

THE WAICHOW INCIDENT – IMPERIAL AIRWAYS “DARDANUS” FORCED DOWN BY JAPANESE FIGHTERS

By Ken Sanford

“We are being fired on from the air.....”

We left Kai Tak aerodrome at 22.58 GMT (Greenwich date November 7th..o.) At 01.30 GMT our position was between seven and ten miles south of Waichow Island, having passed Fort Bayard at 00.58 GMT. Our height was 4,000 feet, visibility was good, more than 30 miles, and there was no cloud. I was at the controls, and Captain Wilson was entering the aforesaid position in his navigation log. Without any warning, there was a rattling noise at the machine, and we realised we were under fire. Captain Wilson took the controls, and I sent out the S.O.S signal, followed by the message “We are being fired on from the air.” After a few minutes, realising the impossibility of escape from our attackers, Captain Wilson turned the machine towards Wai Chow island, which by this time was north east of our position, and I sent another message to Fort Bayard - “Being forced to land at Wai Chow”. This was the last message I was able to send, as our altitude was insufficient to allow of the trailing aerial being used.

The diplomatic mail was jettisoned about three miles from Wai Chow. A landing was made on the military aerodrome about 01.45 GMT. The attacking machines were apparently heavy fighters Type 96. They continued to fire at us up to the time we reached the aerodrome, and were firing tracer bullets. Although, when in the air, not more than two machines were seen at the same time, three fighter machines landed immediately after us.

So went the official report by First Officer J.F.Raeburn on Imperial Airways service HB183 on November 8th 1939(local date), flying the DH 86B Dardanus, G-ADUE, with Captain J.N.Wilson from Hong Kong to Bangkok. On board were just three passengers. This incident took place at a time when Britain was squaring up to the bully in her immediate neighbourhood, and was largely hushed up and eclipsed by subsequent events. Besides, quite miraculously nobody got hurt, and it seems it was the British airliner which had infringed the 15-mile security zone around the Japanese-held island in the Gulf of Tongking. The matter was finally resolved in 1961, when the Japanese government paid the UK a lump sum settlement for this and other incidents.

Research

When I first received the details of the commission from the client, who is a historian with the Hong Kong Historical Aviation Association resident in Britain, all the reference material that came with it was a handful of old Hong Kong newspaper clippings which, crucially, left us in the dark even about the fighter type involved. There was mention of Japanese Navy "seaplanes", which initially led us on a wild goose chase through the aviation literature. So little was known about this incident that I took the step of passing it to our Guild of Aviation Artists researcher John Blake, even though it was not a Guild commission. John went after it with typical gusto, and before long had turned up a whole pile of classified and previously unknown documents on the incident, including the official reports by the pilot and co-pilot in Hong Kong.....mainly from the depths of the (soon to be demolished) British Airways Archives at Heathrow Airport. The painting was constructed largely from the information in those reports.

Once having identified the **Mitsubishi A5M/Type 96 "Claude"** as the culprit, the next challenge was getting adequate data on that (to me) little-known plane. We had a lucky strike with a coloured profile from a Polish publication...illustrating a Japanese Navy Type A5M4 based on Weichow in 1940. The other unfamiliar aircraft was the **de Havilland DH86 Express**, which at first sight looked like a larger and 4-engined version of the better-known *Rapide*. Which it essentially was(at 46 feet this 10-passenger airliner was shorter than a F-16!).

THE WAICHOW INCIDENT – IMPERIAL AIRWAYS “DARDANUS” FORCED DOWN BY JAPANESE FIGHTERS (continued)

A drive down to the tiny shop at the De Havilland Heritage Museum just outside my town of St Albans, yielded a used copy of a little old book dedicated to that airliner. So for a mere £5 I got a bunch of b/w fossil photos and drawings of another extinct aeroplane.

The family *Readers' Digest Illustrated Atlas of the World* noted **Weichow Island** (or Wai Chow, Wai Chao, etc. in the literature) as a speck some way off China's Hainan Island in the Gulf of Tongking, where a certain USN EP3 Orion had a similar enforced visit more recently.

Composition

The striking part of the account was the vigorous and skilful evasive manouevring by the pilot, taking the airliner down to some 50 feet over the sea and turning for the island, and having at the last moment to pull up over the approaching cliffs. Due to his aerobatics, and the fact that the A5M (unlike its successor the A6M Zero) had only light machine guns (firing through the engine cowling) and no cannon, the airliner's plywood and fabric structure was riddled with bullet holes but survived the incident, along with everyone in it.



The above account is extracted from the following Internet website, by courtesy of Ronald T. Kwong: <http://ronaltdkwong.com/news/TheWeichowIncident.html>

The following is an extract from my book *Air Crash Mail of Imperial Airways & Predecessor Airlines*, published by the Rossiter Trust, 2003:

391108 (Nierinck 391108) – Imperial Airways – “Dardanus” – De Havilland DH-86 Diana Class – G-ADUE – near Waichow Island – Hong Kong-Hanoi route

Captain J. N. Wilson & Mr. Raeburn

The aircraft was flying between Hong Kong and Bangkok. The aircraft was fired on and forced down by five Japanese fighters, being hit by about 90 bullets. Captain Wilson was able to land the damaged aircraft, and the passengers and crew were captured by the Japanese. Britain and the Dominions were not yet at war with Japan. According to Crewe, “The Japanese authorities in Tokyo told the British Embassy that the airliner was mistaken by the Japanese fighters for a Chinese aircraft, and that before her nationality was discovered, one of the fighters.

THE WAICHOW INCIDENT (continued)

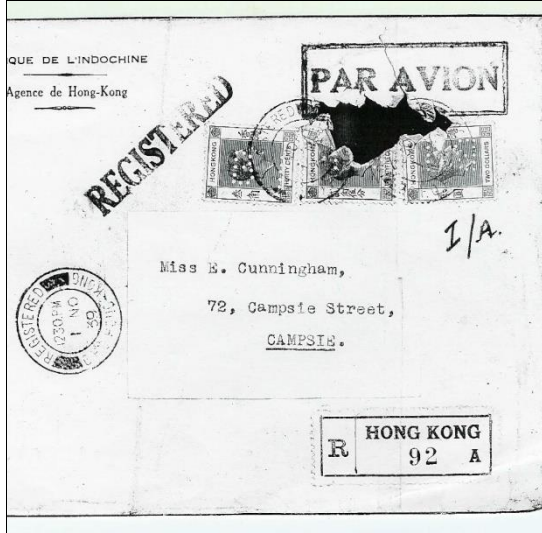
had opened fire on her. A Reuters message states that apologies have been offered to the Hong Kong authorities through the Japanese Consul General there. It was probably about this time that the DH 86s operating the service had large Union Flags painted on the wings and fuselage in order to reduce the chance of misidentification.” Also, future flights gave the island of Waichow a wide berth. Although the passengers were released right away, Captain Wilson and Mr. Raeburn were detained and interrogated on the island of Waichow. The mail and aircraft were also detained. The British Government lodged strong protests with the Japanese Government and the crew and mail were finally released on the 15th of November, and the mail was taken back to Hong Kong for onward delivery.

A few covers are known to exist, and no cachets or special markings were applied. Westbound covers from Hong Kong postmarked between 1 and 7 November were probably onboard. The mail was being carried in the forward locker of the aircraft, and it was here that some of the bullets found a mark. On arrival in Hong Kong the mail was reflowed to Bangkok for distribution, and at Singapore the Australian mail was picked up by Qantas and carried through to Sydney, arriving on the 5th of December. When the mail was opened at the General Post Office in Sydney, a bundle of registered letters (approximately 40) were found to be perforated by a machine gun bullet, which fell out onto the sorting table.

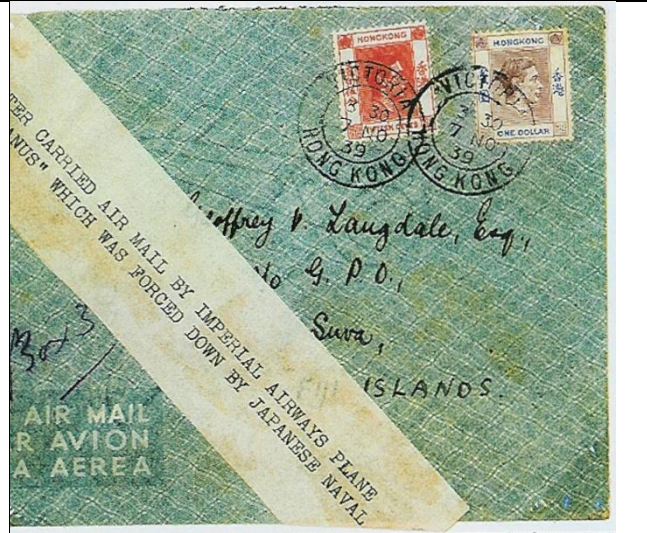
A cover with a bullet hole (as shown) was reported in Qantas Aeriana, dated Hong Kong, 12:30 p.m., 1 November 1939, and backstamped Sydney on 5 December. This cover is in the National Library of Australia in Canberra. A second cover recently appeared in the Nutmeg auction of November 22, 2005. It is a cover from Hong Kong to Suva, Fiji, and it has an explanatory label. It is not known where the label was prepared and affixed. This cover sold for US\$2,800 plus buyer's commission.

This was not the first time that an Imperial Airways aircraft was fired upon by the Japanese. The Times of London of 1 March 1938 reported that: “The Imperial Airways liner flying with mails from Bangkok to Hong Kong was fired on by a Japanese aeroplane south of Hong Kong yesterday. The Japanese authorities in Tokyo have told the British Embassy that the air liner was mistaken by Japanese fighting aircraft for a Chinese machine, and that before her nationality was discovered, one of the fighters had opened fire on her. A Reuters message states that apologies have been offered to the Hong Kong authorities through the Japanese Consul General there. In order to avoid similar incidents however it has been decided to divert the Imperial Airways route between Bangkok and Hong Kong....”.

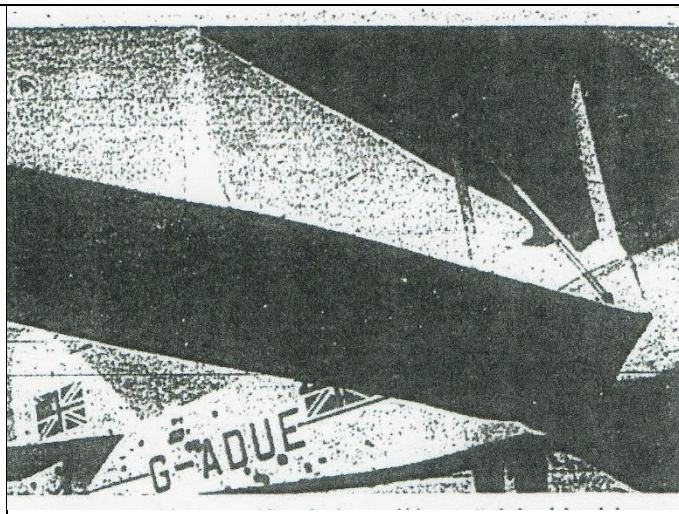
The aircraft fired on was “Daedalus” (G-ADCN), which was operating service BH 11 on the 28th of February. The diversion referred to appears to have related to the courses flown rather than an alteration to stopping points. It was probably about this time that the DH86s operating the service had large Union Jack flags painted on the top of the wings and the fuselage in order to reduce the chance of misunderstanding. However, it didn't appear to help in the case of the November 1939 Waichow Island incident.



Cover in National Library of Australia



Cover from Nutmeg auction



Newspaper photos showing shot-up aircraft