Against the Odds

If you have to ditch a commercial aircraft in the Hudson River,” the news anchor joked, “this is the guy you want.”

The “guy” was US Airways pilot Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger III, a 57-year-old former Air Force fighter pilot and a 29-year veteran of US Airways.

On January 15, 2009, Sullenberger was the pilot on US Airways Flight 1549 from New York’s LaGuardia Airport to Charlotte, North Carolina.

Flight 1549 left the tarmac at 3:25 p.m. Sullenberger thought he was in for an average flight—a routine, everyday trip.

The flight was unremarkable for the first 90 seconds. Then something caught the eye of copilot Jeff Skiles. At 3,000 feet, he saw a flock of Canada geese headed toward the plane. Moments later the geese struck the fuselage, wings, and engine.

The 150 passengers felt a powerful thud against the airplane, followed by severe vibrations from the engine. One passenger said it sounded like sneakers thumping around in a dryer. There was a loud explosion. The cabin filled up with smoke. There was a horrible smell and then an eerie quiet: both engines were disabled.

Sullenberger made a Mayday radio call to air traffic control and calmly explained the situation. They discussed the options: The plane could either return to LaGuardia or land at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey.

Sullenberger knew the situation was too dire for the plane to stay in the air long enough for either plan to be successful. He had about 30 seconds to find an alternative. The pilot decided on a
radical move: He’d ditch the plane in the Hudson River—despite the fact that passenger jets are not built to land on water.

"Brace for impact!" came the captain’s voice over the intercom. A hush fell over the passengers. They thought they were going to die.

Sullenberger lowered the plane’s nose in a gradual glide toward the river. The plane managed to clear the George Washington Bridge and, against the odds, land safely on the surface of the Hudson. It skidded across the water at 145 mph and finally slowed to a stop.

"He was thinking in nanoseconds," said a former airline pilot, speaking of Sullenberger. "He made all the right choices at all the right times. He might have been staring at the instruments, but he was feeling that airplane in his hands. He picked his landing spot and went for it."

Now Sullenberger’s job was to get the people off the plane, which was quickly filling up with water.

Witnesses were convinced that everyone on Flight 1549 was dead. What they couldn’t see was that passengers were already exiting the plane. With water seeping into the plane, Sullenberger and Skiles walked the length of the cabin twice, calling "Is anyone there?" The water was so cold they had to walk on top of the seats. But they would not leave the plane until they were sure everyone was out.

"He’s the man," said one of the rescued passengers. "If you want to talk to a hero, get a hold of him."

After all the thanking was over, Sullenberger was humble. "You’re welcome," he said simply. Like most heroes, he didn’t want the label. According to him, he was just doing his job.

But 154 men, women, and children owed their lives to a modest man who faced adversity with cool competence on one of the most remarkable days in aviation history.

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**WORD NETWORK FOR FACING ADVERSITY**

**Vocabulary** A Word Network is a collection of words related to a topic. As you read the selections in this unit, identify interesting words related to the idea of overcoming obstacles and add them to your Word Network. For example, you might begin by adding words from the Launch Text, such as dire, humble, and competence. Continue to add words as you complete this unit.

**Tool Kit**

Word Network Model