

AirSpace Movie Club: Sully

Musical Intro

Nick:

Welcome to AirSpace, from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Nick.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Emily:

And I'm Emily.

Nick:

So today, we are still in our homes and we're still watching movies and we are going to talk about the film, Sully, which is the Tom Hanks movie based on the real life emergency water landing of US Airways flight 1549, which famously ditched in the Hudson River in New York City in January of 2009. This one is not on any of the streaming subscription services, but it is readily available to rent on YouTube, iTunes, Amazon, or at that one Blockbuster Video, if you are listening to us from Bend, Oregon.

Emily:

Guys, I was just in Bend last year and I'm so mad I didn't get to go. I had no idea.

Matt:

Well, you can follow the Twitter account, right?

Emily:

I'm not on Twitter.

Nick:

If anyone listening today goes to rent Sully from Bend, Oregon, please email us and let us know.

Music under and out

Nick:

What happened in real life? Shortly after takeoff from LaGuardia, the Airbus A320 flew through a flock of Canada geese, which were sucked into both engines. Both engines failed.

Movie Clip

Tom Hanks:

Birds.

Aaron Eckhart:

Whoa.

sounds of birds hitting the plane, fade under

Nick:

In the next 208 seconds after bird impact, Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, and his copilot, Jeff Skiles, made a series of decisions that they could not make it to either of the nearby airports, because of a lack of altitude and all of the other factors, and that they would need to ditch their airplane in the Hudson River. Does everyone remember this happening?

Matt:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nick:

It was a really big deal at the time, right?

Emily:

Well, and when we decided to watch this movie for the podcast, I was like, "Oh yeah, that happened like three, four years ago." No.

Nick:

Yeah, no.

Matt:

Yeah, it does seem like it was just yesterday or something.

Emily:

I thought it just happened.

Matt:

Yeah.

Nick:

Yeah. January 15, 2009. And it was a really big deal, not just because commercial airliners don't ditch in rivers very often, but all 155 passengers and crew survived the accident, and the freezing temperatures of the Hudson River in January. They were all rescued and it was just a really wonderful, feel good, warm human story.

Matt:

So one of the most interesting things about the film to me was the way that the narrative is constructed by a bunch of flashes backwards and forwards in time between the incident, the time leading up to it, and the investigation that follows the crash, and the way that it really kind of plays with the event as it

happened, memories of the event, post-traumatic stress disorder, sort of moments focusing on the event, and then finally the full replay of the event where memory meets the actual historical event. So it's a really interesting movie in terms of just the way that it progresses and follows the timelines of not just the captain, but the crew and some of the passengers.

Emily:

One of the things that makes this story so good, so interesting, other than the fact that it happened in real life and everybody survived with near minor injuries, is the fact that ditching a plane in water, river, ocean, whatever, is very uncommon, it's very uncommon to have such a minor impact on people physically, and the fact that the training of pilots or the training that pilots receive to handle these kinds of situations is not as robust as you might think.

Nick:

I was kind of struck by that from the film. That was one of the really surprising things that I got, doing the research into this, is I assumed that since every airplane seat I've ever sat in doubles as a flotation device and there's always a briefing on what happens if you land in water, I always assumed that there was a lot of training that went into landing an airplane on water if the need arises. And I think the film does a good job of spotlighting that that is not the case. Pilots do not receive extensive training on this particular procedure, but in a related sense, all of the training and experience that Sully in particular had, and very experienced pilots have, lead to a situation where an event like this is survivable because they understand enough about the aircraft and enough about how to operate that they can safely ditch in water, even though there's no specific guideline for how to do that.

Matt:

Right. The fact that he's able to make the decision in that short amount of time and know where he has to put the plane down and where he can't, I mean, that is obviously the product of a lot of experience, right?

Emily:

Well, and it's not just where, it's the how, right?

Matt:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nick:

Yeah.

Emily:

I mean, we kept watching it being like, "Wow." The way they had to get the plane at just the right angle and just the right altitude before you brought it down on the water so that the plane didn't just hit it wrong was really impressive and I have to imagine that part of their training at least comes with dealing with dual engine failure, even if it doesn't deal directly extensively with water landings.

Nick:

That was part of the focus on the hearings, is that there was a procedure for dual engine failure and in the film, you see the copilot, Aaron Eckhart's character, flipping directly to that part in the manual, how to deal with dual engine failure. The trick is that it assumes that you're at 20 or 30,000 feet at that point so you've got a lot more time and it was of limited help of course, because they were only at 2,000 some odd feet.

Emily:

This story, as it was hitting the newspapers ... I mean, it happened on the Hudson River, I mean, New York City was there to observe all of this, right? So everybody saw it and everybody was talking about it. So everybody starts talking about how this is the miracle on the Hudson, and as we got more and more into the movie, I not only realized how little about this story I remembered, because I remembered it being such an incredible feat, but it also made me realize why are they calling this movie, this story, 'Miracle on the Hudson,' because everything about this story tells you only one thing, which is this has nothing to do with being a miracle. It has everything to do with skill, and experience, and training, and the pilot, and crew, and co-pilot's ability to keep a level head, work through procedure, work through protocol, come up with the best solution to the problem that you face. And you see that at, there's a moment in the film where you see young Sully learning to fly and his teacher tells him to no matter what happens, fly the plane.

Movie Clip

Instructor:

Never forget, no matter what's happening, to fly the airplane.

Young Sully:

Absolutely, sir.

Matt:

Yeah.

Emily:

And that, to me, was why I was like, "Why does everybody keep calling this the miracle?" Because it's not.

Matt:

Well, can I counter that with just a brief explanation of what I think? Which is that I think Sully kind of gives us the answer towards the end of the movie, where he says that it wasn't him, it wasn't him alone that was the deciding factor of why everyone survived. It was everything in that moment and everyone who participated, including the ferry boat captains who happened to be close enough that they could come and get the people out of the freezing water before it was too late.

Musical transition

Emily:

2009, right? For something like this to happen January 2009, the sort of context of what was going on in the world and where this happened, being New York City, this is the good news, in a way, in a moment where there's a lot of other bad news things happening.

Nick:

It's weird at this moment in the year 2020 to look back and remember that 2009 felt really tough, with the great recession. It was only seven and some odd years after 9/11, so planes going down in New York is an extremely sensitive thing. And it felt like a big national win, pulling this event through felt like a win and it felt like a win when we needed it, so it's kind of understandable.

Movie Clip

Taxi Driver:

Not meaning of bother, but I have to say, it was an honor driving you today.

Tom Hanks:

Thank you.

Taxi Driver:

What has is been this year so far? Bernie Madoff, Two wars without end, many million new people with no work, and that's just the first two weeks of January. Friday's headline? This is beautiful.

Matt:

So one of the things that's kind of cool about this movie and taps into that idea that it's the miracle on the Hudson because everyone chips in and makes it happen, is that some of the people who are actually in the movie are the actual people who participated in the rescue. Like for example, ferryboat Captain Vincent Peter Lombardi, he's playing himself, as are a lot of the EMTs, firefighters, policemen, and the other people who participated in the rescue.

Movie Clip

Vincent Peter Lombardi:

Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Coast Guard Sector New York, channel 1-6, Thomas Jefferson. We have a passenger airliner in the north river. We're on route, we will advise

Nick:

One thing that was not necessarily as accurate and does not involve any of the real people from the actual events are the NTSB investigators, which is the National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates accidents involving commercial aircraft. In the film, they're antagonistic at times, they're the villains to the extent that there are villains in this, other than the gray geese who flew into the airplane. The investigators kind of imply at times, or outright say, that Sully could have saved the airplane and made it back to the airport. And the vibe is that he's got to make this impassioned 'Mr. Smith Goes to

Washington' speech during the hearing to set things straight and make people understand what was at stake and the decisions that he had to make.

That was actually, kind of, a source of tension in the production of the film. The NTSB investigators apparently at no point really implied that. They were always very upfront that this was a unique circumstance and that it had been handled pretty much correctly. And they did look into whether or not they could have made it back to the airport, but as Sully has said, that is the job of the investigators and when something like this happens, that is what needs to happen. Some of the NTSB people have said that they're worried that the film may honestly compromise flight safety because it plants an idea in the head of pilots that investigators are going to be prosecutors, when that is in fact not the case. And Sully, in fact, himself, the real Sully, asked Clint Eastwood, the director of the movie, to remove the names of the real investigators from the film because he felt that they were not being portrayed accurately.

Emily:

Well, and I think this was a really interesting point, because when something bad happens, you go back and figure out what chain of events occurred in order to create the bad thing happened and what chain of events specifically occurred in order to mitigate that bad event from being really, really bad, in this case, Sully and his copilot, Jeff. So why these investigations are so critical is because by seeing the choices that the pilot and the copilot made that resulted in this positive outcome, you want to be able to understand to the very letter so that it can go back into the training that pilots actually receive. So while you can run simulations and you can run models, none of those are real life. When you have a real-life experience like this that is so anomalous, you want to dig down deep to understand it as much as possible so that you can then reintegrate that information either back into your models, back into your simulations, and back into the training procedures.

For as much as this movie doesn't portray the NTSB accurately, one of the things that this film was praised for was for its depiction of PTSD, specifically with respect to Sully, the pilot. I don't know how either of you reacted to those, they're not flashbacks, but they're sort of what-if flashes, right?

Nick:

Yeah.

Emily:

I don't know how either one of you reacted to those, but I had a very strong reaction to those scenes because they are so reminiscent of things that we have seen in our near history, especially against the New York City skyline and I just remembered seeing those and you get it, you get flashes of it a couple of times throughout the film as he's dealing with the effects of this event on Sully's mental health, but hoo boy. They're not like violent or scary, they evoke something very strong in, I think, most viewers of this movie.

Music up and under

Emily:

That's it for AirSpace Movie Club. Our next episode is going to drop in July. It will be the beginning of our season three, so we will be coming at you with a full-length episode. If we see any other great movies or

TV shows with some really great airspace content for you all, we will share it on our Instagram, @airspacepodcast.

Nick:

AirSpace, from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, is distributed by PRX. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda.

Music under and out

That was where a freighter was hijacked somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean and they were held hostage for a little while. If you don't remember it, they made another movie with Tom Hanks in it, out of that event, called Captain Phillips.

Emily:

Oh, yeah.

Nick:

Right. So, like, this fits into a series of feel-good danger but we escape events that actually happened in real life at a time when the culture really felt like we needed it, to the point where we now typecast Tom Hanks as important Americans who get out of dangerous scenarios in the first half of 2009, which is extraordinarily specific.

Emily:

Well, sure.

Matt:

And what's interesting is Tom Hanks continues to age backwards.

Nick:

Yeah. The goodwill of the country must have like a Dorian Gray effect, where there's probably-

Matt:

He's Benjamin Buttoning, you know?

Nick:

Yeah. There's probably a Woody toy from Toy Story shoved in his desk drawer that gets older as he gets younger.

Audio logo:

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