

A FOUNDATION IN THE SKY – AIR CEYLON WAS BORN 75 YEARS AGO TODAY

by Roger Thiedeman

Annexure: **Air Ceylon lives on – in the Sri Lanka Air Force**, page 16

*The following is adapted from an article by Roger Thiedeman that was published in the Sunday Times on **December 7, 1997**, to commemorate the **50th anniversary** of Air Ceylon's inaugural flight.*



Traditionally, a priority of nearly every newly independent country is the foundation of a national airline. Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was formerly known) was no exception in this regard. Even before independence from Britain was declared in February 1948, the wheels were in motion to equip Ceylon with its own flag-carrying airline.

At the helm was the dynamic Mr. (later Sir) John Lionel Kotelawala, then Minister for Transport and Works. Keenly air-minded, Mr. Kotelawala did much to foster private flying through the Aero Club of Ceylon in the 1930s, even finding time to qualify for a Student Pilot's Licence. When war clouds loomed, he took an active role in recruiting young Ceylonese men to be trained overseas as pilots and other aircrew for enlistment with the Royal Air Force.

In 1947, with Independence a foregone conclusion, John Kotelawala sought to raise the profile of the soon-to-be-independent nation by endowing it with its very own commercial air service. First, he appointed Mr. L.S.B. (Leslie) Perera to head the newly created Department of Civil Aviation, and Mr. M. Chandrasoma, an experienced civil servant, as Leslie Perera's Secretary.

Next, three war-surplus Douglas DC-3 Dakota aeroplanes were purchased. The DC-3s were all named after queens – *Sita Devi*, *Viharamaha Devi*, and *Sunetra Devi* – a tradition which continued for the next decade at least.



Air Ceylon crew members (with Mr. L.S.B. Perera) in a publicity photo on the occasion of one of Air Ceylon's early anniversaries



***Sunetra Devi* (VP-CAT), one of Air Ceylon's pioneering trio of DC-3 Dakotas**

But the birth of the new airline was still a few months in the future. So the three Dakotas, under the aegis of the Civil Aviation Department, were used extensively for pilot training and route proving duties. Joy flights promoted the notion of aviation as a viable means of local transport. The Dakotas also demonstrated their worth by operating emergency relief flights during the floods of August 1947.

In June 1947, at the suggestion of John Kotelawala, *Viharamaha Devi* flew to London to collect a valuable cargo of electoral registers for the coming elections. The historic, nine-day flight supplied further proof of what Ceylonese aviators, and the trusty DC-3, could accomplish.

On Wednesday, December 10, 1947, all this preparatory flying climaxed with the inaugural scheduled flight of the new airline, Air Ceylon. With Capt. Peter Fernando in command and a complement of 16 passengers, *Sita Devi* rose gracefully from Ratmalana's runway soon after 8 a.m. and headed for Kankasanturai (Jaffna). After a brief stop there, the Dakota proceeded to Madras, returning to Colombo by the same route later that day.

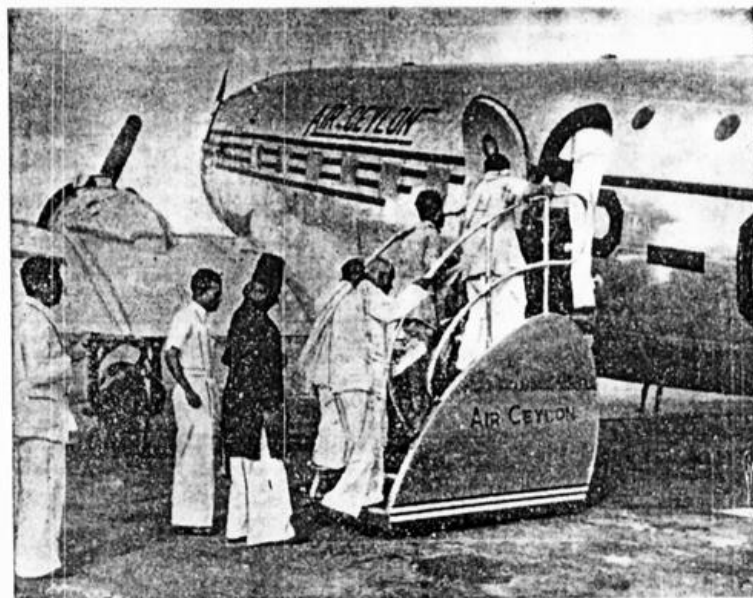
Ceylon Observer

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WEDNESDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 10, 1947

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INAUGURATION OF AIR CEYLON SERVICE between Ceylon and India. The picture shows the first batch of passengers entering the plane this morning.

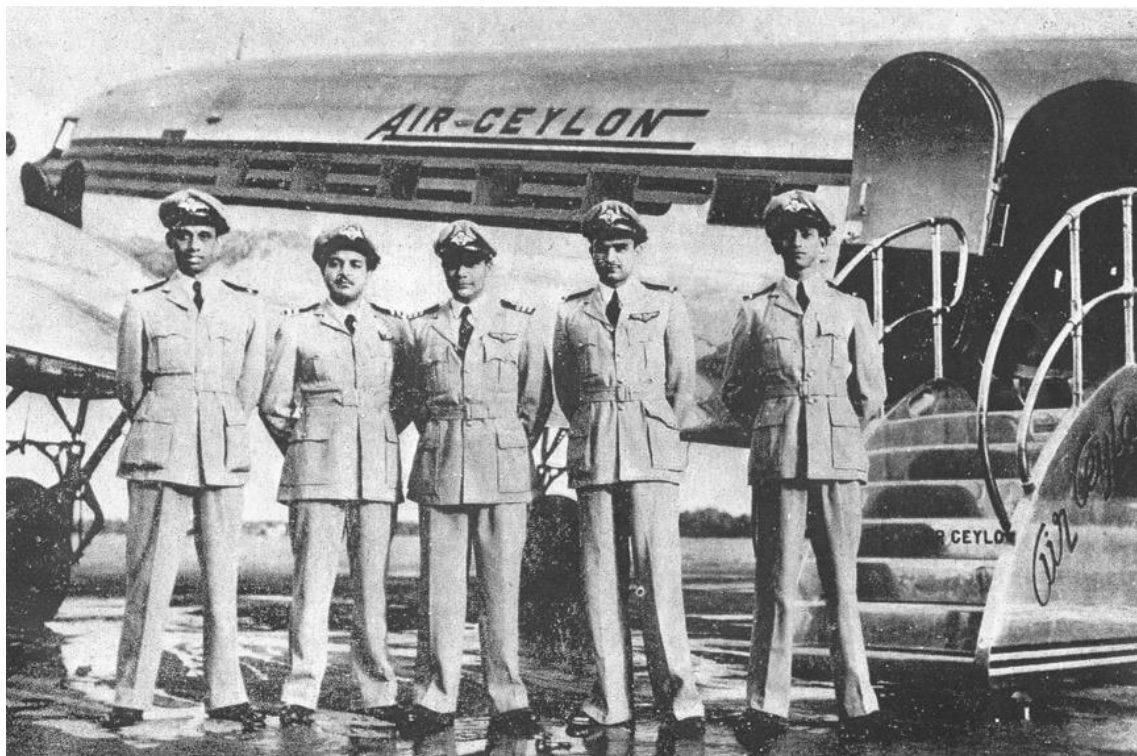
**16 Passengers On
Sita Devi
Air Ceylon Inaugurates
Service To Madras**

Assisting Capt. Fernando on the flight deck were Capt. C.H.S. Amarasekera, First Officer Emile Jayawardena and Radio Officer John Vethavanam. The honour of becoming Air Ceylon's first air hostess fell to Miss Mavis Wijeratne. But this occurred through a twist of fate, as Miss Wijeratne was employed by Air Ceylon solely as a receptionist at the time.

The air hostess designated to crew the inaugural flight took ill suddenly, so Miss Wijeratne was quickly substituted. After that single, inaugural flight, for which she earned a place in Sri Lankan aviation history, Mavis Wijeratne returned to her receptionist job, never to work as an air hostess again.

So began a proud tradition of commercial aviation in Sri Lanka which saw Air Ceylon achieve the distinction of one of the world's safest airlines, never recording a single passenger fatality throughout its 32-year history.

Before long another DC-3, *Sri Lanka Devi*, was added to the fleet. Scheduled services aside, the fledgling airline also operated a variety of charter flights to far-flung parts of the globe. In 1948 history was created again when *Sunetra Devi* became the first aircraft with an all-Ceylonese crew to land in Australia, arriving in Sydney with a party of Ceylon Navy personnel.



Crew of the history-making first charter flight to Australia
***l to r:* Radio Officer John Vethavanam; Flight Engineer W.A.E. 'Bunny' Molamure; Capt. Peter Fernando; First Officer (co-pilot) P.B. Mawalagedera; Radio Officer/Navigator/Purser D.L. Sirimanne**

The same year Capt. Rex de Silva commanded a special flight to Burma (now Myanmar) taking the sacred Sanchi Buddha relics for exposition in Rangoon (Yangon), Mandalay and Akyab.

A series of Air Ceylon charters were also organised for Muslim pilgrims travelling to and from Mecca for the *Hajj* season. Soon, the regular route network extended to Trincomalee (China Bay), Trichinopoly, Bombay and Karachi. Flights to the latter three cities and Madras were, technically, international services, although described as regional routes.

But Air Ceylon achieved genuine international, long-haul status when it entered into a partnership with Australian National Airways (ANA) in 1949. With technical and managerial support from ANA, Air Ceylon began operating a pair of Douglas DC-4 Skymasters from Colombo to London via Bombay, Karachi, Tel Aviv and Rome. Later the service was extended to Sydney, calling at Singapore and Jakarta.



An advertisement for Air Ceylon's first international services, with a rare glimpse of the airline's original livery and colour scheme

The DC-4 Skymasters, four-engined big brothers of the DC-3, were named *Laxapana* and *Ratmalana*, taking their names from Ceylon's first hydro-electric scheme and the birthplace of Lankan aviation, respectively.



Douglas DC-4 Skymaster CY-ACA (previously VP-CBD), *Laxapana*



Douglas DC-4 Skymaster VP-CBE/CY-ACB, *Ratmalana*

When the association with ANA ceased in 1953, KLM-Royal Dutch Airlines took over the Australian airline's share in Air Ceylon. In 1956, with a Lockheed L-749 Constellation leased from KLM, Air Ceylon resumed international flights on what became known as the 'Sapphire Service', with Amsterdam a new destination.



Lockheed L-749 Constellation, *Mahadevi*

The Dutch-registered Constellation was dubbed *Mahadevi*, reviving the tradition of regal names. KLM replaced the aircraft in 1958 with a larger version, the L-1049 Super 'G' Constellation, which was named *Soma Devi* and registered in Ceylon as 4R-ACH.



Lockheed L-1049G Super Constellation, *Soma Devi*

In November 1960, *Soma Devi* in turn gave way to a more modern Lockheed L-188 Electra propjet, also supplied by KLM.



Lockheed L-188 Electra

The Lockheed Constellation, Super Constellation and Electra all came from the same manufacturer in Burbank, California that later produced the L-1011 TriStar jetliners which formed the backbone of Air Lanka operations for many years.

In 1962 Air Ceylon parted company with the Dutch airline and turned to the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) for support on its overseas operations in a pool partnership.



One of several BOAC Comet 4 jetliners used on Air Ceylon international services. 'AIR CEYLON' stickers were placed over 'BOAC' titling when each aircraft was designated to operate an Air Ceylon flight

Using BOAC de Havilland Comet 4 jetliners, Air Ceylon commenced international services to London via Karachi, Cairo and Rome, and to Singapore via Kuala Lumpur. Later, BOAC replaced the Comet 4s with Vickers (BAC) VC10s on Air Ceylon's international sectors.



BOAC VC10 operating a flight on behalf of pool partner Air Ceylon

In 1964, Air Ceylon took delivery of its first, very own, factory-fresh turboprop, a Hawker Siddeley (Avro) HS 748. There was much excitement and fanfare at Ratmalana airport when the brand-new Avro landed with Captains P.B. Mawalagedera and George Ferdinand in charge.



Air Ceylon's first Hawker Siddeley (Avro) 748 4R-ACJ at Ratmalana, seen here with the name *Megha Dhootha* (මෙග්හා ධූතා) just below the cockpit window

The Avro was followed in 1967 by another turboprop, a Nord 262 from France. Unfortunately, the Nord proved unsuitable for local conditions, and was disposed of two years later.



Nord 262 4R-ACL in front of the Ratmalana air traffic control tower

Air Ceylon made an even bolder leap into the aeronautical big time in 1969, purchasing a Hawker Siddeley HS-121 (formerly D.H.121) Trident 1E jetliner, also brand-new. The Trident served an expanded regional network which ultimately stretched to Sharjah in the Persian Gulf.



Hawker Siddeley HS-121 Trident 1E, 4R-ACN

On May 22, 1972, Ceylon became the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. That year also marked the termination of the Air Ceylon/BOAC liaison. Late in 1971 the Lankan carrier had already joined forces with French airline UTA.



Air Ceylon's first DC-8, a 'Dash 53' variant, in its original UTA livery

Becoming Air Ceylon's fourth international partner in 25 years, UTA provided a Douglas DC-8 jet for the Lankan flag-carrier's long-haul services. Initially operated by UTA pilots with Sri Lankan cabin attendants, the DC-8 was subsequently bought outright by Air Ceylon and flown with a 100 percent Air Ceylon crew.



Same DC-8 as above, in Air Ceylon livery with Sri Lankan registration 4R-ACQ

This purchase was applauded as a breakthrough in Air Ceylon's struggle to shed the shackles of foreign influence. Air Ceylon had, at last, come of age. Just before the last of the airline's faithful DC-3s were phased out, a second Avro 748 was bought.

Meanwhile, a variety of jetliners were acquired at various times on short-term leases as substitutes on international services whenever Air Ceylon's DC-8 was undergoing periodic maintenance or repairs. Those leased airplanes included, not in any particular chronological order, a second DC-8, two Boeing 720s, a Boeing 707, a Convair 990 Coronado, and a Sud Aviation Caravelle 10R.



DC-8-43 4R-ACT (powered by Rolls-Royce Conway engines)



Boeing 720-023 4R-ACS (leased from August 1976 to March 1977)



Boeing 720-022 (leased from November 1975 to December 1976)



Boeing 707-138B (leased from December 1976 to June 1977)



Convair 990 Coronado (on lease only in March 1974); the world's fastest airliner ever, with the exception of the BAC/Aérospatiale Concorde



Sud Aviation SE-210 Caravelle 10R (on lease only in November 1971)

Sadly, by the mid-1970s the first signs had begun emerging that all was not well with the national carrier. Whispers of mismanagement, corruption and financial instability were rife. Authorities in Europe impounded a DC-8 for non-payment of fuel bills, and staff morale plummeted when international services were suspended near the end of 1977. A reduced domestic and regional operation soldiered on valiantly with the Trident and two Avros.

Then, one morning in September 1978, Air Ceylon suffered a cruel blow. One of the Avros, just back from a trip to Jaffna, was parked at Ratmalana when a bomb ripped the aircraft apart, reducing it to a charred, twisted hulk. Miraculously no lives were lost.



Avro 748 4R-ACJ at Palaly, Jaffna on August 19, 1978 (photo by RT)



September 7, 1978: the burnt-out hulk of Avro 4R-ACJ at Ratmalana

The surviving Avro and Trident struggled to maintain a semblance of an operation. Those two aeroplanes kept Air Ceylon alive, if only just, even after Air Lanka had taken wing on September 1, 1979. But the malady was terminal, and a once-proud Air Ceylon quietly faded into oblivion before 1979 had ended.

On a positive note, it would be fair to say that the heritage established by the men, women and machines of Air Ceylon, over a period lasting more than three decades, laid the foundation for the new carrier, Air Lanka (and later still SriLankan Airlines), which took Sri Lankan commercial aviation to newer, more exciting and technologically-advanced heights. But that's another story.

Air Ceylon D.C.4 Skymaster at Ratmalana Airport, Ceylon.

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Air Ceylon lives on – in the Sri Lanka Air Force by Roger Thiedeman

Throughout its 32-year existence Air Ceylon operated a total of five Douglas DC-3 Dakota aircraft. But never more than four in any one period. In February 1967 only a pair of Dakotas remained, registered 4R-ACG and 4R-ACI. The first of those 'Daks' was one of the original trio of aircraft bought in 1947. Then registered VP-CAS, it bore the fleet name *Viharamaha Devi*. The other, 4R-ACI, was bought in November 1959 from British European Airways.

In 1976 Air Ceylon's two surviving DC-3s were transferred to the inventory of the Sri Lanka Air Force. With military serials CR-821 and CR-822 respectively, the Dakotas continued to fly with the SLAF on transport and liaison duties. Much later they were finally retired to the Sri Lanka Air Force Museum at Ratmalana, where they remain on display as non-flying exhibits.



**Douglas DC-3 Dakota 4R-ACG (previously VP-CAS, *Viharamaha Devi*/CY-ACG);
later CR-821 with SLAF (see pic below)**



Pic credit: Jan Koppen/OldJets.net



DC-3 Dakota 4R-ACI, later CR-822 with SLAF (see pic below)



It is a moot point as to how many visitors to the Museum realise that Dakota CR-821 was one of the three ‘winged pioneers’ of Sri Lankan airline history.

But the two DC-3s aren’t the only Air Ceylon ‘aluminium alumni’ that went on to serve Sri Lanka in military ‘uniform’. When the airline was disbanded in 1979, the only remaining domestic/regional aircraft was its second Hawker Siddeley (Avro) 748, registered 4R-ACR, bought as a pre-owned airplane in 1975 from a Canadian company.

‘ACR’ – or ‘Romeo’ as it was known by Air Ceylon pilots – was impressed into SLAF service, with the military serial CR-831. Happily, that 748, one of five ‘Avros’ operated by the Air Force, survived the perils and vicissitudes of civil war and is today another exhibit at the SLAF Museum.



One of Air Ceylon's last surviving aircraft, Avro 748 4R-ACR



The former 4R-ACR in SLAF livery with serial no. CR-831

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