# Fiction versus reality: The impact of Hollywood on accident investigations

*‘There Is No Truth. There Is Only Perception. – Gustave Flaubert’*

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Aviation accidents are generally high-profile events. News outlet reports lead to wide speculation before the accident team even arrives on scene, often using misinformation to be the first to get a story out. And social media allows for the mass propagation of false stories and half-truths that many readers take as hard facts. What used to take days for a story to spread, now takes mere minutes. While many investigations take at least year to complete, aviation experts have weighed in on the cause of the accident within months, sometimes even days. Take the loss of Malaysian Airline flight 370 over 3 years ago – the total amount of air time dedicated to postulating speculative theories was astonishing. At the 2012 ISASI meeting in Baltimore, an NTSB sponsored topic on accident communications discussed how the media is a quick reacting, sensationalist-driven process feeding a ratings and revenue-driven news cycle. This can lead to distrust of the investigative agency. For example, during the investigation of Air France Flight 447, due in part to leaks, online rumors and media speculation, the BEA was accused of a lack of transparency and led some family members to become disenfranchised with the BEA (BEA, 2012).

Likewise, Hollywood, through cinema, television and countless pulp fiction, loves a good story; one with a hero and an antagonist. But these stories are scripted with a plot pitting good versus evil; a feel-good factor engendered in the narrative to provide a hero to a story. That is entertainment. Rarely do these stories accurately portray real life event, as real-life events are usually not so engaging. Tag lines purporting to be “based on true events” should be taken with a grain of salt. As Albert Einstein said, “If the facts don’t fit the theory, change the facts.” Hollywood is a master at doing just that.

The consequences of Hollywood embellishments of a true tale are often trivial. There is no harm, no foul in telling a story that keeps the audience engaged. But what if a story is so well told, so believable, that audiences can’t separate fact from fiction? And what if that story jeopardizes an organization’s reputation and its ability to do its job? This is no surprise and the website HistoryvsHollywood.com attempts to parse out fact from fiction in Hollywood stories. Movies featuring aviation disasters are generally human-centric, concentrating on the human element of the story rather than the technical aspects of the event itself. The movie *Flight*, starring Denzel Washington, told the story of an drug-addicted airline pilot that miraculously crash lands an airplane saving most occupants on board. In contrast, Nat Geo’s *Air Crash Investigation* TV series is a technically-driven linear chronology of an accident. The Smithsonian Channel attempted to bridge the gap between human and technical elements with its show *Alaska Aircrash Investigations*. This paper contemplates the potential impact that Hollywood films have to compromise an investigator’s ability to effectively do their job and whether Hollywood “investigations” really matter.

**“The Miracle on the Hudson”**

Most recently, Hollywood has dramatized the accident involving US Airways flight 1549, on January 15, 2009, which experienced an almost total loss of thrust in both engines after encountering a flock of birds soon after departing LaGuardia Airport (LGA), New York City, New York. The Airbus A320 was subsequently ditched on the Hudson River 208 seconds after takeoff. All 155 passengers and crew survived. The media quickly dubbed the accident “The Miracle on the Hudson.”

The NTSB launched a full go team to New York City to investigate and completed its investigation about 15 months later. The NTSB determined that the probable cause of the accident was “the ingestion of large birds into each engine, which resulted in an almost total loss of thrust in both engines and the subsequent ditching on the Hudson River.” While the captain’s difficulty maintaining his intended airspeed on final approach was cited as contributing to the fuselage damage, the flight crew’s decision-making and crew resource management was cited as contributing to the survivability of the accident, something rarely seen in accident reports. There were other fortuitous circumstances on that day – the airplane being equipped for overwater operations, performance of the cabin crew and the proximity of emergency responders – that also cited for contributing to the survivability.

Fast forward 7 and a half years when the Clint Eastwood-directed movie, *Sully*, is released in theaters nationwide. The story is based on Captain “Sully” Sullenberger’s autobiography *Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters* and tells the tale of accident and its subsequent investigation from Captain Sullenberger’s perspective. To what extent the basis for the film accurately contours the content of the book is questionable. The films underlying pretense is that the NTSB was second-guessing Captain Sullenberger’s judgment to ditch the airplane on the Hudson River and threatening the career of a “national hero.” At least this is the public perception. The USA Today wrote an article stating “both pilots are hauled in front of the National Transportation Safety Board, the closest the movie comes to having actual antagonists. They’re seemingly bound and determined to prove that Sully was in error and could have made it to a nearby airport. (The unsubtle message is that the powers-that-be would have rather saved a plane.)”(USA Today, 2016).

**Do Hollywood “investigations” matter?**

The storyline in *Sully* is not a huge surprise. Accident reports are factually-based consensus documents. Numerous organizations with competing agenda are collectively drawn into an ICAO Annex 13-based framework and each participate is obliged to forward their agenda, but the end result is a thorough, professional report, written by investigators whose primary goal is to save lives. Some reports are contentious but most are sober reading with little or no latitude for speculation and conjecture. This is what the traveling public wants – a serious professional attitude to an event report. As a vehicle for a plot driven, emotive narrative, this will hardly fill the seats in a local cinema. But these entertainment genre stories open up the debate to the age-old question – Quis custodiet Ipsos custodes? Or, who watches the watchmen?

Despite how the NTSB is portrayed in *Sully*, quite the opposite was true. From the perspective of investigators who participated in the investigation (the lead author of this paper included), the film accurately portrays the accident sequence as it occurred, but that is where history and Hollywood diverge. The NTSB has the factual basis to back up its claims – all of the factual information collected is publicly available. It seems Mr. Eastwood didn’t take the time to read the fact, and he, like many others, have gotten the story wrong. He is quoted as saying “until I read the script, I didn’t know the investigative board (NTSB) was trying to paint the picture that he had done the wrong thing. They were kind of railroading him.” This isn't the first time one of Eastwood’s films has been criticized for inaccuracies – *American Sniper* was fraught with half-truths and exaggerations as well. If Mr. Eastwood, and others, had taken the time to read the NTSB’s final report, this statement could not be farther from the truth. The NTSB, and all investigative boards, have an obligation to thoroughly investigate all accidents, not just those that result in tragedy.

*Sully* and other docudramas run the risk of distorting the perceptions of the investigative process, both in the eyes of pilots involved in future investigations and the public. While those familiar with the accident investigation process understand that the events portrayed incorporate much artistic license to tell a compelling story, much of the public sees these Hollywood reenactments as something far less fictional. It shouldn’t surprise anyone that accident investigations make a difference. Yet it’s a slippery slope as Hollywood takes a relatively benign 208 second flight and turns it into a major motion picture.

The NTSB’s “highest duty” is to provide an objective factual analysis of the event and make recommendations as necessary to prevent such accident from occurring again; and their track record over the last 50 years is pretty remarkable. The NTSB’s role is not to play favorites or neglect to conduct a thorough investigation because the flight had a successful outcome. Every good drama needs a villain and the NTSB fit the bill perfectly. But while Sully was concerned about his reputation throughout the investigation, *Sully* the movie puts at risk the reputation of the NTSB (and other investigative agencies) by portraying spurious and exaggerated facts.

Much of the media showed support for the film acknowledging the masterful screenplay and acting. The authors do not disagree. However, former and current NTSB management and staff have publicly commented on the inaccuracies in the film and concerns about its implications. For example, the movie suggests that it was Captain Sullenberger himself that suggested to investigators during the investigative hearing that they consider the “human factors” involved in his decision making. How clueless could investigators be? In fact, these simulations had been completed almost 2 months prior without any involvement from the flight crew. The film also portrayed the cockpit voice recorder (CVR) being played during the hearing – a public setting with dozens watching – when the reality is that the crew was afforded the opportunity to listen to the CVR in a private setting (the NTSB’s recorders lab) with just a few investigators present. The NTSB was also seen as favoring the position of the insurance company who wanted to place blame on the pilots when in fact the investigative team’s interactions with an insurance company are minimal and the insurance company has no say (or sway) in an investigation’s conclusions.

In most cases, there is no harm, no foul in the sensationalism of real life events in Hollywood. But the NTSB and other investigative agencies have a job to do. And to do their job effectively they must rely on the cooperation of investigative parties – carriers, other federal agencies, unions and manufacturers. Even more critical is the willingness of those involved in an accident – the pilots, flight attendants, mechanics – to share their first-hand perspective about what happened leading to and during an accident sequence.

The former NTSB Office of Aviation Safety Director, Tom Hauter, is quoted as saying “I understand the need to make money. But I have gotten a lot of calls from pilots blasting the NTSB who believe the false story shown in the film is absolutely real. This is going to be detrimental to future accident investigations because people who see the film think they can’t trust the NTSB.” Aviation websites such as PPRuNe and Aviation Stack Exchange have people asking “is the NTSB hostile to pilots, as depicted in the movie ‘Sully’?” But is this much ado about nothing or do agencies, such as the NTSB, deserve more respect? Will these inaccuracies tarnish the reputation of an agency that was simply doing its job?

The US Airways 1549 docket of over 4,000 pages of factual information collected throughout the 20,000 hours of man hours logged is available to the public. While few will read the docket in its entirety and only some have read the NTSB’s final report (much more reader friendly at about 200 pages), millions have watched *Sully* and formed opinions, many inaccurate, about the NTSB’s investigation. Should an investigative body have to justify its motives because of a Hollywood film? We know when the movie touts to portray “the untold story” by a national hero, the public listens.

The media frenzy and barrage of tweets said a lot about the public’s perception. For many who watched the film, they can appreciate the artistic license given to a screenwriter and director to add drama for the sake of the audience. But as the saying goes “seeing is believing”. While some could see the movie for what it was worth, many others were angry and showed disdain towards the NTSB:

* “‘He saved all those people, why do they even care?’ My mom on the NTSB portrayed in Sully.” @silentdawnlb 12/30/16
* “So far, so good. “Sully” is right on weighing the investigation with public perception. Painful to watch the @NTSB trying to nail the pilot.” @JoeBurlas 12/28/16
* “Eastwood’s “Sully” takes liberty with “Miracle on the Hudson” facts to tarnish hard-working NTSB investigators.” @stevepearl 11/26/16
* “watching Captain Sully doesn’t give me faith in the NTSB & Aviation industry.” @YoungHils 12/26/16
* “just streamed Sully on TV and really enjoyed that flick, amazing though that the NTSB would even investigate anything when all survived.” @TysonWSchmidt 12/10/16
* “After watching Sully the NTSB was a bit nasty to a real hero. I get trying to do your job, but dang…155/155 ppl survived a forced landing” @lostpiloter 10/26/16
* “if you think the #NTSB were trying to mask #Sully out as wrong read the report. It’s pretty complimentary” @billpennock 9/23/16
* *Clint Eastwood v. NTSB – The $65 Million Misunderstanding* – Roger Rapoport, Flight Safety Information, September 20, 2016,
* “Apparently, entire point of Sully movie is to demonize NTSB which deserves respect instead” @OneEricJohnson 9/19/16
* *Sullied: with Sully, Clint Eastwood is weaponizing a hero* – Stephen Cass, The Guardian, September 12, 2016
* *Review: Sully Landed the Plane. Then He Had to Endure the Spotlight* – Manohla Dargis, The New York Times, September 8, 2016

**What happens next?**

Aviation accident investigations are complex and it is important that investigators get it right. To do this requires the cooperation of numerous agencies and people, both directly and indirectly involved. Aviation is about professionalism and professional reputations. Without trust, an investigation will not be as successful. It is unclear how the negative portrayal of the NTSB will influence the professional pilot community, future investigations and ultimately aviation safety if the NTSB (or other investigative agency) is no longer a trusted, reputable organization. Since the release of *Sully*, the international aviation community has not had a major, headline-grabbing event to test the impact of such Hollywood enactments on an investigation. Will pilots be reluctant to speak to investigators? Will they fabricate a story to avoid being a “victim”? Only time will tell, but hopefully, with time, this too shall blow over.

**References**

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