

# A career in business can take flight in unexpected ways

STORY: MICHELE APPELGATE | PHOTOS: ALUMNI SUBMISSIONS

Craig Black ('85 accounting) had a high-stakes business career that led him to travel – a lot. In 2009, he experienced a life-changing flight that completely shifted his priorities.

He was trying to fly from New York, New York, to a client meeting in Kansas City, Missouri. Due to a series of canceled flights, knowing he couldn't make the meeting, he decided to go home to Charlotte, North Carolina.

That's when everything changed. The last-minute booking landed him on US Airways flight 1549, a flight that made history.

Moments after takeoff, the plane lost power in both engines after it struck a flock of Canada geese. Captain C.B. "Sully" Sullenberger III, a former military pilot with 20,000 flying hours under his belt, became a national hero after being credited with saving all 155 people on board.

"When we reached 2,800 feet, we hit the geese, but I didn't know it was birds. It sounded like an explosion – BAM! And the plane just dropped," Black explained.

Passengers soon realized they hit a flock of birds, and they saw an engine was on fire.

For anyone who saw the movie about this experience, the scene immediately following showed everyone being calm and the flight attendants unbuckling their seat belts and walking through the cabin calmly.

"That's not what happened," Black laughed. "There was a diverse reaction amongst the passengers, everything from silenced wide-eyed looks to screaming."

Even after the explosive sound, Black's thoughts were still somewhat routine, thinking they would land in New Jersey with one engine. "I wondered when the next flight to Charlotte would be. My day was getting really disrupted, so I was a little frustrated."

"Upon the bird strike, Sully contacted the tower and said, 'Mayday, Mayday, bird strike. Request to return to LaGuardia.' He put his right hand on the throttle and said to the co-pilot, 'my aircraft' and the co-pilot replied, 'your aircraft.' That's just one of those things — like this was his job. This is what he was built to do. He just took control," Black said.

Sully banked the plane hard to the left to get air across the flaps. Smoke seeped into the cabin. Black's thought was, "Oh, this isn't good."

Captain Sullenberger's voice came over the speakers.

"He said, 'This is the captain speaking. Brace for impact.' He didn't say, 'Brace for landing.' He said 'brace for impact.' He subsequently said he chose his words very carefully," Black said.

Black put his head between his knees. The world went quiet.

"I saw in my mind my wife and children crying at the announcement of my death," Black said as he recalled the experience. "I said a prayer, not to be saved, but to be with us, that if I am to die today, take care of my family, and to make this a quick death if it's going to happen. I was OK with dying. I had a sense of peace around me."

This part of the experience took about one minute and 20 seconds.

"I listened for the landing gear to come down. It never did. Flight attendants kept saying to brace, brace, brace, heads down, stay down. Then we hit the water," Black said. "Academically, Sully had to put the plane in the Hudson at 11 degrees in order not to destroy the plane and cause total carnage. The impact was different depending on where passengers were sitting."



>> PICTURED

In this Jan. 15, 2009 file photo, passengers and crew aboard US Airways Flight 1549 await rescue by a NY Waterways ferry after the aircraft made an emergency landing on the Hudson River off the coast of New York, Thursday, Jan. 15, 2009. After the pilot successfully landed his aircraft in the frigid water, the first rescuers on the scene were not police or the U.S. Coast Guard, but a handful of ferries that offer visitor tours and shuttle commuters between New Jersey and Manhattan. (AP Photo/Steven Day)

The crash reminded Black of a log ride at an amusement park – when you go down fast and hit hard with a big splash at the end. "That's what it felt like for me," he said.

Upon impact, the water tore a hole in the rear fuselage. Then it all stopped. It was quiet. The next few moments are fuzzy, but Black said he somehow made it to the exit door and was standing on the wing with his fellow passengers.

**This nightmare was not yet over.**

Standing on the wing of the crashed plane on that cold January day, Black's mind was racing. He could see the plane was sinking, and he feared he could get sucked underwater alongside the craft. There were not enough life rafts for everyone. His next thought was to swim, even though the temperature was 19 degrees and the water was 38 degrees. He knew hypothermia would set in quickly.

A nearby ferry saw the ditching of the plane and instinctively headed to the crash to rescue passengers.

"I saw this ferry, the *Thomas Jefferson*, coming right at us. My first thought was that I had just survived this plane crash, and this ferry is going to run us over," he said. "It looked like the Titanic. It was huge. It was very surreal."

Starting with women and children, everyone made their way to the ferry. They only had to swim for one or two breaststrokes to make it to the ferry ladder. As he climbed the ladder, he felt his body freezing, and someone on the ferry grabbed his belt "and flopped me on the deck like a fish," he said.

All of his belongings were on the plane, including his phone. He borrowed a phone and quickly called his wife, Amy, to tell her he was OK and that he would be in touch soon.

Once she got home and turned on the TV, she realized how serious it had been.

"I had just picked up the kids from school and was finishing up at the grocery store," she said. "In my mind, their plane had just slipped off the runway somehow. The kids and I began unloading the groceries and we turned on the TV to see a massive rescue taking place of his plane in the Hudson River. I knew he was OK, but now knew it was much bigger than I had imagined. I had already begun calling family members and (my employer) KPMG."

Because of this experience, Black said he learned a lot of life lessons. Things he worried about preflight no longer seem so bad. "You don't think about any of that stuff when you think you're going to die," he said. "Money, job titles, prestige – that's all just noise."

Even though Black loved his job, he said he would no longer push forward just for a title or higher salary. Living in the moment was now his focus. He was making a good living, and he realized some of his previous goals were no longer important to him. He refocused on his health and wellness and began doing triathlons, competed in half-ironman competitions, spartan-type running events, and biking events, and got back into slalom water skiing.

## CHANGES IN HIS CAREER

After the life-changing flight, Black carried his new perspective into his leadership style. Collaboration, trust, respect, and the holistic well-being of his teams empowered their ultimate success. He found himself not just a trusted resource on complex accounting topics but a go-to mentor to colleagues on maintaining healthy lifestyles that enabled them to perform to the best of their ability.

As a result, he has built powerhouse teams from the ground up and calmly navigated them through business transitions and ethics challenges with integrity.

Black retired from his corporate job at KPMG in September 2023.



With a belief that it is never too late to reinvent yourself, Black is currently a contracted actor and model with The Brock Agency, Inc., a top-100 talent agency in the United States. In this role, he is challenging the artistic side of his brain with acting and

auditioning for various acting and modeling opportunities. This new endeavor has presented an opportunity to nurture creative interests and master an entirely new set of skills while further broadening the scope of his professional strengths. ☺

>> PICTURED (ABOVE)

Alex Black (Craig Black's son), Captain Sully, and Craig Black celebrate the 15th anniversary of surviving the plane crash at a restaurant in New York in January 2024.