



Sully

What "based on a true story" really means

BY JEFF SKILES

I CERTAINLY NEVER IMAGINED that one day I would be sitting in a theater watching a movie with a character sharing my name. Although I must say that the actor, Aaron Eckhart, certainly more than holds up his end of the bargain. Nine years younger than me, handsome, and with an impressive head of hair, I can't help thinking that he makes the real article look rather pitiful in comparison.

The movie *Sully* seeks to tell the backstory of the Miracle on the Hudson and the far-reaching investigation that followed in its wake. A story that until now really couldn't have been appreciated by anyone other than Sully and me. We were hailed as heroes for saving 155 lives and yet were simultaneously the subjects of a rigorous, critical, and invasive inquiry for the very same act.

IT'S A MOVIE NOT A DOCUMENTARY

Sully is a Hollywood production not a documentary. The goal is to tell a story. Oftentimes some details don't fall neatly within the dictates of the silver screen, and liberties are taken to make the tale more compelling for the viewer.

From a broad brush perspective, I found the film to be amazingly accurate. Accuracy seemed to be a priority for director Clint Eastwood and his production staff in my small dealings with them. The actors and actresses who were cast to play the various parts in the movie were selected for their resemblance to the actual people they were portraying. In fact, two of those cast in the movie *were* the actual people. One of the female pilots featured toward the end of the movie conducting simulations was the actual US Airways check captain assigned to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Operations Committee in the incident investigation. And,

the ferry boat captain featured in the rescue was the actual ferry boat captain who still plies the Hudson in command of a New York Waterway ferry to this day. For all you Green Bay Packers fans out there — and who isn't a fan of the Packers — his name is Vince Lombardi.

SEEING MYSELF ON THE SILVER SCREEN

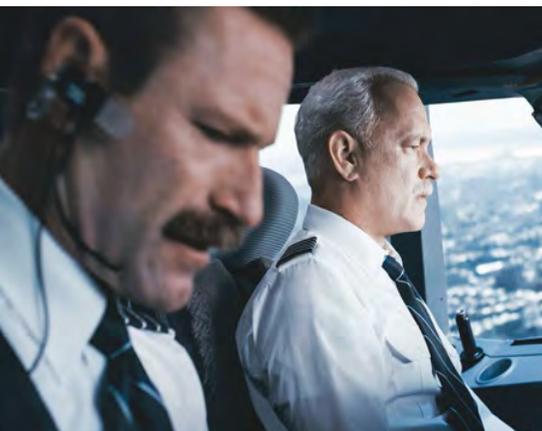
Watching the movie is difficult for me, not because it sparked any emotional reaction, but rather because I know the story too well. There's no drama in it because I know everything about it. I even know when they

were setting up a scene to express something, but the triumphant culmination, for whatever reason, ended up on the cutting room floor. You will never know where those scenes are, but to me it feels a bit like an untied shoelace.

Since the movie has debuted I have been inundated with e-mails from EAAers expressing support and asking questions. Since I'm not an uninvolved viewer, I'm not really in a position to judge how others might perceive the movie, but I can tell you a bit about what was factual. I can also tell you where the movie strayed from complete accuracy to more faithfully and completely convey the broader message of the film.

SMALL DIFFERENCES

The in-flight sequences, the landing, and the rescue on the river were amazing — and amazingly accurate. There were little things to be sure. The flight attendants never walked up and down the aisle. Sully and I didn't have time to waste looking concerned. And, throughout the movie the volume of the cockpit emergency warnings was hardly noticeable. Quadruple the volume and it would be more accurate. In the cockpit that day there was nothing but action as we were surrounded by chaos. Loud alert bells were supplemented by automated voices shouting over the speaker, "Traffic, Traffic," "Too Low Flap," "Whoop, Whoop Pull Up." There were so many warnings coming in that the computer was prioritizing them and not allowing us to hear lower level alerts. I had to follow the checklist and loudly make commands because Sully had to hear them. The reality of what happened in the cockpit would have been far more dramatic than the movie portrayed it. Mostly, though, the accident representation was pretty true to form.



The recovery of the passengers was fairly accurate from what I remember as well. Once again, small differences but nothing big enough to alter the perception of that day.

In the investigation and hearing the movie deviated from real events a bit. To understand this, it's important to understand what the NTSB is and how it conducts an investigation.

HOW THE NTSB WORKS

The NTSB has no regulatory authority, nor does it have any enforcement power. Its function is to investigate transportation incidents and accidents in this country, define a probable cause or causes, and offer safety recommendations addressing how the system might be improved.

To accomplish this, it has set up a specific system of investigation when arriving at the accident scene. The NTSB organizes committees to investigate various components of an accident and invites interested parties onto the committees. For instance, the Cockpit Voice Recorder Committee obviously analyzes the CVR, likewise the Powerplants

Committee reports on the engines. Probably the most influential committee from the pilot's point of view is the Operations/ Human Performance Committee.

The NTSB doesn't pretend to be an expert on the specifics of any one aircraft, airline, or situation. So, it asks for help from interested parties who are subject matter experts. For instance, a representative from GE would obviously be placed on the Powerplants Committee because GE manufactured the engines. While these "parties" are assisting the investigation, they are also representing their own corporate interests, which is why it is critically important to get an advocate for the pilots on these committees.

THE NTSB INTERVIEW

The NTSB interviews everyone surrounding an accident. My interview, which took place separately from Sully and not together as is depicted in the movie, was three hours long. I hadn't slept in three days by that point, and I was denied the most basic right of any charged felon — legal assistance and

representation. I sat at a conference table surrounded by eight or nine members from the NTSB investigation committees. There was no adversarial tone in their questioning as was depicted in the movie, there was no condescension, but there didn't need to be; it is a very intimidating process.

The NTSB also interviewed everyone I had come into contact with during my recent training on the aircraft, as well as the last three captains I flew with on the Boeing 737 before I went to the Airbus.

After their investigation was complete, each committee wrote a report of its actions and findings, and these reports were all combined and summarized into the final NTSB Aviation Accident Report. This process intentionally takes a year, or in our case a year and five months, so that the investigation can proceed without pressure from politics or the need to meet the mandates of the current news cycle.

The report is ultimately presented at what is called the "Sunshine" hearing at the NTSB hearing room, which is, quite

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literally, in the basement of the L'Enfant Plaza shopping mall in Washington, D.C. The hearing is primarily to introduce the NTSB's report to the public. Questions can be, and were, asked of Sully at the hearing, but this is the end of the process; all the investigation had been concluded long before.

HOLLYWOOD

Now, the last seven paragraphs were probably as boring for you to read as watching paint dry, which is why the producers of *Sully* chose to telescope (a Hollywood term) the events of a year and a half into one four-day period after the incident.

So was it real? Well, all the questions I heard in the movie were asked in real life. And, while events may not have occurred in the place or in the order as depicted in the movie, everything I saw actually happened. In actual fact the NTSB investigators were completely respectful, but there is no denying that it is an adversarial situation.

For a year we were left to worry about our future careers as the investigation ground on. Powerful forces central to the investigation were arrayed against us — airlines, aircraft manufacturers, engine manufacturers — any one of whom would consider it a success if it shifted even a small portion of the liability were shifted to another party. The pilots are always a ripe target.

FAIR AND BALANCED

I will say that in our case we received a very fair and balanced investigation and report from the NTSB. I will also say that I believe this was at least partially due to the success of the event — no lives were lost — and the unusual scrutiny that the press and public had placed on the incident.

While people may rightly argue that the movie strayed from the actual facts with regard to the NTSB investigators' bearing and the construct and timing of the hearing, I thought the movie did a good job of telling the broader story of the incident. Clint Eastwood

pulled back the curtain and revealed the reality of the major incident investigation swirling around Sully and me at the same time as Sully was being lauded as a national hero.

Which brings me to my final point. Tom Hanks is a tremendous actor, and he captured the emotion of the moment and the turmoil of the aftermath exquisitely. But Tom is not Sully, and no one can convey Sully's bravery, leadership, and true professionalism as I saw it on that day. Many, if not most, pilots would have felt they were through with their responsibilities the moment the passengers were rescued. But Sully never relinquished command of US Airways 1549, not at the ferry terminal, not in the subsequent days of media frenzy, nor throughout the lengthy investigation. In fact, Sully is still in command of US Airways 1549 — even today. *EAA*

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