

Why was Kai Tak airport's landing so scary?

- BBC World Service, Witness History

BBC World Service, and now Witness History with me, Gill Kearsley. Today, I am taking you back to 1998 and the last flight out of Hong Kong International Airport, known as Kai Tak. The runway is situated in the midway of Victoria Harbour, surrounded by mountains on three sides. Pilots have to make a hair-raising descent through the skyscrapers of Kowloon making it world-renowned.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Captain Sharman. Welcome aboard our Flight 251 to London Heathrow. As you may be aware, it is the last commercial flight out of Kai Tak, which would be closing immediately after we get airborne. So we’re all in this historic day together. “

That is Captain Kim Sharman recalling what he said at the start of Cathay Pacific Flight 251 on 6 July 1998, whilst piloting the last commercial flight to leave Kai Tak before the airport closed down. The airport, named after two Chinese businessmen, Mr Kai and Mr Tak, was world famous for the thrilling landing that became known as the Kai Tak heart attack. Here, it's described in the BBC television programme, *The Air Show*.

“This is one of the most dramatic and spectacular landings in the world for passengers and pilots alike. Just seconds before its touchdown, the aircraft makes a 47° turn onto the final runway heading. At that moment, the passengers have an alarmingly close view over the rooftops, and the wingtips seem teasingly close to the network of washing lines. Yes, aviation lovers of the world, you already know. This is Kai Tak International Airport, Hong Kong. “

Kim estimates that he flew into Kai Tak about four times a month for 23 years. That's more than a thousand landings.

(Kim Sharman) “It was a monumental piece of engineering, 747s swooping over a street. They look, indeed they are, very very low. But it was all legal. It was unique. I’ve been racking my brain trying to think of another airport with those degrees of difficulty, though there weren’t any. It involved a fairly interesting approach because you had to fly down what’s known as an instrument landing system, an ILS. But normally with an ILS, that takes you right down to the ground. This one stops at about 500 feet, 600 feet, and then you have to do a 43° turn to the right to line up with the runway, because if you carried on, you’d have hit Lion Rock as is that so called, because if you look at this mountain above Kai Tak in profile, it looks like a lion’s head. To mark the turning point, there was a famous bit of the hill painted in red and white panels and that was known as

a checkerboard. Now all this, of course, is visual, so you couldn't really do it in poor weather. So it did have its limitations. On a good day, it was a privilege to do it. It really was. Can you remember your first flight in there? Yes I can. I was in the Fleet Air Arm at the time, and strange enough, I've got my logbook with me. And it was on the 14th of October, 1971 in the Sea Vixen. And actually we did a flypast for Princess Anne's visit. And we went around to the south of the island, joined up in formation and came flying down the harbour; and I remember looking up and seeing skyscrapers above me, and going past this building, which has hundreds of round windows in it, and the Chinese know it locally as the building of a thousand holes. Then we went round the south of the island again, and we went hurtling past."

Kim's flypast as a pilot in the British Royal Navy was his first flight into Kai Tak. But how did he find out that he was to be the captain of that last flight?

(Kim Sharman) "Well, we had a system whereby we could request certain flights, and I thought it'd be nice to request that flight, Cathay 251. Of course, I discovered there were several that were after that as well for the prestige. They'd actually given it to me and the management guy was trying to grab it off me. My manager went up, went to bat for me, and it all established itself. And I found out who it was at a Cathay reunion. So I just went up to him and I said, 'I know.' He said, 'what do you know?', and I said, 'I know you tried to steal that flight from me.' "

Having fought off the competition to pilot the flight, on July 5, Kim went for a walk to take in the sights and sounds of Hong Kong, knowing it may be his last time exploring the streets near the airport. He then went to work.

(Kim Sharman) "It was a midnight departure, and it was noticeable approaching Kai Tak how empty it was. Not surprising but it was very noticeable, going to terminal south. Of course, it would be about an hour and fifteen minutes before a scheduled departure. To check-in, there were only two or three check-in desks working because this was the only flight. So it was empty, and already there were trolleys, cars going past with bits and pieces of infrastructure on them, and already you could sense that the thing was closing down. So I walked through, got briefed, through security and then to the airport itself. It was full of press, full of management. Hereon it was like walking through a church I suppose. An abandoned, empty building which had once been so bustling. It just felt cold and empty. It was very very bizarre. All these lorries and things, chuntering off to the airport full of equipment. And that really did drive it home that this was it. This was the last one. "

By 1996, Kai Tak was handling around 30 million passengers and one and a half million tonnes of cargo. It was the third busiest airport in the world for passengers and first for cargo. Squeezed between buildings and rugged mountains, and surrounded by bustling streets, there was no room for expansion. So the new airport was built on an island in the South China Sea. But Kai Tak will be missed.

“Passengers with seats on the very last flight were well aware they were making aviation history.”

“We’ve been here fifteen years now so we’ve been through this place a number of times. It’s great to be here on the last day. “

“It’s almost like saying goodbye to our old friend, but always we are excited to see the new airport.”

Kim spent his last moment on the ground at Kai Tak talking to the press.

(Kim Sharman) “We were being interviewed, I think. There’s myself and the other two guys and we were both being interviewed, and I suddenly realized, oh my Lord, there’s an aircraft full of passengers. So I sent the second officer. I said, ‘go, you better get back onto the aircraft quickly.’ Overall, you know, I’m still captain of the aircraft. I’m still responsible for all the people.”

Kim finished the interviews, climbed the steps to the cockpit and prepared for takeoff. Thousands of people had gathered on the streets to see the last commercial plane out of Kai Tak take off at two minutes past midnight.

(Kim Sharman) “I can remember on the radio when we left, I said ‘goodbye Kai Tak’ or something like that, and then they switched the lights out. This is a curious mixture of being professional and doing a demanding job, and sentimentality.”

One of the world’s best known airports, Kai Tak in Hong Kong, has closed after more than sixty years.

(Kim Sharman) “Twelve and a half hours later landed in London, I took my badges off and never flew again. That was my retirement flight. Not a bad way to finish, is it?”

Captain Kim Sharman was speaking to me, Gill Kearsley, for that edition of Witness History.