

Long Before Hudson Miracle, There Was Capt. Richard Ogg

By ISALAH GUZMAN

Marilyn Ogg watched news coverage last month of pilot Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger's successful ditching of a commercial airliner in the Hudson River. A passenger praised Sullenberger for being the first to ever pull off such a maneuver.

"I thought, that's not correct," Ogg said. "I almost e-mailed."

She would know. More than 50 years ago, her father saved all 31 passengers aboard Pan Am Flight 943 when he ditched a Boeing 377 Stratocruiser in the Pacific Ocean.

Capt. Richard Ogg was midway through a flight from Honolulu to San Francisco on Oct. 16, 1956, when, in the wee hours of the morning, the No. 1 engine began to sputter. Shortly after, the No. 4 engine failed, leaving the plane with just two.

The Stratocruiser was losing altitude. It wouldn't make it to San Francisco or back to Honolulu. Ogg had to ditch.

About 3:30 a.m. Pacific Time on Oct. 16, as the plane passed over the empty heart of the Pacific Ocean, Capt. Ogg, 42, a pilot for 15 years at Pan Am, turned on the plane's PA system.

"Sorry to wake you up," he told his passengers.

"We have developed engine trouble and may have to ditch."

Like Sullenberger, who saved all 155 people aboard his US Airways jetliner, Ogg and his crew stayed calm. Fortune would have it that a Coast Guard cutter, the Pontchartrain, was nearby. Ogg circled the ship for four hours as he burned heavy fuel and waited for daylight.

"We will try to stay aloft until daylight," he said over the radio.

Capt. Ogg's passengers waited patiently. Some slept, and some smoked cigarettes until it was time to brace for impact.

"Your ship is sure a beautiful sight," Ogg told the Coast Guard, which replied, "Thank you, we think so. Glad it's a comfort to you. We got your bacon and eggs on the fire."

Maureen Gordon, 54, a passenger on the October, 1956 flight, watched the US Airways plane footage. She told the San Francisco Chronicle, "I was saying, Wow, this is so similar to what we went through," she said. "Except ours was more fantastic in a way."

Gordon, and a handful of other people on Ogg's plane -- including several who live in the San Francisco Bay Area -- have been experiencing a unique case of *deja vu*.

"Our captain was a pillar of strength," said Jane Gordon, 86, Maureen's mother, speaking by phone from her home in Maryland. "He was just wonderful. I'm sure he was scared to death, but you'd never know it."

Flight 943 took off for San Francisco from Hawaii on Oct. 15, 1956, at 8:30 p.m. The Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, dubbed the Clipper Sovereign of the Skies, was a pinnacle of 1950's luxury designed to appeal to movie stars and the well-heeled.

Aboard the Clipper were 25 passengers, and the cargo hold was packed with luggage and 44 cases of live canaries.

Trouble over the Pacific

Jane Gordon was already awake in the berths in the plane's tail, trying to quiet her 18-month-old twins, Maureen and Elizabeth. Gordon had been suffering a premonition of death since leaving the Philippines, where her husband, Richard, had a State Department posting.

"I was praying when ... we heard this terrible rumble of one engine, and then right after that the other one," she said.

Two engines had lost power. The two remaining engines kept the plane aloft, but their straining consumed more fuel -- and provided less speed.

Ogg had a choice of two bad options: keep going or turn back.

"If we had to ditch near the Farallones, that's bad news, because it's always choppy and rough out there," recalled Pat Pimsner of San Carlos, the plane's purser. "And we had headwinds going back if we turned around."

Ogg came up with a third option: a risky water landing in the middle of the Pacific.

Help from the Coast Guard

The plane had recently been in contact with the Pontchartrain in the Pacific below, where it served as a communications relay for airplanes crossing the sea.

"We were the midpoint. We were the point of no return," said Doak Walker of Juneau, Alaska, a radioman on the Pontchartrain that day. "They knew they couldn't make it all the way.... They'd rather go down next to us."

For hours, Flight 943 circled over the cutter, burning off fuel. Pimsner and the flight crew cleared the cabin of loose objects and reminded the passengers how to inflate their life jackets.

Pimsner recalled that a Boeing 377 that had crashed in the ocean the previous year had shattered its tail on impact, so she cleared the rear berth area and parked the Gordons in their seats.

"At that time they didn't have infant seat belts," Pimsner said. "So, I put each child in one of the parents' laps, and then I threw pillows all over the floor in front of them."

Several times before dawn, the Coast Guardsmen on the ship below told Ogg that they were ready for his attempted landing. The pilot made a dry run as the sun rose, then pulled up and continued to circle.

"The ocean was flat, but they wanted more daylight. By the time we got daylight and they could see, the ocean was picking up again," recalled Dick Olson, the Pontchartrain's boatswain's mate of the watch that day.

Looking good and then . . .

Shortly before 8 a.m., Pimsner and the rest of the cabin crew told passengers to assume crash positions, strap themselves in and extinguish cigarettes. Jane and Richard Gordon clung to the twins, and the plane headed for the sea at 90 nautical mph.

Olson, now a 73-year-old Danville resident, recalled watching from the Pontchartrain as the plane approached the sea. "Ogg's landing seemed to be going well," he said.

But "before he settled down, the wings caught a swell," Olson said.

The plane whipped around, its nose shattering and the tail -- as Pimsner had feared -- snapping away. The crew of the Pontchartrain watched in horror.

"When we saw that hit and explode, we just knew nobody could survive that," said Walker, the radioman. "It crashed a mile away, but we could feel it. We just knew nobody could survive that."

But moments later, as the spray cleared, the Pontchartrain's crew could see tiny figures walking on the wings of the floating, shattered plane.

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As his passengers were rescued, Ogg -- as Sullenberger would do years later -- went twice through the plane searching for anybody left behind. Pimsner accompanied him until they stepped out of the sinking plane.

"He let me go first," she said. "Always a gentleman."

Then Ogg stepped off the plane's wing. About 21 minutes after he had landed it, the Clipper Sovereign of the Skies disappeared underwater.

All passengers were safe. The sole injury was Maureen Gordon, one of the twins, who was torn from her mother's arms, bumped her head and was knocked out. She quickly recovered.

All part of the job

It took days for the Pontchartrain to steam to San Francisco, its officers' quarters packed with plane passengers.

The press swarmed the survivors.

"We had a certain job to do," Ogg told reporters. "We had to do it right or else."

His widow, Peggy, recalled those words as she watched coverage of Sullenberger in New York.

"I think they are very similar people—very calm. Always doing their very best—learning everything they can," she said. "They were preparing for this, and it didn't catch them off-guard."

Ogg continued to fly until his death in 1991, but the ditching stayed in his mind. His widow recalled asking him, as she sat by his deathbed, about a faraway look on his face.

"I was thinking of those poor canaries that drowned in the hold when I had to ditch the plane," he said.

Marilyn Ogg remembers her father getting teary-eyed years later about those canaries, too, and two dogs that were lost in the cargo hold.

"They were cut from the same mold," she said of her father and Sullenberger. "They were both humble men who were cool, calm and collected, and they did exactly what they needed to do."

Ogg, who lived in Aptos for more than 30 years and died in 1991 at the age of 77, later became the subject of a book, a movie and television features. His experience was used in training films for several airlines.

Retired Pan Am pilot, Joe D'Esposito, of Prunedale said Capt. Ogg was a legend.

"He was respected," D'Esposito said. "I was in Miami at the time, but everybody knew about it."

The experience of ditching an airplane is one that all professional aviators hope to avoid during their career. There could be nothing more terrifying than the thought of being forced down in the middle of an ocean, sea or any other large body of water. It is a nightmare to think about it. But, every time a crew goes what we used to call "feet wet," this scary thought crosses their minds.

Life is simple! When something goes wrong, you continue to play the hand that you are dealt, and if that hand is total power failure you just keep flying the airplane the very best that you can, and pray to Almighty God that He will somehow pull you out of the mess that you are in. If he does, the chances are that you and your crew may be called heroes. The fact remains that Almighty God deserves all the glory. The only thing that the crew can do is their job which they were trained to do. The pilot's job is to keep flying the airplane no matter what.

Check out this video <http://bit.ly/XHCYeE> It is film of the actual ditching.

~A comment by Adverse Yaw