

Three Decades Ago, A Water Landing in Mactan

Hundreds of rescuers, dozens of sea vessels, and several helicopters looked for highly regarded Department of the Interior and Local Government Secretary Jesse Robredo and the two pilots on board a Piper Seneca flight. Originally bound for Camarines Sur, the aircraft crashed on the afternoon of August 18. Robredo's aide Jun Abrasado was rescued shortly after and described the incident after their plane encountered trouble half an hour after take-off in Mactan. The engine problem prompted Capt. Jessup Bahinting to land in Masbate instead of their intended destination of Naga City. A witness also reported seeing the plane wobble for several minutes before dropping to the sea. It floated for about ten minutes before sinking. The plane was located by divers three days after the crash.

What happens during a water landing? How can one prepare for it? The size of the plane, both the plane and the water's condition, and the skill of the pilot in gently landing the plane on water are all important factors. If a plane does not land evenly on water, it could break apart as if it were on land. If the wings break on landing, a plane could sink fast. It may be very difficult to land a plane on water without incident but it has happened in the past. In 2009, a Hudson River water landing by an Airbus A320 was deftly commanded by Capt. Chelsey "Sully" Sullenberger with no fatalities. The plane's engines were reportedly disabled by repeated strikes by a flock of geese. The crew was able to safely ditch the plane in the icy but calm New York river after losing power on both engines. Later, Capt. Sullenberger said he chose to ditch the plane near boats to be closer to potential rescuers. While water landings are unlikely to happen, knowing what to do in the event of one could save one's life. Passengers should routinely read flight safety instructions. They should not panic and must know where the nearest possible exit is. On certain aircraft, some exits cannot be used in a water landing. Where and how to use a life vest is another vital piece of information. Removal of sharp objects is also important. For light planes, pilots must always have a flight plan and must look for a suitable place to land when there is a problem since the plane only flies at low altitude. Usually a light plane will fly only up to 6,000 feet since it is not pressurized.

Some have wondered after the tragedy in Masbate if there has there been a successful water landing in Philippine waters. In 1977, a plane that could not make it to its intended runway made an emergency landing in Mactan, Cebu. Filipino commercial pilot Capt. Millardo Aviñante was able to share his experience on that flight shortly before he passed away a few years ago. Three decades earlier, he and his co-pilot landed a plane at sea carrying more than two dozen passengers with no casualties. What follows is a first-hand account of his water landing in Cebu.

It is a Sunday afternoon in July 1977. Capt. Millardo Aviñante is in command of a Philippine Airlines flight on board the 60-seater Japanese aircraft NAMC YS-11. He and his co-pilot Ricky Bondoc are getting ready to land on Runway 22 at Mactan Airport. The captain, a soft-spoken man in his 30s, notices that on gear down, the right engine does not unwind and has lost power. Alarming, the left propeller does not feather, meaning it has failed to turn and reduce drag.

He orders First Officer Bondoc to gear up at the last minute. They know that the plane must maintain speed to prevent a violent stalling of the turboprop aircraft. For Capt. Aviñante, everything is happening so fast that he has neither time nor means to announce what is going on. He has his hands full and there is no microphone or intercom in the aircraft. About half a mile from the airport, he realizes the plane cannot make it to the runway. He has to act swiftly as time is running out. He surveys the surrounding area and decides to make a hasty water landing on the sea in Punta Engaño.

Flight purser Cherie Tioseco, then a 20-year-old flight attendant, remembers that it seemed like a routine, smooth landing. She did not have an overhead view and only sensed something was amiss when water started to seep from the lavatory. She then heard the captain shout, "Evacuate!"

The passengers, too stunned to panic, did as they were instructed. One family, a foreign couple and their grown son, helped the other passengers slip into their vests.

It took a while for the aircraft to start sinking. There was enough time, about 10 minutes, for all 26 persons on board to evacuate. As crash survivors, they had no shortage of rescuers as the sea was dotted with fishermen and tourists in bancas. Small boats began to rush to the sinking plane and take in passengers and crew.

Capt. Aviñante made sure no one was left behind and was the last to board a banca. He looks back with a smile when he remembers that all the rest of the bancas had one boatman each. His rescue boat had two boatmen paddling so he reached shore ahead of everyone else.

By Capt. Aviñante's estimate they were in waters 25 feet deep. He also remembers the irony of what he had just accomplished — he had made a perfect water landing and he did not even know how to swim.

Robredo's flight was not as fortunate. It is reminiscent of the plane carrying President Ramon Magsaysay in 1957. Two occasions when greatness fell from the sky.

The author interviewed Capt. Antonio Halagueña, the late Capt. Aviñante, and Flight Purser Tioseco for this article.

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