

Emma Sophina

THE MIRACLE OF FLIGHT 1549

On the 14th of January 2009, Singer/songwriter Emma Sophina from Perth, Western Australia boarded flight 1549 bound for Charlotte, North Carolina. It was to be a routine flight, but just 90 seconds after take-off, disaster struck. Nicole Partridge tells her incredible story.

Emma Sophina zipped up her suitcase, headed down to the hotel lobby and waited for her shuttle bus. After a week of holidaying in chilly New York on her own, she was ready to leave. That afternoon, January 14, she would be flying to Charlotte, North Carolina to see old friends – a flight she had changed two days earlier.

She checked her watch as the bus pulled up - it was early. "A long wait," she moaned. On arrival at LaGuardia International Airport, she grabbed a coffee, and updated her facebook. "I'm heading to Charlotte," she told friends. After what seemed like hours, the boarding call came. Emma, along with 154 other passengers, mostly business people, were ushered onto flight 1549. She found her seat in 13F. A businessman sat down next to her. She smiled at him, reached for the in-flight magazine and began thinking about a chorus to a song she needed to write. The routine flight was scheduled to take one hour and 15 minutes.

The airbus ascended with a roar, pushing her against the seat. Outside, the sky was clear, crisp and blue – a perfect day for flying. Emma, a Pastor's daughter from Perth began to relax, keen to be leaving New York and going to

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Charlotte. But minutes after take-off, excitement turned into fear as a loud thud rocked the cabin. Something was wrong. The engine was heard to sound like tennis balls being flung around a clothes dryer, as some had said; others described the sound as a hailstorm. Passengers could smell smoke. A large flock of geese had collided with the plane. Several had flown into the engine.

Captain Sullenberger, radioed control: "Mayday! Mayday! This is cactus 1549. We have hit birds and lost thrust in both engines. We're turning back towards LaGuardia." The reply came from the traffic controller, confirming his decision, "Head back to LaGuardia." By now





he had calculated the distance back to the airport and the lack of engine power; Sullenberger explored other options – perhaps Tetaborough – a small airport 19kms from mid-town Manhattan. This too was problematic. He radioed back. “We’re going in the Hudson.” There was silence at the other end. Then the Air Traffic Controller turned to his co-worker in disbelief and said, “Did he say he’s going in the Hudson?”

Captain Sullenberger’s years of experience kicked in as he took control of the situation and without fear, attempted what few commercial airline pilots had ever done successfully before. In 1996, an Ethiopian airliner had tried a similar water landing. The plane broke into pieces, killing all passengers.

Inside the cabin there was an eerie calm without the noise of the engines. Emma Sophina made her peace with God. “Ok God,” she said to herself, “if it’s my time to go, then I am okay with that,” sensing a complete peace. The woman in 14E was not okay with that - she was hyperventilating. Nor was the man at the back of the cabin who yelled, “Fire!” The anxiety of the passengers was palpable. Some grabbed mobile phones to call loved ones; others simply prayed.

Emma could have reached into her bag and made a call, but instead quietly reflected on her 27 years. It had been a good life and she came from a close knit family. Her American born father and Australian mother had been pastors for as long as she could remember. They had travelled around PNG, Melbourne, Sydney and eventually Perth where they settled to become the Pastors of an AOG in the suburb of Eden Hill. Growing up, Emma admits she was an average student. Her real gift was music. At a young age, she performed in church plays and by the time she was 13, she was leading worship at church. She then

went on to sing with Planet shakers and Youth Alive WA.

It’s fair to say; Emma’s life had been a good one. But at 23 heartbreak struck - a failed relationship left her without a job, a car or money. She sank into a deep depression. In a bid to escape, she headed to a gold-mine, four hours north east of Kalgoorlie where she spent a year and a half working and assessing her life. “I just remember being in the wilderness saying to God, ‘Have you forsaken me? Have you left me?’ This time tested my faith in God and what I really believed. Through it all, she says, “He held me in the palm of his hand; let me be a child and just cry when I needed to.”

Eventually with the help of counselling, support and prayer, Emma came through the intense darkness, holding fast to the scriptures such as Proverbs 3:5. At 27, she had finally regained her independence and confidence; ready to face the world again and returned home. The trip to New York was part of her healing – her destiny was calling her again.

But Emma’s destiny lay with Captain Sullenberger, a veteran of the air, with more than 30 years experience flying commercial planes. The plane, in his capable hands, was now 3000 ft over one of the most densely populated cities in the world and descending rapidly. He charted his landing - the only expanse large enough for a jetliner was the Hudson River. In what has been described as pure heroism, ‘Sully’, as he is known to those closest to him, skilfully manoeuvred the airbus, gliding the plane to safety.

“Brace for impact,” he warned passengers, just moments before descending into the icy waters. Emma Sophina had 15 seconds to decide how she would support herself. Assessing her options, she chose to grab the seat in front of her. She put her head onto her lap



To download a copy of Emma's EP, go to I-tunes or Decca Records. <http://www.deccarecords-us.com> Or to keep up with what Emma is doing, visit her face-book. myspace.com/emmasophina

and held on tight. Within moments, flight 1549 landed abruptly, but safely, in the frigid waters. Doors were flung open – an evacuation plan was put into place. “We’re in water,” somebody shouted. Emma quickly found herself a life jacket and headed for the door as the water level inside the plane began to rise.

After only four minutes, the first ferry arrived and began pulling passengers from the wings of the sinking plane. Rescue boats would take them to dry land. Once in a life raft, the reality of what had happened hit Emma: “I suddenly realised I was an Australian in a river with no ID,” she recalls. She had lost everything: passport: drivers’ licence: credit card and bank cards. By now, the news was out. The normally quiet Hudson River had become a frenzy of activity, filled with large and small rescue craft. “Is everyone out?” yelled a rescue diver.

“Everyone is out!” Emma screamed from her life-raft, by now

up to her waist in icy water. A photo was taken of Emma mid sentence – an image that would be posted to news sites around the world. More helicopters and news crews began arriving, capturing the moment on film and in print. Reporters were asking questions and lots of them.

Over the days that followed, the media went into over-drive. Interviews were conducted with the passengers, crew and the captain. “Who are you?” they asked the petite Aussie girl, “and what do you do?” Overwhelmed by the attention, Emma left New York to gather her thoughts. It was then, God reminded her of a prophecy that had been given to her eight



years earlier. 'That something big would happen; one that would bring her a recording contract.'

She then contacted the only people she knew in New York, Marc Swersky - a well known Grammy-award winning producer, who had worked with some of the biggest names in the business: Joe Cocker, Hillary Duff and Natalie Cole and Tony Black, another Grammy winner - who has worked with the greats, including Alicia Keys and Janet Jackson. Within days, Emma, Mark and Tony were in the studio recording a song: a thankyou to the crew of flight 1549 and in particular, Captain Sullenberger and first officer, Jeffrey B. Skiles. The song

entitled, *Send A Little Prayer* was a combined effort. "Truly, this has been the divine orchestration of God," says Emma, who stands in awe of the doors that have opened for her. "This is not me conjuring up something, it's been favour... I could never have planned this."

Nor could she have designed what was to happen next. Over the weeks following the aircraft disaster, Emma was interviewed on some of America's highest rating shows: the CBS Early Show, Good Morning America, Fox and Friends and Larry King, where she was asked to perform her tribute song. "No-one has ever performed live on his show," she enthuses. "When I think about what's happened in New York, I am reminded of the scripture, 'That God is able to do far more than we could ever hope or imagine.' This little Perth girl got to perform on Larry King. That has amazed me."

Spotting her incredible talent, Record Producers met with Emma to discuss a contract. Within days of her public appearances, Emma had signed a five year record deal with the successful Decca label; the same label that has signed Andrea Bocelli, Delta Goodrem and Boyz to Men. "This is truly the grace and favour of God," she tells me.

Just prior to leaving for New York, Emma was living and working in Perth, helping with her parents' church; teaching, singing and singing at events such as the Hopman Cup and Perth's Telethon. Her dream of writing and securing a record deal happened much quicker than she had ever imagined. "I remember the day we went to the record company. We had an hour and a half meeting and the record guys said to me, 'Can you remain? We need to talk over the details.' Another miracle - no-one usually signs a deal that quickly," says Emma.

"It's been a walk of Faith," says

Emma who now lives in New York. In July this year, she released her first EP (extended play), a five track disc, now available on i-tunes. What has been described as 'Miracle on the Hudson' has also become a miracle in the life of one Perth girl. Although she does admit to being lonely from time to time, there's always Skype. What she misses most about Perth is her family and her cocker spaniel.

"Today, I am at peace," she says quietly. "I am in the place where I know that my Creator is in control. If I had not gone through my wilderness years - I would not have the strength to deal with the ups and downs of the record business. During this time," she says, "it was a song by Sara Groves called *It's going to be alright* that sustained me. In the natural I knew I was a mess, but I also knew it would be alright."

And her hopes for the future? "I just want to follow Christ and be a disciple for him. I have become much more aware of this. The disciples were hand picked by God and they didn't worry about anything once they decided to follow Christ. That's the best place to be. Yes, I'd like a husband to join me on this journey and I know the future involves travelling, which is ironic. I have a plane crash and God wants me to travel," she laughs. "My calling is to be a bridge between the things of God and the secular world. It's what I have known for years."

Inspired by the success of U2, Emma says she doesn't chase fame - she wants to use her talent to make a difference. "I want to be influential for the right reasons. If God can put me on the front page of the New York Post, he can do anything - just watch this space."

Nicole Partridge
Freelance writer