

## **THE IDLE AMERICAN**

**Tears of a Tragedy....**

**Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury**

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**Tears of** millions of Americans have scarcely dried since the tragic mid-air collision of a passenger airliner with a military helicopter on January 29 in the icy waters of the Potomac River in Washington, DC.

A total of 70 victims--64 passengers, a crew of three and three in the helicopter--lost their lives a handful of seconds and a few hundred feet short of the Ronald Reagan National Airport runway, some 1,200 miles from Wichita, KS, where the flight originated some three hours earlier.

We've always heard that such tragedies "come in threes." Prayers abound for all who perished, as well as for all who lost loved ones. May this calamity be isolated, far more removed from the next one....

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**Upon hearing** the news, millions of Americans' thoughts reverted to another river scene almost exactly 16 years ago. That's when an Airbus A320 airliner was skillfully "landed" on the Hudson River in New York City, some 200 miles from DC.

It was 5,858 days earlier--to be exact--when Captain Chesley (Sully) Sullenberger became a national hero. When the plane sustained a bird strike only minutes after take-off from NYC's LaGuardia Airport en route to Charlotte, NC, Sullenberger guided the aircraft toward the river. The waters were icy there, too, but the plane remained afloat long enough for all 150 passengers and a crew of five to be rescued. No one died, and just one passenger was injured.

Truly, it was a "Miracle on the Hudson," occurring in January 2009, just a couple of weeks before the nation's last major commercial airline crash near Buffalo, NY, where 50 persons perished....

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**Numerous ironies** are associated with the current tragedy. There always are, with many known only by those whose losses are up close and personal.

One, about half of the passengers were figure skaters and their entourages.

Largely ignored by major media were two interesting facts. About 24 hours before the crash, there was a close call between a commercial airliner and a military helicopter near the same DC airport, and about 24 hours later, one of the world's most recognized figure skaters died. Dick Button, five-time world champion and twice an Olympic gold winner, dying at age 95 of natural causes....

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**The current** crash involved a military Blackhawk helicopter colliding with a Bombardier CRJ700 regional jet.

Manufactured in Canada, it was considered one of the true "workhorses" of commercial aviation, never experiencing a mid-air emergency.

The last CRJ700 plane was manufactured four years ago....

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**Back in** 1959, there was another airline calamity involving Buffalo, but this time, not in New York state.

It occurred near Buffalo, TX, where 28 passengers and a crew of six

perished. Downed by mechanical failure in a thunderstorm, the Lockheed L-188 Electra had been in service only 11 days for 132 flight hours.

It was a Braniff flight, one of the company's first of many setbacks preceding its bankruptcy in 1982....

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**Many of** Braniff's challenges were unavoidable, but at least one advertising debacle was among the worst on record--for any company.

If memory serves--and sometimes it doesn't--the Buffalo crash occurred during Braniff's trumpeting of its "we're-going-to-be-on-time" campaign. If flights were an hour late, passengers were handed silver dollars upon deplaning, along with promises to do better. The Braniff folks even placed large clocks at cabin entries as reminders of their promise.

The Buffalo crash underscored the prevailing preference of arrival on time being more important than safe arrival. The campaign abruptly ended, of course, and the clocks came down....

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**Coming to** mind is the 1992 funeral service of a pilot friend whose instruments failed in a Colorado mountain range, where Tim Williamson and five friends had planned to ski--not perish.

One sentence of the funeral tribute described what may have been my friend's last words.

"Hello, Denver Control. Hello, Jesus."...

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**Dr. Newbury, longtime university president, continues to speak and write. The Idle American, begun in 2003, is one of the longest-running syndicated columns. Contact: 817-447-3872. Email: newbury@speakerdoc.com. Website: www.speakerdoc.com.**