



VITALS

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A Weekly Safety Newsletter For Medical Transport Professionals

Thinking About The Unthinkable

The Director of Operations and Safety for the USAF Aero Clubs, Lt. Col. Dan Archer, recently sent a note out to club members about Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, III. Capt. Sullenberger, born on January 23, 1951, is the pilot who successfully ditched US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River. Not bad for a man 8 days from his 58th birthday.



How did Sullenberger stay calm? The air traffic controllers were instructing him to go to a small airport in New Jersey about 10 miles away. In a few seconds, he had to decide where to land; weigh the risk of not making it to Jersey versus landing in freezing water; determine how quickly he was losing altitude; determine if he could clear the George Washington Bridge; and, decide if he could steer the plane without thrust.

How did Sully process all of that information in a few seconds after the plane lost power and he smelled smoke and jet fuel in the cabin? Is he an unfeeling Superman that was not terrified? Of course not, fear circuits in the brain are generated automatically. The amygdala (among other things) kicks in and you're scared. The skill that Sully used to overcome fear is called "deliberate calm" by pilots. It is the result of a process in which visceral reactions are balanced by more deliberate thought processes. This rational deliberation is centered in the prefrontal cortex and the ensuing balancing act is known as metacognition, that is, thinking about thinking. "Deliberate calm" requires both conscious effort and practice. The use of realistic flight simulators gives flight crews the opportunity to not panic, because they have actual practice staying calm. We'll return to the concept of metacognition in later articles, but now, more about Sully.



Sully is undoubtedly a special guy. When he was 12 his IQ was high enough to join Mensa. He became a licensed pilot at 14. A graduate of the US Air Force Academy, he holds Master's Degrees in industrial psychology and public administration. When 1549 went down he lost a library book entitled *Just Culture: Balancing Safety and Accountability*. He is a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, Center for Catastrophic Risk Management. So, what we have is a really smart person who spends a lot of time thinking about safety and how he's going to think when confronted with an unsafe situation. In fact, he speaks internationally on airline safety and develops new airline safety protocols.

We in Medical Transportation can learn a lot from Sully. Are we learning from our experiences? Are we teaching ourselves not to panic? Do we use every crash as a learning opportunity to gather information to keep crashes from happening? Do we have a culture that takes near misses of any kind and discovers what kept the near miss from being a tragedy?

Sully pictured the Hudson River as a runway, because he trained his mind to create alternatives. To Sully, the unthinkable was not acceptable. *Is the unthinkable acceptable to you?*