The morning of 23 July 1954, a Cathay Pacific Airways DC-4A registration VR-HEU (Victor Roger – How Easy Uncle) cruises at 9,000 feet over the South China Sea.

The Co-pilot, Cedric Carlton spots a cream colored aircraft rapidly approaching from the right side. He tells the Captain, Phil Blown, who looks out his own window and sees another cream colored aircraft approaching from the left side. Without warning the two fighters open fire on the helpless DC-4

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Morning 12 mid-July 1954, Tan Son Nhut Airfield outside Saigon, Vietnam. A Vickers PBV Catalina, the Canadian built version of the Consolidated PBY-5A, of the Macau Air Transport Company, a subsidiary of Cathay Pacific Airways, sits on the ramp waiting for the morning fog to burn off. The Catalina, an amphibious aircraft is used by Macau Air Transport to haul contract cargo around South East Asia and South China Sea.

When the fog clears Captain Len Cosgrove along with copilot Jim Keirnan and flight engineer James Winyard take off in their venerable Catalina and head toward the coast and out over the South China Sea, North East towards Hong Kong.

Once Cosgrove reached cruise altitude of 9,000 feet he and the crew settled in for the four and a half hour long flight. Hours later, appearing on the horizon was the green mass of Hainan Island, off the coast of mainland China. Hainan Island was a geographical obstacle that Cosgrove and his crew had to maintain a respectable distance from.

The island, since 1950, was now under full control of Communist Chinese forces and did not permit any commercial flights over or near the island.

Flying a safe distance, twenty to thirty miles, from the coast. Cosgrove could see Sanya Airfield off in the distance, only a dirt smudge from his perspective.

Cosgrove knew the airstrip and area well. Four years earlier when Communist Chinese forces from the mainland invaded the island, he had picked up Kuomintang refugees at Sanya Airstrip and flown them to Macau.

Studying the dirt strip from 9,000 feet he noticed it looked different at one end. He pulled out his binoculars and looked closer. At the end of the strip were sections of concrete laid out, including concrete pads and dispersal areas. That could mean only one thing. Jets!

Mig-15s, or more appropriately J-2s.

Cosgrove, Copilot Keirnan and flight engineer Winyard agreed that they should maintain a greater distance from Hainan Island on future flights.

By mid-afternoon they landed at Hong Kong’s Kai-Tac Airport. Captain Cosgrove called up the senior official at the Department of Civil Aviation Hong Kong and told him of the construction and inevitability of Migs appearing on Hainan Island. The official noted the information provided in the phone call, but nothing came of it. No warnings were issued and the air traffic lanes remained unaltered, 20-30 miles from Hainan Island.

18 July 1954 A Qantas Lockheed Constellation crewed by Captain Forgie Forgan-Smith and First Officer Arthur Whitmarsh, is an hour and a half away from Hong Kong’s Kai-Tac airport. This was the second of a four leg trip from Sydney to Labaun, Malaysia, to Hong Kong, to Iwakuni, Japan and finally Tokyo.

The Qantas Constellation was 300 miles East of Hainan Island when First Officer Whitmarsh threw his lunch tray behind him and grabbed the controls. Out of the right window Whitmarsh saw a grey high-tailed jet rapidly climb up from underneath and cross over the Constellation to the left side and disappear.

Captain Forgan-Smith saw the aircraft too and marked the position on his chart. When the Constellation landed in Hong Kong. Forgan-Smith talked directly to the Department of Civil Aviation Hong Kong and told them exactly what happened, that a jet had flown from below and crossed over them and disappeared. Forgan-Smith showed the senior official where the incident occurred on his charts. The official told the experienced airline captain he must be mistaken. Chinese jets could not operate that far out to sea from the mainland!

The next morning as Forgan-Smith, his crew and a Qantas gate agent were heading through the terminal to the constellation an irate passenger from the day before demanded to know why a grey jet aircraft had flown so close to the plane, it scared the hell out of him. The man turned out to have been a Lt Cdr with the US Navy, having flown combat missions during the Korean he knew what a jet looked like.

Forgan-Smith asked the man if he would share his statement with the Senior Department of Civil Aviation official for Hong Kong. The official listened with greater care than he had showed Forgan-Smith and made a number of notes. Nothing came of the incident and the air lanes outside Hainan remained unchanged and no warnings were issued regarding the possibility of jet aircraft.

On the afternoon of 21 July 1954 Cathay Pacific Airways, DC-4A VR-HEU, sits at Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut airfield waiting on repairs to a strut on the left side landing gear. The flight had flown passengers in from Singapore earlier that day and was supposed to have departed hours earlier, but was delayed to do the repairs. By the time the repairs had been finished the Captain of the airliner John Carrington realized that it would be too late to fly into Hong Kong’s Kai Tak airport, which strictly forbade night operations except in cases of extreme emergency.

Capt Carrington and his crew elected to wait until the next morning to fly to Cathay Pacific Airways home base at Kai-Tak. They spent a restless night at the airfield. Unbeknownst to the crew, Viet Mihn guerillas had attacked the airfields perimeter that night. The flight was delayed again as the runway was checked by French forces for any damage or mines left behind during the raid.

With the all clear given, Captain Carrington and his crew took off and headed out over the South China Sea, past Hainan Island and landed in Hong Kong shortly after 1000.

A new crew took over VR-HEU. The Captain Phil Blown 41, of Australia. He had flown in fighters in combat with the RAAF in New Guinea during WWII as a Flight Lieutenant and joined Cathay Pacific in 1948. He was Cathay Pacific’s Chief Pilot having taken the position in 1952. Co-pilot Cedric Carlton 33, also served with the RAAF during World War II. Posted throughout Australia and seeing combat in New Guinea flying kittyhawks. He joined Cathay Pacific in 1948 and was an experienced pilot in his own right. Stephen Wong a native of Hong Kong had been hired and trained by Cathay Pacific Airways served as the Radio Operator. Supporting the crew and passengers were two hostesses Esther Law another Australian and resident of Hong Kong, and Rose Chen another native to Hong Kong.

A day behind schedule, the revised flight plan was for the crew to take off that day, the 22nd of July and fly to Bangkok Thailand. Once on the ground in Bangkok the flight crews would switch out and another crew, along with stewardesses Esther Law, and Rose Chen would fly to Singapore pick up passengers and return to Bangkok in the late evening. The next day, 23 July the original crew of Captain Phil Blown, Cedric Carlton, Stephen Wong, Eshter Law and Rose Chen would return to Hong Kong.

The first leg of the trip on the afternoon of the 22nd of July from Hong Kong to Bangkok was uneventful.

VR-HEU completed the next leg of the trip from Bangkok to Singapore. Picking up 11 passengers, including all five members of the Parish family who were returning to the states from Jakarta. The DC-4 arrived back in Bangkok landing shortly after midnight on the 23rd, having experienced some engine problems on the way.

The flight was supposed to leave in the morning, before the sun. As Capt Blown approached the plane, George Cattanach, lead flight engineer for Cathay Pacific Airways Bangkok station told Capt Blown the magneto in the number three engine was being fixed due to timing problems and would need to be remedied before departure. Cattanach and his team finally fixed the magneto, and told Capt Blown that it should be further checked out once they arrive back at home station in Hong Kong. George Cattanach would be a passenger on the trip as he was heading to Hong Kong to attend a conference with the Department of Civil Aviation in Hong Kong and to see his fiancé who also worked for Cathay Pacific Airways.

After the magneto delay the passengers were allowed to start boarding. As Capt Blown, co-pilot Carlton, and radio operator Stephen Wong were going through their pre-flight checks, Capt Blown remarked to the crew that “even though we’ve lost more time, things could be worse.”

And they did get worse. Blown and Carrington realized that they could not get the number one engine to turn over, as many times as they tried the engine would not start.

Capt Blown ordered the hostesses to deplane the passengers so they could attempt an impulse start of the number one engine. With three of its four engines running and an empty fuselage the DC-4 lifted into the air and Capt Blown was able to successfully impulse start the engine while circling the airfield. They quickly landed and loaded the passengers back onto the plane now with all four engines running.

Finally Cathay Pacific Airways DC-4A VR-HEU lifted off the runway shortly after 0500. Capt Blown turned the DC-4 onto a heading of 070 headed out over the jungles of Thailand, Laos and South Vietnam, just north of the ancient city of Hue and out over the South China Sea towards the emerging sun on the horizon.

On board were thirteen passengers, and five crew for a total of eighteen souls. The thirteen passengers came from all walks of life. Planning on returning to the United States after having taken up residence in Bandung, Java. Leonard L. Parish, 34 had been a pilot with the Army Air Forces during World War II. After the war he flew DC-3s for China National Aviation Corporation. In 1954 he worked for Import Export Aviation Corporation to supply aviation parts to companies throughout Indonesia and Malaysia. Accompanying him was his wife Frances 33, and their small children Valerie 6, Lawrence 4, and Phillip 2. Another American on board was Peter S. Thatcher who had served in the Army during World War II as an aide to General Marshall. He was now traveling throughout South East Asia as a civilian contractor for the Army Department in Tokyo.

Returning from visiting her sick father in Singapore, Mrs. Peggy M. Thorburn was returning to Hong Kong to see her husband who was the Chief Official for British Chartered Banks in Hong Kong. Mrs. Helen M. Finley was heading to Hong Kong to attend a meeting. Her husband was the British Consul to Medan, Sumatra.

Paul Young Nam-Ying was an 18 year old medical student from Bangkok heading to Hong Kong to start his residency. Mr. Lui Luen-fong was a Fukenese business man returning to Taiwan via Hong Kong. Rita Teresa Diana Chung, 28 was returning to Hong Kong. Also onboard was a Mr. Tie Tian-Chuang also returning to Hong Kong.

Three hours after takeoff, appearing on the horizon was Hainan Island.

0818 two Chinese La-11 fighters of the 85th Fighter Regiment lift off from Sanya airfield Hainan Island. They are directed by ground controllers to the unsuspecting airliner twenty miles off the coast.

At 0829 radio operator Stephen Wong made his mandatory position report over the airways, 18 degrees N Latitude, 110 degrees E Longitude, 9,000 feet.

At 0830 First Officer Carlton was about to begin adjusting the heading from 070 to 047. Captain Blown told him that they’ll maintain the 070 heading for another ten minutes before turning North East towards Hong Kong to give the island a wider berth. The airliner continued on heading of 070 flying parallel along the southern Coast of Hainan Island at a distance of twenty two miles.

At 0833 co-pilot Cedric Carlton looked out his right side window and reported a low winged aircraft with Chinese markings closing in fast from above. Capt Blown looked out of the left side cockpit window and saw another low winged fighter diving towards the aircraft from above. Capt Blown disengaged the autopilot and put the airliner into a diving turn. At the same moment the Chinese fighters opened up on the defenseless aircraft.

The first bursts from the LA-11s set engines number 1 and 4 on fire and ruptured fuel tanks in the right wing. Capt Blown put the DC-4 into a screaming dive to evade the incoming fire. Swerving the large airliner to the left and then the right. Radio operator Steve Wong began frantically transmitting across all radio frequencies “[Kai Tak Tower](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kai_Tak_Airport), Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! No. 1 port engine on fire, losing altitude, requesting all possible assistance.”

It seemed that no matter which way Capt Blown and Carlton turned the plane they would take incoming fire from the Chinese fighters.

As Blown and Carlton continued their dive the airspeed rose to over 350 mph, 100mph over the max speed the DC-4 was built for. Capt Blown thought that maybe he could dive down and deny the fighters another angle from which to attack while attempting to blow out the flames from the ruptured engines and fuel tanks. The number four engine was running out of control and Carlton managed to extinguish the fire on that engine and slow down the runaway prop.

The airliner was being shot to pieces. Bullets and cannon rounds ripped through the fuselage up through the cockpit sending pieces of the instrument panel and glass flying through the cockpit. Steve Wong continued to transmit his Mayday message over the air even though Hong Kong had acknowledged the first transmission. Unknown to Wong after his first transmission the Chinese fighters had shot away the radio antennas and aerials. His successive transmissions were never heard.

Stewardess Esther Law had been in the rear of the aircraft when the shooting began. Unknown to her what was happening outside she went to investigate a loud rushing sound coming from the right rear of the plane. She opened the lavatory door just in time to see the entire facility and part of the fuselage fall away from the plane having been shot away by the Chinese fighters.

Inside the cabin the carnage from the Chinese fighters was taking its toll. Of the thirteen passengers and five crew on board, five passengers were killed in their seats as bullets tore through the fuselage. Hostesses Rose Chen and Esther Law attempted to hand out life preservers and rolled up blankets to passengers in preparation for the inevitable ditching. George Cattanach was killed as he crawled down the aisle handing out life preservers. Hostess Rose Chen was leaning over a seat handing out rolled up blankets to passengers when the seat and Rose took a direct hit from a cannon round killing her instantly. Mr. Leonard L Parish cradled his sons, Lawrence, and Phillip under him to protect them from the incoming fire. His paternal efforts couldn’t protect him nor his young sons from the Chinese fighters. Paul Young Nam-Ying the 18 year old medical student was killed in his seat.

At 5,000 feet the DC-4 no longer had any yaw control. The rudder controls had been shot away.

At 3,000 feet the right side aileron was shot away and the plane started a right hand corkscrew down towards to choppy South China Sea below. Blown and Carlton manipulated the power in the remaining engines to try and get some type of control authority, putting the now smoking engine one and good engine number two to idle and firewalling number three.

Capt Blown and Carlton’s Herculaneum efforts slowed the damaged airliner down to 160 mph a mere two hundred feet above the water. Realizing a speed any lower that 160 caused the right wing to stall Capt Blown and Carlton prepared to ditch. As the crew descended the best they could in a stricken airliner the right wing hit the crest of a wave tearing it off between the three and four engine. Stephen Wong remained at his station still desperately calling out for assistance in vain. In the next moment the DC-4 slammed head on into a 15 foot swell. On impact Steve Wong was flung forward and impaled on the drift meter, killed instantly. Water started pouring into the fuselage as the survivors of the crash in the fuselage managed to escape from the sinking aircraft. Capt Blown and Carlton were able to extricate themselves out through the cockpit windows as the green South China Sea poured in.

Cedric Carlton emerged on to the surface and looked around at the horrific scene. The pock marked fuselage rolled in the waves filling with water, while the left wing floated on the surface still on fire. He looked at his watch, less than three minutes had elapsed since the Chinese fighters had begun their attack. In front of him a life jacket appeared and he struggled into it. Other passengers were clinging to bags of mail, or struggling to get on life vests amidst the carnage. Cedric yelled at them to grab and hold onto anything that floats.

Capt Blown tread water as he witnessed the carnage surrounding him and was fortunate enough to grab onto five white canvas bags filled with Mae West life jackets. He inflated them all and passed them out to any survivor he found. He swam over to Peter S. Thatcher who was supporting a woman that had a gash across her throat and no pulse. While it was apparent that the lady was beyond saving Capt Blown slipped a life jacket on her regardless. He told Thatcher to help him search for survivors, but all they found were the bodies of one of the Parish boys, stewardess Rose Chen, and Mrs. Finley.

Cedric Carlton noticed one of the passengers Peggy Thorburn hanging onto a large rolled up raft. He hesitated opening it since the Chinese fighters were still in the area. It was a large 20 person raft and he didn’t want to inflate it and risk it blowing away if inflated without enough people to hold it down.

1,000 feet above the strewn wreckage the Chinese fighters made a pass and then circled of the area before heading back to Sanya airfield on Hainan Island.

Cedric and Blown gathered the survivors around the large packaged raft. Once Carlton was confident the fighters were not returning he and the rest of the surviving crew and passengers started to inflate the raft, a task that took close to twenty minutes. Once the survivors were inside the raft they counted heads and realized that out of 18 souls on board, including crew there were only nine survivors. One of the survivors, Rita Teresa Diana Cheung 28, was badly injured, she had a mangled leg from the crash and was fading in and out of consciousness. Three others had bullet and shrapnel wounds.

The survivors pulled the shade out to cover the raft to shield them from the sun and any prowling Chinese fighters. Capt Blown ordered everybody to keep their life jackets on in case any Chinese fighters returned to strafe the survivors and they needed to jump back in the water. Cedric Carlton and Peter S. Thatcher kept watch to make sure they were prepared in case such a scenario were to occur.

The survivors in the raft could see the shore from their location, less than 3 miles away. As Capt Blown put it “we would rather stay safe in the currents of the sea than risk being brain washed on land.” The Chinese villagers and fisherman that witnessed the shoot down, according to the survivors made no efforts to reach their location.

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Unknown to the survivors numerous radio operators monitoring the air waves heard Stephen Wong’s distress message “[Kai Tak Tower](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kai_Tak_Airport), Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! No. 1 port engine on fire, losing altitude, requesting all possible assistance.”

When the Chinese fighters opened fire on VR-HEU, Stephen Wong frantically called out for assistance. His single successful call was heard across the South China Sea. Mum Louittit the radio operator on a Cathay Pacific Airways DC-3 bound for Labuan Malaysia heard the distress call. He contacted the senior radio operator at Kai Tak, who confirmed the transmission from Cathay Pacific Airways DC-4A VR-HEU. Louttit monitored the frequency for several more minutes, but only heard the one transmission from Stephen Wong.

The senior officer on duty at the RAF station on Kai Tak, Wing Commander Pip Pickering heard and recorded the transmission at 0833 and calculated the DC-4’s last transmission point. He then gave the order for two DeHavilland Hornets from No. 80 squadron to investigate the area. The Hornets were fueled taking took off shortly after 0910. Wing Commander Pickering relayed the distress message and coordinates to the US base in the Philippines, Clark Air Base. Pickering then contacted a Saigon bound RAF Vickers Valetta military transport, a Short Sunderland flying boat that was on patrol and an Avro York transport aircraft headed for Singapore and directed them to the last known location of VR-HEU to assess the situation and search for survivors.

The duty officer at Clark Air Base confirmed receipt of the transmission at 0835 Hong Kong time, 0935 Manila time. Seconds later the civilian operated rescue control center in Manila called the duty officer relaying the message they had received from Stephon Wong onboard VR-HEU. The duty officer relayed the information to the 31st Air Rescue Squadron and gave the order to scramble two Grumman SA-16A Albatross amphibious rescue aircraft.

Captain Jack T. Woodyard, who was on his first day of standby alert at Clark Air Base and was in the operations room planning a check-flight for Co-pilot Capt Tommy B. Arnold who would soon be upgrading to pilot. After finalizing the details of the flight Captains Woodyard and Arnold headed out to the Albatross on the ramp and with the rest of the crew began to run through their pre-flight checklists. Just as Woodyard and Arnold were about to start the engines a Captain came running from the control center. He told yelled, the pilot and navigator, Capt Albert Smith, were needed back in the control center right away. Capt Woodyard and Smith were told that a Cathay Pacific Airways DC-4 had reported an engine fire off the coast of Hainan Island and was losing altitude. Capt Woodyard, and his crew along with another Albatross would head towards the location and assist in any way they could. Woodyard knew he would need a lot more fuel than the standard 975 gallons and called up maintenance to give them another 300 gallons to top off the tanks. When Woodyard arrived back at the Albatross two fuel trucks were hastily filling the tanks

Woodyard and his crew took off twenty-one minutes later, the second Albatross was a half hour behind commanded by Captain Dale R. Baker. Capt Woodyard plotted a course for Hong Kong and ordered Capt Baker in the other Albatross to plot a coarse to the last known location of the DC-4. The plan was for Woodyard to head south from Hong Kong and Baker to head North from the last known location in order to cover more ground and look for any signs of the DC-4 or survivors. Neither knew that the DC-4 had been shot down and slipped beneath the sea, all they knew was that there had been a reported engine fire and a loss of altitude. Both figured that a DC-4 could still limp along a sizeable distance on only three engines.

Across the South China Sea at Tourane Air Field a French Air Force radio operator had heard Stephen Wong’s distress call. He notified a French Aeronavale, Consolidated PB4Y Privateer on patrol along the coast of Vietnam. The fully armed Privateer altered its course towards Hainan Island to assist.

The two DeHavilland Hornets of No. 80 Squadron arrived first shortly before 1030. The Hornets overflew the area at 5,000 feet and did not see any wreckage or survivors. The Hornets circled the area lf the last known transmission, not seeing anything they began to widen their search. Five minutes later the Vickers Valetta arrived and located the survivors in the raft. The Chinese began broadcasting over the air waves that any military aircraft in the vicinity of Hainan Island need to leave immediately. The Valetta recalled the Hornets for protection. An hour later the lumbering Short Sunderland appeared over the survivors, but could not land due to the large swells, fearing the plane would be torn apart and becoming a liability themselves. Within another fifteen minutes the Avro York bound for Singapore arrived on the scene, followed shortly by the French Privateer, and even an Air Vietnam DC-4 heading for Saigon passed through to help look for survivors.

For two hours the survivors in the raft looked up at the sky in amazement at the aerial display of support waiting to be rescued.

The two lumbering SA-16s droned on towards Hainan Island at 207 mph. Captain Woodyard leading the way with his crew consisting of co-pilot Captain Tommy B. Arnold, navigator Captain Albert F. Smith, Flight Engineer Staff Sergeant Douglas F. Blair, Radio Operator Airman Third Class Lawrence F. Rodriguez, and Aero Medical Specialist Airman Second Class Cecil R. Smith.

Capt Woodyard asked A3C Rodriguez to contact Kai Tak for any updates on the DC-4. Kai Tak relayed that did not have any further contact with the DC-4 beyond the first transmission. Capt Woodyard thinking that the DC-4 might have not reached Hong Kong asked Capt Smith the navigator to calculate a new heading heading between the DC-4s first call and Hong Kong. A3C Rodriguez asked Kai Tak for any further information and was told that rescue aircraft had been sent to the area, but no new updates had been reported.

When he was advised by Kai Tak control that no further broadcasts were heard from the DC-4 he recalculated their heading for its final transmission point. Woodyard told Rodriguez to contact Capt Baker’s Albatross and notify them of their new heading. Capt Baker reported that they had managed to intercept a message from the Short Sunderland on 500 kilocycles stating that they had located survivors in a raft at 18\* 36’ and 100\*28’.

Capt Woodyard figured that the large Short Sunderland was more than capable of picking up the passengers, but figured that he and Capt Baker could still assist by looking for any scattered survivors. Woodyard adjusted his heading to the West by 4 degrees and Baker adjusted his heading accordingly to rendezvous with the survivors.

Airman Third Class Rodriguez relayed a message to Capt Woodyard from the Chinese. The same message that the Vickers Valetta had heard, any military approaching the scene of the accident is prohibited and shall remain well clear of Hainan Island. Capt Woodyard told Rodriguez to simply acknowledge receipt of the message and the two Albatrosses continued on their way.

Seventy-five miles out Rodriguez was able to establish communication with the French Privateer. The Privateer relayed to Woodyard that they had visual contact with the survival raft and it appeared that there were only two survivors. The privateer remain on station and provide any assistance if required.

Still not knowing that Chinese fighters had attacked the DC-4. The radio operators at Kai Tak notified the Chinese at Canton that there had been an accident and gave details and a description of the plane and emerging rescue efforts and asked for any assistance. The Chinese responded that the Short Sunderland could remain, but any other “war planes” would be fired upon without warning if they approached land. Clark AFB relayed the threat to the two Albatrosses and advised them to stay 12 miles away from shore. Capt Woodyard told Rodriguez to simply acknowledge the warning from Clark AFB, seeing as they were only 7 miles from the raft.

When Capt Woodyard and Capt Baker arrived. Capt Woodyard told Capt Baker to survey the area and he would descend through the broken cloud cover to spot the raft. As Woodyard descended to 1500 feet he realized could not find the raft from such a low altitude in the rough sea. The French Privateer sensing the problem overflew the raft and dropped a smoke marker which Capt Woodyard and the crew spotted from four miles away. Woodyard wondered by the survivors were still in the water, why hadn’t the Sunderland picked them up?

As Woodyard descended lower and lower he noticed the rough sea and large swells and realized that the sea might be too rough for the Sunderland. Woodyard realized that even as versatile as the Albatross was, it stood no chance in the immense swells.

Two miles north of the survivors was a small island off the coast of Hainan Island, Tai Chou Tau. Capt Woodyard overflew the island and noticed the sea appeared much calmer on the North West part of the island and planned to land the Albatross there and taxi to the survivors.

Upon landing Capt Woodyard noticed the swells were rougher than observed, crashing over the wings and submerging a wing float. Woodyard and his crew were able to gain some semblance of control and headed towards the survivors. Once out of the shelter of the island Woodyard and the crew had to slow down in the rougher swells. They were guided by the French Privateer as it flew over them and circled the survivors.

Woodyard and his crew spotted two survivors in the raft and as the Albatross drew closer Woodyard turned off the left engine to aid in recovering the survivors. Airmen Rodriquez and Smith opened the left hatch and threw a line to the survivors. In the raft Co-pilot Cedric Carlton secured the line and rolled back the cover on the raft and to the crew’s astonishment, there were nine survivors in the raft, not two. This would put the Albatross over its max weight limit for takeoff by 1000lbs. Rodriguez and Smith helped the survivors on board the last being Captain Phil Blown.

As the crew handed out blankets to the wet survivors Captain Blown headed toward the flight deck and told Woodyard and Arnold that they had been shot down by the Chinese and there may be other fighters in the area.

Up to this point no one that heard Stephen Wong’s radio transmission, including the aircraft circling the area, knew that DC-4A VR-HEU had been shot down. They thought the airliner had an engine fire and crashed.

Woodyard quickly got in touch with Captain Baker in the other Albatross and told them to switch to a different frequency so the Chinese could not monitor their transmission. Woodyard told Capt Baker that the survivors had been shot down by Chinese fighters and they may still be in the area and that he should notify the other aircraft in the area on alternate frequency.

In order to take off in the rough seas with such and overloaded aircraft the screw needed to secure JATO rocket bottles to the sides to assist in the take off. Co-pilot Captain Arnold was in the rear of the plane helping to attach the JATO bottles. They managed to get one attached on the left side, but were having problems with the right side. Arnold came back up to the flight deck to report they were having problems with one of the JATO bottles on the right side when he overheard Capt Baker report that there were unidentified aircraft approaching, they appeared to be fighters. Arnold rushed back to the fuselage and with some explicit encouragement overheard throughout the interior of the Albatross by crew and survivors alike. Capt Arnold managed to attach the 98lb JATO bottle to the left fuselage, single handedly.

Capt Woodyard turned the Albatross around and pointed it into the wind on a heading of 110. By this point the Albatross was only 500 yards from Tai Chau Tau Island and he could see men running to the shore and getting into boats. As Arnold strapped into the Co-pilot seat still sweating and swearing profusely Woodyard gave the mighty Albatross full throttle and slowly picked up speed and once Woodyard and Arnold were sure that they had control of the Albatross in the less choppy water so close to shore they ignited the JATO bottles and the Albatross lurched into the air and began climbing skimming the swells. The crew had agreed that they should fly the survivors to Kai Tak in Hong Kong with the best hospital facilities. As the Albatross turned North East towards Hong Kong the unidentified aircraft flew over the two Albatross. They were AD-4 Sky Raiders of the US Navy from the aircraft carrier USS Philippine Sea.

Capt Baker ordered all the aircraft to cover and escort Capt Woodyard’s Albatross and survivors, he reported that there were no more survivors and that all aircraft “get the hell out of here.”

The French Privateer announced over the radio that he was fully armed and was willing to repay the Chinese for the barbaric act. After much negotiation and profuse thanks for the support, Capt Woodyard managed to calm the French Pilot with an “aurevoire” The French Privateer turned around and headed back to Tourane. The Vickers Valetta broke off and headed for its final destination in Saigon along with the Avro York now heading for Singapore.

The remaining aircraft, 2 Hornets, Sunderland, and Skyraiders formed a perimeter around Woodyards Albatross and headed towards Hong Kong. On board Airman Second Class Smith provided what comfort and care he could to the survivors. Rita Cheung with the mangled leg laid on the floor drifting in and out of consciousness. Mrs. Parish in shock kept repeating “I have lost my husband, I have lost my sons.” Airman Rodriguez wrapped 6 year old Valerie Parish in his flight jacket to keep her warm.

Once safely away from Hainan Island the Sky Raiders split off and returned to their carrier. Within sight of Hong Kong Rita Cheung succumbed to her wounds. Airman Smith draped his flight jacket over her now lifeless frame.

At 16:15 Hong Kong Time Woodyard’s Albatross and the survivors landed at Kai Tak airport. The airfield was swarming with medical personnel and reporters. The survivors were rushed to Kowloon hospital for treatment. Once in the hospital it was then that Co-pilot Cedric Carlton finally realized that he had been shot and that the bullet had gone clear through the under portion of his arm.

The Flight Manager of Cathay Pacific Tom Bax stopped by the hospital to check on the survivors and the crew. Cedric showed him how he had a splint and bandages for a non-existent sprain on his right arm, but his left ankle was swollen to the size of a melon. On the next bed survivor Mr. Lui Luen-Fong showed Cedric and Tom his bandaged left leg, but swollen right wrist. Later a nurse came to check on the survivors and when Cedric was asked if he’d had bowel movement that day, Cedric replied “not voluntarily” the nurse missing the glib remark, immediately ordered him an enema.

Cedric Carlton’s ails did not end there.

Mum Louttit, the radio operator on the Cathay Pacific DC-3 from Hong Kong to Laubaun Malaysia who was the first to receive Stephen Wong’s distress radio transmission stayed hunkered over the radio during the entire flight waiting for any new information. When the Albatross with the survivors was on its way to Hong Kong Airmen Third Class Rodriguez passed around a piece of paper for everyone to write down their names. There were nine names on the paper and he counted nine survivors so he reported the names of the survivors written down to Kai Tak. A problem arose, one of the passengers Mr. Lui Luen-Fong had written down his name and an alias he used for business, meaning one survivor was not accounted for and that was Co-Pilot Cedric Carlton.

Mum Louttit contacted Cathay Pacific Airways operations in Kai Tak and requested the list of survivors and shared the list with the pilots of the DC-3 who knew the crew of the DC-4. They did not see Cedric’s name and assumed the worst. When the crew landed at Laubon they told the other flight crews what they had heard. One of the other crew members, a Captain McKenzie knew Cedric Carlton from his early flying days in Australia. When he heard that Cedric was not on the list of survivors he organized an impromptu wake for his friend with the other flight crews. As the night wore on, spirits poured freely and the spirits of the flight crews lamented the loss of their friend. The wake continued into the early morning. Capt McKenzie, his co-pilot and radio operator Mum Louttit still reeling the effects of the impromptu wake began their trip from Labuan to Hong Kong. Their condition did not make much difference to their performance, for several oil company passengers remarked they had never experienced landings so smooth before, wondering if it was the radio operator who had accomplished such a feat. When the crew checked in with flight operations they were overjoyed to hear that their friend Cedric Carlton was indeed alive and recovering in the Kowloon hospital.

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Theory #1

US Ambassador to Thailand William “Wild Bill” Donovan was supposed to fly on a C.A.T. transport that week. Donovan was known to travel frequently setting up CIA operations throughout South East Asia with the majority taking place in Vietnam. The Chinese had been aware of the CIAs covert activities in South East Asia, starting with the OSS after World War II. Shooting down the lead propagator of these activities would hopefully greatly diminish the CIA’s capabilities in the region.

The Chinese could have known about Donovan’s trip and prepared to set a trap. Donovan’s trip never occurs, but Cathay Pacific Airways VR-HEU does appear in the general area around the right time. The Chinese fighters are ordered to intercept. The pilots not knowing English and given a limited briefing are prepared to see a CAT aircraft, but instead encounter an aircraft with C P A on the fuselage. Figuring this is their target they open fire even though there is a large 5’ x 3’ Union Jack on the tail.

I don’t believe this theory. I don’t believe the Chinese would risk inciting action by the United States by shooting down and killing a member of its State Department just to quell covert actions in Vietnam.

Theory #2

The warlords of Taiwan, smarting at the expulsion from their Homeland, needed an incident. It should be a simple type of incident plausible to a world tired of war, but one that would bring immediate aid from a powerful friend.  
  
Taiwan intelligence decided on the destruction of a military Curtiss Commando C-46 cargo plane by Chinese fighters. Aboard would be a full load of volunteers dressed in the full trappings of high rank officers attending a conference in Bangkok.  
  
The shooting down must be close to a Chinese coastline, yet in International Waters and before the onset of the Continental Shelf. This would allow salvage operations if things got that far. The salvage would determine the bodies were indeed officers of substance.  
  
The eastern coast of Hainan Island was the perfect location, and furthermore, it had an approved Airways lane nearby. With their plans at an advanced stage Taiwan leaked the information to the Communist Chinese. The target was mouthwatering – to wipe out most of the Taiwan general staff must not be missed!  
  
On the morning of 23 July 1954 the Curtiss Commando left Taipei. About one hour later it had an engine failure and was forced to return to base. Meanwhile, Cathay’s DC-4, after its early mechanical delays, lumbered along in majestic dignity. At the calculated intercept point the Chinese La-11’s lurked. They swooped on their expected Curtiss Commando and blasted it into oblivion.

While the Kuomintang have done some disturbing and despicable things during the Chinese Civil War. I don’t think the ROC would be willing to lose a vital cargo aircraft, let alone load an entire aircraft full of volunteers destined to be shot down and killed be Chinese fighter, no matter how high their rank would appear.

Off the West coast of the Philippines United States Navy aircraft carriers CVA-74 USS Philippine Sea and CVA-12 USS Hornet along with the rest of the ships of the 7th Fleet were steaming into the South China Sea to conduct operations.

Having been at sea for almost twenty days the flight crews of VF-54 were heading up to the flight deck for their planned flight for the day. Budget cuts and lack and funds after the end of the Korean War permitted flight crews one flight every five days. Having flown two days in a row the previous days the pilots were ecstatic to be flying a third day in a row.

As the pilots neared their AD-4 Skyraiders they were called back to the ready room. The pilots figured that it was too good to be true, flying three days in a row. They were prepared to hear that their flight was cancelled.

At 0835 US Naval Base Subic Bay the duty officer on watch overheard the distress call from DC-4A VR-HEU. The distress call was confirmed by the duty officer at Clark AFB, the Rescue Control Center in Manila and Kai Tak Airport in Hong Kong. The message was relayed to the Commander of Naval Forces, Philippines Admiral Stump who then ordered the commander of the 7th Fleet to alter course and provide any assistance.

As the pilots from VF-54 piled back into their ready room prepared to be told that their flight was scrubbed, the Commander of Air Group 5 Cdr George Duncan, a triple ace from World War II, quieted the crews and told them that a British airliner had reported an engine fire and had lost contact somewhere off the coast of Hainan Island. They were ordered to takeoff and head towards to the last known broadcast position. Cdr Duncan relayed Admiral Stumps warning to the crews since they would flying close to Chinese controlled Hainan Island, approach not closer than 15 miles, but be quick on the trigger if rescue efforts are interfered with. A prophetic line.

8 Skyraiders from VF-54 launched off the USS Phillipine Sea and 8 Skyraiders from VF-95 were launched from the USS Hornet and headed North towards Hainan Island over 400 miles away. As they neared the location they tried to raise other aircraft in the area, but were unable. The Skyraiders spread out line abreast to cover more area to look for survivors. By the time they arrived in the area they saw the Albatross heading towards Tai Chau Tau island preparing for takeoff. Once the Albatross was airborne and clear of Hainan Island the Skyraiders turned around and headed back to their carrier. Search flights continued for the next two days, finding no further survivors or wreckage.

26 July 1954, the third day of search operations by aircraft from the USS Philippine Sea and USS Wasp. The previous two days had found no further survivors or wreckage. With Admiral Stumps warning to be “quick on the trigger” on everybody’s mind the rescue operations for the third day began. 7 Skyraiders from VF-54 took off from the Philippine Sea, 8 were planned, but one had to abort due to mechanical problems. Following the VF-54 were two night fighter AD-4N’s from VC-35. On board the Hornet 4 Skyraiders from VF-95 were ready to launch, along with a two night fighter F4U-5N Corsairs, and a AD-4W Guppy from VC-11 would serve as an airborne early warning and communications relay platform.

The group of Skyraiders, corsairs, and guppy headed towards the coast of Hainan to conduct another search for survivors or any signs of wreckage. They were not looking for a fight, but they were prepared. The Skyraiders and corsairs were fully armed and loaded with 4 20mm each.

The first element from VF-54 lead by CDr George Duncan with Ens. Dick Neubaurer flying as his wingman, formed up at 500 ft above the water with the second element. Above them and a mile behind at 2,000 feet was Lt Roy Tatham, minus his wingman who had aborted. At 3000 feet and another mile behind was Lt John Rochford and Ens Dick Crooks as his wingman. The two corsair Night Fighters from VC-35 were providing cover at 10,000 feet. 5 miles to the West the Skyraiders and Guppy mirrored the same formation, with the Guppy and two night fighter skyraiders at 10,000 feet.

The group arrived 15 miles off the south east coast of Hainan Island and for two hours flew back and forth off the coast maintaining a safe distance. Nothing was seen in the ocean below aside from two Polish freighters being escorted by four Chinese junks. The Skyraiders from Vf-54 descended down to over fly the freighters when Lt Roy Tatham noticed two aircraft diving out of the sun. His initial thought was they were the two night fighter skyraiders that had grown tired of escorting the Guppy and were heading down to investigate. As the fighters drew nearer Lt Tootham could clearly see they were night Skyraiders and called out “Break right, bogies at four o’clock, they’re making a run on us!”

The two aircraft tore through the formation guns blazing. They turned out to be two PLAAF La-11s with green mottled camouflage and the Chinese start clearly visible on the fuselage. The Skyraiders broke formation and Lt Tatham wheeled his Skyraider around onto the lead La-11’s tail. He let loose a barrage from his 4 20mm cannons that tore into the La-11. As the disabled La-11 fell through the formation of stirred up Skyraiders Ens Dick Crooks managed to place some parting shots on the La-11 before it crashed into the sea.

Dick Crooks element leader John Rochford got onto the tail of the second La-11. Following the fighter in a descending turn from 3,000 to 1,000 feet. He was in the perfect firing position, but nothing was happening. Lt Rochford cursed in his cockpit, realizing in the seconds of excitement he had forgotten to arm his guns. After he franctically pressed any and all buttons involved his guns were armed and he let loose a stream cannon fire that tore into the La-11, but it continued flying. Having expended all his ammunition and fixated on the target ahead Lt Rochford considered what other alternatives he had to bring down the La-11. Just then four Skyraiders flew past and unleashed a torrent of shells that tore the La-11 apart. As it spiraled down one of the corsairs having dived from it’s perch at 10,000 feet managed to score a few hits before it also plunged into the sea.

In the span of only two minutes the swarm of skyraiders had dispatched their assailants from the sun. As the crews checked in it was discovered that everyone was accounted for, no losses. As they passed back over the Polish freighters the Chinese junks opened fire. Cdr Duncan requested permission to strafe the junks, but was denied.

CDR George Duncan bragged “Although the pilots who participated in this flight are not familiar with air-to-air combat, they joined the battle without hesitation, demonstrating a willing aggressiveness equal to the most experienced fighter pilots. Throughout the action, their conduct certainly was in keeping with the highest tradition of Air Group Five and the Naval service.”

Lt Tatham, who had first seen the Chinese fighters diving out of the sun recalled “I didn’t mind the following along behind, but it kind of pissed me off when they started shooting.”

A total of 7 pilots were credited with a shared kill for the two La-11s.

26 Jul 1954 LA-7 VF-54 AD-4 Guns CVA-47 USN Lt. Roy M. Tatham

26 Jul 1954 LA-7 VF-54 AD-4 Guns CVA-47 USN Ens. Richard R. Crooks

26 Jul 1954 LA-7 VF-54 AD-4 Guns CVA-47 USN Lt. Cmdr. Paul J. Wahlstrom

26 Jul 1954 LA-7 VF-54 AD-4 Guns CVA-47 USN Lt. j.g. Richard S. Ribble

26 Jul 1954 LA-7 VF-54 AD-4 Guns CVA-47 USN Lt. j.g. John L. Damian

26 Jul 1954 LA-7 VF-54 AD-4 Guns CVA-47 USN Lt. j.g. John M. Rochford

26 Jul 1954 LA-7 VC-3 F4U-5N Guns CVA-12 USN Lt. Cmdr. Edgar B. Salsig

Thirteen months later the Chinese Government finally sent a letter to Cathay Pacific Airways. Inside was a check for the amount of 251,400, the cost of a war surplus DC-4A. Missing from the letter was any sort of apology or acknowledgement of what had happened.

https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index.html

* [VF-51](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_016.htm)
* [VC-61 Det. B](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_017.htm)
* [VF-53](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_018.htm)
* [VC-11 Det.](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_019.htm)
* [VF-54](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_020.htm)
* [VC-35 Det.](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_021.htm)
* [VF-92](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_022.htm)
* [VC-3 Det. B](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_023.htm)
* [HU-1 Det. 16](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv47-54/index_024.htm)

<https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index.html>

* [VF-91](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index_017.htm)
* [VF-93](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index_018.htm)
* [VF-94](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index_019.htm)
* [VA-95](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index_020.htm)
* [VC-3 Det. M](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index_021.htm)
* [VC-11 Det. M](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index_022.htm)
* [VC-35 Det. M](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index_023.htm)
* [VC-61 Det. M](https://www.navysite.de/cruisebooks/cv12-54/index_024.htm)

8 April 1965

Two F-4Bs VF-96 radio call sign Showtime from USS Ranger CVA-61 on Yankee Station heading towards a BARCAP over the Gulf of Tonkin. The two F-4s are tracked by Chinese radar entering Chinese airspace. The Chinese claim the F-4s over flew Yulin Naval Base on the southern part of the island. The Chinese were unable to respond before the F-4s left the area. The Chinese had declared a 30 mile “no-fly” zone extending from all boarders of China including Hainan island.

9 April 1965

0803 VF-96 prepares for another BARCAP sortie led by CDR Frazer and LTJG Christopher Billingsley radio Showtime 603 with LT Don Watkins LTJG Charles Hayes Showtime 610 as his wingman. (2 Aim-9 2 Sparrows, single tank) The third F-4B #151425 , crewed by LCDR William Greer and RIO LTJG Richard Bruning, experienced an engine flameout two thirds of the way down the catapult launch and crashed into the sea, both ejected and were picked up. The fourth F-4B, #151403 crewed by LTJG Terence M. Murphy and ENS Ronald J. Fegan Showtime 602 take over as element lead as number three (4 AIM-7). The spare F-4 crewed by LT Howard Watkins and LTJG John Mueller already prepped, but not in proper position to immediately take station on a catapult. This delay in positioning puts dozens of miles between Showtime 602 and Watkins. Eventually Watkins takes off as the new number four and climb to catch up with Showtime 602 through the broke to scattered clouds at 10,000 ft.

Showtime 603, Showtime 610, maneuver to take positions for the BARCAP. Flying a racetrack pattern at 35,000 ft, twenty-five miles East of Haiphong North Vietnam.

The first element Showtime 603 and Showtime 610 are on one set of frequencies talking to one radar controller, while Showtime 602 and Watkins and Mueller are their own set of frequencies with their own radar controller back on the Ranger.

The first pair Showtime 603 and 610 head north to take up station for their BARCAP 25 miles off the coast of Haiphong. Watkins and Mueller speed north to catch up with Showtime 602 crewed by Murphy and Fegan.

Rangers ship born Ground controlled intercept in the combat information center, Tac V Radio Callsign Gray Eagle, picks up three contacts 200 miles away from Showtime 602 and vectored them 1-1-0 towards the emerging threat. Showtime 602 turns towards the new heading and into the threat.

Minutes later over the radio Wakins and Mueller hear Showtime 602 call “three in the con.” Watkins and Mueller start scanning the sky, their radar and ask Gray Eagle for any additional information. Seconds later Watkins reports that he has been bounced by a fourth contact from the rear, a Chinese J-5. At the same time Showtime 602 reports they are being intercepted by three J-5s.

Watkins and Showtime 602 are alone and separated from each other.

Showtime 602 is dueling with 3 J-5s. Watkins dives through the clouds shoving the throttles forward and the engines into afterburner in an attempt to escape the J-5 on his tail. Showtime 602 pulls into a vertical climb towards the J-5s and fire off an AIM-7 Sparrow missile. The first missile launches and goes ballistic. 602 tries a second AIM-7, but it suffers a motor ignition failure falling away.

Minutes later Watkins hears “This is Showtime 602, out of missiles, RTB.” “Roger Showtime 602.” The radar controllers report seeing Showtime 602 turn away from Hainan island.

Gray Eagle assigned to Showtime 603 and 610 calls them from their BARCAP to assist Showtime 602 and Watkins.

Showtime 603 and Showtime 610 arrive in the area. Showtime 603 launches locks up a target with a AIM-7 Sparrow and launches

Showtime 610 fired an AIM-7 at a J-5 in “ideal interception conditions” but the motor failed to ignite. 610 followed up by launching a pair of AIM-9 Sidewinders. One released and started tracking while the other failed to leave the rail, followed by a second AIM-7.

Lead, Showtime 603 attempted to launch an AIM-7, but it failed to leave the rail. Showtime 603 reports seeing the J-5 maneuver and avoid the single AIM-9 fired by 610. Showtime 603 tried to fire another AIM-7, but that also failed to launch.

In the middle of the melee Watkins reported seeing an aircraft spiral out of the clouds trailing flames and smoke, supposing it was a MIG call over the radio “Good shooting, who got him?”

0905 After an engagement that lasted less 18 minutes the aircraft of VF-96 running low on fuel exit the area and form up on an A-3B tanker that was diverted from supporting a Rolling Thunder strike package. As they form up they realize of the four aircraft that had taken off, only three have formed up. Gray Eagle reports that they do not have Showtime 602 on their radar.