EASTWOOD’S *SULLY*:
INVESTIGATION OF A PILOT’S FORCED RIVER LANDING

By Terri Cornett

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A seasoned pilot deliberately guided a commercial flight filled with terrified passengers into New York’s icy Hudson River. Safely emerging from the potential watery grave, the pilot and every life aboard the aircraft reached safety. As the news media and American citizens hailed a newly discovered hero, the National Transportation Safety Board sought a new villain.

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Sporting my favorite flannel pajamas, I curled up in the comfy corner of my brown leather sofa. Sami, my Sheltie, settled upon my lap to share a bowl of freshly popped popcorn as I picked up the DVD remote. After pushing the faded *play* button, I found myself immersed in the Warner Brothers 2016 movie, *Sully*. This riveting film retells the events of January 15, 2009, the day that Captain Chelsey Sullenberger made an unprecedented...
emergency water-landing of U.S. Airways Flight 1549. Based on Sullenberger’s 2009 *New York Times Bestseller* autobiography, *Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters*, Sully, the movie is Hollywood’s accurate adaptation of the near-fatal plane crash. Starring one of America’s favorite actors, Tom Hanks, the movie chronicles the flight’s take-off, trouble, and touchdown into New York’s Hudson River. However, *Sully* extends beyond Hollywood’s normal realm of nail-biting plane crash stores because the bulk of the movie centers around the ensuing National Transportation Safety Board’s investigation of Captain Sully’s decision to use the Hudson waterway for a landing strip. Eastwood’s movie raises awareness that while the general American public was hailing Sullenberger as the *Hero of the Hudson* due to his decision that spared the lives of all those aboard the commercial airliner, the NTSP was contemplating the idea that Sully had unduly risked passenger’s lives.

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**The Liftoff**

On January 15, 2009, at approximately 3:25 pm (EST), Flight 1549 took flight from New York’s LaGuardia Airport in route to Charlotte, North Carolina’s Douglas Airport. Within three minutes of lift-off, the 150,000-pound commercial Airbus A320 reached an altitude of 2,818 feet and an acceleration speed of 230 miles per hour. But suddenly, the airplane encountered a flock of migratory Canada geese soaring at an approximate speed of 50 miles per hour. With tucked feet and outstretched necks, the flock flew directly into Flight 1549’s angle of ascent. This bird strike not only obscured the pilot’s view but also flew directly into the plane’s twin engines. Heavily damaged from the large birds’ impact, both of the turbofan engines failed as they burst into flames at the life-threatening altitude of 2,818 feet (approximately 4.5 miles) above the ground. While gliding, unpowered, above Manhattan, Captain Chesley “Sully”
Sullenberger (portrayed by Tom Hanks) and Co-Pilot Jeff Skiles (portrayed by Aaron Eckhart) made several attempts at restarting the idle engines in accordance with the National Transportation Safety Board’s (NTSB) checklist.

Without success at regaining engine power, the plane began a downward descent as Captain Sully radioed the New York Terminal Radar Approach Control (TRACON), the single location from which multiple New York City airport flights are monitored. Although TRACON advised Sully to return to LaGuardia, Sully made an independent judgement that the plane could not safely return to the airport due to the plane’s rate of descent. With no other reasonable options, Sully surmised that New York’s Hudson River was the only available runway that offered any chance of the plane landing safely. As Flight 1549 zoomed within 900 feet above the George Washington Bridge, Sully ordered the flight attendants: “Brace for impact!”

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The Impact, the Miracle, and the Rescue

Just ninety seconds after leaving the ground, U.S. Airways’ big metal bird splashed into the Hudson River at a speed of 150 miles per hour. Luckily for the people aboard, Sully’s forty years of experience as a pilot and safety advisor perfectly landed the plane horizontally onto the water. And, miraculously, for all 155 souls aboard Flight 1549, not one single death occurred. With all the passengers and crew alive, the intact but damaged plane sat afloat on the Hudson.

But dilemma still faced the people aboard Flight 1549 as the icy waters of the Hudson began flooding the plane’s cabin through broken windows and damaged hatchways. Fearing death by drowning or hypothermia, the people on board heeded Captain’s Sully calm leadership as he directed the plane’s evacuation. Shivering, in shock, but alive, the passengers and crew exited the plane’s cabin, stood atop the plane’s wings that were submerged in the bone-numbing
32° water. And, as the winter wind blew with an estimated 20° wind chill factor, all souls prayed for rescue.

Within minutes, New York Waterway ferries arrived from nearby docks and rescued the survivors. Once ashore, members of Flight 1549 were welcomed and administered care by New York’s finest: police, firefighters, doctors, nurses, counselors, and volunteers.

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The Investigation
As with any commercial transportation accident, the NTSB performed an investigation into the incident. The NTSB hearings suggested that despite the fact that Captain Sully’s independent judgement had spared all of the lives on board Flight 1549, Sully had unnecessarily risked the passenger’s lives by deliberately disobeying orders to return Flight 1549 to LaGuardia. The NTSB performed multiple flight simulations of identical conditions of the Sully’s January 5th flight. Data such as the plane’s speed, altitude, angle of assent, and weight were reconstructed in a flight simulation. The simulation also included New York’s January 5, 2009 atmospheric conditions such as air pressure, temperature, and wind velocity. Four out of four NTSB’s
simulations determined that Sully could have successfully redirected the plane back to LaGuardia and safely landed the plane.

Sully, however, remained steadfast in defending his unprecedented, life-saving decision. He calmly argued with the investigative board that one vital component of his emergency decision had not been accounted for by the flight simulations – the human element. Sully claimed that the computer-generated simulations were incapable of considering human emotions or the time frame that the human brain requires to process different scenarios, especially during times of emergency. Due to Sully’s consistent argument, the NTSB ran one last simulation with an additional 35 seconds to account for the human factor. This final simulation resulted in the virtual flight crashing into LaGuardia, and Sully was cleared of any wrong doing. Finally, Captain Chesley Sullenberger earned the title of National Hero.

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With my popcorn bowl empty and Sami asleep on his favorite pink blanket, this serious toned movie ended. Later, as I ventured to bed, a thought crossed my mind: the $1.50 rental fee that I paid to Redbox for this movie was $1.50 well spent. Before I drifted to sleep, my mind’s eye re-envisioned Eastwood’s perfectly orchestrated onscreen plane crash while my ears continued to ring with the passengers’ frantic screams. However, when I woke the next morning, I realized that Mr. Eastwood’s movie is not about a plane crash. Rather, his movie is about a public transportation investigation. If not for Eastwood’s movie, I and many Americans would still be unaware of the NTSB’s false accusation and poorly handled investigation into Captain Sullenberger’s life-saving actions. Now we know.

As for actor Tom Hanks? Despite his world-renowned face, Hanks professionally leads viewers to believe, if only for 96 minutes, that they are watching Captain Chesley Sullenberger
portray himself onscreen. Hanks achieves this perception by professionally mimicking the traits associated with commercial airline pilots; controlled body movements, calmness of voice, and serious facial expressions. And did I mention a gray-haired Hanks? This dedicated actor even dyed his hair and mustache to equal the aging physical appearance of Chesley Sullenberger.

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Landing that big bird in the Hudson might not have been the NTSB’s first choice, but it was Sully’s only choice. Thank God for miracles, for Chesley Sullenberger, and for Tom Hanks.