

"TWO FLAGS OVER CANTON"



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PHOENIX ISLANDS

TWO FLAGS OVER CANTON

The pork chop-shaped Canton Atoll and its seven neighbors in the Phoenix Islands are located in the Polynesian area of the south-central Pacific. Although minor archeological sites (stone platforms) have been found on Sydney and Hull Islands, the entire group was uninhabited when visited by American whaling vessels and British warships in the early part of the Nineteenth Century. While Enderbury Island (originally called Enderby) was discovered and reported by a British captain in 1823, the first discovery of Canton is unknown. The location of the latter was shown, however, in a Secretary of the Navy list of Pacific Islands in 1828. Designated at one time or another as Mary, Swallow and Mary Balcout, it was named Canton by an American captain in 1872. This nomenclature came from the New Bedford whaler "Canton" which piled up on the atoll's reef on 5 March 1854. Following salvage operations and a brief sojourn, the 32 men departed (30 March) in four small boats. After a remarkable 49-day voyage of some 3,200 miles with great hardships from hunger and thirst, the sailors arrived safely at Guam and were ultimately returned to their New England port via Hong Kong.

Literally teeming with local and migratory shore birds and seafowl, it was not surprising that the next commercial concern in the area involved guano mining. On 8 February 1860, "Mary's Island" was one of the Pacific islands claimed by citizens of the United States under the "Guano Act" of 1856. Although there is no record to indicate that American guano diggers occupied Canton, they periodically worked at Enderbury between 1860 and 1890. On the other hand, a British company removed guano from Canton in 1885 and 1886. Soon after this use (about 1889), Canton was one of the Phoenix Islands annexed by Great Britain for potential use as a cable station. In 1899, the British leased the island to the Pacific Islands Company but they did not develop it. A subsequent lease to the Samoan Shipping and Trading Company in 1916 resulted in planting of coconut palms at Canton and some outlying islands (notably Hull where copra-cutting camps were established).

Captain Charles Kingsford-Smith selected Canton as an emergency landing place during his pioneering flight (in the "Southern Cross") from Oakland, California to Brisbane, Australia on 31 May to 9 June 1928. Though not utilized, it foreshadowed aviation developments a decade later.

International interest in this area increased markedly in the late 1930s. On 6 August 1936, the British reasserted their sovereignty over Canton and followed this on 8 April 1937 with placement of the Phoenix Islands in their Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. A few weeks later, both American and New Zealand scientific expeditions arrived at Canton to observe a total eclipse of the sun on 8 June. While friendly in their relationships, both groups claimed sovereignty for their respective governments (the Americans erected a concrete marker with a stainless-steel flag on Memorial Day). On 31 August, shortly after departure of the scientists, representatives of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands established a permanent residence on Canton. This action was followed the next year with colonizing of Sydney, Hull and Gardner Islands (renamed Manra, Orono and Nikomaroro) by natives from the overcrowded Gilberts. Despite major efforts (the number on Hull grew to 610), existence was only marginal and they were eventually resettled (by the mid-1960s) in the Solomon Islands.

While the British occupation was taking place, President Roosevelt on 3 March 1938 issued an executive order placing Canton and Enderbury Islands under the control and jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior. Three days later, a small group of Americans settled on Enderbury; on 7 March, four other United States citizens established a similar base camp on Canton. Next, on 1 April 1938, the Secretary of the Interior granted Pan American Airways a license to use Canton as a scheduled stop for trans-Pacific flights. Hence, the company cleared the lagoon and started development of a seaplane base with related land facilities immediately south of the main ship channel on the western side of the atoll. One of these was a lighthouse which was named Musick Light to honor the captain of the Pan American "Samoa Clipper" who (with his crew) was lost at sea (near Tutuila Island) on an experimental survey flight across the southern Pacific on 11 January 1938.

The peaceful conflict of interest culminated in a 6 April 1939 agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom for 50-year joint control and administration of Canton and Enderbury Islands (the other Phoenix Islands remaining in a jointly claimed status, with American activity limited and the British exercising varying degrees of administration and control from time-to-time.

The related exchange of notes specifically provided for construction and operation of an airport at Canton by an American company which, in return for an agreed fee, could be used by British aircraft companies. Thus, starting in July 1940, Pan American Airways utilized Canton as a stop-over and refueling station for its flying-boat service between Honolulu and Auckland. In addition, the airline station manager served as the Department of Interior representative.

The "Flying Clipper" service through Canton was soon overtaken by military developments. To provide for ferrying of bombardment aircraft to the Philippines, the Army Air Forces first utilized a central Pacific route in September 1941. Since this course via Midway and Wake was extremely close to Japanese forces in the mandated islands, the Army Armed Forces requested approval of a South Pacific ferry route. This approach was accepted on 3 October and the Hawaiian Department of the Army promptly dispatched survey parties to investigate the possibility of providing an airfield at Canton (and other locations) by 15 January 1942. A 308-man party (with required equipment and supplies) departed Oahu on 3 November. Arriving on the 14th, the Army engineers started construction of a 5000-foot rolled coral runway on the northwest rim of the atoll. Progress in this effort was temporarily disrupted by the attack on Pearl Harbor which resulted in discontinuance of commercial aviation, evacuation of civilians and turnover of the island to the Armed Forces.

Until arrival of Task Force 942 (Army and Army Air Forces personnel) in January 1942, minimum defense was provided by the engineers. With this augmentation, adequate ground defense was provided (air defense did not arrive until 11 September), operating and base support people were available, and construction begun on an extension of the runway (to 6000 feet),

airfield support facilities, barracks, storehouses, a hospital, fortifications, camp sites, a perimeter road and dredging of the entrance channel. Although emergency use of the basic runway began on 6 January (three B-17s enroute to the Philippines), regular operations started on April 23, with Canton as a key point in the so-called "South Pacific Airways" of the Air Corps Ferrying Command (later designated as the Air Transport Command).

In addition to being a hub of Pacific air movement, Canton was used for anti-submarine search and photographic reconnaissance-bombing missions in 1942 and the first half of the following year. During the latter part of 1943, it became a major base for conquest of the Gilbert Islands. In preparation for this use, a 6800-foot fighter strip (also compacted coral) was constructed along the northern rim. At the height of the Seventh Air Force pre-invasion deployment in early November, the following units were located at Canton: 26th Bombardment Squadron (B-24s); 392nd Bombardment Squadron (B-24s); 531st Fighter-Bomber Squadron (A-24s); 46th Fighter Squadron (P-39s); 422nd Sub-Depot; and a detachment of the 17th Air Base Squadron.

Although there was no actual combat on Canton, the buildup in 1943 elicited Japanese attacks. On 30 January, for instance, it was shelled by a submarine. During the following six months, there were several attempted bombing raids. None of these were successful; the closest call coming on 22 July when the enemy released his bombs just off the atoll.

Starting with the 308 construction people in November 1941, the number of military increased rapidly. By March 1942, for example, there were 1,143 Army personnel at Canton. Altogether, a total of 30,000 military (mostly Americans) were reported to have been stationed there during World War II.

Soon after the Japanese surrender, the Civil Aeronautics Administration (became the Federal Aviation Agency in 1958) sent representatives to Canton. In November 1946, the CAA Island Manager was designated as Field Representative of the Department of Interior (and later as Deputy Marshal for the Justice Department). This individual served as a counterpart

to the British Commissioner of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. Initially, Pan American resumed commercial service using the former military runway. In October 1948, however, the Civil Aeronautics Administration started a development program (reported to have reached \$2.8 million) in such capital improvements as reconstituting runway (four inches of asphaltic concrete over a six to nine inch crushed coral base), roads, buildings and equipment to support a major airport facility. Since most of the developments were located north of the ship channel, this portion became known as "Northside" or the American area. On the other hand, the portion below the entrance which contained the Pan American and British housing was referred to as "Southside" or the British area.

The height of commercial aviation activities was in the 1950s when there were four major airlines: Pan American, Qantas Empire, Canadian Pacific and British Overseas Airways Corporation. The Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) operated an International Flight Service Station, maintained landing facilities and air navigation aids and furnished power, water and sanitation facilities; the United States Weather Bureau provided meteorological services; the Standard Oil Company of California maintained refueling systems; and Murray Air maintained facilities in support of transiting aircraft. Throughout this decade there were approximately 300 people residing at Canton. In August 1959, for instance, there were 330 (176 Americans and 154 British subjects). Most of these people were connected with airfield operations and administration, but two small commercial fishing enterprises (one British and the other American) started in 1951. Among the numerous war mementos at Canton during this period was the "President Taylor." This troopship which had grounded on the reef during delivery of the initial task force in January 1942 was utilized as a clubhouse until fire gutted the vessel in 1954.

With advent of jet aircraft, the airlines ceased their regularly scheduled flights into Canton and designated it as an emergency stop only (the last scheduled stop was made by Qantas on 7 September 1959). The Federal Aviation Agency, nonetheless, continued to provide flight services at the installation.

During the same week when Qantas started overflying Canton, a National Aeronautics and Space Administration site survey team selected the installation as Station #11 in its projected worldwide Project Mercury tracking network. Since this location was within the Pacific Missile Range's geographic territory, the civilian space agency made an agreement with the Navy (30 October 1959) for the latter to construct the required technical facilities. Actual construction was made between 22 May and 6 November 1960 in the area of the former fighter strip on the northern rim. The new range station became operational on 1 April 1961 and supported the Mercury orbital flights with the acquiring, monitoring and recording of telemetry data, and providing voice communications. Further, by agreement with the host (10 March 1961), the Federal Aviation Agency furnished base and logistics support (including operation of point-to-point communications). As a note of interest, the FAA continued to maintain the airport in good condition. In October 1963, for instance, the runway, taxiways and parking areas were resealed by an Hawaiian contractor.

With transfer of operational responsibilities for major portions of the Pacific Missile Range on 1 February 1965, the Air Force Western Test Range assumed operation of the National Aeronautics & Space Administration (NASA) telemetry station at Canton. Soon thereafter (23 March), the site successfully supported the first manned flight in Project Gemini (astronauts Virgil Grissom and John Young). Western Test Range tenure at Canton Atoll, however, was short-lived. At the time of the transfer, a determination had already been made that there were no Department of Defense requirements for the instrumentation site and the question posed as to whether it should be transferred to NASA or continue under Air Force management with full reimbursement by the civilian space agency. With a decision by NASA to assume operational responsibility, station management was transferred on 1 May 1965.

The civilian space agency was soon destined to operate more than the tracking station. With a marked aviation decline following conversion to jet aircraft (about 30 operations per month by mid-1963), there was a gradual reduction in the number of FAA employees. In early 1964, this continuing decrease resulted in relocation of the International Flight Service Station

to America Samoa. Finally, on 30 June 1965, FAA activities were terminated completely at Canton and the phased-down installation turned over to NASA. The civilian space agency continued to operate the telemetry station through the final Gemini operation on 11 November 1966. With determination that the tracking site would not be needed in the Apollo instrumentation network, NASA ceased all operations on 31 December 1967.

Meantime, evacuation of the Gilbertese from the southern Phoenix Islands in combination with the decline in commercial aviation resulted in a steady erosion of the British community. By mid-1964, they had closed their separate post office and had replaced their European Commissioner with a native from the Gilbert Islands. Even token British presence was finally removed concurrently with departure of the Federal Aviation Agency.

Upon termination of all activities at Canton Atoll by the end of 1967 and no known use, the Department of the Interior authorized the Government of American Samoa to salvage whatever they wanted from the deactivated installation. During the spring and summer of 1968, the Samoans removed operable vehicles, construction equipment, refrigeration and air conditioning equipment, plumbing fixtures, office equipment, furniture, and even a few buildings. By the time this salvage operation was nearing completion, a potential new American military use was projected. Hence, to insure continuing United States control and to safeguard the residue of facilities, equipment and material pending authorization for this use, the Air Force arranged in the fall of 1968 for a small security force of American Samoans to remain at the location. This caretaker arrangement continued until initial Space and Missile Test Center deployment at its Canton Island Operation Location on 18 September 1970.

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11 January 1971

CHRONOLOGY OF CANTON AREA

- Prehistoric: Phoenix Islands contain evidence of minor use by Polynesians (uninhabited in 19th Century).
- 1823: Captain of British vessel reported discovery of Enderbury.
- 1828: What later became known as Canton shown on U. S. Sec of Navy list of Pacific Islands (date of discovery unknown).
- 5 Mar 1854: New Bedford whaler "Canton" piled up on reef (named for this wrecked ship in 1872).
- 8 Feb 1860: U. S. guano companies claimed Canton but did not use it; Americans, however, periodically removed fertilizer from Enderbury between 1850 and 1890.
- About 1889: Canton annexed by Great Britain as a potential cable site.
- Spring 1928: Beginning of aviation interest in area.
- 6 Aug 1936: British reasserted their sovereignty over Canton.
- 8 Apr 1937: British placed Phoenix Islands in their Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony.
- 8 June 1937: American and New Zealand scientific expeditions observe total eclipse of sun at Canton (both groups claimed sovereignty for their respective governments).
- 31 Aug 1937: Representatives of Gilbert and Ellice Islands established permanent residence on Canton (followed up next year with colonization of Sydney, Hull and Gardner Islands).

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- 3 Mar 1938 U. S. placed Canton and Enderbury under Dept of Interior (within a week, a permanent residence was established on Canton and a temporary base camp on Enderbury).
- 6 Apr 1939: Agreement between U. S. and U. K. for 50-year joint use and control of Canton and Enderbury.
- Jul 1940: After development of a seaplane base, Pan American Airways began service at Canton (regular stop between Honolulu and Auckland).
- 14 Dec 1941: Army engineers started construction of runway on northwest rim of Canton Atoll (vanguard of approximately 30,000 military stationed at Canton during World War II).
- Jan 1942: Army and Army Air Forces Task Force arrived at Canton.
- 23 Apr 1942: Regular operations started at Canton as key point in "South Pacific Airways" of Air Transport Command.
- Nov 1943: With construction of fighter strip, used as a major base for conquest of Gilbert Islands.
- 1946: Returned to civilian control (American and British) with resumption of commercial aviation.
- 1948-1958: Civil Aeronautics Administration (later FAA) developed and operated Canton as an International Flight Service Station (used by Pan American, Qantas Empire, Canadian Pacific and BOAC).
- 7 Sep 1959: Last scheduled stop at Canton (emergency use only thereafter for jet aircraft).
- 30 Oct 1959: NASA made agreement with Navy to construct and operate a Project Mercury tracking station at Canton (became operational on 1 Apr 1961).

- 1 Feb 1965: Air Force Western Test Range assumed management of telemetry station (successfully supported first manned flight in Project Gemini on 23 Mar).
- 1 May 1965: Telemetry station management transferred to NASA.
- 30 Jun 1965: Closing of Canton to civilian aviation. FAA and British departed with installation turned over to NASA.
- 31 Dec 1967: NASA departed Canton (tracking site not needed in Apollo support network).
- Jan 1968: Dept of Interior authorized Government of American Samoa to salvage whatever it wanted from deactivated installation.
- Fall 1968: Air Force arranged for small security force of American Samoans to remain at Canton (pending authorization for a new American military use).
- 18 Sep 1970: With diplomatic permission, initial Space and Missile Test Center deployment at its Canton Island Operating Location.
- 1 Nov 1970: Assignment to SAMTEC of Canton Island Auxiliary Airfield (with Birnie, Enderbury and Hull Tracking Annexes).
- 24 Dec 1970: Contract awarded to Kentron Hawaii, Ltd., for logistics and base support at Canton.
- 25 Jan 1971: Completion of Operational Readiness Tests on initial support configuration in Phoenix Islands.

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