

What the 'Sully' Movie Gets Wrong

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When the movie *Sully* opens in theaters today, Tom Hanks will stand in as the eponymous hero whose 2009 splash-landing in the river—aka the “Miracle on the Hudson”—turned US Airways Capt. Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger into an instant celebrity. Directed by Clint Eastwood, it has all the elements of a gripping story: a terrifying near-disaster, in which everyone mercifully survives.

But the filmmakers faced one big problem: [Where's the suspense?](#) The facts are well-known: The flight itself lasted all of four minutes—from take off at New York's LaGuardia Airport, to that unlucky collision with [a flock of geese that took out both engines](#), after which passengers endured a heart-stopping ride as Sully and his co-pilot Jeff Skiles made the call to ditch the Airbus A320 in an icy Hudson River rather than return to the airport. The evacuation and water rescue took only 24 minutes, as ferries and other vessels in the area quickly came to the rescue. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation and public hearing that followed were anticlimactic—the crew, including the three flight attendants on board, had done the right thing, according to the board's final report.

That's, well, kind of boring. Director Eastwood has admitted that he needed a villain. “Where's the antagonist?” he reportedly asked when approached about the project. Sully's best-selling book, *Highest Duty*, was more inspirational than a tell-all, and offered no candidates for the role of black hat. So the filmmakers solved their no-drama problem, in [true Hollywood fashion](#), by making one up.

Actually, they made up an entire band of baddies: a glowering tribunal of investigators who torment Sully and Skiles for days immediately after the accident, not just questioning their decisions, but contradicting their accounts. While they're identified in the film as NTSB officials, that's where the resemblance to reality ends. These celluloid NTSB sleuths are fictional characters—an odd twist, given that almost all the other people depicted on screen, like passenger Jim Stefanik, and air traffic controller Patrick Harten, who took Sully's mayday call, are real people identified by their actual names.

When the film's pilots are shown in their first interview with the feds, the plot quickly strays from the well-known narrative. The so-called “lead investigator Charles Porter,” played by Mike O'Malley as a snarling Torquemada, immediately pounces on Sully and Skiles about alcohol and drug use, and follows that with claims that “engineers” and simulations of the flight revealed that they could have gotten the plane safely back to LaGuardia. Better yet: One engine still had power. Sully and Skiles are shocked, traumatized; Sully fears losing not just his reputation, but his whole livelihood: “I've got 40 years in the air, but in the end, I'm going to be judged on 208 seconds.” And so it goes, for much of the movie's 96-minute run.

Dramatic, yes. Factual? As one source connected to the NTSB put it: “The basic premise of the film is simply inaccurate.”

In fact, the NTSB was never consulted or even contacted by anyone connected with the film, a spokesperson confirms. There's no one named Charles Porter at the agency and his two film colleagues, “Ben Edwards” and “Elizabeth Davis,” played by veteran actors Jamey Sheridan and Anna Gunn, are also phony. Meanwhile, [drug and alcohol tests of the crew](#) were done right after the accident, and turned up nothing; by the same token, it's also perfectly reasonable—and in fact standard procedure—for the interviewers to ask about that as well as any personal or financial problems the crew may have been experiencing. The simulations of the flight, done in cooperation with the plane's manufacturer, were months away; and when they were in fact done, the results tilted in the pilots's favor.

I reached out to the lead investigator in the case, Robert Benzon, who is now retired after a 27-year career with the agency; this was his last major air crash investigation. Did it bother him that the real NTSB people weren't portrayed as themselves? “To be honest, I am kind of glad I'm not mentioned by name,” he tells Condé Nast Traveler. “Especially if the idea is to portray us as some kind of vindictive, out-to-get-'em star chamber inquisition.”

When we spoke, Benzon had yet to see the film, but what he's gleaned from the trailer and other reports have him concerned. “The NTSB treated Captain Sullenberger and his fellow crewmembers very benignly, as we always did in the many other major investigations with crew interviews,” he says. In fact, by the time the NTSB conducted interviews, “they were international heroes,” he adds. “As a result, we were even more deferential.”

Other details are ironically off: An exterior shot of where the NTSB hearing is being held shows the Federal Aviation Administration headquarters—the two agencies are quite distinct and separate, and they are often at odds over how quickly to [move on safety reforms](#). And in the movie's depiction of the first "interrogations," (that's the movie studio's description—the NTSB calls them "interviews"), the pilots are always shown together; agency procedure is to interview all crewmembers and witnesses separately, according to Benzon. In scenes of the hearing itself, the pilots confront the cockpit voice recording of the flight for the very first time. In fact, pilots are always given a chance to listen to it privately, usually well before the hearing, and the audio is never played in any type of public forum. (Printed excerpts of the dialogue were displayed at the actual hearing to accompany a video recreating the flight.)

These are minor quibbles, Eastwood might say. And don't [all docu-dramas](#) take some creative license? A disclaimer at the end of the film does acknowledge a condensed timeframe for dramatic effect. Still, Benzon is concerned that showing the NTSB as a bunch of callous and self-serving bureaucrats could damage the public's respect for the process—and could even be detrimental to aviation safety. "Pilots who see the movie might think we come in with preconceived notions, and they'll be reluctant to cooperate" in future investigations, he says.

Asked about the NTSB criticism, Warner Brothers declined to answer questions, as did Sully himself and his co-pilot Skiles, who is back in the cockpit and now a captain for American Airlines. [Sully has talked and written](#) about the stresses he experienced post-accident and the self-doubts he experienced, and his worries over the results of the NTSB probe are undoubtedly genuine. But anyone who wants to see the real story of the investigation can read the [full transcript of the hearing online](#). Another spoiler alert: It's pretty dull.

As for the movie itself: I saw it, in an IMAX theater (bring some Dramamine if you see that version). It actually felt like I watching two films. The half that depicts the flight itself and the rescue, as well as Sully's nightmares reliving the event, is riveting, with strong performances and impressive special effects. The rest? Even if you know nothing about the NTSB or aviation safety, it feels too long and somehow unsatisfying. Like your typical coach flight, maybe?