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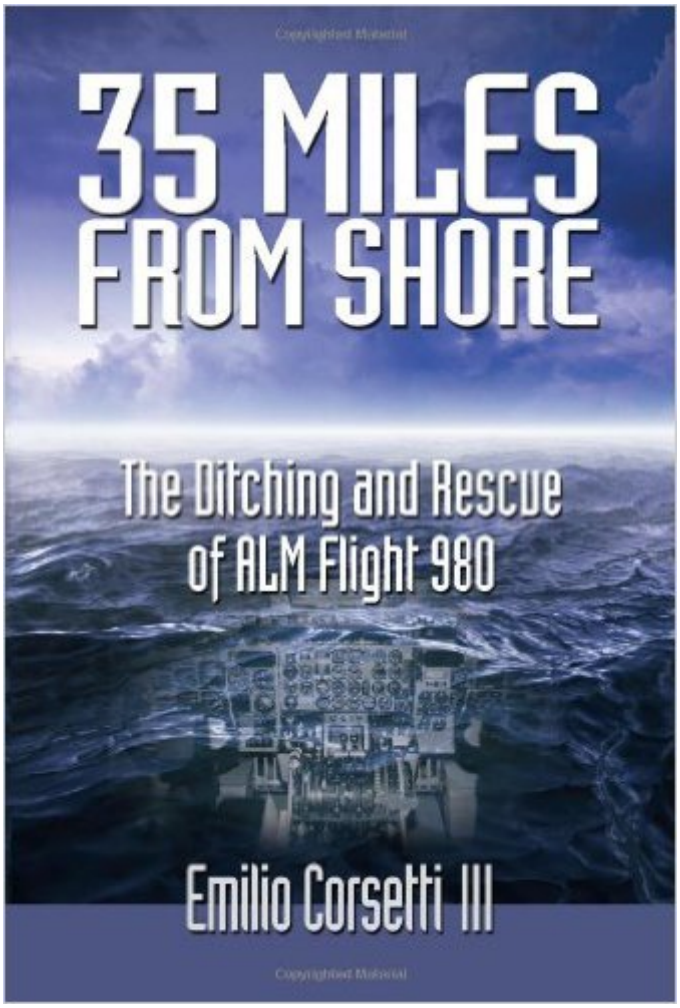
35 Miles From Shore: The Ditching And Rescue Of ALM Flight 980



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Synopsis

On May 2, 1970, a DC-9 jet with 57 passengers and a crew of six departed New York's JFK International Airport en route to the tropical island of St. Maarten. The flight ended four hours and thirty-four minutes later in the shark-infested waters of the Caribbean. It was, and remains, the only open-water ditching of a commercial jet. The subsequent rescue of survivors took nearly three hours and involved the coast guard, navy, and marines. This gripping account of that fateful day recounts what was happening inside the cabin, the cockpit, and the helicopters as the crews struggled against the weather and dwindling daylight to rescue the survivors who have only their life vests and a lone escape chute to keep them afloat."Mr. Corsetti left no stone unturned in his detailed book of this accident and the rescue that followed. His description of the aftermath of the crash, the anguish of the survivors after the ditching, brought the reader right into the midst of the action." William Phenn Readersviews.com

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Customer Reviews

It has been more than 37 years since ALM flight 980 ran out of fuel and was forced to ditch in the shark-infested waters off the coast of St. Croix in the Carribean. When one stops to consider the thousands of commercial jet flights that take off and land each and every day all over the world it is all the more remarkable that what took place on May 2, 1970 remains to this day the one and only open-water ditching of a commercial jet in aviation history! Author Emilio Corsetti III is a both a professional pilot and a gifted writer. As such, he is a man uniquely qualified to scrutinize the facts surrounding this unfortunate incident that has long since faded from memory. "35 Miles From Shore"

is the remarkable story of what went down on that stormy Saturday afternoon nearly four decades ago. Clearly this is an incident worth looking into and a story worth telling. "35 Miles From Shore" is a book that will grab your attention right away and hold your interest until the very end.It is important to note that the service between JFK in New York and the island of St. Maarten had been inaugurated just a few months earlier in a joint agreement between the official airline of the Netherlands Antilles ALM and the U.S based carrier Overseas National Airways. Under this arrangement known as a "wet lease" ONA would provide the aircraft, pilot and flight crew and ALM would provide the flight attendants. Under the terms of the agreement hammered out by the CEO's of the two airlines installation of an extra fuel tank was deemed necessary and this tank was to be installed on the aircraft by no later than April 1st, 1970.

In "35 Miles From Shore" Emilio Corsetti III, himself a professional pilot, shows why professional accident investigators talk in terms of a "chain of events." This accident had numerous links in its chain, any of which could have been broken by different people at different times.ALM Flight 980 (operated under contract by ONA) was a regularly scheduled DC-9 (N935F) from New York's JFK airport to the island of St. Maarten. This route was close to the edge of the DC-9's range without auxiliary fuel tanks, which weren't available when the service began. Some people make a great fuss over this, but in reality the flight was dispatched with greater fuel than was legally required when it left JFK. Since the flight flew over Bermuda on the way down, there was always an option of stopping for fuel, an option that was occasionally exercised. Certainly having a higher fuel capacity would have been nice, but was not required for safe operation of the flight. What was required was good decision making from the flight crew, a crew beset by problems.Today airlines have "Crew Resource Management" (CRM) and other training designed to help pilots work well together. This accident and a host of others around the same time (with Eastern 401 being the most famous) developed at least in large part due to domineering Captains making bad decisions while trying to do everything themselves and stifling communication from subordinates. These Captains are now largely (and thankfully) retired, but flying with one of those self-absorbed sky kings who were frequently abusive to junior crewmembers made for a terrible trip. I know; I've been there. This particular combination was especially bad with Captain Balsey DeWitt in command.

I was an observer on one of the Marine Corps CH-46 helicopters that took part in the rescue and I strongly recommend this book as a complete record of what happened. It is a spellbinding but professional account of the ditching, what went before and what followed afterwards.My only

disappointment is that the author does not ask the On Scene Commander Lt. Blank why he used the Aircraft he had at his disposal the way he did. It was a puzzle to the Marines at the time and still is.At 16.30, Lt. Blank had the following assets at his disposal.4 * CH-46. Useful load 8,750 lbs. Time to scene- 25 mins2 * CH-46. Useful load 8,750 lbs. Time to scene- 45 mins1 * SH-3. Useful load 4,000 lbs. Time to scene- 50 mins2 * SH-52 Useful load 3,000 lbs. Time to scene- 75 minsIt was about this time, 16.30, that Lt. Blank diverted the 4 Marine CH-46s to St. Croix, followed shortly by the other 2. It didn't make sense to us at the time, and it makes even less sense now, that he would bench his most capable aircraft, which also happened to be the nearest to the scene. They were the fastest, too, even if not by much. The CH-46s were fully equipped and certified for instrument flight. They were all brand spanking new, new engines putting out full power, all equipment and radios working and were manned by the best pilots in the squadron, all with 2.000+ hours, at least 1,000 of them flown in a 13 month tour in Vietnam, where they flew almost every day, all hand flying, no autopilot.The Marines had done an outstanding job. They launched, with full fuel, in 15 minutes instead of the usual one hour. They were the first rescue helicopters to launch, within 25 minutes of the DC-9 ditching.

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