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Baltimore man recounts survival of Flight 1549

A huge crash, dead silence and thoughts of family

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US Airways Flight 1549 out of New York's LaGuardia Airport had been in the air for just 90 seconds when a collision with a flock of birds forced Capt. Chesley B. Sullenberger to make a dramatic landing in the Hudson River.

Corporate attorney Jim Hanks, 65, a partner in the Baltimore office of Venable LLP, prefers to sit at the front of the plane when he flies. But for the Airbus A320 flight to Charlotte, N.C., the Federal Hill resident found himself in an aisle seat three rows from the back. The location that would complicate Thursday's ordeal. He tells the story in his own words:

It sounded like a small explosion or a very large snap or crackling sound. And then right away there was silence, which I knew meant we had lost power in both of the engines.

Then there was some acrid, electric-smelling smoke that came into the cabin. That was the first thing I was really worried about: Is this cabin going to fill up with smoke? But that stopped, and we discovered our situation was far worse than a little acrid smoke.

There was dead silence within the aircraft. It was one of those situations where everyone was very, very tense, but if everybody holds on and nobody snaps, people will remain calm.

I was thinking - or, probably, more hoping than actually thinking - that the pilot could get the plane turned around and get back to LaGuardia. But that turned out to be not possible because we weren't that high off the ground. After a minute or two, he came on the speaker and said, "Brace for impact."

It was very calm, very matter of fact, no hint of even urgency in his voice. That was the first and last thing he said, just those three words. And so that was pretty worrisome right there.

One of the flight attendants came on and said, "Put your head down in your lap; cover your arms." Her voice seemed maybe a little bit more anxious than his, but she was not panicky or anything.

There was one guy after a minute or two who shouted out, "Stay calm! Stay calm!" I thought, as he was saying it, 'That's not a particularly helpful thing to say. It kind of underscores the gravity of the situation.'

Hanks was traveling from the stockholders meeting of a client in New York to the board meeting of another client in Charlotte. Now he sat at the rear of an airplane as it descended toward the Hudson River.

I could see the New Jersey cliffs come up on the right, I could see the buildings of Manhattan to the left, so I could see that he was lining up with the river and getting lower and lower. And then we hit.

There was just a huge crash. It was just a very, very hard, loud impact. There was stuff flying all around, a lot of noise, crashing. I wound up with this big piece of metal on my lap. It had to be some part of the plane.

Then, a brief moment of silence. And then everybody headed for the exits.

I remembered, of course, what you hear so many times on airliners at the beginning of each trip, head for the nearest exit, remembering that it may be behind you. So, I went back to the rear. As soon as I stepped into the aisle, there was already three or four feet of water. It was pretty close to my waist.

There were a couple of flight attendants, and they were actually coming forward. One of them said, 'It's hopeless,'

referring to getting the door open. Notwithstanding that, I took a couple of steps further back to actually see for myself.

What I saw was openings between the door and the jamb that were allowing a lot of water to rush in. And also I could see that the water was rising on the outside of the plane. That should have been enough for me to realize that the flight attendants were right and to get out of there, but nevertheless I tried the door myself.

It wouldn't budge. By then, the water had risen nearly to his chin. Hanks thought that he was going to drown. He thought of his wife, Sabine, 39, and their 4-year-old daughter, Maria Dorothy, both in Austria.

My initial thoughts were very, very warm thoughts about them. And then kind of less-pleasant thoughts came into my mind, like my wife is going to be a widow at a fairly young age; my daughter is going to lose her father and probably not even remember him.

That was the worst moment, when I knew I wasn't going to be able to get out that door and when the water was up around my neck. I was visualizing not being able to get out because there were a hundred and fifty people ahead of me trying to get out of the plane with water at the same level from back to front.

These are thoughts that were going through my mind as I was going toward the back, as I was in the back. I was kind of matter-of-fact about it. I didn't take time to really reflect on how grave my situation was. I wanted to overcome it.

Hanks didn't know that Sullenberger had raised the nose of the plane just before impact. While the rear of the cabin was filling with water, the front remained dry. And the doors there were open.

I turned around and headed up the aisle. Much to my surprise, the plane was actually emptying out very quickly. And as I walked up the aisle, the water level on my body began to drop from my neck to my chest, to my waist, to my thighs, my knees, and by the time I got to the front of the plane, there was no water. The people who were in the front of the plane, they must have stepped out into those rafts and never gotten wet.

We were probably on the raft for about 30 minutes. It certainly felt cold. After the ferryboat arrived, I was holding on to the metal ladder that they put over the side to keep the raft alongside and assist people up the ladder. You can imagine what it's like to be drenched in water, in 20-degree air temperature and holding onto metal. I could feel my hand freezing to the metal. I had to keep moving my hand up and down on the metal.

We got a lot of people off the raft. Then I heard somebody behind me yell, "Get the old guy up! Get the old guy up!" And I looked around because I hadn't seen any older gentlemen that we might need to take care of first. I looked up and realized that the guy was talking about me.

Ferries and rescue boats surrounded the sinking aircraft. On board a New York Waterway ferry, Hanks was handed a cell phone. He asked his office to patch him through to his wife in Kitzbuhel, who had been watching news of the crash on CNN.

The next day, Hanks flew home to Baltimore. In the interview yesterday from which this account was drawn, he described the decision to fly back.

When they offered me the travel options, I did say, "Can I go back by train?" But there I was out at LaGuardia Airport in the hotel that they put us up in. I could get to the airport in two minutes right across the highway. So, I didn't think about it more than a half a second. I said, "No, that's fine."

The thought did occur to me, I must say, that if there were geese out there yesterday, there can be geese out there today. But I'm not going to let a bunch of geese run my life.



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