

## Flight 1549 landing in the Hudson - January 2009

This is a first-hand account from a passenger on Flight 1549. It is an internal memo to the members of his firm. It is very well written, is descriptive, and gives this man's honest reactions to the events around him. It's from a Partner at Heidrick & Struggles, an executive recruiting firm, who was on Flight 1549. Gerry McNamara (New York/Charlotte) was on US Airways Flight 1549 last week. Here is his account of the event:

Thursday was a difficult day for all of us at the firm and I left the Park Avenue office early afternoon to catch a cab bound for LaGuardia Airport .

I was scheduled for a 5pm departure, but able to secure a seat on the earlier flight scheduled to leave at 3pm. As many of us who fly frequently often do, I recall wondering if I'd just placed myself on a flight I shouldn't be on!

Just prior to boarding I finished up a conference call with my associate, Jenn Sparks ( New York ), and our placement, the CIO of United Airlines. When I told him that I was about to board a US Airways flight, we all had a little fun with it.

I remember walking on the plane and seeing a fellow with grey hair in the cockpit and thinking "that's a good thing... I like to see grey hair in the cockpit!"

I was seated in 8F, on the starboard side window and next to a young business man. The New York to Charlotte flight is one I've taken what seems like hundreds of times over the years. We take off north over the Bronx and as we climb, turn west over the Hudson River to New Jersey and tack south. I love to fly, always have, and this flight plan gives a great view of several NY landmarks including Yankee Stadium and the George Washington Bridge .

I had started to point out items of interest to the gentleman next to me when we heard a terrible crash - a sound no one ever wants to hear while flying - and then the engines wound down to a screeching halt. 10 seconds later, there was a strong smell of jet fuel. I knew we would be landing and thought the pilot would take us down no doubt to Newark Airport . As we began to turn south I noticed the pilot lining up on the river - still - I thought - en route for Newark .

Next thing we heard was "Brace for impact!" - a phrase I had heard many years before as an active duty Marine Officer but never before on a commercial air flight. Everyone looked at each other in shock. It all happened so fast we were astonished!

We began to descend rapidly and it started to sink in. This is the last flight. I'm going to die today. This is it. I recited my favourite bible verse, the Lord's Prayer, and asked God to take care of my wife, children, family and friends.

When I raised my head I noticed people texting their friends and family....getting off a last message. My blackberry was turned off and in my trouser pocket...no time to get at it. Our descent continued and I prayed for courage to control my fear and help if able.

I quickly realized that one of two things was going to happen, neither of them good. We could hit by the nose, flip and break up, leaving few if any survivors, bodies, cold water, fuel. Or we could hit one of the wings and roll and flip with the same result. I tightened my seat belt as tight as I could possibly get it so I would remain intact.

As we came in for the landing, I looked out the windows and remember seeing the buildings in New Jersey, the cliffs in Weehawken, and then the piers. The water was dark green and sure to be freezing cold. The stewardesses were yelling in unison: "Brace! Brace! Brace!"

It was a violent hit - the water flew up over my window - but we bobbed up and were all amazed that we remained intact.

There was some panic - people jumping over seats and running towards the doors, but we soon got everyone straightened out and calmed down. There were a lot of people that took leadership roles in little ways. Those sitting at the doors over the wing did a fantastic job...they were opened in a New York second! Everyone worked together - teamed up and in groups to figure out how to help each other.

I exited on the starboard side of the plane, 3 or 4 rows behind my seat through a door over the wing and was, I believe, the 10th or 12th person out. I took my seat cushion as a flotation device and once outside saw I was the only one who did....none of us remembered to take the yellow inflatable life vests from under the seat.

We were standing in 6-8 inches of water and it was freezing. There were two women on the wing, one of whom slipped off into the water. Another passenger and I pulled her back on and had her kneel down to keep from falling off again. By that point we were totally soaked and absolutely frozen from the icy wind.

The ferries were the first to arrive, and although they're not made for rescue, they did an incredible job. I know this river, having swum in it as a boy. The Hudson is an estuary - part salt and part fresh water - and moves with the tide. I could tell the tide was moving out because we were tacking slowly south towards Ellis Island, The Statue of Liberty, and The Battery.

The first ferry boat pulled its bow up to the tip of the wing, and the first mate lowered the Jacobs ladder down to us. We got a couple people up the ladder to safety, but the current was strong pushing the stern of the boat into the inflatable slide and we were afraid it would puncture it...there must have been 25 passengers in it by now. Only two or three were able to board the first ferry before it moved away.

Another ferry came up, and we were able to get the woman that had fallen into the water on the ladder, but she just couldn't move her legs and fell off. Back onto the ladder she went; however, the ferry had to back away because of the swift current. A helicopter arrived on station (nearly blowing us all off the wing) and followed the ferry with the woman on the ladder. We lost view of the situation but I believe the helicopter lowered its basket to rescue her.

As more ferries arrived, we were able to get people up on the boats a few at a time. The fellow in front of me fell off the ladder and into the water. When we got him back on the ladder he could not move his legs to climb. I couldn't help him from my position so I climbed up the ladder to the ferry deck where the first mate and I hoisted the Jacobs ladder with him on it...when he got close enough we grabbed his trouser belt and hauled him on deck. We were all safely off the wing.

We could not stop shaking. Uncontrollable shaking. The only thing I had with me was my blackberry, which had gotten wet and was not working. (It started working again a few hours later).

The ferry took us to the Weehawken Terminal in NJ where I borrowed a phone and called my wife to let her know I was okay. The second call I made was to Jenn. I knew she would be worried about me and could communicate to the rest of the firm that I was fine. At the terminal, first responders assessed everyone's condition and sent people to the hospital as needed. As we pulled out of Weehawken my history kicked in and I recall it was the site of the famous duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr in 1804. Thankfully I left town in better condition than Mr. Hamilton who died of a mortal wound the next day! I stayed with my sister on Long Island that evening, then flew home the next day.

I am struck by what was truly a miracle. Had this happened a few hours later, it would have been pitch dark and much harder to land. Ferries would no longer have been running after rush hour and it would not have been the same uplifting story. Surely there would have been fatalities, hypothermia, an absolute disaster!

I witnessed the best of humanity that day. I and everyone on that plane survived and have been given a second chance. It struck me that in our work we continuously seek excellence to solve our client's leadership problems. We talk to clients all the time about the importance of experience and the ability to execute. Experience showed up big time on Flight 1549 as our pilot was a dedicated, trained, experienced professional who executed flawlessly when he had to.

I have received scores of emails from across the firm and I am so grateful for the outpouring of interest and concern. We all fly a great deal or work with someone who does and so I wanted to share this story - the story of a miracle. I am thankful to be here to tell the tale.

There is a great deal to be learned including: Why has this happened to me? Why have I survived and what am I supposed to do with this gift? For me, the answers to these questions and more will come over time, but already I find myself being more patient and forgiving, less critical and judgmental.

**For now I have 4 lessons I would like to share:**

- 1. Cherish your families as never before and go to great lengths to keep your promises.**
- 2. Be thankful and grateful for everything you have and don't worry about the things you don't have.**
- 3. Keep in shape. You never know when you'll be called upon to save your own life, or help someone else save theirs.**
- 4. When you fly, wear practical clothing. You never know when you'll end up in an emergency or on an icy wing in flip flops and pyjamas and of absolutely no use to yourself or anyone else.**

And I'd like to add: Fly with gray-haired pilots!

"Plan like you'll live to be 90; live like you'll die tomorrow." Mjb  
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