

SITA's lengthy journey to Japan.

The following SITA story is also the tale of a personal venture within the Japanese environment at the end of WW2.

In those days I was an engineer based at Saigon where I had been momentarily transferred from the French Civil Aviation Administration – CAA - to SITA for various projects that had not materialised and I was rather worried about what my future would be. At SGNXS, I was the only one familiar with the implementation and support of radio-teletype - RTTY - equipment as I had already implemented such equipment for the CAA. SITA had a plan to establish RTTY circuits Saigon/Antananarivo and Antananarivo/Paris to replace the existing but very slow radio Morse code circuit. A direct radio link Saigon/Paris was considered unreliable for providing 24/24 hours service because of poor short wave propagation between these two locations at certain hours of the day. That project did appear to be a good opportunity for me but unfortunately the Vietnamese authorities based on ITU recommendations stopped the project as they intended to provide and lease themselves such circuits to potential users. However the South Vietnamese Administration was willing to purchase the 10kw transmitter that SITA had foreseen for its own use. For that reason I started renovating that second hand equipment in order to conclude the deal. The Vietnamese team who came for the test did not seem too familiar with the radio-teletype so I suggested to make a live test with another station for them to be certain that the whole set-up was in perfect order but the team leader replied that they had brand new equipment on hands and all they needed was to get the transmitter in perfect order. In fact it is only some years later that I learnt that the real purpose for them to acquire that transmitter was to use it for jamming Hanoi broadcasting towards South Vietnam.

As I was working on the equipment Mr Bodier, the Regional Representative for the Far East came to the site and introduced to me a Dutchman, Mr Moulinj, and said: "Since myself will be leaving in a near future Mr Moulinj will be your new boss based in Tokyo". I was never to see Mr Moulinj again and I learnt later that after spending 10 months in Tokyo his conclusion was that SITA like all other telecom organizations had absolutely no chance to operate in Japan under its present laws. I then thought that Japan could be a door towards my future: A door, yes, but well locked and no key in sight!

Not long after, a small event reinforced my belief that maybe with my knowledge of the Far East I could make some progress in Japan. We were expanding Vientiane SITA radio station and the transmitters were installed in Air Laos compound. A problem arose when installing the half-wave aerials. For one frequency the space available was too short for extending the wire unless we could fix one end of it into the Bank of Tokyo neighbouring building, Mr Bodier said: "We have already asked them and the answer is "no". The Air Laos' Manager made a similar statement, adding that an exchange of letters with the Bank of Tokyo's local manager had come to nothing. It was near 40°C all around and we were working under the sun in short pants. I endorsed a T-shirt, went to the bank and asked for the local manager. His French was not better than my English at that time but we managed to understand each other. I explained that the project was a major one to guarantee aircraft safety, that important and necessary weather information were exchanged through the radio station and consequently frequent flyers like ourselves should feel concerned about our own safety... and I got finally a positive

answer. Comforting my mind this short story told me that a final Japanese “no” still hides some flexibility.

Like all other people around me I knew nothing about Japan. To improve my knowledge I decided to spend two weeks of my annual vacation there and I applied for Japanese visas and two GP2 10pc passes for myself and for my wife. Obtaining hard currencies was a major problem in those days and we finally left with something like 20 US\$ in cash and the rest to be collected at a partner of the Banque de l’Indochine somewhere in Tokyo.

There were a few De Luxe accommodations in Tokyo such as the ones where airline crews were staying but where we could not financially survive for more than a few days so to avoid such situation I had obtained from a seaman friend a list of reasonable guest houses where to stay in the main cities of Japan. After landing at Tokyo Haneda we took a taxi to proceed to the hotel. Immediately something looked quite familiar to me : all taxis were the small Renault 4CV with their rear engines. That was going to be the only familiar thing I would see that time in Japan.

Once at the hotel, since I had no cash, I showed my bank document to the manager who seemed to be familiar with such approach and told me:

- Tomorrow a lady from our staff will escort you to the bank.
- Not necessary, just write the bank address on a paper and I will show it to the driver.
- No, the taxi will not know exactly where it is, he will drop you somewhere around and you will never find it.

I was thinking to be a bit cleverer than that man believed I was but since he was willing to give me an escort why not.

So the next morning we left for the bank. The 4CV taxi dropped us somewhere as foreseen and believe it or not it took two hours walking round and round through the small streets of the district for my Japanese escort to find the bank office. During that search I discovered that Tokyo streets had no name and the houses had no number. The US army had solved their own problems by giving numbers to avenues and main streets and then posted arrows indicating the ways to their own quarters but that was not much help to a visiting foreigner. By that time I understood why the hotel manager said that I would never find the bank office while walking alone

I then thought about our morning breakfast. So far in SE Asia eating breakfast had never been a problem for me. Enter any small restaurant or hawker stand, come close to the kitchen or the place where people are collecting food and if something smell good or look nice just select it. But here we came down early at the coffee shop and a lady brought us a rice bowl, two fresh eggs and dry algae that she left on the table and went away. So we wait for the next thing to come but nothing happened. After some time the lady came back asking by gestures why we don’t eat. When she understood our problem she show us the right way to do, breaking the eggs, beating the yolks, dropping the algae in the mixture and eating it with the rice. When more guests came down they were served the same menu although they clearly knew already how to handle it. Japanese eat rather frugal food and under the pressure of the war it had become even more accentuated.

I then decided that before doing any work we will make use of the first week of leave to discover the place and study the environment. We left for Kyoto and Nara using the cheapest ways we could find to travel and survive. It was obvious that at that time in Japan unless you enter either into a top grade establishment or in a bar used by the US Army, communicating with people was a very serious problem. However I was pleased with the place and thus even more decided to progress with my project. Now that I had obtained a very superficial idea of the Japanese environment I wanted to learn more about KDD and we went back to Tokyo.

The SITA set-up to connect and serve Japan was the following: each airline in Tokyo would leased from KDD an RTTY circuit to Hong Kong, or to Manila for a couple of them, and in these two locations a SITA manual centre would transfer the traffic to the SITA Network. Incidentally a first problem to be solved was that in order to follow the Japanese telecoms law both ends of the circuit had to be located in the sole user's premises. To comply with such law C&W Hong Kong was renting to any Japanese user a few square feet of its own centre.

Inside Japan the major airlines were using leased circuits to link Tokyo to their own offices in the main cities like Osaka or Kobe and therefore the need for the implementation of a small manual centre in each airline regional headquarter in Tokyo. For connecting offices with a smaller volume of traffic the usual answer was telex but problem again since the Japanese telex was handling Roman and Japanese characters with for consequence a perforated tape with 6 holes per character instead of the 5 holes in use on the leased channels and thus the necessity to retype manually all transiting telex messages.

Back in Tokyo I visited all foreign airlines. The fact that there was a small centre lead by a Japanese chief of centre in almost all of them helped me a lot since they were speaking some English and they had an excellent knowledge of KDD's organisation. I was given the opportunity to be introduced to KDD middle management, a step forwards that was going to be very helpful to me some years later.

I returned to Saigon satisfied with my trip. First I had spent quite a pleasant stay in Japan. Second I had then a much better idea of how KDD was operating. Third I had learnt that in KDD, as I had previously observed in certain Asian organisations, any direct approach at top level would be strictly reduced to an exchange of civilities and would lead nowhere. In such organisations the Middle Management concerned by a new project must be convinced that it is good for them and for their company before bringing it upwards at the President' level.

My next worry was with SITA Management, why should an engineer be selected, and more specifically why me, to pursue the Tokyo project? Well, let's wait some opportunities!

Meanwhile the political situation was evolving rapidly in SE Asia. The Korean War has ended. We were in the middle of the Cold War. French Indochina was no more a single country, having been replaced by four independent states with more or less tense relationships. The US influence became predominant mainly in South Vietnam and Thailand. Such situation reflected directly on the airlines business. The European airlines lost their former secured colonial customers. Each newly independent state created its own national carrier while the number of US charters increased rapidly to

sustain the growing US presence. Among the local airlines Cathay Pacific, Singapore Airlines and Thai Airways became soon very serious competitors to the European ones.

In order to support the US charter airlines I made once an attempt to open a SITA centre in Okinawa but during the process the island was returned to Japan and the project was dropped.

SITA followed the common trend and Ruelle who had replaced Bodier at Saigon left for Africa and was replaced locally by Nguyen Thong Thuy as Representative for Vietnam. As for myself I was posted at Bangkok and later at Hongkong.

From these new assignments I started expanding the network and I was doing relatively frequent trips to the HDQ in Paris. Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) has been the first airline to create the Polar Road between Europe and the Far East with a stop at Anchorage, Alaska. Soon after more airlines followed. By then I was still most of the time travelling sub-load and while going to Europe by the Polar Road there were generally less chances to be disembarked.

Transits in Tokyo were giving me opportunities to meet KDD staff. They were well aware of the overall set-up and knew that the traffic generated by airlines private leased circuits was actually transiting to SITA network at HKG or MNL. The private RTTY circuits were sometime affected by various factors such as seasonal variations of radio waves propagations as well as technical failures and we could freely discuss all those problems altogether. Furthermore KDD like SITA was facing in some countries different kinds of problems such as quality of service, lack of equipment and so on and at each visit we were mutually exchanging information on such subjects. Actually year after year our mutual relationship became quite friendly.

When SITA started implementing its new data network it became obvious that it would be very expensive if each airline operating in Japan had to lease an AVD channel and those airlines with only one or two weekly flights could certainly not economically afford it. I approached Yoichi Inoue, one of the KDD managers of whom I had by then appreciated the prompt understanding, and discussed the case with him. He said: "Write to me and explain your project in details. We will translate your letter in Japanese and present it to the top management". Two weeks later I was receiving at HKG a copy of the Japanese translation and by then I knew that things were moving.

We were at the end of 1975 and a SITA Satellite Processor was finally implemented and running at Tokyo, a positive end of what has probably been the lengthiest negotiations for entering a country in the history of SITA.

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