

## READING CHALLENGE

# The Miracle on the Hudson

*How Captain Sully saved 155 lives in 208 seconds*

<b>Level</b>	B1 — Intermediate
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<b>Age Group</b>	Teens (11-16)
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<b>Topic</b>	True Stories
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<b>Duration</b>	~15 min read
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<b>Skill</b>	Reading
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On the afternoon of 15 January 2009, a cold Thursday in New York City, US Airways Flight 1549 pushed back from Gate B22 at LaGuardia Airport. The **cockpit** was calm. Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, aged 57, sat in the left seat. First Officer Jeffrey Skiles sat in the right seat. Behind them, 150 passengers and three flight attendants were settling in for a routine flight to Charlotte, North Carolina. Nobody on board could have imagined that in less than six minutes, this ordinary flight would become one of the most extraordinary events in aviation history.

## A Routine Take-Off

Flight 1549 was an Airbus A320, a popular and reliable aircraft used by airlines around the world. The weather that day was clear but bitterly cold — the temperature was around minus seven degrees Celsius. The **runway** was dry, and conditions for flying were good. At 3:25 p.m., Captain Sully received clearance from the control tower, and the A320 began to accelerate down Runway 4. The engines roared with full **thrust**, and the plane lifted smoothly into the grey winter sky above Queens, New York.

Sully was one of the most experienced pilots in the United States. He had been flying for over 40 years, starting as a fighter pilot in the US Air Force before joining commercial aviation. He had logged more than 19,000 flight hours. Skiles, his first officer, was also highly experienced with over 15,000 hours. Together, they had more than 34,000 hours of flying experience. This experience would prove essential in the minutes ahead.

## Birds in the Sky

Less than two minutes after take-off, at an **altitude** of about 850 metres, Sully noticed something ahead. A formation of large birds was flying directly towards the aircraft. There was no time to change direction. In a fraction of a second, a flock of Canada geese — large birds that can weigh up to 6 kilograms each — smashed into the plane. Passengers heard loud bangs and saw flashes of flame from both engines. The **impact** was devastating. Several geese were sucked into each engine, destroying the delicate fan blades inside. Within seconds, both engines lost all power.

The cockpit fell strangely quiet. The constant background roar of the jet engines — a sound so familiar that pilots barely notice it — was gone. In its place was an eerie silence, broken only by the rush of wind over the wings. A burning smell filled the cabin. Passengers looked at each other in confusion and growing fear. The plane, which had been climbing, began to slow down. Without thrust, the A320 was now a 70-tonne **glider** — a machine designed to fly with engines, forced to glide without them.

## 208 Seconds to Decide

Sully immediately took control of the aircraft from Skiles. He pressed the radio button and spoke the words that would soon be heard around the world: "This is Cactus fifteen-forty-nine. Hit birds. We've lost thrust on both engines. We're turning back towards LaGuardia." The air traffic controller, Patrick Harten, quickly offered Runway 13 at LaGuardia. But Sully looked out of the window and made a rapid calculation. They were at only 850 metres, they were losing altitude fast, and LaGuardia was already behind them. He did not

have enough height or speed to make it back.

Harten then suggested Teterboro Airport in New Jersey, which was closer. Again, Sully calculated. Teterboro was across the Hudson River, and the plane was in a steady **descent**. If he tried for Teterboro and failed, the plane would crash into a densely populated area of New Jersey — houses, schools, shops full of people. The risk was too great. In those few seconds, Sully made the decision that would define his life: "We're gonna be in the Hudson."

Harten could not believe what he was hearing. No commercial jet had ever successfully landed on water with all passengers surviving. The controller later said he believed at that moment that everyone on Flight 1549 was going to die.

## Ditching in the River

Sully had to do everything perfectly. A water landing — called "ditching" in aviation — is extremely dangerous. If the nose of the plane dips too far forward, the aircraft can cartwheel and break apart. If one wing touches the water first, the plane can spin violently. The speed has to be exactly right. Too fast, and the **fuselage** can shatter on impact. Too slow, and the plane drops out of the sky like a stone.

In the cabin, the flight attendants heard Sully's voice over the speaker: "**Brace** for impact!" The three attendants — Donna Dent, Doreen Welsh, and Sheila Dail — immediately began shouting instructions to passengers: "Brace! Brace! Heads down! Stay down!" Passengers grabbed their ankles and pushed their heads against the seats in front of them. Some prayed. Some sent quick text messages to their families. One passenger later described these moments as the longest of his life.

At 3:31 p.m., exactly six minutes after take-off, Sully guided the powerless A320 over the George Washington Bridge with just 270 metres to spare. He aimed for a straight stretch of the Hudson River near 48th Street in Manhattan. The plane's speed was around 240 kilometres per hour. Sully pulled the nose up gently, keeping the wings perfectly level. The tail of the aircraft touched the **frigid** water first, and then the fuselage slid along the surface of the river like a giant water ski. The impact was violent but controlled. Overhead luggage bins flew open. Water began rushing in through the rear of the cabin. But the plane held together. It floated.

## Getting Out Alive

The moment the plane stopped, the **crew** went into action. The flight attendants opened the emergency exits over the wings and at the front of the aircraft. Two emergency slides deployed and automatically began to **inflate**, transforming into life rafts. Passengers began to **evacuate** — some climbed onto the wings, others got into the inflated rafts. The January water temperature was about two degrees Celsius. Anyone who fell in faced the immediate danger of **hypothermia**.

The evacuation was not completely smooth. Water was flooding in fast through the rear door, which flight attendant Doreen Welsh had opened. She was knocked off her feet by the freezing water and suffered a deep cut on her leg, but she continued helping passengers escape. Some passengers ignored the crew's instructions and tried to take their luggage with them, blocking the narrow aisle. But overall, 155 people left the aircraft in just a few minutes

— an incredible achievement.

Meanwhile, rescue boats were already racing towards the plane. New York Waterway ferry boats, which carry commuters across the Hudson every day, were the first to arrive. Their captains had seen the plane come down and immediately turned their boats towards it. Coast Guard vessels, police boats, and fire department boats followed within minutes. The rescuers pulled shivering passengers from the wings and rafts, wrapping them in blankets and rushing them to shore.

## The Captain's Final Check

As the plane slowly sank deeper into the icy river, Captain Sully refused to leave. While everyone else was evacuating, he walked through the cabin — twice — checking every seat, every row, every overhead bin. He wanted to make absolutely sure that nobody was left behind. Only when he was certain the cabin was completely empty did he finally walk to the front exit. He was the last person to step off Flight 1549. Water was already up to his ankles.

By 3:55 p.m., just 24 minutes after the bird strike, all 155 people — 150 passengers and 5 crew members — were safely off the aircraft. Not a single person died. The most serious injuries were a few broken bones and the cut on Doreen Welsh's leg. Several people were treated for hypothermia after spending time in the frigid water, but everyone recovered. [Debris](#) from the engines was later found scattered across the Bronx, but no one on the ground was hurt either.

## A City Celebrates

The news spread instantly. Television helicopters captured images of the white plane floating on the grey river, with passengers standing on the wings — images that became some of the most famous photographs of the decade. New York's Governor, David Paterson, called it "the miracle on the Hudson." The name stuck. Within hours, Sully became the most famous pilot in the world.

President George W. Bush called Sully to congratulate him. President-elect Barack Obama, who would take office just five days later, praised the crew's bravery. Sully and his crew were invited to attend Obama's inauguration on 20 January 2009. The city of New York gave Sully the "Keys to the City," an honour reserved for people who have done something truly remarkable.

But Sully remained humble. When journalists asked him how he felt about being called a hero, he said he was simply doing his job. He repeatedly praised his crew and the first responders — the ferry captains, the coast guard, the police divers — who had worked together so quickly. He also gave credit to the passengers, who mostly stayed calm during the evacuation. "We were all part of this," he said.

## Lessons from Flight 1549

The accident investigation, led by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), confirmed that the bird strike had completely destroyed both engines. They recovered the remains of Canada geese from inside the engines. The investigators tested whether Sully

could have made it back to LaGuardia or to Teterboro, using computer simulations. The conclusion was clear: if Sully had tried to reach either airport, the plane would almost certainly have crashed into buildings. His decision to land on the Hudson was the only option that could save everyone.

The event changed aviation in several ways. Airports began taking bird control more seriously, using radar, trained dogs, and even special noise machines to keep large birds away from runways. Engine manufacturers started testing their engines against larger bird strikes. Airlines reviewed their ditching procedures and emergency training. The crew of Flight 1549 became a model for how pilots and flight attendants should work together in a crisis.

In 2016, the Hollywood director Clint Eastwood made a film about the event called *Sully*, with the actor Tom Hanks playing Captain Sullenberger. The film showed not only the 208 seconds of the emergency but also the investigation afterwards, when some officials questioned whether Sully really needed to land on the river. The investigation ultimately cleared Sully completely, confirming that his decisions were exactly right.

Today, Captain Sullenberger is retired from flying but continues to work as a safety consultant and public speaker. He has written two books about his experience. The aircraft itself — the Airbus A320 with tail number N106US — was pulled from the Hudson River and is now on permanent display at the Carolinas Aviation Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, the city where Flight 1549 was originally supposed to land. Visitors can walk through the cabin and see the exact seats where passengers sat on that freezing January afternoon when an ordinary flight became an extraordinary miracle.

## Vocabulary

#	Word	Definition
1	<b>altitude</b>	the height of something above the ground or above sea level
2	<b>impact</b>	the force of one object hitting another; a strong effect on something
3	<b>thrust</b>	the forward force produced by an engine, especially a jet engine
4	<b>brace</b>	to prepare yourself physically for something dangerous or unpleasant, often by holding tightly
5	<b>fuselage</b>	the main body of an aircraft, where passengers and cargo sit
6	<b>glide</b>	to move smoothly and quietly through the air without engine power
7	<b>runway</b>	a long, flat strip of ground where aircraft take off and land
8	<b>descent</b>	the act of going down or moving to a lower position
9	<b>evacuate</b>	to leave a dangerous place quickly, or to make people leave
10	<b>inflate</b>	to fill something with air or gas so it becomes larger
11	<b>crew</b>	all the people who work together on a plane, ship, or spacecraft
12	<b>debris</b>	pieces of something that has been broken or destroyed
13	<b>frigid</b>	extremely cold
14	<b>hypothermia</b>	a dangerous medical condition when your body temperature drops too low
15	<b>cockpit</b>	the area at the front of a plane where the pilot sits and controls the aircraft

## Comprehension Quiz

### 1. What caused both engines of Flight 1549 to fail?

- A) A mechanical problem in the left engine
- B) A flock of Canada geese flew into both engines
- C) The plane ran out of fuel shortly after take-off
- D) Lightning struck the aircraft during a storm

### 2. How long after take-off did the bird strike happen?

- A) About 30 seconds
- B) About 5 minutes
- C) Less than 2 minutes
- D) About 10 minutes

### 3. Why did Captain Sully decide NOT to return to LaGuardia Airport?

- A) The airport was closed due to bad weather
- B) He did not have enough altitude or speed to reach any runway
- C) Air traffic control told him the runway was blocked
- D) He wanted to try a water landing for the first time

### 4. What did Captain Sully do before leaving the sinking aircraft?

- A) He called his family on his mobile phone
- B) He collected the flight recorder from the cockpit
- C) He walked through the cabin twice to make sure nobody was left behind
- D) He waited for the rescue boats to arrive first

### 5. How many people survived the emergency landing on the Hudson River?

- A) 150 out of 155
- B) 153 out of 155
- C) All 155 passengers and crew
- D) 148 out of 155

## Answer Key

Q	Answer	Question
1	<b>B</b>	What caused both engines of Flight 1549 to fail?
2	<b>C</b>	How long after take-off did the bird strike happen?
3	<b>B</b>	Why did Captain Sully decide NOT to return to LaGuardia Airport?
4	<b>C</b>	What did Captain Sully do before leaving the sinking aircraft?
5	<b>C</b>	How many people survived the emergency landing on the Hudson River?