



Written by [Gary Benoit](#) on January 19, 2009

Heroics Behind the “Miracle on the Hudson”

Flight 1549 took off from New York’s LaGuardia Airport without incident, headed for Charlotte, North Carolina. However, according to various media accounts, the plane encountered a large flock of geese just a few minutes after takeoff. The plane lost both engines, converting it from a jetliner into a 170,000-pound glider. It was here that the first hero of the day, Captain Chesley B. Sullenberger III, came in to play.



Heroic Captain

According to the Associated Press, Sullenberger’s first thought was to turn the plane around for an emergency landing back at LaGuardia. However, he quickly determined that the jet was "too low, too slow," and near too many tall buildings to reach the airport. His next thought was Teterboro Airport in New Jersey, but he realized that would mean the risk of a "catastrophic" crash in a populated neighborhood. Unwilling to risk the lives of others on the ground, the pilot determined to put the plane down in the frigid waters of the Hudson River, and just three minutes after takeoff, the plane had safely splashed down.

This quick thinking under extraordinary circumstances is a testament to Sullenberger’s natural talent and steadiness of mind. Passengers were amazed at the captain’s presence of mind during the ordeal. His brief, to-the-point communication right before the landing, "Brace for impact," was given with complete calmness. They were also amazed by the smoothness of the splash-down, and many didn’t even realize they had landed on the water!

The captain remained calm and in control after the landing. As the occupants were escaping the sinking plane onto the wings and life rafts, Sullenberger retrieved the plane’s manifest, to be used to account for all the passengers. He directed the remaining passengers out, then twice toured the flooding cabin to ensure that everyone was safely out. Only then did he exit the plane and step onto a raft.

Sullenberger was the last to leave the plane, and also the last to leave the raft. Mark Hood was the last passenger on the raft, and tried to get the pilot to step into the rescue ferry first, but the captain refused.

Once aboard the ferry, Sullenberger immediately took the manifest to the wheelhouse and used the



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radio to contact the other rescue boats to check on the passengers and crew. Everyone was alive.

Mary Berkwits, one of the passengers, said of Sullenberger, "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here today. He was just wonderful." The pilot is of course being hailed as a hero for his selfless leadership throughout the ordeal, though it is doubtful he would accept that appellation. His family members describe him as "a modest fellow," and friends and colleagues say he is "even-tempered and unassuming."

One of Sullenberger's family friends, Jim Walberg, told the *New York Daily News*, "Sure, he's a hero, but he's also a humble man. 'Hero' isn't a name he'll take to very easily." A police source related to the paper, "That guy is one cool customer.... He had saved everybody and was behaving like it was just another day at the office." And when Michael Balboni, New York's deputy secretary for public safety, thanked Sullenberger, "He said to me, in the most unaffected, humble way, he says, 'That's what we're trained to do.' No boasting, no emotion, no nothing."

Caring and Chivalrous Passengers

It had been only about three minutes since takeoff, and the announcement "Brace for impact" had been made. Most of the passengers quickly complied, but Josh, a passenger who was sitting in the exit row, had the presence of mind to take the safety card and study the emergency instructions. By the time the plane landed, he was well prepared; he immediately twisted the door and threw it out into the water. Then ensued what the *New York Times* quoted passengers as calling an "orderly mess" and "controlled panic" — and chivalry.

Tess Sosa was carrying her nine-month-old son, and was unable to get into the aisle. Panicking, she tried to crawl over the backs of the seats while holding the baby. Brad Wentzell saw what was going on and came to the rescue. "I kind of bear-hugged them and picked them up and said, 'You're coming with me,' and carried them to the front to the exit," Wentzell told the *Times*. A stranger standing at the door helped the mother and child out onto a wing.

Once on the wing, however, Wentzell noticed that the life raft they were to board was upside down and out of reach. In what seemed a choreographed action, he turned back and grabbed the wrist of another passenger, Carl Bazarian, who in turn grabbed onto a third man, who held on to the plane. With this chain formation, Wentzell was able to lean out, flip the raft, and pull it within reach. When one of the raft's occupants fell off into the water, Wentzell and Bazarian bravely reached out and hauled him aboard.

Dan Norton had opened one of the other emergency exits and was leading the way onto the wing when he realized that in his rush to open the door he had forgotten to bring his seat cushion. It turns out that his quick-thinking "neighbor" passenger had been thoughtful enough to bring his as well as hers.

Ferry-boat Rescuers

Once the plane hit the water, it took only minutes for the "first responders" to arrive. These were not the police, Coast Guard, or other emergency workers; they were Hudson River ferry operators who witnessed the landing and immediately sprang into action. The timing of the event couldn't have been better — the ferries were preparing for their daily evening commute and were ready to go.

Vince Lombardi was the first ferry captain to reach the plane, with the *Thomas Jefferson*. Lombardi humorously told the *Times*, "We noticed the plane in the water. We thought it was an odd-looking vessel." He radioed the Coast Guard then immediately headed out to help, arriving less than four



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minutes after the plane hit the water. The ferry crew began methodically rescuing the plane's passengers from the rafts.

The workers on the *Athenia* also responded quickly to the potential catastrophe. When the crew saw the plane in the water, "We just threw off the lines and went out there," said Captain Carl Lucas. When Captain John Winiarski and a deckhand, Frank Illuzzi, saw the *Athenia* speeding away, they joined them with their ferry, the *Admiral Richard E. Bennis*. "We seen them scurrying out into the river, so we turned around and saw the plane in the river. We made a beeline," related Winiarski.

All in all, 12 boats responded to the emergency, all within minutes. The *Times* noted that "the crews stopped their work and changed the world." Although the ferry workers performed heroically to rescue the passengers, they don't think it's anything special. One of the captains is Brittany Catanzaro, only 20 years old and a pilot for only five months. Her reaction? "We're just working as if we're training and drilling."

The "second responders," the police and fire departments, arrived a few minutes later and joined in the rescue. Without the quick response of the ferry workers, though, there was a real threat of hypothermia to the passengers in the freezing waters.

All the ferry captains praised the deckhands for stepping right up and getting to work. Lucas told the *Times*, "I didn't have to give any orders to the crew."

Thanks to the goodness and heroic actions of the US Airways captain, some of the passengers, and the ferry workers, this near-catastrophe ended in less than 10 minutes, without a single death or even serious injury. This is something for all Americans to feel good about!

Photo: AP Images



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