



## Hudson River hero is ex-Air Force fighter pilot

By Thomas Frank and Alan Levin, USA TODAY  
January 17, 2009

NEW YORK — Mary Wilson flipped on the television in her Dallas home Thursday afternoon, saw reports of a plane landing miraculously on New York's Hudson River, and thought, "I could see my brother doing that."

And it was her brother.

Chesley Burnett "Sully" Sullenberger III was hailed as an aviation hero Friday, the day after he guided a US Airways jetliner carrying 155 passengers and crew to safety when its engines failed shortly after taking off from New York's LaGuardia Airport. Sullenberger remained in New York as investigators began probing the wreckage of the Airbus A320.

His sister said Sullenberger would reject any notions of heroism.

"I think his tendency is to say, 'I'm not a hero, the crew all worked for this. There really is no hero, just a bunch of people who did their jobs and we all worked together,'" Wilson said in a phone interview with USA TODAY.

On Friday, the pilot fielded congratulatory calls from President Bush and President-elect Barack Obama, according to the Associated Press. His wife said he was still in New York and probably would not return home to California for several days.

Wilson, 56, said she and her brother, 58, learned diligence and preparedness from their late father, Chesley Burnett Sullenberger.

When the elder Sullenberger taught the kids to drive while they were growing up in Dennison, Texas, he would be emphatic with them about looking out for possible hazards. His mantra was simple: Be prepared for the unexpected.

"My dad might have contributed to the way my brother is. He wanted us to think about what could happen, and how could I be prepared for that. What if the car steering goes out? We all heard that our whole childhood. I think my brother just starting thinking that way. He's always thinking about, 'How am I going to handle this?'" Wilson said.

Wilson herself still looks underneath parked cars when she's driving on suburban streets. Her dad taught her that as a technique to spot people who may be about to walk into the street.

The father, who had been a Navy dentist, got his only son intrigued in flying when he would talk about planes and ships, Wilson said. Sullenberger III took flying lessons as a teen, logged 2,000 hours in high school and landed an appointment at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

"He was so disciplined and diligent," Wilson said of her brother.

At the Air Force Academy in the early 1970s, Sullenberger was considered a top pilot and won a prestigious award his senior year, Wilson said. "Anything there was to be flown there, he flew it," she said.

In Sullenberger's subdivision in Danville, Calif., about 30 miles east of Oakland, neighbors know him as quiet, even-keeled person often seen walking his yellow Labrador or walking with his wife Lorrie.

"He has the perfect personality to be a pilot," neighbor John Garcia said in an interview. "Sully was always a very positive person," neighbor John Garcia said in an interview. "He's intelligent. He didn't say a lot. A very calm, even tempered person."

Sullenberger brings his father's diligence to his job as a US Airways captain. "He wants to know everything about the weather, everything about the plane, everything about the routes and the airport," Wilson said.

Nonetheless, Wilson grew nervous when she saw the TV news yesterday afternoon at home while taking a break from her work as an actuary. When Wilson heard the plane was a US Airways Airbus A320 flying from LaGuardia to Charlotte — a jet and a route her brother flew — she called her sister-in-law, Lorrie Sullenberger, in Danville, Calif.

"Lorrie, I just want to check on (him)," Wilson said to Lorrie Sullenberger.

"Yeah, he's the captain on that plane," Sullenberger replied.

By that time, the passengers and crew were on shore, having safely evacuated the sinking plane — but only after Sullenberger made final checks of the cabin to make sure he was the last to leave.

Wilson acknowledges that many people would be astonished that her brother would disregard his own safety and double-check the cabin of a sinking jet for any passengers. But Sullenberger thinks of it simply as a responsibility. "I think he would just say, That's what I was supposed to do," Wilson said. "I couldn't have left that plane without doing that."

Sullenberger is a former Air Force fighter pilot who has spent nearly 29 years flying airliners. Perhaps an even more important preparation for flying a crippled jet, Sullenberger also was a licensed glider pilot.

In addition to his many thousands of hours of flying experience, Sullenberger is in the small group of pilots who specialize in the latest techniques for improving the last major cause of airline accidents — the failings of human behavior.

"In the business, you meet guys who are constantly thinking about safety," says Steve Wallace, the former chief accident investigator with the Federal Aviation Administration. "All this extra studying, participating in safety initiatives and groups. It seems to me he's the kind of guy whose brain constantly turned over these scenarios in his head."

When US Air, the predecessor to US Airways, began teaching its pilots "Crew Resource Management" (CRM) in the 1990s, Sullenberger helped develop the training course, he said in a resume available on the internet.

CRM is credited with helping pilots reduce errors by working together more collaboratively and is now taught at every airline. The program became mandatory in 1995.

Sullenberger "was one of the leaders within" the Air Line Pilots Association at US Air who pushed for improvements in reducing human errors, says John Cox, who also flew at the airline and was the union's safety chief.

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