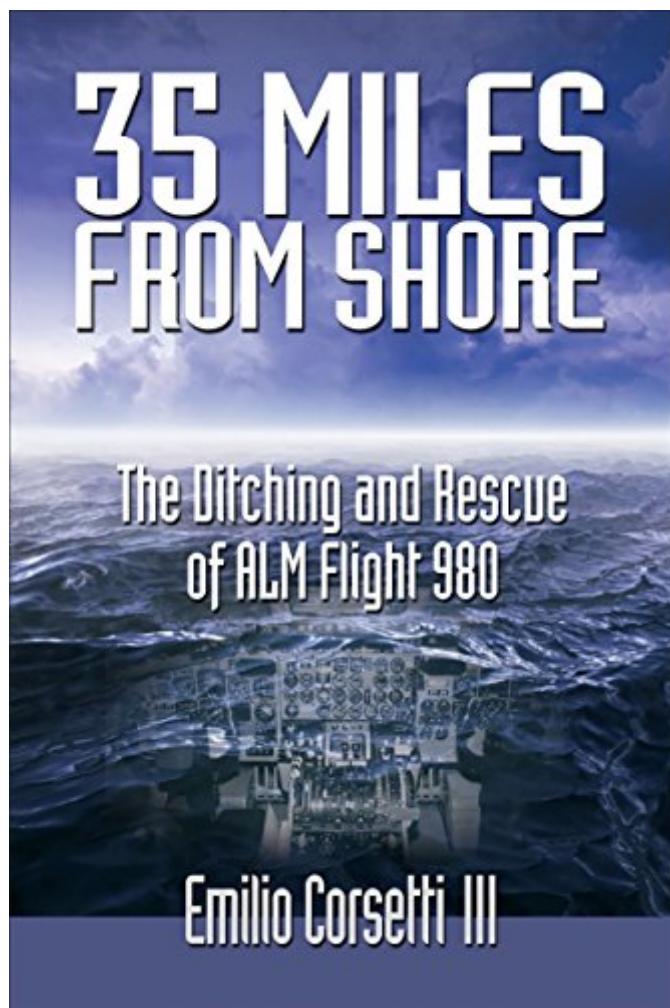


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# 35 Miles From Shore: The Ditching And Rescue Of ALM Flight 980



## **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 "This gripping account of a tragedy, with heroes galore, is mesmerizing reading. Corsetti's minute by minute style doesn't miss a thing. A 4 star Rating!" Ron Watson New Book Reviews

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

Overall this book was extremely interesting. It starts slow because of the need to introduce all the characters and set the complicated stage that lead up to the accident. Once stage is set the book is a real page turner. Other than the pure human drama, the book is interesting to me because it highlighted the simple things that can be done to make an aircraft accident survivable. I will be much better prepared from now on when I fly. I think most people who are interested in aircraft will enjoy this book, but you must be willing to invest a little time to get through the first part. After that, hang on, it is a great read.

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.

I enjoyed the book. The facts are well written but it's not dry or hard to read. I do wish there was a conclusion as to why the plane crashed but I'm sure the survivors and victims families wish they knew too.

... and unlike in the game of horseshoes, the consequences of not reaching the desired goal in this endeavor, would be, both, tragic and news-worthy. Author Emilio Corsetti does a fine job (through hours of interviews with survivors of ill-fated ALM Flight 980, as well as pain-staking research on the Internet) weaving together the events in place that, ultimately, brought down Overseas National Airways' DC-9, 35 miles short of its intended destination ... and he does so in a way that makes this tragic event read more like a novel than the subject of a day's headline news. A fast-paced story, that show-cases both the heroic efforts and dismal failures that were participants in this extraordinary event.

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. DeWitt was a check airman and was known for going out of his way to be difficult, arrogantly calling himself the "cherub-faced assassin," a nickname that caught on with other ONA pilots. The First Officer, Harry Evans, was very inexperienced and had previously had unsatisfactory simulator training with DeWitt. Throughout the flight DeWitt did most everything himself, even flying the aircraft manually, talking on the radio, and coordinating a diversion simultaneously at one point, a method that left Evans out of the decision making loop altogether. DeWitt had made a series of decisions that had caused the flight to burn more fuel than was called for (notably cruising at lower altitudes and less efficient speeds,) and when he discovered the weather at St. Maarten was marginal continued on instead of diverting for fuel. I am actually somewhat sympathetic to the decision to continue; it's the kind of decision pilots make every day. What I am not sympathetic with is his multiple unstable approaches in terrible weather while extremely low on fuel before deciding to divert. His seemingly cavalier disregard of fuel requirements was the proximal cause of this accident. After the ditching DeWitt acted very responsibly and greatly assisted in the rescue efforts, for which he should be commended. That he never flew again is also a good thing. The book discusses the interpersonal conflicts on this flight, the various links in the accident chain, the actual ditching of the aircraft and recovery of the passengers (the DC-9 floated very well and allowed safe egress for most passengers,) and the aftermath of the accident including safety improvements made since the

accident. Today N935F still lies 5,000 feet below bottom of the sea. Corsetti intuitively knows what parts of the story to emphasize and at what time. The closing of the book is a sort of "lessons learned," and while he discusses many technical details, he is able to effectively communicate them to people with any level of aeronautical knowledge. I think it was an inspired choice for him to cite the NTSB's report on the accident to reinforce one of his central themes (p.277): "The Board also finds that the probability of survival would have been increased substantially in this accident if there had been better crew coordination prior to and during the ditching." This is exactly the point, and is the primary reason that airlines have CRM, TEM, and other programs today. As an airline pilot (with thousands of hours flying time in the DC-9) I am rarely overwhelmed by a book profiling an accident. This book is an exception: it is well written, accurate, comprehensive, comprehensible, well documented, and grippingly written. I recommend it for anyone interested in aviation, aviation accidents, human factors, or dramatic nonfiction.

I read Emilio Corsetti's book, and thoroughly enjoyed it. This is a true account of a tragic ditching, in open water, of a Douglas DC-9 airliner, and the story of the passengers and crew. Most survived, but there were fatalities in this unfortunate accident. Corsetti interviewed many survivors from this ditching, including the Captain of this ill-fated flight, and also spoke with many of the rescuers. The narrative is exceptional, and the photos that accompany the story are fantastic. You will not want to put this book down once you start it. Highly recommended, I give it (5) stars. Until this book by Corsetti, there was no real description or account of this accident, which occurred in 1970. Well done, Emilio.

Having spent some years in commercial aviation, passengers and weather and crazy situations, this was about as riveting and interesting as it gets. And hell no I didn't want to be on this flight.

Very well written and comprehensive book about an aircraft ditching most people today know nothing about. Though the book has a large cast of characters so to speak, and because of that it is hard to remember who is who. That does not deter me from recommending the book. Though the story does involve a lot of people, it is informative in that I learned a lot about how we got to where we are today in modern air travel. There were a lot of smaller airlines that were instrumental in opening up the routes of today.

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