THE MOST HEROIC AIRLINE PILOTS OF ALL TIME

News / Airlines



A China Eastern Airlines pilot has been labelled a hero, and presented with a cash reward, after his quick thinking avoided a runway collision that could have killed up to 439 people.

According to Chinese media, the pilot, named He Chao, was at the helm of an Airbus A320-200, preparing to take off from Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport. As his aircraft was accelerating down the runway, however, a second China Eastern Airlines plane – an Airbus A330-300 arriving from Beijing – entered its path. The pilot chose to continue to accelerate and performed a steep take-off, avoiding a collision by just 19 metres (62 feet). Reports suggest there were a total of 413 passengers and 26 crew on board the two planes.

The near-miss has been compared to the 1977 Tenerife Airport disaster, the deadliest aviation accident of all time, in which 583 people were killed after two Boeing 747s collided.

An investigation found that air traffic control was to blame, and while Mr He was rewarded for his actions with a cash bonus equivalent to around £360,000, two air traffic controllers had their licenses revoked.

Here we look back at other aviation near-misses.

1. The Jakarta incident – June 24, 1982

This British Airways flight from Heathrow to Auckland was passing over Jakarta when it ran into

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volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount Galunggung, resulting in the failure of all four engines. Naturally, there was concern in the cockpit, with the flight engineer exclaiming: “I don’t believe it – all four engines have failed!”

The captain, Eric Moody, tried to reassure passengers with the following statement: “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We have a small problem. All four engines have stopped. We are doing our damnedest to get them going again. I trust you are not in too much distress.”

Passengers reportedly scribbled notes to loved ones, while Moody calculated how far the plane might be able to glide before reaching sea level (91 miles he deduced). Luckily, at around 13,500 feet, the engines restarted successfully.

2. British Airways Flight 5390 – June 10, 1990

In this remarkable incident, on board a BA flight to Malaga with 81 passengers, a badly-fitted windscreen panel failed, sucking the captain, Tim Lancaster, halfway out of the cockpit. His head and torso were outdoors – at 17,300 feet and being battered by 300mph winds – while his legs remained inside, with flight attendants gripping him tightly. Co-pilot Alastair Atchison made an emergency descent, but – due to the sound of rushing air – could not hear air traffic control. He eventually landed safely in Southampton, where Lancaster was treated for frostbite, shock and a broken arm.

3. The miracle on the Hudson – January 15, 2009

Perhaps the best known incident of recent times, involving the most brilliantly monikered pilot. Chesley Sullenberger III, at the helm of US Airways Flight 1549, managed to land safely on the Hudson River after a flock of Canada geese disabled the aircraft. All 155 passengers survived; Sullenberger’s reward was a book deal with HarperCollins, and early retirement.

4. The Windsor incident – June 12, 1972

American Airlines Flight 96 from LA to New York ran into trouble soon after a stopover in Detroit, when the rear cargo door suddenly broke off. The subsequent explosive decompression saw part of the floor at the rear of the cabin give way, severing a control cable and disabling one of the engines. Captain Bryce McCormick, who initially believed the plane had suffered a mid-air collision, declared an emergency, while flight attendants took oxygen to passengers (masks did not deploy because the plane was below the 14,000ft limit). The plane returned to Detroit, and – despite being forced to land dangerously fast – McCormick touched down safely.

5. The Gimli Glider – July 23, 1983

While cruising at 41,000 feet, halfway through a flight from Montreal to Edmonton, Air Canada Flight 143 ran out of juice – due to, shockingly, a refuelling miscalculation caused by a recent switch to the metric system. The problem had not been spotted earlier because of an electronic fault on the aircraft’s instrument panel, and the plane lost all power. Luckily, Captain Bob Pearson was an experienced glider pilot, guiding the 767 to RCAF Station Gimli. The landing was hard and fast – Pearson had to brake so hard he blew two tyres, while the aircraft’s nose fell off, starting a small fire – but all 61 on board survived unharmed.

6. Aloha Flight 243 – April 28, 1988

In 1988, a 737, flown by Aloha Airlines with 90 people on board was en route to Honolulu, cruising at an altitude of 24,000 feet, when a small section of the roof ruptured. The resulting explosive

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decompression tore off a larger section of the roof, and a 57-year-old flight attendant called Clarabelle Lansing was swept from her seat and out of the hole in the aircraft. Fortunately, all other passengers were belted up, and the pilot – Robert Schornstheimer – managed to land 13 minutes later, avoiding further loss of life.

7. BA Flight 38 – January 17, 2008

Another recent case, BA Flight 38 was just two miles from Heathrow when its engines suddenly failed to respond to the crew's demand for extra thrust. A build of ice crystals in its fuel lines had caused a restriction in the flow of fuel. The plane landed around 270 metres short of the runway, just beyond the A30. The plane was a write-off, but just one passenger suffered a serious injury. The pilot's name? Ironically, John Coward.

8. Cathay Pacific Flight 780 – April 13, 2010

In a similar incident to BA Flight 38, this Cathay Pacific service from Surabaya Juanda International Airport in Indonesia suddenly lost the ability to change thrust as it neared Hong Kong, landing at almost twice the recommended speed. Pilots Malcolm Waters and David Hayhoe were given the Polaris Award – from the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations – for their heroism.

9. Saving a superjumbo – November 4, 2010

The captain of this Qantas flight – Richard Champion de Crespigny- was also given a Polaris Award. Engine number 2 exploded over Indonesia, damaging a wing and causing a fuel tank fire, forcing the plane, an A380 with 469 people on board, to make an emergency landing in Singapore. It blew four tyres when it landed, but no one was hurt.

BONUS: The Flybe captain whose arm fell off – February 12, 2014

We finish on a slightly comical note. Landing in gusty conditions is a minor inconvenience for any pilot. It's a major hassle when your prosthetic arm has just fallen off. This is precisely what happened to one Flybe captain in 2014. Shortly before touchdown, "his prosthetic limb became detached from the yoke clamp, depriving him of control of the aircraft," said an Air Accidents Investigation Branch report.

The captain considered getting the co-pilot to take control but concluded that, given the time available and the challenging conditions, his best course of action was to move his right hand from the power levers on to the yoke to regain control. Fortunately the incident ended happily, with the 46-year-old landing safely.

The report went on: "He did this, but with power still applied and possibly a gust affecting the aircraft, a normal touchdown was followed by a bounce, from which the aircraft landed heavily."

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