

City Talk



Hactl is renowned today for its reliability and world-leading efficiency. SING TAO

HARD WORK MADE HK LEADER OF AIR CARGO

In my last article, I described the growth of the air cargo business in Hong Kong, which started in the 1970s and rapidly became the leading air cargo hub in the region and continued to be the champion of air cargo throughput in the world.

The Airport Authority allowed three terminal operators to compete at Chek Lap Kok.

Hactl, the pioneering Hong Kong Air Cargo Terminal Limited, was awarded the first franchise to operate from 1998, with Asia Airfreight Terminal following soon after and eventually Cathay Pacific Airways, which left Hactl in 2012 to operate the third air cargo terminal.

Hong Kong lived up to its name and has maintained its championship position.

But this was not achieved without a few hiccups. Some of us will remember the computer failure at the opening of SuperTerminal 1 in 1998. The passenger terminal operation and cargo handling functions were scheduled to transfer to Chek Lap Kok on the same day, as it is technically difficult to operate both airports at the same time.

The air traffic control system, and all flight operations – both passenger craft and freighter – would also need to cut over to the new airport at the same time, as both airports operating concurrently within such close proximity would have caused huge air-space management issues.

The unprecedented amount of data requiring on-line processing, previously tested to be capably handled by the then-advanced computerized system, overloaded the system, leading to a breakdown.

For many days, the operation had to revert to manual processing, causing huge delays and confusion and leading to the continued use of the old Kai Tak Terminal.

However, engineers are not deterred



Nuts and bolts

Edmund Leung

by such challenges. Soon the gremlins were sorted out and the system performed generally without faults, serving customers efficiently for the next two decades.

Overtime, some manufacturers ceased production and could no longer provide replacement parts and maintenance support.

The engineers had to develop their own maintenance capabilities to ensure smooth operation, employing state-of-the-art systems including AI technology to monitor the complex system.

Hactl's SuperTerminal today remains the leading air cargo terminal for Hong Kong, with the largest floor area spanning almost 400,000 square meters, and with capacity to handle 3.5 million tonnes of cargo each year – typically including dry consumer goods, live animals, radioactive and other hazardous goods, temperature-sensitive cargo, valuable goods, outsize cargo and even race horses.

One can almost say that there is nothing in this world that the air cargo terminal cannot handle.

From an innovative system that suffered embarrassing teething problems at commencement, Hactl's management programs and mechanical handling systems have earned a reputation for reliability and world-leading efficiency today, the result of a lot of tender loving care and ingenuity from the engineering team.

Like all reliable transport systems, it is continuous attention and improvement that keeps the machines operating round the clock, working quietly behind the scenes to support the economy of Hong Kong.

Veteran engineer Edmund Leung Kwong-ho casts an expert eye over Hong Kong's iconic infrastructure