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Sully & Skiles Bring The House Down With The Airplane At AirVenture



(ABOVE) (L/R) First Officer Jeffrey Skiles, and Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, crew of US Airways Flight 1549, told about their January ditching in the Hudson River at the Honda Pavilion during EAA AirVenture-Oshkosh.

(LEFT) U.S. Airways First Officer Jeff Skiles of Oregon, Wisconsin.

Story & Photos by Dave Weiman

OSHKOSH, WIS. – Headlining the presentations held at the Honda Pavilion during EAA AirVenture, was that of Capt. Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger and First Officer Jeffrey Skiles of U.S. Airways Flight 1549 fame, “Miracle On The Hudson!” It has been 6 months since the dynamic dual ditched an Airbus A320 in the Hudson River when both engines flamed out after hitting a flock of geese. The flight that made them famous took all of 5.5 minutes.

They received a standing ovation from the standing-room-only crowd, many who were there for the triple-header that day. Featured first in the Honda Pavilion in separate presentations was Burt Rutan and Sir Richard Branson of the Virgin Galactic commercial space program, followed by newly appointed FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt, and then the crew of Flight 1549.

Throughout news reports and public appearances since the accident, Skiles has been referred to as “the copilot,” rather than as the “First Officer” of the flight. But there was no question as to who was flying at the time: “Yes, I’m the guy that flew the plane into the birds and (I) want some of the credit for making Capt. Sullenberger famous,” said Skiles, in a light moment to set the stage for the

presentation. Sullenberger, who realized the dire emergency they were in, immediately said to Skiles, “My aircraft,” at which time Skiles gladly relinquished the controls, “to see if he could do any better,” said Skiles, now making light of the situation, which he took seriously at the time.

Capt. Sullenberger stated that he visualized not making it to Teterboro Airport...the Hudson was their only option, he thought at the time.

Once the crew made their decision, Capt. Sullenberger prepared to ditch and carefully managed what energy remained to glide in. “I had to make the flare in the right attitude,” said Sullenberger. Not too high...not too low, and straight and level. “Before that, it was an inside/outside, inside/outside action, watching airspeed and altitude.”

This was the first time Sullenberger and Skiles had flown together, which is not unusual for the airlines. “It’s about being able to put two strangers together in the cockpit as if they had flown together for a long time,” said Sullenberger. “It’s about leadership. It’s about a lot of things.”

Just prior to touchdown, Sullenberger told the passengers to “brace for impact,” rather than have them reach for their life vests. “I wanted to choose my words carefully.” Then after touchdown, he told passengers to

“dawn your life vests,” and the New York City ferries arrived within 4 minutes.

Skiles gave credit to the entire crew and rescue people. “It wasn’t just us...there were many people involved.” The skills and training of Sullenberger and Skiles, in addition to the cabin crew of Shelia Dail, Doreen Welsh, and Donna Dent, saved 155 people that day.

Every pilot in the audience that had ever gone “gulp” in the cockpit for whatever reason, could relate to what these pilots must have gone through.

During the question and answer period, someone in the audience asked Sullenberger if he felt his experience as a glider pilot helped, and he replied yes in regards to paying attention to “energy management.”

Looking back, do you feel ditching in the Hudson was the best option, someone else asked.

Sullenberger replied by noting the findings of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), which used a flight simulator to determine that half of the time the aircraft could have successfully returned to LaGuardia Airport, and the other half of the time, it could not. “But we never could have made Teterboro,” said Sullenberger.

When asked if either pilot had considered adding a seaplane rating to their certificates, Sully quipped, “I got word that the FAA said if I do this twice more, I can get my rating!”

Growing up in Wisconsin, Skiles had been to Oshkosh many times previously with his father, who was a private pilot. But this was Sullenberger’s first time to the world’s largest fly-in, and he was totally amazed and impressed with the people and the event.

“This is just phenomenal,” said Sully. “It is fun to be in the same place with people who have the same passion I have had since I was 10.”

Skiles said this was his first visit to AirVenture for multiple days on end, and remarked how impressed he was with the organization and the passion of the volunteers.

Coincidentally, one of the tugboat operators’ names was “Vince Lombardi,” said Skiles, who is a Green Bay Packer fan. Lombardi once coached the team.

Sully said that he and Skiles have tried to make the most out of the experience by bringing some recognition to broader issues at hand, including the current state of the “airline” industry. Hopefully now that they have seen that it is the general aviation community, which is truly setting the pace for the entire aviation community, they will help bring recognition to the state of the “general aviation” industry, as well.

“We’re trying to make as much good of this for ourselves, our families, and our profession as we can,” Sullenberger said.

Sullenberger has reportedly made a \$3.2 million book deal to tell his story. But Sullenberger admitted during the presentation that Skiles is the public speaker between the two, and will do very well in reaping the benefits of the

January 15, 2009, mishap.

The pilots have been guests at the inauguration of the 44th President of the United States, featured on the David Letterman Show, and had more opportunities to fly unique aircraft than the average GA pilot could even imagine, including the new Airbus A380, U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds F-16, and a P-51 Mustang at EAA AirVenture.

The following evening, Sullenberger and Skiles appeared at EAA’s Theater In The Woods with actor David Hartman, who took the incident as serious as it was. It was clear who was in command of that performance, because even a pro like Hartman could not control the entertaining Oregon, Wisconsin resident, Jeff Skiles.

Whatever levity the two pilots have now to lessen the trauma associated with the mishap on that cold January day, is surpassed by how seriously they view their jobs as airline pilots.

In a touching moment, Skiles stated that he would be honored to be Sullenberger’s First Officer for the captain’s first flight back on line, displaying the bond that has grown between the two professional pilots (www.midwestflyer.com). □



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