routine training mission in his Grumman SA-16 Albatross, 51-009,^[15] immediately took off. A second Albatross followed Woodyard 35 minutes later.

The Hornets were the first to arrive on the scene, followed by the Valetta, Sunderland, York and the Privateer. While the Hornets carried out a thorough search of the area for survivors, the French Privateer, piloted by an apparent Englishman with a Cockney accent, informed the Albatross which was 50 miles away, that "We have spotted the dinghy with survivors; looks like two of them from here. The British and American planes were not able to communicate with each other as they were on different radio frequencies.

Captain Blown, on seeing the Sunderland arrive, tossed a packet of green sea dye overboard in an effort to assist rescue personnel. The Sunderland acknowledged this by setting off a smoke flare. Unable to land in atrocious conditions, the amphibious Sunderland circled helplessly for 2 hours before Woodyard's Albatross finally arrived and circled for an hour before landing on the calmer side of Ta-Chow Island, where it taxied towards the dinghy in incredibly rough water before pulling all survivors on board and taking off for Hong Kong escorted by the Sunderland. A.A.P. and Reuters reported at the time that 3 survivors were picked up by the RAF Sunderland.^[16]

The last passenger to be hoisted on board was a badly injured Miss Rita Cheung, who had broken her left leg in 2 places and had suffered a deep gash on her forehead. She died aboard the rescue aircraft, 10 minutes before the plane reached Kai Tak.

Radio operator Stephen Wong was also killed. It is believed his head was impaled on a drift meter during the ditching of the Cathay Pacific airliner.^{[7][9][10][11][13]}

There were several hypotheses for the attack, which included:

- VR-HEU was carrying a Chinese Nationalist ambassador;^[12]

- The United States Ambassador to Thailand, "Wild Bill" Donovan, former head of the OSS (the forerunner of CIA) was to have travelled on a Civil Air Transport plane that same week.^[13]

The official line from Peking, however, was that the Cathay Pacific airliner was mistaken as a Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) plane on a mission to raid a military base at Port Yulin on Hainan Island.^[17]

On 26 July 1954, during the survivor search operation, two Douglas Skyraiders from the aircraft carriers USS Philippine Sea and Hornet shot down two Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force La-9s off the coast of Hainan Island. It is not known whether they were the same La-9s that shot down VR-HEU.^[18]

Aftermath

The shooting down of VR-HEU raised tension between the People's Republic of China and Britain and the US. The British Foreign Office, through its Chargé d'affaires in Peking, Mr Humphrey Trevelyan delivered Britain's protest to Communist China two days later. The US Secretary of State, Mr John Foster Dulles issued a sharp statement condemning the attack, saying the United States took the gravest view of the act of further barbarity and that the Chinese Communist regime must be held responsible.^[10]

On the political front, the shooting down probably harmed the PRC's chances of admission into the United Nations. Republican Senator H. Alexander Smith interrupted a marathon debate over atomic legislation to read Mr Dulles' statement before calling the situation "critical". Republican Representative Walter Judd, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, expressed the view that the incident was another reason why Communist China must not be admitted to the United Nations.^[10]

The People's Republic of China admitted responsibility three days later by apologising and making compensations to Cathay Pacific and the victims.^{[2][17]}

The two La-11 pilots were rumored to have been executed by the PR Chinese government.^[17]

Blown, who had been in command of VR-HEU at the time it was shot down, was hailed as a hero. He continued flying for Cathay Pacific for a further three to four years after the incident, and then retired to New South Wales, Australia, where he died in a nursing home in September 2009, aged 96. Cathay Pacific Director Flight Operations, Nick Rhodes, has commented on the bravery shown by Captain Blown on that day, and commended him for the dedication he had shown to ensuring the survival of his passengers.



References

1. ^ [a b c d e f](#) The passengers and crew of Silver Wings - 23 July 1954 - and the crew of the rescuing US aircraft - The Life & Times of James Harper
2. ^ [a b c](#) Hong Kong - Plane Survivors - Movietone News
3. ^ http://www.joebaugher.com/usaf_serials/1942_4.html
4. ^ [a b c](#) 42-72205 - Douglas C-54A-10-DC - - USAAF - Taxiway Alpha
5. ^ Some sources indicate the total as 18 but according to this site [\[1\]](#), it appears to be 19; the discrepancy requires further reconciliation.
6. ^ Accident details - VR-HEU - Plane Crash Info
7. ^ [a b c d](#) VR-HEU Account by passenger: Valerie Parish - Major Commercial Airline Disasters
8. ^ VR-HEU - The Life & Times of James Harper
9. ^ [a b c](#) Airliner Disaster, *South China Morning Post*, 24 July 1954
10. ^ [a b c d e f g](#) C.P.A. Airliner Outrage, - *South China Morning Post*, 26 July 1954
11. ^ [a b c](#) Incident On the China Coast by Peter Thacher, *The Reader's Digest*, 19 November 1954
12. ^ [a b c](#) [\[2\]](#) Blown's official report to the British Foreign Office, 1954
13. ^ [a b c](#) We Rescued the Victims of Red China's Murder Planes By Capt. Jack T. Woodyard, USAF, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 23 October 1954
14. ^ No 76 - 80 Squadron Histories Air of Authority - A History of RAF Organisation
15. ^ <http://www.edcoatescollection.com/ac5/ROW%20Asia/VR-HEU.html>
16. ^ Plane Down In Ocean: Eight Saved - The Sydney Morning Herald, 24 July 1954 c/o Trove, National Library of Australia.
17. ^ [a b c](#) Red China Apologises For Attack On Plane - Reuters, France Presse, 26 July 1954.
18. ^ " Air Clash off Hainan." *South China Morning Post*, 27 July 1954.
19. ^ ASN Aircraft accident Douglas C-54A-10-DC VR-HEU Hainan Island - Aviation Safety Network
20. ^ [a b c](#) Eastwood and Roach 1991, page 122

***The Passengers & Crew of Cathay Pacific Airways VR-HEU 'Silver Wings'
&
The Crew of the SA-16 Albatross - 31st Air Rescue Squadron***

23rd July, 1954

***Passenger List
(those in yellow were lost July 23, 1954)***

- 1. Leonard L. Parish - Age 34, At one time flew for China National Aviation Corporation and was a partner in the Import Export Corporation in Bandung, Java where he resided. The Parish family had lived in Bandung since 1950. This veteran pilot knew what was happening in those moments and assisted the crew to prepare the passengers, including his family, for the likely outcome. He was not a paralyzed observer that night.***
- 2. Frances Parish - Wife of Leonard Parish, age 33***
- 3. Lawrence "Larry" Parish - Age 4***
- 4. Phillip Parish - Age 2***
- 5. Valerie Parish - Age 6***
- 6. Mr. Peter S. Thacher - One time Aide to General George Marshall (author of the Marshall Plan), an American civilian employed with the Army Department in Tokyo***
- 7. Mrs. P.M. Thorburn - Wife of a Hong Kong bank official***
- 8. Mrs. H.M. Finley - Wife of the British Consul at Medan, Sumatra***
- 9. Mr. Paul Yong Nam-ying - Age 18, Student, Hong Kong University. He wanted to be a doctor.***
- 10. Mr. Lui Luen-fong - A Fukiense businessman***
- 11. Miss Rita Teresa Diana Cheung - Age 28. Died 10 minutes before the Rescue Plane reached Kai Tak Airport, Hong Kong. She was buried on July 25, 1954, at the Catholic Cemetery, Happy Valley, Hong Kong. Rita was the only one of those lost to receive burial.***
- 12. Mr. Tie Tian - chuang***

13. Mr. G.H. Cattanach - A C.P.A engineer, who was traveling as a passenger for a technical discussion with the Director of Civil Aviation in Hong Kong, bravely tried to help the passengers aboard the stricken plane.

Cathay Pacific Crew

1. Captain Philip P. Blown - Pilot

2. Cedrick W. Carlton - Co-pilot

3. Stephen Wong - Chief Radio Operator - He steadily continued to call the mayday as the airliner went down. This man stayed his post and performed his duty.

4. Rose Chen - Stewardess

5. Iris E. Stobart - Chief Stewardess - Both Rose & Iris saw to the needs of their passengers while in defenseless assault for as long as they could.

6. Esther Law - Stewardess

***United States SA-16 Albatross Air Rescue Crew - Clark AF Base, Philippines
Their bravery, skill, and compassion were greatly appreciated***

1. Captain Jack T. Woodward - Pilot, age 34

2. Captain Tommy R. Arnold Jr. - Co-pilot, age 31

3. Lawrence Rodriguez - Radio operator, age 20

4. Albert F. Smith - Navigator, age 22

23Jul54 Clark HU-16 SAR

Cathay Pacific VR-HEU

Cathay Pacific VR-HEU, a four-engined propeller-driven Douglas Douglas C-54 Skymaster airliner operated by Cathay Pacific Airways, en route from Bangkok to Hong Kong on 23 July 1954, was shot down by Chinese Communist Lavochkin La-7 fighters off the coast of Hainan Island, killing 10 on board.

A couple of the names mentioned rung a bell. Captain Jack Woodyard was a SA-16 pilot in the 31stARS at Clark, when I was there and when he landed the 'Dumbo' on a rough sea near the Chinese held island of Hainan, where the commies had shot down a british airliner on its way to Hongkong. Jack and the crew picked up 21 injured survivors and had to taxi a long way, due to heavy sea, preventing a lift off, even with JATO bottles.

All along, the air was full of US fighter planes, hoping to nail some of the coward commie planes, but all were gone back to the island. He eventually got the bird airborne and landed at the Koloon (spelling?) airport across the the bay from Hongkong. That was in 1954 and he still was a captain.

The Chuck Laine is also mentioned. He was my NCOIC at Selfridge in 1955 with the 49thARS, where also Bill Vargas was assigned, when I got there from the Far East in August 1954. The others mentioned I never met.

ChBeers! Udo Fischer



Photo provided by Udo Fischer



Captain Jack T. Woodyard, USAF, carries 6 year old Valerie Parish from his SA-16 Albatross aircraft after the rescue was complete.

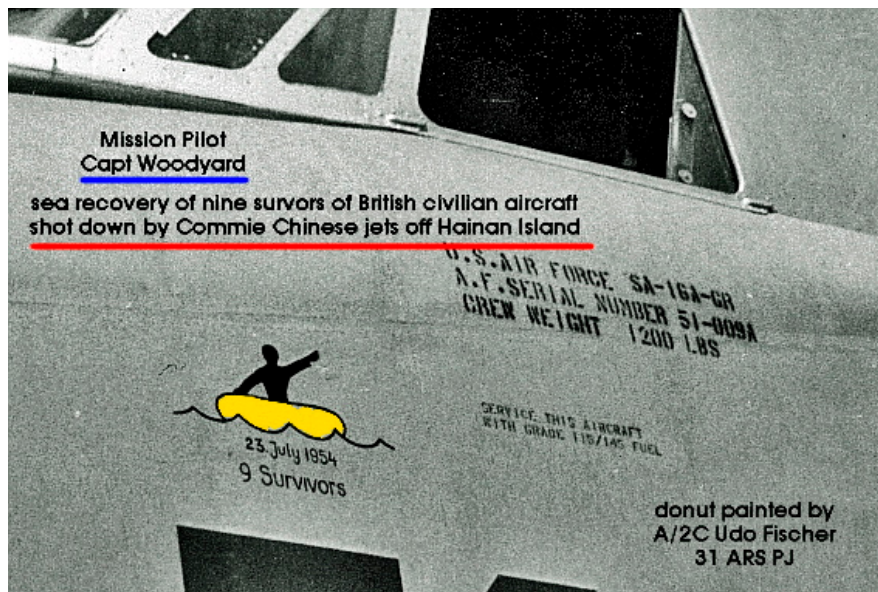
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Captain Woodyard to the Rescue

A few hours later, also in response to the distress call, two Grumman SA-16 Albatross of the USAF's 31st Air Rescue Squadron arrived. The planes had flown a long way, coming from Clark AFB in the Philippines. On the lead plane, Captain Jack Woodyard, USAF, orbited to assess the situation. Where others were unwilling to attempt the rescue in the heavy seas, Woodyard felt that he had to make the attempt. The seas were more than challenging — in fact, he knew there would be no doubt of a crash if he attempted to land in the heavy seas. Furthermore, the ten passengers on the raft would put his aircraft severely overweight if he were to try to take off again after the rescue. Undaunted, Captain Woodyard started to formulate a plan.

Looking up from the raft, Captain Blown recognized the USAF SA-16 Albatross. He knew that the Americans would try a landing even while the others held off. He also knew that some of his passengers were in dire need of medical attention, some with serious shrapnel wounds. With renewed hope, he yelled out, "The Yanks are coming! The Yanks are coming!"

Photo provided by Udo Fischer



23Jul54 save graphic painted on HU-16 by A/2C Udo Fischer
Photo provided by Udo Fischer

Cathay Pacific VR-HEU

Occurrence summary

Date	23 July 1954
Type	Attacked by PLAAF La-7s, crashed into the sea
Site	off the coast of Hainan Island, People's Republic of China
Passengers	13
Crew	6
Fatalities	10
Survivors	9
Aircraft type	C-54 Skymaster
Aircraft name	<i>Avro Anson 1 "Silver Wings"</i>
Operator	Cathay Pacific Airways
Tail number	VR-HEU
Flight origin	Bangkok
Destination	Hong Kong

VR-HEU was a four-engined propeller-driven Douglas C-54 Skymaster airliner, the military version of the Douglas DC-4, operated by the Cathay Pacific Airways from August 1949 to July 1954. While en route from Bangkok to Hong Kong on 23 July 1954, the plane was shot down by fighter planes of the People's Republic of China off the coast of Hainan Island, killing 10 on board.

VR-HEU was a Douglas C-54A manufactured by the Douglas Aircraft Company. It was delivered to the USAAF on 16 May 1944, where it served for less than two years. It was bought on 19 February 1946 by KLM and first operated by KLM West Indies before returning to KLM main line in February 1948. It was sold to Cathay Pacific in August 1949.

There were a total of 19 people on board VR-HEU. They consisted of three flight crew — headed by the British captain, Phil Blown — three female cabin crew and 13 passengers. In all, one flight crew member, two cabin crew members and seven passengers were killed in the attack and subsequent crash of the airliner.

Flight and attack

After being delayed in Bangkok for an hour because of mechanical problems on its no. 2 engine, VR-HEU finally took off from Bangkok at 2119 GMT on 22 July, bound for Hong Kong. A previous flight had taken the plane from Singapore. For the next 4 hours and 25 minutes the routine flight proceeded as planned.

At 2340 GMT, cruising at 9,000 ft and roughly 10 miles east of the international air corridor line off Hainan Island and only 31 minutes from Hong Kong, two PLAAF fighters, believed to be propeller-driven Lavochkin La-7s, appeared behind VR-HEU, one on its starboard side at a range of about 150 yards back and 300 yards above and the other on its port side. At approximately about 2344 GMT, the fighters opened fire and the no. 1 and 4 engines were hit and caught fire. The no. 4 engine's auxiliary and main fuel tank were also ablaze.

While Blown took evasive actions to avoid further damage, co-pilot Cedric Carlton issued blankets to passengers instructing them to place them on the back of their seats for protection against the bullets. Radio operator Stephen Wong made a first distress call at 0845 HKT (2345 GMT). "Kai Tak Tower, Cathay XXX, Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! No. 1 port engine on fire, losing altitude, requesting all possible assistance." Wong made no less than 10 mayday calls before VR-HEU ditched. Cathay Pacific engineer G. H. Cattanach, travelling as a passenger, tried to make the passengers comfortable when it became known that the plane was going to ditch.

VR-HEU began losing altitude and at 5,000 ft, its rudder control was shot off. Travelling at 350 miles per hour, Captain Blown tried his utmost to evade incendiary bullets coming from the fighters by turning the Skymaster left and right. At 2,000 feet, the right aileron was shot off and the plane began turning right on its own initiative. The captain then countered the increasing turn by shutting down the Nos. 1 and 2 engines and fully opening No. 3. Approximately 2 minutes after the initial attack and unable to carry on a controlled levelled flight, the Cathay Pacific captain decided to carry out a ditching of his Skymaster in rough open seas that included 15 foot waves and a 25 knots wind.

The starboard wing tip was the first to make impact with the water, severing the right wing between the No. 3 and 4 engines. The impact caused the tail to break off and float off 50 yards from the main wreckage. The main fuselage now floated at an angle of 45 degrees with the rear open fuselage pointing towards the sky.

After the plane ditched into the ocean, the attacking fighters ceased firing at the Skymaster around about 1,000 feet before making a turn around the wreckage and headed towards Sanya. While nine passengers and crew were killed by bullets and the subsequent ditching, nine others survived and escaped the sinking plane. Blown and his co-pilot escaped through a broken starboard sliding window which had water coming in fast.

With all survivors floating on the water with no life vests on, co-pilot Carlton suddenly noticed that Mrs Thorburn was hanging on to a raft still in its case. Fearing the bright yellow rubber raft might attract the attention of PLAAF fighters, it took Carlton twenty minutes to finally inflate the

rubber dinghy and lift all nine passengers in. Once on the dinghy and concerned about attacking planes returning, some of the dazed, injured passengers, with their clothes in shreds, hid under a plastic sunshade covering the edges of the dinghy. Although Captain Blown and passenger Peter Thacher kept watch, the attacking planes never returned.

Rescue efforts



US Air Force SA-16 rescuing survivors

An Air Vietnam plane en route to Hong Kong from Hanoi and which had altered its course as a result of the calls, spotted the sinking plane and a dinghy one and a half miles from the Hainan coast. It circled for 40 minutes before heading for Hong Kong. Thanks to those calls, the RAF in Hong Kong immediately redirected a Saigon-bound Vickers Valetta military transport and further dispatched a Short Sunderland flying boat, an Avro York military transport, as well as two de Havilland Hornet fighters from the 80 Squadron, from RAF Kai Tak to the reported position of the C-54. A fully armed French Privateer after intercepting the emergency radio call, also took off from Tourane (Da Nang), French Indochina (now Vietnam).

Meanwhile, the civilian-operated Manila rescue control centre in the Philippines, on picking up the SOS call from Wong, alerted the 31st Air Rescue Squadron of the USAF at the Clark Air Force Base. Captain Jack T. Woodyard, on first alert duty that day, about to depart on a routine training mission in his Grumman Albatross SA-16, immediately took off. A second Albatross followed Woodyard 35 minutes later.

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The last passenger to be lifted on board was a badly injured Miss Rita Cheung, who had broken her left leg in 2 places and had suffered a deep gash on her forehead. She died aboard the rescue aircraft, 10 minutes before the plane reached Kai Tak.

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Aftermath

The shooting down of VR-HEU raised tension between the People's Republic of China and Britain and the US. The British Foreign Office, through its Chargé d'affaires in Peking, Mr Humphrey Trevelyan delivered Britain's protest to Communist China two days later. The US Secretary of State, Mr John Foster Dulles issued a sharp statement condemning the attack, saying the United States took the gravest view of the act of further barbarity and that the Chinese Communist regime must be held responsible.

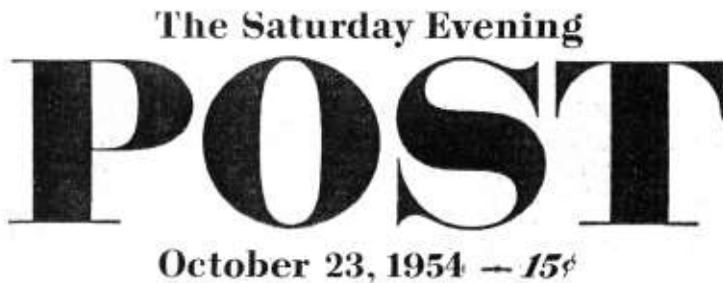
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On 23 July 1954, PRC aircraft shot down a Cathay Pacific (U.K.) airliner, killing 10 of 18 people aboard (including 6 Americans). USN aircraft from the carriers *Philippine Sea* and *Hornet* provided air cover to the rescue operations. On 26 July, three aircraft from *Philippine Sea* shot down two PRC fighters that had fired upon them.



Two Red Chinese fighter pilots suddenly attacked an unarmed British airliner, killed nine innocent persons, including two American children. The surviving passengers were saved from under the guns of the Communists by a daring feat of airmanship. This is the rescue pilot's own story:

We Rescued the Victims of Red China's Murder Planes

By CAPT. JACK T. WOODYARD, USAF

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Thompson Woodyard is six feet, four inches tall and weighs 215 pounds. He was born in Roanoke, Virginia, thirty-four years ago, but has called Washington, D.C., home since he was nine. After finishing high school he worked as a soda jerk and movie-theater treasurer and learned to fly small planes. In 1941 his District of Columbia National Guard unit was called up and he has been wearing Uncle Sam's uniforms ever since. He became a reserve officer and a military pilot in 1943 and during his 7000 hours as a plane jockey has qualified to fly everything from Aeroncas to B-29's. When he was stationed in Alaska five years ago he got into air-rescue work and he has made 2300 landings on the water. With his wife, Norma, and three children, he is now stationed at Clark Air Force Base, sixty miles north of Manila. **Captain Woodyard won the Distinguished Flying Cross for the mission described in this article.**

The Editors.

CLARK AIR FORCE BASE
PHILIPPINE ISLANDS.

LAST July twenty-third some Chinese communist aviators without mercy shot down a civilian airliner in the South China Sea, killing nine persons outright. This is the story of how my crew and I managed to rescue the other nine, one of whom died in our plane en route to the hospital.



Historic Wings

THE ONLINE
MAGAZINE OF
AVIATORS, PILOTS
AND ADVENTURERS
SINCE 1997

Captain Woodyard to the Rescue

A few hours later, also in response to the distress call, two Grumman SA-16 Albatross of the USAF's 31st Air Rescue Squadron arrived. The planes had flown a long way, coming from Clark AFB in the Philippines. On the lead plane, Captain Jack Woodyard, USAF, orbited to assess the situation. Where others were unwilling to attempt the rescue in the heavy seas, Woodyard felt that he had to make the attempt. The seas were more than challenging — in fact, he knew there would be no doubt of a crash if he attempted to land in the heavy seas. Furthermore, the ten passengers on the raft would put his aircraft severely overweight if he were to try to take off again after the rescue. Undaunted, Captain Woodyard started to formulate a plan.

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Historic Win

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U.S. AIR



Captain Jack T. Woodyard, USAF, carries 6 year old Valerie Parish from his SA-16 Albatross aircraft after the rescue was complete.

In my outfit - the 31st Air Rescue Squadron - two plane crews share the "alert" duty. The "first alert" crew sleeps and eats on the flight line, ready for immediate call at any hour; the "second alert" gang can go to their homes here on the Clark Air Force Base, but must be on half-hour call. During their duty week - about one week out of three - one of the alert crews alternates with the other, twenty-four hours on first alert, then twenty-four hours on second alert. In this way the duty is divided among the crews flying our six Grumman Albatross amphibian planes - SA-16's, we call them.

On the hot, humid morning of July twenty-third we - three officers, three enlisted men - happened to be on first alert. We were up early, planning some routine flying, during which we would stay within easy radio range of the base in case they assigned us a mission. This flight was intended to give my copilot, Captain Arnold, some check-out experience in the twin-engined Albatross. The Albatross is a fine plane, as you will see, but often there is some trickiness involved in landing on the waves in a 30,000 pound aircraft, and perhaps a bit more in taking off again from those same waves. As I found out several years ago, it's very different from flying land planes. It takes practice.

We have our own area here at Clark AFB and our own rescue control center in a small building alongside the taxiway. At 8:35, as we were warming up the engines and talking to the tower, Capt. Don Shaw came running out of the control center. He said, **"They want the pilot and navigator at the control center right away. Looks like we have a mission for you!"**

This was the sort of day when everything goes just right, like the pieces fitting into a jigsaw puzzle. As soon as I got to the control center with Capt. Albert Smith, the navigator, I determined that we might need more fuel. Normally we carry 975 gallons - 675 in the main tank and 150 in each drop tank - enough for more than eight hours flying. But I immediately called maintenance and said, **"Better give us three hundred more"** - which meant topping off the two drop tanks to their capacity. Maintenance got on the stick and brought the fuel truck over pronto. They put two men on each hose and filled the two drops simultaneously under Arnold's supervision. Arnold completed the preflight run up.

In the control center Smith and I were given a brief message relayed from the civilian-operated Manila rescue control center, which had picked up an SOS from a DC-4 passenger plane belonging to Cathay Pacific, a British air line which flies between Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong. This plane, with eighteen people on board, had an engine on fire at latitude 18°06' and longitude 110°06', was traveling at a true air speed of 207 m.p.h. at 9000 feet and was losing altitude fast. That was all.

The co-ordinates placed the plane in distress about twenty miles southeast of Hainan, a big, 13,000-square-mile island off the China coast. This was more than 700 nautical miles and more than four hours' flying time across the South China Sea from the Philippines. It was logical to assume that other planes would be searching for the DC-4 also-Hong Kong is only about two hours north of the co-ordinates and Tourane, Indochina, is only a little over one hour. But in this business everybody pitches in to do what he can to save lives.

We were airborne at 8:55, only twenty minutes after the SOS was received at our Clark control center. At first we headed for Hong Kong, assuming that the Cathay Pacific pilot had continued on course in that direction. I knew that his was an emergency case, but the loss of one engine in a DC-4 is not so bad as most people imagine-he might make it all the way to Hong Kong. Of course, the pilot could set it down on one of the nearby Hainan airfields, but that would mean suffering the consequences of communist imprisonment.

One thing we didn't want to do was get behind the plane in distress. If we did we'd be in the position of the dog 100 yards from the rabbit's hole, trying to catch the rabbit which was only 100 feet from the hole. No chance of contact until too late. I had Captain Smith figure how long a DC-4 on three engines would take to get from Point X to Hong Kong; his figures showed that even at the slowest speed the DC-4 would get there before us.

Meantime, Capt. Dale Baker, on second alert at Clark AFB, took off in his Albatross thirty-five minutes after we had left. He headed for the last reported position. Our plan was for him to work north from there while I would work south from Hong Kong.



The Philippine-based rescue plane picked up the survivors about 4 mi. east of Red-held Hainan.

When we were about forty minutes out of Clark I asked my radio operator, A/3c Lawrence Rodriguez, to contact Hong Kong for interpretation of the original distress signal. Nothing more had been heard from the Cathay Pacific plane. Obviously, something was seriously wrong or there would have been some news. I changed course to head toward a point midway between Point X and Hong Kong. A little while later we radioed Hong Kong again. Still they could tell us nothing except that search aircraft had been dispatched from Hong Kong. Now I had Smith plot a course which would bring us only fifty miles north of Point X - I estimated that the pilot would require fifty miles to nurse the plane down from 9000 feet and ditch it.

We contacted Captain Baker's Albatross to tell him of our change in plan. He told us he had just intercepted a message on 500 kilocycles - the international distress frequency - saying that survivors had been sighted on a raft at position 18°36' and 110°28'. The raft had been spotted by one of the Hong Kong planes, a British Short Sunderland flying boat. We expected that the raft would be taken care of by the big boat, but we figured we could help out in the search for other scattered survivors.

A third course alteration of only four degrees took us directly toward that position. We pushed our Albatross up to 165 knots indicated, which at our altitude means about 210 m.p.h. actual speed. The drop tanks began to drag. We steamed on toward the new position, which was about seventy miles northeast of the original Point X. The pilot had covered fifty miles plus twenty since he sent out his lone distress signal. It took Navigator Smith only a minute to ascertain that the raft's position was within the twelve-mile zone which the communists had designated as their international boundary. About an hour from our destination Hong Kong called to say that no military aircraft were to approach the scene of the incident-all were ordered to remain well clear of Hainan Island. I instructed the radio operator merely to acknowledge the message.

The communists had an arrogant answer... any other "war planes" would be "fired upon without warning if they approached land."

What happened, I learned later from the July twenty-eighth New York Times, was this: The Hong Kong Civil Aviation Department radioed to White Cloud Airfield at Canton, reporting that there had been an accident and giving details and markings of the search planes taking off from Hong Kong. The communists had an arrogant answer; they said the Sunderland flying boat could remain, but any other "war planes" would be **"fired upon without warning if they approached**

land." This message, Mr. Eden hotly told Parliament later, went against "all international custom and behavior."

At 12:30 P.M. - I noted the time later in the controller's log at Clark AFB - our own people had advised our Albatrosses to stay out of the twelve mile zone. By the time we received that message we were already within the zone and on the water.

About seventy-five miles from the raft's given position we established radio contact with a French Privateer-a modified version of the old B-24-which had flown up from Tourane, Indochina, to help by dropping some rescue gear, since it was unable to land on water. When we got within fifty miles and descended to 1500 feet, the Frenchman came on again - he spoke English with a cockney accent - with the news we wanted to hear, "**We have spotted the dinghy with survivors; looks like two of them from here.**"

I asked the Frenchman where the other planes were - the Sunderland, the York and the Cathay PBV that had been sent from Hong Kong. He said they were flying search patterns, but he hadn't been able to raise them on his radio; what happened was that he was using 121.5 megacycles while the British planes were on 119.7, a frequency we were also having trouble tuning in.

We asked the Frenchman for a UHF tone to steer by. This he gave us, and we made a beeline for him. Fifteen miles out we asked him to guide us to the raft and to drop a drift signal as a marker. After that, from about four miles out, we spotted the raft through the broken clouds - a round yellow raft or, as the British will have it, a "dinghy" - bobbing up and down with the swells, about four miles from Hainan Island and about two and one half miles south of a small island with high cliffs named Tachou Tao. In any case, well within the twelve-mile limit.

In the raft we could see two figures. Neither of them waved or even moved. Why hadn't the Sunderland gone in to pick up the survivors? I realized quite well when I got down low and had a good look at the sea. The swells were eight to ten feet high, which, the Sunderland pilot told me later in Hong Kong, would have torn his heavy boat to pieces.

The Albatross is no toy - it is sixty-five feet long and has a wing span of eighty-five feet. But it has one great advantage - it has reversible props which can stop, in an incredibly short distance from where it first hit the water. "**You just pretend it's a helicopter, stall it on top of a wave, and then you've got a seagoing yacht,**" the boys say. That's not quite correct, but almost.

The landing would be a rough one, I knew. But I had put the Albatross down in rougher seas, 80 I prepared to go in and pick up the survivors. I circled the raft, dropped a smoke signal, told the other planes my intentions and started looking for a place to land.

During the four-hour flight I hadn't thought of using the small island, Tachou Tao, as a shelter, because I hadn't imagined the raft so close in. But once I saw it, I knew the swells would be smoother inshore. The wind was out of the south, about fifteen knots. So I flew between the high humps of the island, skimming over the fishing village on the flats, and took a look at the north side; there I estimated that the swells were only five or six feet high. I also became curious about the natives' lack of interest, even though I had heard it is the Chinese nature to watch a

man drown without throwing him a rope. Despite rumors to the contrary, I believe the survivors when they say the Chinese paid no attention to the incident during the four or five hours the raft bobbed offshore.

At this point I shall try to describe what the sea was like. From east to west, a 200-foot ground swell was running-that is, a swell with crests about 200 feet apart. But there was another pattern crisscrossing it almost at right angles, and this One had crests spaced only fifty feet apart, we estimated. But what we needed to know almost exactly was how much space there was between the crests.

First we threw out smoke markers; then we flew parallel to the crests to check their bearings. We used a stop watch to time the crests as they passed the markers. Divide the number of swells into the time elapsed to get the period. The period squared, times five, gives the distance between the crests in feet. 'If, for example, you count five crests in thirty seconds, the period is six, which, when squared, becomes thirty-six. Multiply thirty-six by five and you get 180 feet between crests. Above all, it's essential to heed the old flight-line verse

*Avoid like hell
The face of a swell*

- because a fifteen-ton plane smacking head on into a swell might as well fly into a brick wall.

So I decided to land toward the island, parallel to the fifty-foot system. This way, though it meant landing crosswind, I would skim fewer crests - only one every 200 feet. There were some rocks near the island, so we couldn't go in too close and take full advantage of the shelter, but it was a lot better than the open sea.

I started dragging the aircraft into the island from about two miles offshore. I let it descend gradually, feeling my way down until my keel barely touched the ground swell, to make sure my eyes weren't playing me any tricks. I let the tail touch, kissing off two crests, but retaining control and air speed. I stalled her on the third crest of the ground swell and applied full reverse. In that way I slowed the aircraft to almost nothing by the time the next crest was encountered 200 feet away. Captain Arnold asked, "**What the devil are you doing here when the raft is way out there?**"

It had been, after all, only a normal, open-sea, rough-type landing. The reversible props had done the trick. As soon as we could turn ninety degrees we were off toward the raft, climbing the heavy water we found outside the shelter of the little island.

Because the Albatross sets low in the water, we couldn't see more than a few hundred feet; the wind seemed to have kicked up a bit, too, because we noticed the smoke from the signals was lying nearly flat on the surface. I asked my Frenchman in the Privateer to check my course toward the raft, and he told me to bear a little more to starboard; The Sunderland came over also and asked if he could be of help. I asked him to stand by; thus far everything was under control.

About halfway between the landing point and the raft Captain Baker flew over. I told him there didn't seem to be any damage to the aircraft. He said, "**Roger, we'll cover you,**" He made some passes for photo coverage - our own plane's camera wasn't operating properly and we didn't get a picture out of the whole episode.

Amazingly enough, the sea seemed to get smoother as we ended our two-and-one-half-mile taxi jaunt and approached the raft-another piece of the jigsaw meticulously fitting into place. But a few minutes later the crew was having a hard time keeping their feet as we approached the raft. Smooth or rough, the South China Sea is no. lake. We circled the raft once to check the condition of the survivors. Could they lend a hand with a line after we threw One to them? They signaled that they could. My engineer, Sgt. Douglas Blair, stood, line in hand, in the bow hatch, about five feet forward of my pilot's seat, outside the cabin.

It appeared that we would have to make a two-engine approach, taxi past the raft and back up to it-these reversible props make it possible to taxi backward. But again the sea smoothed out for us. So I used only the starboard engine, cut the port engine and stopped its props so that the blades were split, permitting the raft to float under the prop without conking one of the survivors. Captain Smith stayed at his navigator's table to handle communications between bow and stem, but Arnold and Rodriguez went aft to help the medical technician, A/2c Cecil Smith.



U.S. AIR FORCE

Woodyard's plane taxis along the turbulent South China Sea toward the survivors' raft. "It was a miracle," says Woodyard, "that nine survived."

The plane nestled alongside the raft - one of the best approaches I've ever made on any kind of water. The crew could practically hand the line to the man standing in the raft, who turned out to be Capt. Philip Blown, the pilot of the downed DC-4. He folded back the tarpaulin which had covered the raft.

"Two, three, four! No, my God, it's loaded!" I exclaimed, according to what the crew said later. Up to now, nobody had been certain there were more than two people in the raft; the Sunderland had once estimated three. We had some trouble when the pitching of the aircraft started sawing the lines in two, but the passengers were brought on board in good order, beginning with a little six-year-old girl, Valerie Parrish, of Iowa Park, Texas, whose mother also

survived, but not her two baby brothers or her father, who had been the Java representative of an American aviation-export company.

The little girl was shivering, so Rodriguez put his flight jacket around her. **"It was worth my whole career to pull that little girl out of the raft,"** Arnold said later in speaking of the rescue.

A sad sight these passengers of mine were. The terrific impact of their 160 m.p.h. crash landing had for the most part torn their clothes off them. Several had deep gashes in their arms and legs, although the salt water had stopped the bleeding. One Chinese girl who had boarded the plane at Bangkok, Rita Ong, had a deep wound in her forehead and a leg horribly mangled. She also was obviously suffering from internal injuries. Mrs. John Thorburn, redheaded wife of an official of the Chartered Bank in Hong Kong, had an ear which appeared nearly severed.

Captain Blown, the last man off the raft, was a sight when he came forward to report to me. For this Australian I will say this: he was a cool one; he maintained as much dignity as any man could who was badly cut and bruised, covered with orange-colored dye marker, and dressed only in his shorts.

"We were shot down," he said quietly. **"Watch out for yourself. There may be other fighters in the area."**

This was a shocker. Remember that nobody - at least nobody in the noncommunist world - had any idea up to this time that the Cathay Pacific plane had experienced anything except engine trouble. If the communist pilots had had their way, the outside world would never have known, and all the passengers would have carried their secret to their salt-water grave.

Immediately I called Captain Baker in the Albatross overhead and asked him to switch to the rescue frequency to prevent the communists' hearing what I was going to say. Then I communicated Blown's revelation and asked him to caution the other aircraft.

Obviously, we had better get out of this area quick as a flash. If the communists would shoot down a civilian air liner, what wouldn't they do to a United States Air Force plane tossing helplessly on the open sea?

Captain Blown said he was certain there were no other survivors than the nine we had picked up. Nevertheless, we took one last look through the floating debris. We found nothing except a litter of seat cushions, splintered wood of life jacket cases and some anti-exposure suits. The most lifelike object we encountered was a child's rag doll, about fifteen inches long, floating face down, swirling dumbly in the restless sea.

As we taxied back toward our little island, which, though it was enemy territory, offered us shelter for our urgently desired take-off, I told the crew to hang the JATO bottles on the hatches aft. JATO - it means jet-assisted take-off - gives a plane the boost needed in rough water. We might have made it without JATO, though we were now more than 1000 pounds overloaded, but I doubt it. If I couldn't have taken off I'd have taxied eastward until a surface vessel picked us up.

The Navy at Sangley Point had ascertained that there was a ship within six hours' steaming of our position.

Here occurred the only funny incident of this fateful day, though it didn't amuse us at the time. These JATO bottles weigh 190 pounds each, and one of them-the starboard bottle-had to be lifted head-high. Arnold Rodriguez and Airman Smith struggled mightily trying to put it in place, but the canvas cover on the snap latch wouldn't unzip. Arnold came forward to tell me that they couldn't get the blankety-blank thing secured.

If the communists would shoot down a civilian air liner, what wouldn't they do to a United States Air Force plane tossing helplessly on the open sea?

At that moment we received a blood chilling radio report from one of the planes topside, **"Unidentified fighters approaching!"**

Arnold dashed aft; the next time I looked back the pesky bottle was fastened all right and they were swinging the hatch closed, ready for take-off. I believe Arnold suddenly found himself with the strength of ten, and did it all by himself.

The "unidentified". planes turned out to be Skyraiders off a United States Navy carrier-the same type of planes which three days later shot down two communist fighters which attacked them, also near Hainan. You can imagine what relief we felt when we learned the identity of these planes. Just why the communists didn't attack us during our sixty minutes on the water we'll probably never know.

I elected to take off from inshore the island seaward, cross downwind, about forty-five degrees true. It was a unique take-off, describing a quarter-circular pattern to take advantage of the smooth water. The aircraft has a tendency to keep turning with torque to the left, but on this day it was counteracted by the wind until I made the turn for the take-off. When I fired the JATO bottles and we were airborne, we were headed about forty degrees from the path we were making when we started the run. The wind was right, the swells were right and we had just enough protection from the island. The jigsaw pieces were still falling just where we wanted them.

Tourane, Indochina, was closer, but I knew the medical facilities at Hong Kong were better. So we checked the fuel supply and after determining that it was sufficient, we headed for Hong Kong.

Captain Blown told me his story. That morning he had been flying the Bangkok-Hong Kong leg of his trip as usual, skirting Hainan Island, as all planes must if they don't want to encounter the belligerent Chinese. The DC-4 was plainly marked "Cathay Pacific" and had a Union Jack three and a half by five feet painted on its tail. Copilot Carlton was the first to notice a cream-

colored, red-nosed, propeller-driven fighter plane 100 yards above the airliner, about 150 yards astern. Blown looked to his side of the plane and round himself facing a twin of the other fighter.

Both pilots were horribly surprised when the two fighters began to pump machine-gun bullets into the unprotected plane. The No.1 engine began to smoke. Carlton ran aft to help the stewardesses pass out lifebelts to the passengers. He came back and reported that a fire had started in the No. 4 engine, and the main gas tank was flaming. Blown began to zigzag, losing altitude as he twisted and turned. The fighters shot away the instrument panel. Soon they had knocked out his rudder controls.

"I sent one of the crew aft to get life jackets," said Captain Blown, "I might as well have sent him before a firing squad."

... by the time they realized their mistake
they must have determined to shoot us to
bits, so we could tell no tales.

From the smoke and shattered metal of the cockpit, Blown yelled over his shoulder, **"Brace yourselves for ditching!"** The plane hit the water with a tremendous thud. The crash tore out one of the cockpit windows, and it quickly filled with water. Blown swam through the bubbling foam toward the sunlight.

Blown estimated that three to five or the eighteen passengers were killed by the fighters' guns; four to six died from the crash itself. Blown himself saw three lifeless bodies in the water before the Albatros arrived. He knew his radio operator's head had been impaled on his drift meter; his engineer was thrown against the bulkhead with such force he went clean through it.

It was a miracle that nine survived. The nine floated and swam for an hour before copilot Carlton noticed the box which Mrs. Parrish was hanging onto. It turned out to contain a twenty-man rubber raft. He spent twenty minutes inflating it and then pulled the nine survivors on board. Four men, four women and little Valerie - three out of six Americans still lived, three out of five British, three out of seven Chinese.

Even while we were climbing toward Hong Kong I told Arnold to take the aircraft, and went aft to see if I could do anything for our passengers. The Albatross contains four passenger plane seats; these were occupied by three of the women - Mrs. Parrish, Mrs. Thorburn, Stewardess Esther Law, who had a broken nose and battered face, and by Valerie. The cruelly crushed Rita Ong had been placed on the deck aft; she moaned now and again, and said to the medic, Smith, **"Don't let them come back and shoot us any more."** We didn't dare move her to one of the two litters forward unless we could set the broken bones. It was never to be; she died halfway to Hong Kong.

Two of the men, Carlton and a Bangkok Chinese named Fong, sat on boxes between the seats. Blown and the other man sat on the edge of a litter just aft of the pilot's seat. This other man, an

American Defense Department employee named Peter Thatcher, traveling from Singapore, had been shot through the leg, as I recall, but was not seriously injured. He wore an anxious look when he said to me, **"I am carrying important classified information in my head. Don't let them give me anesthesia unless a representative of the American consulate is present."** I told him not to worry; I'd see that the consulate was informed.

Mostly these people were simply bewildered by the fate that had befallen them. They said hardly a sentence. Tears were not shed. Mrs. Parrish was in such a state of shock she didn't realize she had a broken collar bone. Only once did she murmur, **"I've lost my husband and both my sons."**

We landed on Kai-Tak aerodrome in Hong Kong at 4:15 P.M. and taxied in front of the military-operations building, where we were met by ambulances and a large group of officials and newspapermen.



U.S. INFORMATION AGENCY

Victim No. 10, Rita Ong, survived the ordeal at sea only to die aboard the rescue plane. The Reds "apologized" for the shooting, claiming the airliner was mistaken for a Chinese Nationalist plane.



Captain Jack T. Woodyard, USAF, carries 6 year old Valerie Parish from his SA-16 Albatross aircraft after the rescue was complete.

Photo provided by Udo Fischer

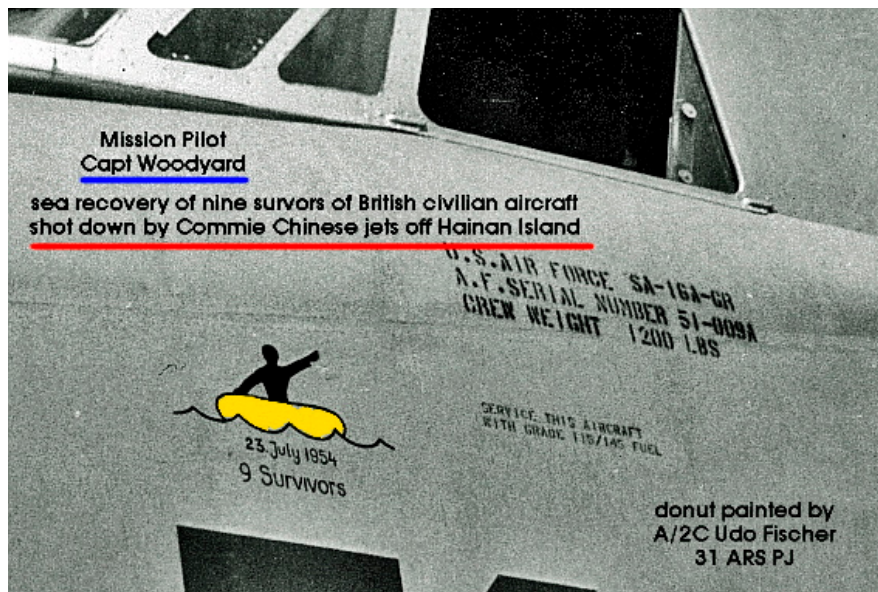
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Captain Woodyard to the Rescue

A few hours later, also in response to the distress call, two Grumman SA-16 Albatross of the USAF's 31st Air Rescue Squadron arrived. The planes had flown a long way, coming from Clark AFB in the Philippines. On the lead plane, Captain Jack Woodyard, USAF, orbited to assess the situation. Where others were unwilling to attempt the rescue in the heavy seas, Woodyard felt that he had to make the attempt. The seas were more than challenging — in fact, he knew there would be no doubt of a crash if he attempted to land in the heavy seas. Furthermore, the ten passengers on the raft would put his aircraft severely overweight if he were to try to take off again after the rescue. Undaunted, Captain Woodyard started to formulate a plan.

Looking up from the raft, Captain Blown recognized the USAF SA-16 Albatross. He knew that the Americans would try a landing even while the others held off. He also knew that some of his passengers were in dire need of medical attention, some with serious shrapnel wounds. With renewed hope, he yelled out, "The Yanks are coming! The Yanks are coming!"

Photo provided by Udo Fischer



23Jul54 save graphic painted on HU-16 by A/2C Udo Fischer
Photo provided by Udo Fischer

Why did the communists shoot down the Cathay Pacific plane? Were they trying. to force the plane to land on Hainan so they could pry Thatcher's secrets out of him? One rumor had it that the United States Ambassador to Thailand, "Wild Bill" Donovan, former head of the OSS, was the man they were gunning for-actually, I have read, he was scheduled to travel on a CAT - Central Air Transport- plane that same week. CAT is the American-financed air line founded by General Chennault and is sympathetic to the Nationalist Government on Formosa. The Chinese communists themselves admitted, in apologizing to the British for shooting down the plane, that they thought it was a Chinese Nationalist aircraft.

Alter he got back to Singapore and his old job, Captain Blown told reporters on August twentieth he was by then convinced the communists mistook his aircraft for a CAT plane, and **"by the time they realized their mistake they must have determined to shoot us to bits, so we could tell no tales."** That speculation will do for me until a better one comes along. It might even be possible that the Chinese pilots didn't or couldn't read any further than the first three letters of "Cathay Pacific." I do hope that the two planes the Navy shot down three days later contained the same inhuman individuals who made a widow of Mrs. Parrish.

THE END

VR-HEU was a four-engined propeller-driven Douglas C-54 Skymaster^[3] airliner, the military version of the Douglas DC-4, operated by the Cathay Pacific Airways from August 1949 to July 1954.^[4] On 23 July 1954. While en route from Bangkok to Hong Kong on 23 July 1954, the plane was shot down by Chinese Communist fighter planes off the coast of Hainan Island, killing 10 on board.^{[5][6][7][2]}

The aircraft

VR-HEU was a Douglas C-54A manufactured by the Douglas Aircraft Company. It was delivered to the USAAF on 16 May 1944, where it served for less than two years.^{[3][8]} It was bought on 19 February 1946 by KLM and first operated by KLM West Indies before returning to KLM main line in February 1948.^[8] It was sold to Cathay Pacific in August 1949.^[8]

[edit] Crew and passengers

There were a total of 19^{[1][9]} people on board VR-HEU. It consisted of three flight crew, three female cabin crew and 13 passengers. In all, 1 flight crew, 2 cabin crew and 7 passengers were killed in the attack and subsequent crash of the airliner.^[11]

Flight synopsis

Takeoff and flight

After being delayed in Bangkok for an hour due to engine problems on the no. 2 engine, the VR-HEU Skymaster finally took off from Bangkok at 2019 GMT on 22 July, bound for Hong Kong. A previous flight had taken the plane from Singapore. For the next 4 hours and 25 minutes the routine flight proceeded as planned.^{[10][11][12]}

The attack

At 2340 GMT, cruising at 9,000 ft and roughly 10 miles east of the international air corridor line off Hainan Island and only 31 minutes from Hong Kong, two PLAAF fighters, believed to be propeller-driven Lavochkin La-7s, appeared behind VR-HEU, one on its starboard side at a range of about 150 yards back and 300 yards above and the other on its port side. At approximately about 2344 GMT, the fighters started opening fire and the no.1 and 4 engines were hit and caught fire. The no. 4 engine's auxillary and main fuel tank were also ablaze. While the captain took evasive actions to avoid further damage to his plane, co-pilot Carlton rushed out of the cabin and issued blankets to passengers instructing them to place them on the back of their seats for protection against the bullets. Cathay Pacific engineer G.H. Cattanaach, travelling as a passenger to a technical meeting with the Hong Kong Director of Civil Aviation, rushed to and fro trying to make the passengers comfortable when it became known that he plane was going to ditch. VR-HEU began losing altitude and at 5,000 ft, its rudder control was shot off. Travelling at 350 miles per hour, the captain tried his utmost to evade incendiary bullets coming from the fighters by turning the Skymaster left and right. At 2,000 feet, the right aileron was shot off and the plane began turning right on its own initiative. The captain then countered the increasing turn by shutting down the Nos. 1 and 2 engines and fully opening No. 3. Approximately 2 minutes after the initial attack and unable to carry on a controlled levelled flight, the Cathay Pacific captain decided to carry out a ditching of his Skymaster in rough open seas that included 15 feet waves and a 25 knot wind. The starboard wing tip first hit the water, severing the right wing between the No. 3 and 4 engines.^[13] The impact caused the tail to break off and float off 50 yards from the main wreckage. The main fuselage now floated at an angle of 45 degrees with the rear open fuselage pointing towards the sky.^[11] The attacking fighters ceased firing at the Skymaster around about 1,000 feet before making a turn around the wreckage and headed towards Sanya, a city on the southern end of Hainan Island. While nine passengers and crew were killed by bullets and the subsequent ditching, nine others survived and escaped the sinking plane. Captain Blown and his co-pilot escaped through a broken starboard^[13] sliding window which had water coming in fast. With all survivors floating on the water with no life vests on, co-pilot Carlton suddenly noticed that Mrs Thorburn was hanging on to a raft still in its case. Fearing the bright yellow rubber raft might attract the attention of PLAAF fighters, it took Carlton twenty minutes to finally inflate the rubber dinghy and lift all nine passengers in. Once on the dingy and concerned about attacking planes returning, some of the dazed, injured passengers with their clothes in shreds, hid under a plastic sunshade covering the edges of the dinghy. While Captain Blown and passenger Peter Thacher kept watch, the attacking planes never returned.^{[10][12][11][6][14]}

Rescue efforts

After realising they were being attacked, radio operator Stephen Wong, holding onto his mike, quickly yelled out the first distress call at 0845 HKT (2345 GMT). "Kai Tak Tower, Cathay XXX, Mayday! Mayday! No. 1 port engine on fire, losing altitude, requesting all possible assistance."^{[6][11]} Wong continued making a total of no less than ten Mayday calls up to the point when VR-HEU ditched into the sea. An Air Vietnam plane which was en route to Hong Kong from Hanoi and had altered its course as a result of the calls, spotted the sinking plane and a dinghy one and a half miles from the Hainan coast. It circled for 40 minutes before heading for Hong Kong. Thanks to those calls, the RAF in Hong Kong immediately redirected a Saigon-bound Vickers Valetta military transport and further despatched a Short Sunderland flying boat, an Avro York military transport, as well as two de Havilland Hornet fighters, from RAF Kai Tak to the reported position of the C-54. A fully armed French Privateer after intercepting the emergency radio call, also took off from Tourane (Da Nang), French Indochina (now Vietnam). Meanwhile, the civilian-operated Manila rescue control centre in the Philippines, on picking up the SOS call from Wong, alerted the 31st Air Rescue Squadron of the USAF at the Clark Air Force Base. Captain Jack T. Woodyard, on first alert duty that day, about to depart on a routine training mission in his Grumman Albatross SA-16, immediately took off. A second Albatross followed Woodyard 35 minutes later. The Hornets were the first to arrive on the scene, followed by the Valetta, Sunderland, York and the Privateer. While the Hornets carried out a thorough search of the area for survivors, the French Privateer, piloted by an apparent Englishman in a Cockney accent, informed the Albatross which was 50 miles away, that "We have spotted the dinghy with survivors; looks like two of them from here." Using different radio frequencies, the British and American planes were not able to communicate with each other. Captain Blown on seeing the Sunderland arrive, tossed a packet of green sea dye overboard in an effort to assist rescue personnel. The Sunderland acknowledged this by setting off a smoke flare. Unable to land in atrocious conditions, the amphibious Sunderland circled helplessly for 2 hours before Woodyard's Albatross finally arrived and circled for an hour before landing on the calmer side of Ta-Chow Island. It taxied towards the dinghy in incredibly rough water before pulling all survivors on board. The last passenger to be hoisted on board was a badly injured Rita Cheung. Her left leg was broken in 2 places and she had a deep gash on her forehead. Escorted by the Sunderland and York, the Grumman Albatross made a wide turn and headed for Hongkong. Rita, however, died 10 minutes before the plane reached Kai Tak. Radio operator Stephen Wong was also believed killed when his head was impaled on a drift meter during ditching of the Cathay Pacific airliner.^{[14][12][10][11][6]}

Theories for the attack

There were several hypothesis for the attack, they included:

- VR-HEU was carrying a Chinese Nationalist ambassador;^[13]
- the United States Ambassador to Thailand, "Wild Bill" Donovan, former head of the OSS (the forerunner of CIA) was to have travelled on a Civil Air Transport plane that same week.^[14]

The official line from Peking, however, was that the Cathay Pacific airliner was mistaken as a Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) plane on a mission to raid a military base at Port Yulin on Hainan Island.^[15]

Aftermath

Political and diplomatic

The shooting down of VR-HEU stoked tensions between the People's Republic of China and that of Britain and the US. The British Foreign Office, through its Charge d'Affaires in Peking, Mr Humphrey Trevelyan delivered Britain's protest to Communist China two days later. While the US Secretary of State, Mr John Foster Dulles issued a sharp statement condemning the attack, saying the United States took the gravest view of the act of further barbarity and that the Chinese Communist regime must be held responsible.^[11]

On the political front, the shooting down probably harmed PRC's chances of admission into the United Nations. Republican senator H. Alexander Smith, interrupted the marathon debate over atomic legislation to read Mr Dulles' statement before calling the situation "critical." Republican representative Walter Judd, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, expressed the view that the incident was another reason why Communist China must not be admitted to the United Nations.^[11]

[edit] Apology and compensation

Communist China admitted responsibility three days later by apologising and making compensations to Cathay Pacific and the victims.^{[15][2]}

[edit] Fate of the attacking pilots

The two La-7 pilots were rumoured to have either been executed by the Communist Chinese government^[15] or died subsequently in a skirmish with Douglas Skyraiders from the Essex class aircraft carrier USS Philippine Sea and Hornet.^[16]

[edit] See also

List of airliner shootdown incidents

[edit] References

- [^] ^a ^b ^c ^d ^e ^f The passengers and crew of Silver Wings - 23 July 1954 - and the crew of the rescuing US aircraft - The Life & Times of James Harper

2. ^ [a b c Hong Kong - Plane Survivors](#) - Movietone News
 3. ^ [a b 42-72205 - Douglas C-54A-10-DC- - USAAF - Taxiway Alpha](#)
 4. ^ [ASN Aircraft accident Douglas C-54A-10-DC VR-HEU Hainan Island](#) - Aviation Safety Network
 5. ^ [Accident details - VR-HEU](#) - Plane Crash Info
 6. ^ [a b c d VR-HEU Account by passenger: Valerie Parish](#) - Major Commerical Airline Disasters
 7. ^ [VR-HEU](#) - The Life & Times of James Harper
 8. ^ [a b c Eastwood and Roach 1991, page 122](#)
 9. ^ Some sources indicate the total as 18 but according to this site [\[1\]](#), it appears to be 19. To be confirmed.
 10. ^ [a b c Airliner Disaster](#) - South China Morning Post, 24 July 1954
 11. ^ [a b c d e f g C.P.A. Airliner Outrage](#), - South China Morning Post, 26 July 1954
 12. ^ [a b c Incident On the China Coast by Peter Thacher, The Reader's Digest](#), November 19, 1954
 13. ^ [a b c \[2\] Captain Phillip Blown's official report to the British Foreign Office](#), 1954
 14. ^ [a b c We Rescued the Victims of Red China's Murder Planes By Capt. Jack T. Woodyard, USAF, The Saturday Evening Post](#), 23 October 1954
 15. ^ [a b c Red China Apologises For Attack On Plane](#) - Reuters, France Presse, 26 July 1954.
 16. ^ [Air Clash Off Hainan](#) South China Morning Post, 27 July 1954
- [VR-HEU, Planecrashinfo.com](#)
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 - Eastwood, Tony; John Roach (1991). *Piston Engine Airliner Production List*. The Aviation Hobby Shop. [ISBN 0 907178 37 5](#).

[edit] External links

- [Cathay Pacific Airways](#)

The Passengers & Crew of Cathay Pacific Airways VR-HEU 'Silver Wings' **&**

The Crew of the SA-16 Albatross - 31st Air Rescue Squadron

23rd July, 1954

Passenger List
(those in yellow were lost July 23, 1954)

1. Leonard L. Parish - Age 34, At one time flew for China National Aviation Corporation and was a partner in the Import Export Corporation in Bandung, Java where he resided. The Parish family had lived in Bandung since 1950. This veteran pilot knew what was happening in those moments and assisted the crew to prepare the passengers, including his family, for the likely outcome. He was not a paralyzed observer that night.

2. Frances Parish - Wife of Leonard Parish, age 33

3. Lawrence "Larry" Parish - Age 4

4. Phillip Parish - Age 2

5. Valerie Parish - Age 6

6. Mr. Peter S. Thacher - One time Aide to General George Marshall (author of the Marshall Plan), an American civilian employed with the Army Department in Tokyo

7. Mrs. P.M. Thorburn - Wife of a Hong Kong bank official

8. Mrs. H.M. Finley - Wife of the British Consul at Medan, Sumatra

9. Mr. Paul Yong Nam-ying - Age 18, Student, Hong Kong University. He wanted to be a doctor.

10. Mr. Lui Luen-fong - A Fukiense businessman

11. Miss Rita Teresa Diana Cheung - Age 28. Died 10 minutes before the Rescue Plane reached Kai Tak Airport, Hong Kong. She was buried on July 25, 1954, at the Catholic Cemetery, Happy Valley, Hong Kong. Rita was the only one of those lost to receive burial.

12. Mr. Tie Tian - chuang

13. Mr. G.H. Cattanach - A C.P.A engineer, who was traveling as a passenger for a technical discussion with the Director of Civil Aviation in Hong Kong, bravely tried to help the passengers aboard the stricken plane.

Cathay Pacific Crew

1. Captain Philip P. Blown - Pilot

2. Cedrick W. Carlton - Co-pilot

3. Stephen Wong - Chief Radio Operator - He steadily continued to call the mayday as the airliner went down. This man stayed his post and performed his duty.

4. Rose Chen - Stewardess

5. Iris E. Stobart - Chief Stewardess - Both Rose & Iris saw to the needs of their passengers while in defenseless assault for as long as they could.

6. Esther Law - Stewardess

**United States SA-16 Albatross Air Rescue Crew - Clark AF Base, Philippines
Their bravery, skill, and compassion were greatly appreciated**

1. Captain Jack T. Woodward - Pilot, age 34

2. Captain Tommy R. Arnold Jr. - Co-pilot, age 31

3. Lawrence Rodriguez - Radio operator, age 20

4. Albert F. Smith - Navigator, age 22