

HIGH Expectations

During the last few weeks, I have been asked countless times to comment on what has been known as the “Miracle on the Hudson,” the immediately famous ditching of US Airways Flight 1549, an Airbus A320, in New York City’s frigid Hudson River. After being quoted on this event in a few hundred news outlets around the world, I want to say just three things about this accident.

First, I find it amazing that the ditching is the fourth in a series of major airline accidents where the aircraft was destroyed but everyone escaped with relatively minor injuries. I am thinking of the Air France Airbus A340 at Toronto, the British Airways Boeing 777 at Heathrow, and the Continental Boeing 737NG at Denver. At first everyone talked about how “luck” got everyone off the Air France aircraft, but now that there have been three more major nonfatal accidents, people are realizing, I think, that there is more to it than luck. Clearly, manufacturers are doing something right regarding the crashworthiness of the airframes, and the airlines have to take some credit for the extraordinary performance of the cabin crews.

Second, the US Airways accident is important because it reminds us that despite our best efforts, there will always be some residual risk. According to Bird Strike Committee USA, “a 12-lb Canada goose struck by a 150-mph aircraft at lift-off generates the force of a 1,000-lb [454 kg] weight dropped from a height of 10 ft. [3 m].” There is nothing we are ever going to do that will make it easy at 300 mph to avoid, or to safely fly through, a flock of geese. I have been trying to explain to the public that flying in a commercial airliner is one of the safest things they will ever do in their

life, but it will never be without risk — and that is OK. That seems to make their heads hurt, but it needs to be said.

Finally, I was surprised at how emotional it was for me to listen to recordings of air traffic control (ATC) communications with Flight 1549. In less than a minute, the flight crew and ATC dealt with a normal departure, an emergency return, four runway options at two different airports and a ditching, handling the situation in a crisp and professional manner. The public seems amazed, but those of us who have dealt with emergencies in the cockpit and in ATC heard exactly what we expected to hear. *That is just what we do.*

We all grew up thinking about how we would handle a crisis like that, hoping that if the time came we would get it right. The thought of living up to that expectation is what made most of us fall in love with this business and stay with it. The desire to perform brilliantly at a critical moment is something that we all have in common.

So, take a second. Put aside the data, the crew schedules and the reporting systems, and have a quick listen to those ATC recordings on your computer. You undoubtedly will smile, remembering for a second how good it feels to be part of an industry where such high performance standards are just the way we do things.



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