

Hudson River's heroic pilot relives landing for Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

"I'm not sure we can make any runway."

"We're gonna be in the Hudson."

"Say again captain."

That is some of dialogue between airline Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger and the control tower moments before he landed US Airways Flight 1549 into the Hudson River in New York on Jan. 15, 2009.

The black box recovered from the cockpit is privileged information and contains everything Sullenberger and first officer Jeff Skiles said in the 208 seconds after Canada geese took out their two engines on the Airbus and the 155 aboard the plane landed in the 36-degree water. (The air temperature was 21 degrees that day.)



Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, left, on Aug. 24 talks to stunt pilots who will be in the air today at Lake Tahoe Airport. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Everything happened so fast the only announcement Sullenberger made to the passengers was to brace for impact. Even the flight crew didn't know there was about to be an emergency water landing.

Sullenberger relayed this and other aspects of the harrowing experience to a crowd of about 175 people Aug. 24 at Embassy Suites in South Lake Tahoe.

"You would have thought that we had been working together for years," Sullenberger said of himself and Skiles. They had met three days earlier. Now they are like brothers.

It was their years of experience that allowed them to be calm, act on instinct, and ensure not a single person died as they descended at a rate of two stories per second.

Pilots don't get to practice these types of scenarios. There is no simulator that allows them to practice a water landing.

"The only way to train is theoretical discussions in a classroom," Sullenberger said.

While the two pilots were not high-fiving or slapping each other's back after the successful landing, Sullenberger said they did turn to each other and simultaneously said, "That wasn't as bad as I thought."

The plane was damaged so much it could not be flown again. It has since been restored a bit and is on display for the public in North Carolina.

In the time since Sullenberger reached hero status he has spent his time working on air safety, giving talks and getting kids interested in aviation. Plus, he has written two books – "Making a Difference Stories of Vision and Courage from America's Leaders" which came out in May and "Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters" which was published in May 2010.

He and Skiles are the honorary co-chairs of the EAA Young Eagles program that gets young people interested in aviation. He will be at Lake Tahoe Airport on Aug. 26 for the Young Eagles flights.

His wife, Lorrie, and daughters Kate and Kelly joined him on this trip to Tahoe. The Bay Area residents are regular visitors to Lake Tahoe, having owned a place at Incline Village in the past.

They are avid skiers, with most of their time spent at Northstar. Biking the Flume Trail and hiking parts of the Tahoe Rim Trail are other athletic pursuits they enjoy, Lorrie Sullenberger told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The couple has a romantic tie to Tahoe, too. In the late 1980s they were passengers in a friend's four-seater plane when Sullenberger proposed while flying over Lake Tahoe.

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Note: Lake in the Sky Air Show is today at Lake Tahoe Airport. Opening ceremonies are at 10am, though the pancake breakfast starts at 8am. Closing ceremonies are at 3:30pm.