

The Man In The Sky

Tom Kaminski

Zman Interviews the Man
With a Bird's-Eye View of
Every Major Event in NYC

While you sit stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic on FDR Drive or the Cross Bronx Expressway, there is one man who is keeping an eye on you from above. Millions of people tune in to him to hear the latest traffic report.

But Tom Kaminski is not only a traffic reporter for one of the world's busiest cities; he is also the man with the best view of most major incidents throughout metropolitan New York. He has followed virtually every major event that occurred in New York City over the past quarter century from his vantage point in the sky.

Of course, the most dramatic event of his career was coverage of the 9/11 Twin Tower attack, but he has also witnessed every major fire and airplane crash, innumerable jackknifed tractor-trailers—and even happy events such as the mass outdoor weddings at New York's major Chassidic courts.

- Shimon Rosenberg - Y. Lefkowitz



Traffic & Weather
Together

EVERY 10 MINUTES

Tom Kaminski's traffic helicopter was flying over the George Washington Bridge when a dark shadow passed. Although he didn't know it yet, this was one of the hijacked planes speeding toward the World Trade Center.

It was 8:46 AM on September 11, 2001. Kaminski was preparing to finish his morning shift when his eye was caught by a brilliant flash of light, followed immediately by an immense fireball. The first thought that flashed through the mind of his pilot, Arthur Anderson, was that an airplane had crashed.

Anderson immediately contacted the air traffic controllers at nearby LaGuardia Airport and asked them whether one of their airplanes had gone down. There was no response.

The pilot of the helicopter repeated his question: "Did you just lose an airplane?" "Stand by," came the ambiguous reply.

American Airlines Flight 11 from Boston had just crashed into the North Tower. In another two minutes Kaminski was scheduled to deliver his final traffic report for the morning. He quickly called the newsroom to find out what had happened. But nobody responded. Kaminski and Anderson remained clueless.

Meanwhile, 8:48 arrived and it was time for Kaminski to deliver his final report from the air. He did not know it yet—he did not even understand what had happened—but he was about to become the first person to break the news of the September 11 attacks to a shocked world.

Alright, uh... we are just currently getting a look... at the World Trade Center. We have something that has happened here at the World Trade Center. We noticed flames and an awful lot of smoke from one of the towers of the World Trade Center. We are just coming up on this scene... this is easily three-quarters of the way up... we are... this is... whatever has occurred has just occurred, uh, within minutes and, uh, we are

trying to determine exactly what that is. But currently we have a lot of smoke at the top of the towers of the World Trade Center. We will keep you posted.

Those were the first words transmitted to the public about arguably the worst terror attack in American history. Officials at the headquarters of Port Authority, owners of the World Trade Center, heard Kaminski's report and began responding immediately.

This is Tom Kaminski in Chopper 880

Any driver with some experience around the New York metropolitan area knows that familiar catchphrase. His name is one of the best known in the city, and his traffic reports are as much a part of the woodwork as the highways and bridges themselves—except that Tom Kaminski is never "under construction."

Mr. Kaminski begins his workday at 5:45 AM and continues to deliver live traffic reports through rush hour until 9:00 AM. Later, he works an afternoon shift that runs from 4:30 until 7:00. Over the course of the day he reports 33 times on the traffic as well as on any other noteworthy information that comes his way.

Recently, we met up with him shortly after his Bell 206 helicopter landed at the heliport in Linden, New Jersey. We wanted to hear firsthand what he had to share about his unique job and some of the experiences he has lived through. We discovered that he holds one of the more exciting jobs around.

Aside from reporting to millions of interested listeners, Kaminski has had, in his own words, "the best seat in the house" at every major event in the New York area since 1988. "I'm privileged to get the kind of view of New York that many people only dream about," he says, "and I'm humbled by how many of you tell me I helped you. I really appreciate that. I'm a very fortunate guy, in many ways."

Starting Out in Traffic

When Kaminski graduated from Montclair University in 1984 with a degree in journalism, he had no intention of going into traffic reporting. His dream, like so many other freshman journalists, was to run from one event to the next, providing live reports from the front about interesting events as they happen.

The first job that came Kaminski's way was with a company named Shadow Traffic Network, which was based in Union, New Jersey. This traffic reporting company provided information for 67 news stations in the New York City vicinity. Most people are not aware of this, but very few news stations can afford to support their own weather and traffic reporting divisions. They usually obtain the information from one or two larger companies that provide the same data for dozens of other stations. Not only that, but some reporters actually work for a number of stations under different pseudonyms. Shadow Traffic was one such company.

Kaminski never intended to remain with traffic reporting for long. He saw it as a steppingstone to a more exciting position. Nor was he privileged to enjoy the luxury of flying around in a helicopter from day one.

"On my first day at work," he told *Zman*, "my supervisor gave me the keys to a car, a two-way radio and told me, 'Go get lost.' We had six cars with large antennas, two-way radios and sacks filled with maps (this was long before GPS), and my job was to drive one of the cars eight hours a day. Each day we arrived at work, sat down in our cars, spread ourselves out and then we called in our traffic reports."

Listening to Kaminski rattle out his reports today one might conclude that he was born and bred on the streets of New York City. In fact, he tells us that on the day he began work he could not find his way around.

"I'm a New Jersey guy," he says. "I knew very little about the city. But thanks to my new job I learned how to use a map and I also learned all the New York highways and

streets. One day I was sent to the Bronx, the next day to Queens, the next day to Staten Island and then to Westchester, Connecticut, Rhode Island and so on. This gave me a lot of experience. I learned where everything was and I began to know well all the vital roadways in the region."

Traffic Helicopters

Kaminski proved to be a good student. In almost no time, he learned all of the shortcuts and alternative routes that could help drivers avoid traffic snags. He became so adept at his job that in 1988 he was hired by WCBS radio news station to provide and deliver its traffic reports.



WCBS news room circa 1970.



Kaminski received a "Broadcaster of the Year" award in 2011.



Wayne Cabot (right), who has worked for WCBS since 1988, pictured here with Steve Scott who joined him on September 11, 2006, after 20 years of anchoring news in Chicago.