

Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger



Preparation

Some people say it was luck. Some say it was fate. Some say it was a miracle. In fact, what happened on January 15, 2009—landing a commercial jet airliner successfully in the Hudson River with 155 passengers and crew surviving the ordeal—is commonly referred to as the “Miracle on the Hudson.” However, after studying the events and the participants involved, one thing is clear—luck had little to do with the outcome of this trouble-filled flight and the real miracle was that Chesley Sullenberger (Captain Sully) was the one piloting the plane. He had the training, the experience, the decision-making skills and the calmness to pull off such a landing. Indeed, the usually humble Captain Sully later reflected on the incident, saying, “I think, in many ways, as it turned out, my entire life up to that moment had been a preparation to handle that particular moment.”

Approximately 30,000 commercial airline flights take off and land successfully each and every day in the United States without incident. American Airlines Flight 1549, with service from LaGuardia airport in New York City to Charlotte, North Carolina started out like any other flight that day and no one on board thought their flight was going to be the exception to the rule. After all, flying is routine. Passengers come and go and, except for the first time flyer or the nervous flyer, no one really thinks too much about flying from one destination to another. Why? Because flying commercial airplanes is, statistically speaking, the safest way to travel. The odds of dying on a



Airbus A320 flight 1549 in the Hudson River.

commercial airplane are one in eight million. In fact, at the time of this flight, the airline industry had gone 29 months without a death on board a plane due to a crash.

The advertised airtime for Flight 1549 was 87 minutes. The actual airtime, however, lasted exactly four minutes and 42 seconds, with the first one minute and 14 seconds being routine and predictable. With co-pilot Jeff Skiles at the controls, the plane departed the runway a few seconds before 3:26 in the afternoon. What happened next was anything but routine and predictable. At 3:27 and 10 seconds, Captain Sully spotted something through his widescreen window. “Birds!” he shouted. As it turned out, they were massive Canadian Geese—lots of them. Literally one second later, the thumping sound of birds hitting the plane could be heard by all 150 passengers on the plane. A few seconds after that, the jet engines began to grind to a halt and within 10 seconds both engines had gone eerily silent. The flight attendants on board later reported that it was so quiet that it sounded like a library. Captain Sully instantly understood the situation was dire. “I knew immediately that this, unlike every other flight I’d had for 42 years, was probably not going to end with the airplane undamaged on a runway.”

There were many factors working against Captain Sully and Flight 1549. First, with both engines out of commission, this plane was essentially an 81 ton glider. A plane can sustain the loss of one engine, but not both engines. Second, because the plane had only been airborne for less than 90 seconds, the plane was still ascending at the low level of 3,000 feet and at a moderate speed of 230 miles per hour. After the bird strike, the plane began a rapid descent at a rate of one thousand feet per minute, which meant the pilots had less than three minutes to develop a plan and land the plane. Third, safe places to land a plane like a desert, a corn field or even a remote road were not available. This plane had taken off from one of the busiest and densely populated cities in the world. Not only did the pilots have to consider the 150 passengers on the plane, they also had to consider the safety of the millions of people on the ground who could potentially be killed in a crash of this magnitude.

Clearly, the pilots had their work cut out for them. Ten seconds after the birds hit the plane, Captain Sully put his hands on the controls of the plane and said, “My airplane,” which was the protocol for transferring the control of the plane back to the captain. First officer, Jeff Skiles, responded, “Your airplane.” With that gesture, Captain Sully accepted the responsibility for the passengers, the crew and the airplane. Even in the midst of this potentially tragic situation, Captain Sully later commented on his thoughts at that moment, “I was sure I could do it.” He certainly had the credentials to pull it off.

Captain Sully began flying when he was 15. He was accepted into the Air Force Academy. Upon graduation, he served almost seven years as a fighter pilot. Upon being honorably discharged from the Air Force, he spent the next 29 years flying commercial airliners. Over the course of his career, he was assigned to study plane crashes for the Air Force and the National Transportation Safety Board. He was responsible for analyzing pilot error and developing new protocol for airline safety.

Captain Sully spent a lifetime preparing himself for this type of situation. He was a highly trained pilot. Furthermore, he knew how to keep a cool head in a crisis and he had the ability

to make quick and practical decisions. Now, he had less than three minutes to bring all of his preparation, training and skills together to pull off the biggest feat of his life.

“Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!” were the first words Captain Sully made to the air traffic controller at LaGuardia Airport. He continued, “This is Cactus fifteen thirty-nine. Hit birds. We’ve lost thrust in both engines. We’re turning back towards LaGuardia.” Patrick Harten, the air traffic controller, scrambled to get the appropriate runways clear for an emergency landing and offered him runway three. However, Captain Sully was the one who had to make the determination whether he could make it there or to any other airport. In a few short seconds he had to decide the best possible solution for everyone on board and still consider those on the ground. Even missing the runway by a few hundred feet in New York City could mean certain death for many on the ground. In the end, he later reflected, “We were too low, too slow, too far away and pointed in the wrong direction, away from the nearby airports.” He decided on the lesser of two evils. “We can’t do it,” he said in a remarkably calm voice. “We’re gonna be in the Hudson.” His next words were to the passengers on the plane, “This is the Captain. Brace for impact!” The flight attendants immediately began echoing his commands, “Brace! Brace! Heads down! Stay down. Brace! Brace!”

Patrick Harten, the air traffic controller, had difficulty accepting Captain Sully’s decision and kept offering new airports as possibilities for Flight 1549. Harten later said, “People don’t survive landings on the Hudson River. I thought it was his own death sentence.” Captain Sully thought otherwise and firmly believed that the Hudson was the best option for survival. “I did not think I was going to die,” he later commented. “Based on my experience, I was confident that I could make an emergency water landing that was survivable.” He began to calculate air speed and trajectory for the water-based landing. Based on studying other crashes, he knew he needed to put the airplane down in close proximity of other boats to improve chances for survival.

More than three minutes after the birds disabled the engines, Flight 1549 splashed down in the Hudson. The temperature outside was 21 degrees that day and the water was a near-freezing 36 degrees. When the plane came to a stop, Captain Sully opened the cockpit door and shouted one word, “Evacuate!” And everyone did, quickly and orderly. As the passengers made it out onto the wings and into the inflatable lifeboats, the airplane began to fill with water. Acting like the captain of a sinking ship, Captain Sully took two walks down the isle to make sure all passengers had safely exited before he boarded a lifeboat. Within minutes, 14 boats came to the rescue and successfully retrieved all 150 passengers and five crew members.

Usually the media chooses to focus on the latest scandal or the celebrity who falls from grace. This time, however, they became infatuated with the highly unlikely, but successful outcome of Flight 1549, the traumatic experiences of those on board, and the man who successfully landed the plane, Captain Chesley Sullenberger. He became quickly known to the world as *Captain Sully*, and this name is now synonymous with terms like poise, effective decision-making, and calmness under pressure. Captain Sully, a man who dutifully performed his job in anonymity for 29 years, was now the talk of the world. This is the classic case of an ordinary man caught in an extraordinary circumstance. He thought the attention would eventually die down, but it did not. He was invited to President Obama’s inauguration where he met with the President and the First Lady. The entire crew, dubbed the “fearless five” by the media, was honored before Super Bowl XLIII and given a standing ovation prior to kickoff. Mayor Bloomberg presented the crew with ceremonial keys to the City of New York. Captain Sully threw out first pitches, attended the Academy Awards and made the talk show circuit. He went on to receive countless awards for his courage and grace under pressure. What people most admire is that Captain Sully was given the ultimate test in life and passed it, saving the lives of all those passengers. A lifetime of education, training and dedication to his profession paid off

when it mattered most. Many people are not ready for their biggest tests in life, but Captain Sully was fully prepared and ready for it when it came.

America fell in love with Captain Sully, but other than landing the plane successfully in the Hudson River, what attributes, training and experiences made him the right person for the job? To fully understand this, it is important to start at the beginning. Chesley Sullenberger was born in Denison, Texas in 1951 and lived in a small one-bedroom house along with his parents and sister. Chesley credits his parents for teaching him to have a great work ethic and to believe that anything is possible. His dad expanded the house, room by room, year by year. “My dad taught himself to do the carpentry, the electric installation, even the roofing—and then he taught us,” he lamented. “The four hammers in the house, one for each of us, got a huge workout. In the morning, before it got too hot, my dad would send us up on the roof to pound nails into the shingles.”

At the early age of five, Chesley became keenly interested in flying by watching jets come and go from Perrin Air Force Base. In his early years, he put together model airplanes and dreamed of being a pilot. By the time he was 11 years old, he was reading every book and magazine he could find about aviation. When he was 16, he went down to the local airport and found an instructor who would teach him to fly. Mr. Cook agreed to charge the eager boy \$6 an hour for the plane and \$3 an hour for the instruction. Chesley’s dad agreed to pay for the plane rental, but Chesley had to pay for Mr. Cook’s instruction. So, Chesley got a job as a janitor at one of the local churches and earned the money to fly. After two months and 16 lessons, his instructor told the 16-year-old boy to take off and land three times all by himself, something that would be unheard of today. He continued to fly and when he logged the mandatory 70 hours of flying, he took the exam to receive a private pilot certificate. His first passenger was his mother, but he quickly progressed to taking teenage girls for rides in the plane. After logging 27,000 hours in the cockpit, those first dates still stand out fondly in his mind.

Chesley combined his good work ethic with an above average intelligence and was consistently in the 99th percentile in almost every subject he took in school. His family did not have a lot of money, but he knew that if he applied himself and got excellent grades, he could apply to the Air Force Academy. This would allow him to get a free college education and continue with his true love of flying. In 1969, this goal was attained when he was accepted into the Air Force Academy. Of the 1,406 cadets that arrived that summer, only 844 would graduate. The life of a cadet is demanding, regimented and focused, which seemed to fit the mindset of Chesley. He signed up to fly gliders his sophomore year, an experience that undoubtedly helped him fly Flight 1549 without power in either engine. In addition to graduating in 1973, he was named Outstanding Cadet in Airmanship, which meant that he was recognized as the top flyer of his class.

Sullenberger spent the better part of the next seven years as a fighter pilot for the United States Air Force. Early in his career, he was given the call sign, *Sully*. He quickly rose to the rank of Captain and that is how he acquired the nickname *Captain Sully*. An interesting twist of fate occurred when he was assigned to study accidents on the Air Force Mishap Investigation Board. During this period he was able to study pilot decision-making, analyze pilot error and examine what pilots could do in similar situations. By studying the mistakes of others, he could help other pilots become better pilots. Personal growth as a pilot also came from these in-depth investigations. Reflecting on this time in the military he would write, “Each man we lost had his own regrettable story, and so many of the particular details remain with me.” He was becoming an expert on what to do and what not to do in an emergency situation.

After being honorably discharged from the Air Force in 1980, Captain Sully spent the next 29 years as an airline pilot. He continued to study aviation safety when he became an accident investigator for the National Transport Safety Board, this time studying commercial airline crashes. He even coauthored a paper with NASA scientists and started his own

consulting business on airline safety. It would be easy for a pilot of 40 years to become complacent or lazy, but Captain Sully strived to hone his skills and become a better pilot. “I’ve tried to be that kind of pilot,” he said. “I’ve derived great satisfaction from becoming good at something that’s difficult to do.” It should be fairly easy to see why Captain Sully would make the following statement, “For 42 years, I’ve been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience, education and training. And on January 15th, the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal.”

There are many disaster experts and books on how to survive a catastrophe, whether it be a hurricane, fire, plane crash or terrorist attack. There appears to be a few central themes that come from this research. First, people caught in these situations tend to freeze and think this can’t be happening to them. People hesitate to act mainly because they don’t have a plan and are not prepared for the situation. The brain takes longer to function and to formulate a plan under stressful conditions. In other words, if you wait for the disaster to occur before you formulate a plan, it is often too late. As an end result, people become docile, quiet, afraid and still. Many wait to be told what to do because they don’t know what to do themselves. According to the National Transportation Safety Board, 56% of passengers involved in a serious airplane crash between 1983 and 2000 survived. Survival favors those who read the safety briefing cards, take the time to locate the nearest exit and even count the rows of seats between them and the exit (smoke keeps most from being able to see after a crash), check under the seats for life vests and actually listen to the flight attendant’s safety briefings before takeoff. In other words, they prepare themselves ahead of time and develop a plan. Plans override fear and counter the natural instinct to say, “This isn’t happening to me.” Regardless of the disaster, be it a plane crash or a fire, there is usually 90 seconds to get out before something even worse happens. Generally speaking, those who act and act wisely, live. Those who sit and think about what to do usually do not make it out alive.

Research also shows that only a very small percentage of people actually excel and provide leadership in a disaster situation. Captain Sully is definitely one of these unique individuals. Yes, it was his job to make the best possible decisions and lead the passengers to safety. However, one also has to ask the following question, “What would have happened if a less experienced, less capable pilot had been at the helm that day?” Would it have been the same outcome? Not only did he possess the training and skill to pull off the landing, he also had the poise and the ability to make life-altering decisions when it mattered most. He was definitely the right person for the job because he had prepared his entire life for just such a moment.

It is worth noting that Captain Sully was not the only capable person on Flight 1549 that day and he shouldn't get all the credit. It was definitely a team effort. The flight attendants performed remarkably, directing passengers during the evacuation. First responders in the boats arrived quickly and rescued people from the wings of the planes.

Don Norton, a passenger in 11F, was sitting in an exit row. He had read the safety instructions and removed the door in a “nanosecond.” He then proceeded to direct people out the door and onto the wings in a very organized fashion. Thanks to Norton's quick reaction and his leadership in this crisis, the first people to leave the plane came from that exit door. If it weren't for people like this, the “Miracle on the Hudson” could easily be known as the “Tragedy on the Hudson.”

So, what are the enduring lessons that we should learn from Flight 1549 and the legacy of Captain Sully? The lessons of this chapter go far beyond handling disasters and should be applied to life. First, at an early age, Chesley Sullenberger developed a passion for flying, set goals for himself and understood the sacrifices involved to achieve those goals. For instance, after turning 16 he wanted to take flying lessons, but he also understood that meant getting a job to pay for those lessons. He also set a lofty goal of gaining admittance to the Air Force Academy, so he worked diligently on his academics to get accepted. Second, he never settled for mediocrity and he

prepared himself to be the best pilot that he could possibly be. He was not content with being “good enough” and he continued to challenge himself throughout his career. As a result of his goal setting, preparation and his drive for self-improvement, he was able to pass the most important test of his life.

My hope is that you will not simply audit life. Be an active participant and not just a bystander as the events in your life unfold around you. Captain Sully teaches us that you are never too young to find your passion in life, set goals and be willing to work hard to achieve your dreams. Remember, the difference between success and failure is almost always tied to preparation. Without this enduring trait, opportunities will unfortunately be lost and doors will ultimately close.

A few months after the successful landing on the Hudson, Chesley Sullenberger wrote a book about his life and the events of January 15, 2009, entitled, *Highest Calling*. In it, he leaves us with this final message, “We need to try to do the right thing every time, to perform at our best, because we never know which moment in our lives we’ll be judged on.” No matter who you are and what profession you choose, life will continuously throw tests at you. In life, just as in a disaster, you want to be the person with enough knowledge and experience to lead, not the person waiting to be told what to do. The best way to accomplish this is to have a mindset of self-improvement. Create personal and professional goals for yourself. Don’t settle for mediocrity, set the bar high and be prepared for anything life throws your way.