Establishing SITA in the Far East, Australasia & Pacific area.

I landed in Indochina in 1950 as a member of the French Air Forces. Then in 1953, I joined the DGAC (Direction Générale de l'Aviation Civile) and was posted as Chief engineer at the Saigon Regional Flight Control Centre. In 1956 as the 3 states of French Indochina were moving towards independence SITA proposed to take over the existing AFTN (Aeronautical Fixed Telecommunication Network) in a similar way that Aerosiam was operating In Thailand. I was therefore transferred to Air France and seconded to SITA in order to provide technical support and some AFTN know-how to the local SITA management. To be brief that project failed as the new independent states were expecting to obtain all necessary equipment and technical support from USAid , Colombo Plan and other similar sources.

The SITA telegraphic network in Asia, inherited from Air France, was covering former French Indochina with two main centres: Saigon and Hanoi, the latter going to be closed following the Geneva agreement. The other centres were Hué, Tourane, Dalat, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Savannakhet, Pakse et Phnom Penh. C Bodier was the Regional Manager.

With the end of the fighting following the Geneva conference the local airlines activities decreased substantially and the small SITA centres of Vietnam and Laos were shut down one after the other. Only in Cambodia a new centre was implemented at Siem Reap (Angkor Wat) at the request of Air Cambodge. Meanwhile at the request of TAI (Transports Aériens Intercontinentaux) two new centres were established in the Pacific at Papeete and Noumea. These new centres were staffed by teletype operators only, no more Morse code operators as it was earlier the case in Indochina.

H Ruelle, who had taken over after C Bodier, left for Africa and I was posted at Bangkok. We were at a peak moment of the cold war and decolonisation. Organizations similar to SITA, such as AERADIO or ARINC were leaving Asia either from their own will or by force and so were doing many foreign companies.

In the huge Asia-Pacific area the SITA network was covering only a couple of main cities (Hong Kong and Manila) whereas the number of airlines operating in the area was increasing with the creation of new national carriers, the opening of new places to tourism and so was doing the need for improved telecommunications. On the other hand all local PTTs, with only one or two exceptions, were retrenched behind their monopoly statute into which they would never consider any break-through.

On the AFTN commercial messages were holding the lowest priority, were chargeable, and some countries like India would not even accept them. It was therefore obvious that an entity like SITA, specialized in that activity, covering the world and open to all airlines was the right solution but having such goal within the prevailing environment of the time appeared like a totally unrealistic dream.

By then we were in 1964 and I was more or less in charge of Thailand, Laos, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. I say more or less as in fact I was still a UA (local manager) while holding the power of attorney for a dozen of countries in Asia/Pacific.

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Just for a change a short anecdote about these powers. I was in a Public Notary's office at Noumea and a clerk had handed my powers document to his boss:

-Where is Mao ?
It was the time of the "Hundred flowers" in China and I answered:
- Probably in Beijing !
- I am not talking about the man but about a country.
- ???
- You are holding a document which mentions Mao, have never heard of such country. Your document has been stamped and registered in France and Belgium, has nobody ever queried about it?
- Apparently not, it must be a mistake but I will find out.

At the moment we could not find any proper explanation. Mongolia and Malaysia were written in full but what about Mao?

Back home I looked at the English version of the powers I was using in Thailand: It was Macau which in French is spelt Macao and the typist had missed two letters so it came out as Mao.

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So I was still seconded from the DGAC from which administration I never received any instruction and I started working on my own plan, negotiating with local administrations, convincing new airlines to join SITA and persuading others to release private circuits in favour of SITA network.

In 1967 I implemented SITA in Sri Lanka (Colombo) and in 1968 in New Zealand (Auckland) then in 1970 in India (Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and later Madras) as well as in Burma (Rangoon).

 In 1970 I was transferred to Hong Kong, a better place to cover the Far East & Pacific. Furthermore Hong Kong was becoming our first computerized centre in Asia. That was the time of the Vietnam War and US charter airlines were joining SITA to make use of our regional coverage. In the same year we opened new centres in Taiwan (Taipei), in the Fiji Islands (Suva and Nandi) while in Australia the Sydney centre operated by TAA (Trans Australia Airlines) was transferred to SITA.

In Malaysia the Kuala Lumpur centre was opened in 1971, being connected to Singapore, the very year Singapore became an independent state separated from Malaysia. On the same year the SITA network was extended to Nepal (Kathmandu), as well as to Vanuatu, then known as New Hebrides, (Port Vila) and through party-lines to American Samoa (Pago Pago) and Western Samoa (Apia) thus completing the South Pacific coverage.

I did seriously considered in 1972 the implementation of SITA in Okinawa. I studied on site the feasibility of such a project, as it was important for the US charter airlines serving Vietnam. However that island, which since the end of WW2 had remained under American control, was finally returned to Japan and the project had to be cancelled, Japan still being a bastion of NTT (Nippon Telegraph & Telephone) and of KDD (Kokusai Denchin Denwa from Mandarin for International Telegraph & Telephone), bastion into which no company or entity had been able to penetrate so far.

By August 1972 I finally managed to open a centre in South Korea (Seoul) a former Japanese colony that until then had been following the attitude of Japan in terms of telecommunications

An insurrection started in 1971 inside East Pakistan which ended with the creation of a new state, the Bangladesh, with the capital Dacca where another SITA centre became operational in 1973.

On the same year the potential volume of traffic in and out of the Sultanate of Brunei justified the opening of a centre in Bandar Seri Begawan (former Jesselton).

Finally a satellite processor was installed in Tokyo in 1975 : a positive issue after the most lengthy negotiations which I am been facing during my career. SITA had started negotiating in 1950 if I am right. Later a SITA envoy, Mr Moulinj, had spent more than a year in Japan without success, and I had personally taken over that job in 1970. In the following years the Tokyo centre was upgraded to the level of the major centres of SITA and the network extended to Osaka and other Japanese cities.

The fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh meaning the end of the Vietnam War occurred in 1975. In Laos the Vientiane centre remained operational all along these events. In Vietnam the Saigon centre was closed but kept in good shape by the staff remaining on site. In Cambodia the Phnom Penh staff were sent to the countryside from where none of them came back while the Siem Reap operator was shot dead on the spot.

During a conference held at Vientiane in 1977 between the Lao and Vietnamese authorities, IATA and SITA, for the reopening of the Amber One corridor over Laos and Vietnam I had made contacts with the new Vietnamese administration and seized that opportunity to discuss the reopening of SITA in Vietnam. I finally obtained satisfaction but the new centre had to be located at Hanoi and not Saigon since all international flights had to land at Hanoi. This new centre became operational in 1979. But rules were modified as the economy growth and five years later Saigon Tan Son Nhut airport was reopened to the international traffic and so was the Saigon SITA centre.

The year 1978 saw in Indonesia after very lengthy negotiations the transfer to SITA of the Jakarta centre which had been since 1960 operated by Garuda on behalf of SITA. In Jakarta the former Financial Manager of SITA, Mr Snitselaar, had spent two years in vain negotiations on that subject.

Tourism was expanding to the Indian Ocean and furthermore commercial activities were growing between India and the Maldives, the Seychelles and the Mascareigns Islands and so were doing airlines activities. My attention turned to this area and centres and party-lines were established in Maldives (Mahe), as well as the Seychelles (Victoria) and Mauritius (Port Louis), the latter centre having not been created by our region.

Implementation of party-lines were also justified to extend the network to Guam (Agana) and the Mariana Islands (Saipan) in Micronesia.

Along with Deng Xiao Ping's economic reforms China open itself to the external world and the airlines activities increased following the same path. I was tracing that evolution while establishing contacts with the concerned parties and in 1980 we were able to open a centre in Beijing and a second centre in Shanghai in 1983. Canton was opened a few years later. As foreign airlines began to serve directly smaller cities in China we

provided the service to them by installing VSAT stations in the cities concerned such as Kunming and Urumchi.

Pyong Yang, the North Korean capital was opened in 1987 as well as Port-Moresby in New Guinea.

Meanwhile the future of Hong Kong was very uncertain as a substantial part of the colony, the New Territories, were to be returned to China by 1997. I was looking for a back up solution for what was now SITA's main centre in Asia and my attention moved to Singapore because of its location at the centre of a region covering the Far East, the Pacific and Australasia. Furthermore that city-state was modernizing rapidly and was providing to the telecommunications oriented business, in addition to the satellite links, the access to an important knot of sub-marine cables which provide much better response time for the conversational mode of operation. On the island a certain area had been reserved for the installation of activities related to the aeronautics and I made a request for a 60-year leasing agreement at a very reasonable rate on which land SITA would build-up its new centre. The request was granted, as well as the assurance that we could import the qualified manpower for starting the business, and a few more requests important to us. Once all formalities were completed I joined my new base at Singapore in November 1988.

On the same year, after the defeat of the Khmers Rouges in Cambodia and with the effective support of Aeroflot, I was able to reopen the Phnom Penh centre with two VSAT stations located in town and at the airport.

The Portuguese enclave of Macau had been until then served by telex from Hong Kong. However with the appearance of data transmission and the enlargement of the airport I opened a SITA centre in the territory.

Answering to the new need for communications with the Bhutan where the Paro airport (elev. 2280m) opened to international traffic I installed in 1993 a centre in its capital, Thimpu.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Mongolia regained its independence and a SITA centre connected to Hong Kong was created in 1991 at the capital, Ulaanbaatar.

In the Asian environment of the last century, when SITA was unknown by local administrations, the PTTs retrenched in their monopoly, the new national airlines keen to do everything by themselves and no one willing to make any commitment on paper all progresses were made by establishing good relations with the parties concerned in order to get their consent to our requests. All agreements were purely verbal: promises made by the PTTs that they will indeed provide the circuits in time and on presently agreed terms, made by the new airlines that they will join SITA, made by other airlines that they will transfer their private circuits to SITA if that was the case, and made by me to the PTTs concerned that their revenue will not decrease as a result of our actions. In fact it worked well as each party kept to its own words. There were two main reasons for it: the Far East business mentality familiar with such approach, and the proper timing of the projects which, promptly completed, suited well the potential users.

Actually I was extremely lucky to be trusted by SITA top management and to be well supported and understood in that approach by the Operations and Personnel Departments. Through a formal organisation only part of this program could have been

achieved and competitors would be there whereas at that stage SITA had remained the only shared network opened to all airlines while covering the whole of the Far East, Australasia and Pacific area.

Not so sure about it? Well let's see a real case:

In 1966 while being a UA in Bangkok I received the instruction to join the SITA Financial and Operations Managers visiting Colombo for a study about the opening of a centre there at the request of UTA (Union des Transports Aériens). We stayed two days in the city as a meeting had been arranged with the Director of OTS (Overseas Telecommunications Services). The SITA request was the rental of a 15wpm circuit with Hong Kong to which the answer was: "Yes but not less than 30 wpm" and we went back home. Some weeks later I was instructed to go to Colombo and proceed with the installation of the centre. While on site I discussed with the UTA manager who told me that when he heard earlier that AERADIO was installing a centre for Air Ceylon he requested his management to order a circuit for UTA as he did not want staying behind in term of communications. Two centres in such a small place that sounded strange to me, I informed our HDQ accordingly but no feedback from them. About six weeks later a wind of panic, our HDQ had realized that both projects had been based on the same participants and that neither project was sustainable with only half of them.

New meeting in Colombo held this time with both AERADIO and SITA. The Air Ceylon CEO explained that he had asked SITA HDQ to open a centre in Ceylon. Six months later having received no news about that subject he asked again and was told that a project was under study. While still waiting for news he met the AERADIO manager who replied positively and that where we were standing by then. To make it short let's go to the conclusion: SITA will manage the new centre but AERADIO should not bear any losses and SITA will have to re-employ AERADIO staff, take its premises, support the costs for the transfer of circuits, and so on.

From that story I concluded that: Primo SITA had to take the lead while building its network and kept itself well aware of airlines needs, not waiting for them to approach and bring in other providers. Secundo such local projects should be prepared and managed at regional and local level where the majority of problems have to be solved before being presented by the HDQ to the Board for approval.

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In 1980, I was made aware by G Giraudbit that SITA intended to provide a new service: AIRCOM, based on ACARS (Aircraft Communication Addressing and Reporting System) technology. For memory the purpose of the system is for an aircraft to transmit automatically, at that time through VHF, some technical data to be retransmitted by SITA to the airline concerned. I was immediately interested by this project as it was reviving the "Aéronautiques" part of SITA's name as air to ground communications had disappeared together with the use of Morse. I recruited Ron Fox for the job of promoting and demonstrating the service and the first user has been Ansett Airlines of Australia, followed one year later by Qantas. In1984. AIRCOM became a global service when in Europe Air Inter and Lufthansa joined it and a link established between the ARINC and SITA systems thus providing AIRCOM access to US carriers.

The first CUTE (Common Users Terminal Equipment) system was installed in Frankfurt followed one year later by Los Angeles. It was also an interesting project bringing SITA back to airport activities. I recruited Nigel Dickson and posted him in Singapore for presenting the project to the airlines with Keith Parker in charge of its implementation. It worked well and within a few years, at the time I retired, CUTE had been selected and was operational at Hong Kong Kai Tak, Taipei Chang Kai-Shek, Bangkok Don Muang and Singapore Changi T1 while at Manila Ninoy Aquino International airport the installation of CUTE was underway.

To succeed in business it is necessary to know what the customer wants but equally important it is to offer him what he needs. In the early days of SITA a large portion of its staff had been transferred from airlines. In small centres even the Morse operators had contacts with the crews and knew airlines problems whereas the airlines ' local managers were coming to the centres to pickup their messages and mentioned their own communication problems to SITA. Then the air to ground communications disappeared with the Morse, hand delivery was replaced by teletype circuits, the airport manned centres moved to town. For two decades the SITA network was modernizing, which is excellent, but it had lost its aeronautical accent and could as well be servicing a group of supermarkets. ACARS and CUTE for instance have not been created by SITA and we, in the field, could feel that our HDQ was waiting for requests or suggestions from its members before moving ahead either on network extension or to new services.

In our region I always instructed the local managers to keep close contacts with airlines and report their findings to me. In countries where there was no SITA centre I did visit airlines regularly until I could find enough materiel to justify the presence of SITA on the sites concerned.

That is for a summary of the implementation of SITA in the Far East, Australasia and Pacific, now just a bit of history.