

An Ordinary Day

A review of the film



Flight

(2012)

Robert Zemeckis (Director)



Reviewed by

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Warning: Spoiler Alert! Some unforeseeable events in the movie, *Flight*, will be revealed in this review. Readers who have not yet seen the movie are forewarned.

It's just an ordinary day when the main character, commercial pilot William "Whip" Whitaker (played by Denzel Washington), wakes up after a long night of heavy drinking in a nondescript hotel room with a naked flight attendant (his coworker and apparent romantic interest, Trina Márquez). It's an ordinary day when he snorts a few lines of cocaine to help negate the effects of alcohol before heading to the airport to fly a plane carrying 96 passengers and six crew members on a 52-minute flight from Orlando, Florida, to Atlanta, Georgia. It's an ordinary day when, after successfully flying through extreme turbulence, he chats nonchalantly with the passengers over the public address system, while discretely pouring three shots of vodka into his orange juice. It's an ordinary day, until . . . all hell

breaks loose, and the plane dramatically crashes to the earth, killing two crew members and four passengers.

In the hospital immediately following the crash, as Whip is just waking up from unconsciousness, his union representative says, “The way you landed that plane was nothing short of a miracle. No doubt.” The initial investigation determines that the cause of the crash was mechanical failure of the horizontal stabilizer, making it impossible to keep the plane in a horizontal position. Simulations of this failure reveal that 10 other skilled pilots would have been unable to make a successful landing; therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) lead investigator describes the mechanical problem as “a catastrophic event from which recovery was improbable and stable flight impossible.” Yet Whip, while under the influence of alcohol and cocaine, managed to land the plane and save the lives of most of the passengers on board.

Consequences and Lies

Fast-forward to almost the end of the movie, 13 months after the crash. Whip, dressed in prison garb, is talking to the other prison inmates at a twelve-step recovery meeting. “That was it. I was finished. I was done. It was as if I had reached my lifelong limit of lies. I could not tell one more lie. And maybe I’m a sucker, because if I had told just one more lie, I could have walked away from all that mess.” He is referring to his last-minute confession at the NTSB investigation admitting that he was drunk (and high on cocaine) during the flight and the crash landing.

What can explain Whip’s decision to tell the truth, face the consequences, and ultimately turn his life around? What can explain his transition from arrogant, intoxicated, “don’t mess with me” commercial pilot to recovering addict serving a five-year prison sentence while describing himself as free for the first time in his life? Proponents of a twelve-step philosophy might say that he had “hit bottom.” According to Miller and C’de Baca (2001), his transformation might be described as resulting from a sudden epiphany, a “quantum change.”

We see his dramatic transformation as being better explained by a series of environmental contextual influences, as described by Tucker and King (1999). Tucker and colleagues explained that whether an individual recovers from addiction with or without formal help, the underlying commonality is a prolonged series of events that ultimately trigger behavioral change, even though the act of quitting may appear to be quite sudden (Tucker, Vuchinich, & Pukish, 1995; Tucker, Vuchinich, & Rippens, 2002).

Most individuals struggling with an addiction experience consequences in their daily lives. Sometimes these consequences are dramatic (although seldom as dramatic as a plane crash); often the consequences are of the more ordinary variety—fights with one’s spouse,

being late for work, having a hangover. Whip has experienced numerous consequences of his addiction. His marriage has failed, his relationship with his 15-year-old son, Will, is damaged seemingly beyond repair, and he has few other meaningful relationships. Then, he miraculously survives a plane crash with only minor injuries, while one of the few people he seems to care about dies in the crash (flight attendant Trina).

One might think that this would be enough to compel him to turn his life around. Instead, after a few days of abstinence, he soon returns to drinking and strikes up an unlikely relationship with a down-and-out but newly clean heroin addict named Nicole. Although they seem to care about one another, when Whip's drunken binges begin to threaten her newfound sobriety, Nicole walks away from the unhealthy relationship, leaving him alone, again.

Ambivalence

The crash, the investigation, and the powerful acting of Denzel Washington leave most viewers with ambivalent feelings toward this central character. One is left wondering whether he is an irresponsible criminal, a flawed hero, or possibly both. As far as viewers can tell, Whip has spent his entire career flying while intoxicated, thus putting the passengers and crew at risk. On the flight that crashed, although he had been drinking and doing drugs, he was able to save 96 people from almost-certain death. But did he save 96, or was he responsible for ending the lives of the other six? One doesn't know whether to admire him or blame him. In fact, one can't help but wonder whether he could have safely landed the plane while sober. Is he that skillful as a pilot, or was his feat of daring attributable to the disinhibiting effects of alcohol and drugs?

Many of the characters in the movie seem to also have ambivalent feelings toward Whip. For example, after Trina's funeral, which Whip could barely tolerate, one of the other flight attendants, Margaret, sends her young son over to thank Whip for saving his mom. In a subsequent conversation with Whip, as he is trying to convince Margaret to testify to the NTSB that "it was an ordinary day," Margaret states that she knows he was intoxicated during the flight, and she hints that she knows flying drunk *was* ordinary for Whip.

Similarly, when Whip goes to see the seriously injured copilot in the hospital, neither the copilot nor his wife seems to be able to reconcile whether to blame Whip for the crash or to thank him for his skillful landing. Whip's criminal lawyer probably expresses the pervasive ambivalence most clearly when he says, "When I first met you, I couldn't believe what a drunk, arrogant scumbag you were. But then I did the research, Captain Whitaker. I heard the expert analysis, and I've got to tell you, I'm in awe of what you did."

The Power of Addiction

Unlike many other stories of alcohol and drug addiction, *Flight* does not try to show the audience “why” Whip has a problem with alcohol and drugs. There are no stories of childhood abuse, no mention of alcoholic parents, and no obvious personal failures other than those that seem to be a consequence of his addiction. Maybe that is because there isn’t always a reason. “Regular” people develop addictive disorders, and many alcoholics continue to have success in their professional lives despite their drinking.

Although there are many consequences of his drinking, Whip manages to lead a seemingly normal life, hiding his addiction behind a façade of lies. He convinces himself that he chooses to drink, and he seems to realize that alcohol often wins out over relationships, as reflected in the following quote: “I got a ex-wife and a son I never talk to. You know why? Because I choose to drink.” Furthermore, although Whip superficially believes that he has control over his drinking, telling his union representative and his attorney that he can easily stop on his own, his ambivalence is demonstrated in the form of several failed attempts to quit over the course of the movie.

Although the film does not expressly state why Whip developed an addiction, we find ourselves searching for a reason. We wonder whether it is common for commercial airline pilots to have addictive disorders. Is it possible that careless use of alcohol and drugs goes hand-in-hand with the self-assured personality of the airline pilot? The Alcoholics Anonymous “Big Book” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001a) featured a story of a Native American Vietnam veteran, a pilot with many similarities to Whip’s character. The pilot in the story was convicted of violation of federal law for flying while intoxicated. He stated, “Drinking was encouraged; the pilot persona was one of hard, gutsy flying with equally hard drinking, and attendance at happy hour was considered a duty” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001b, pp. 522–523). He described the shame and humiliation of the media coverage following his arrest.

In the movie, the media seem ever present, both in the form of reporters following Whip and in the constant television reports showing the crash and the investigation. Although the viewer never discovers the reason for Whip’s alcohol addiction, the portrayal of alcoholism in the movie seems plausible—he easily meets diagnostic criteria for an alcohol use disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), and he seems unable to consistently cut down or control his drinking.

One of the most dramatic moments in the movie (aside from the flight and crash scenes) is when Whip, now nine days sober, is faced with a fully stocked minibar the night before his hearing. He is alone, restless, and awake in the middle of the night, standing at the window, when suddenly the minibar fridge across the room cycles, causing a hum that gets his attention. It’s as if he can’t resist the urge to at least peek inside. He opens its door, and the screen shot is from the perspective of inside the lighted fridge: all of those bottles and

cans of alcohol taunting him. With so much at stake, will he give in to temptation? One hopes he doesn't, but, sadly, he does take the first of many drinks that he will consume that night. The next day, at the hearing, still intoxicated but temporarily bolstered by cocaine, Whip testifies.

Making Changes

This brings us to the pivotal moment when, after a long series of drinking-related consequences, Whip makes a decision that turns his life around. He is in the hearing room, and the lead NTSB investigator seems ready to label Whip as a hero, not only excusing blame but indicating that his ingenuity as a pilot saved most of the passengers on that ill-fated flight. Whip's incriminating toxicology report has been strategically quashed by his lawyer, but the question remains about who drank the vodka and left the empty bottles in the trash on a flight that didn't offer beverage service.

Projected on the screen, larger than life, is the image of Trina's pretty face. The lead investigator asks Whip whether he thinks that Trina, the only other crew member with a positive toxicology report, consumed the vodka. Whip struggles. He can't get the words out. He can't seem to place blame on his dead ex-girlfriend, who was out of her seatbelt at the time of the crash because she was attempting to help a young boy. In a low voice, he admits that he drank the vodka on the plane, that he is drunk at that moment at the hearing, and that he is an alcoholic. He finally breaks free from the lies.

At the end of the movie, one sees a glimmer of hope for better "ordinary days" in Whip's future after prison. Hope comes in the form of his changing relationship with his son, as Will interviews his father for a college essay about "the most fascinating person that I've never met." As they sit in the prison yard, Will asks his father the fundamental question "Who are you?" just as the subtle but dramatic sound of a plane flying overhead is heard.

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