Foxtrot Delta Romeo

(Flight Data Recorder)

Nicholas C. Cyganski
nccyganski@wpi.edu
www.friendlyskiesfilm.com
774-364-5258
Synopsis: On 23rd July 1983, Air Canada Flight 143 runs out of fuel at 41,000 feet, halfway through its flight from Montreal to Edmonton. The aircraft’s flight data recorder (FDR) captures the heroic actions behind the cockpit door on that fateful day.

Setting: A commercial airliner flight deck

Cast of Characters (In order of appearance):

ATTENDANT: A female flight attendant dressed in uniform, emotionless

CONTROLLER: A male air traffic controller, dressed business casual

BOB: Captain (Pilot); a confident man with robot-like precision and resolve

MAURICE: First Officer (Co-pilot); not as experienced, but appropriately questioning

RICK: The Engineer; a reserved man, in polo and khakis, travelling with his family

Note from the Writer: This work is an homage to Charlie Victor Romeo, a 1999 play and 2013 film, which has won thirteen awards as of 2015, and was named Time Magazine's play of the year in 2004. Bringing the complexity of an aircraft flightdeck to the stage may seem a daunting task, but a healthy minimalism has proven triumphant. The audience never has to see the aircraft controls or panels, as they conveniently face away from the audience. The director is encouraged to take liberties with improvised reactions and the exact timing of events. The focus should be on the actors’ chilling recreation of a scene that few men have faced and survived.

Expected Run-Time: 15 - 20 Minutes
(The stage is dark except for a pool of light surrounding ATTENDANT, close to the audience. She has some of the safety equipment typically found on a flight. A recorded safety briefing is heard while ATTENDANT acts out the usual motions.)

Recording: “Ladies and Gentlemen, please pay attention as we display the safety features and procedures of the aircraft in case of an emergency. During an emergency, please remain in your seats with your seatbelts fastened, and your seat in the upright position. In case of a drop in cabin pressure, breathing masks will drop from the ceiling and should be placed over your head. If there is smoke in the cabin during the evacuation of the aircraft, the walkway emergency lights will display to the exits, which are located here, and here. In case of an extreme emergency landing, you will be instructed to get into the brace position, which is executed by placing your head between your knees and your hands over your head. We would also like to remind you that you should turn off all electronic devices. We thank you for paying attention during this brief presentation.”

ATTENDANT: The date is July 28th, 1983. More than one thousand people will meet their end in an aviation disaster this year. What you are about to see is the true story of Air Canada Flight One-Forty-Three.

(Blueout)

(Blueout)

(Blueout)

(The cockpit consists of two seats behind the aircraft panel, which only needs to conceal the pilots from view up to their chests, directly facing the audience. A third seat sits behind and between the two pilots. Light from the aircraft panel illuminates the pilots from below, as does do the wingtip lights from a distance to either side.)

(In complete darkness, only the wingtip lights are flashing and engine noise is heard)

CONTROLLER: Air Canada One-Forty-Three, change to my frequency, one-twenty-two point seven-five.

(The cockpit lights illuminate, and wingtip lights dim)

BOB: That’s one-twenty-two, seven-five for Air Canada One-Forty-Three.

(Pause. There is a knock at the cockpit door. The flight crew look at each other briefly)

BOB: Oh! That’s probably Rick. (at the door) Come on in.
(RICK enters and begins to shake hands, first with BOB, then MAURICE)

RICK: Pardon me, gentlemen.

BOB: (At MAURICE) This is Rick Dion. He’s one of our maintenance engineers, and a fellow glider pilot of mine from St-Lazare.

MAURICE: (Shaking hands) Maurice Quintal. Nice to meet you.

BOB: And you’re here--- (Looking for RICK to continue his sentence)

RICK: Oh. I’m just vacationing with my family, but I was hoping you gentlemen could show me the new flight deck.

BOB: Ah, yes. (Gesturing to the panel) This is our brand new Boeing 767. It’s all digital, so it only takes the two of us to fly it. (Gesturing to MAURICE)

MAURICE: And right now we’re cruising at 41,000 feet. Higher and faster than anyone else in the fleet.

RICK: (Looking all around) Wow, quite a difference in here.

BOB: On one of its first flights last week the computer indicated that we had an engine failure, but it was clearly wrong. (Handing a red binder to RICK from between the seats) I still keep this close at hand, though.

RICK: Ah, the emergency checklists. You know, that actually brings up an interesting---

(RICK is silenced by an alarm and blinking red light on the overhead panel)

MAURICE: (Surprised, but not alarmed) Fuel pressure? Why would that be?

BOB: Woah.

MAURICE: (Reaching up to silence the alarm) Something’s wrong with the fuel pump.

(BOB and MAURICE scan the panel while RICK searches through the binder)
BOB: *(Under his breath)* It’s just the bloody pump failing, I can tell you that.

RICK: It’s the... left... forward fuel pump.

BOB: Well, we’ve got five more good ones.

*(The same alarm sounds again)*

MAURICE: That’s the second one. That’s both left fuel pumps out.

BOB: Hold on, let me check the fuel quantity.

*(BOB pushes buttons on the lower panel, while MAURICE cancels the alarm again)*

MAURICE: This doesn’t make much sense...

BOB: Yeah, it says we *should* have plenty of fuel for the flight, but we can’t know for sure. *(Turning towards Rick, who is still standing behind them)* What’s your assessment of this?

RICK: My own personal thoughts? We might be low on fuel in the left tank. I’ve seen the alarms act like that before when the pumps are just sucking on fumes.

MAURICE: Then we might be low on fuel in the right tank too.

BOB: Let’s head for Winnipeg. *(Assertively)* Now. Just in case.

*(BOB and MAURICE begin shuffling papers and RICK takes a seat behind them.)*

MAURICE: *(into his headset)* Winnipeg Center, Air Canada One-Forty-Three.

*(Lights come up on CONTROLLER, positioned perpendicular to the audience, sitting at a radar console)*

CONTROLLER: *(into his headset)* Air Canada One-Forty-Three, go ahead.

MAURICE: Yes, sir. Uh. We have a problem. Requesting direct to Winnipeg.
CONTROLLER: Air Canada One-Forty-Three, cleared direct to Winnipeg. You are cleared down to six-thousand. Descend at your discretion.

(Lights dim on CONTROLLER)

MAURICE: Descending now, Air Canada One-Forty-Three.

BOB: (A sense of urgency) Alright, let’s get down there.

(The same alarm sounds again, which MAURICE silences again)

MAURICE: Oh man. They’re all going out. One by one.

(MAURICE pushes a button paging the cabin with the familiar tone, and picks up the interphone from between the seats, which typically resembles a corded phone receiver)

(After a pause) Cabin? We think we have problems with our fuel system. We are diverting to Winnipeg.

BOB: Rick, can you think of anything we haven’t done?

RICK: No. I-I can’t, Bob.

(The left engine begins to audibly spool down, before the autopilot disconnect alarm sounds and a flashing yellow light illuminates on the panel. ALL focus on the panel. ALL shift in their seats to the right, and BOB presses hard on his right rudder pedal)

BOB: Okay... We’ve lost the left engine.

RICK: No doubt then, we’re running out of fuel.


(BOB picks up interphone, sounding the cabin tone again and waits for an answer.)

Yes, uh. Prepare the passengers for an emergency landing at Winnipeg.

(During the checklist, the fuel pump alarm sounds again. RICK looks at the overhead panel, but BOB and MAURICE do not take notice until they hear the right engine spooling down. ALL fixate on the lower panel again, this time in shock. BOB relaxes on the controls.)

BOB: No engines.

RICK: 75 miles to go. There’s no way.

MAURICE: (Into Headset) Winnipeg Center, Air Canada One-Forty-Three.

(Lights up on CONTROLLER)

CONTROLLER: Air Canada One-Forty-Three, go ahead.

MAURICE: Just lost both engines.

CONTROLLER: (To himself) Holy shit. I’m talking to a dead man.

BOB: (into headset) Uh, Winnipeg Center, One-Forty-Three, this is uhh, this is a mayday. We uhh, require vectors to the nearest runway. We are declaring an emergency.

CONTROLLER: Air Canada One-Forty-Three, uhh, we copy that all okay, you are declaring an emergency. Uhh. Standby. (Pointing to screen) I had them! They were right here! They’re gone! (yelling towards off-stage) Hey! I need primary radar! (Into Headset) Uh, One-Forty-Three, we’ve lost your transponder, and we’re attempting to pick up your target with primary radar now. (Gesturing ‘hurry up’ to off-stage)

(ALL are exasperated to hear this bad news. Lights dim on CONTROLLER)

MAURICE: Roger, One-Forty-Three.

BOB: (Pause.) We’ve got to figure out how fast we’re falling.

(As ALL begin shuffling papers, all the lights previously illuminating the pilots’ faces from the panel go dark, along with the wingtip lights.)

How come I have no instruments?
RICK: We’ve lost power! We should have the standby instruments in a minute.

(Lights up on CONTROLLER, who is holding a ruler up to his screen)

CONTROLLER: Uhh, One-Forty-Three, we have you at 65 miles from Winnipeg, and approximately 45 miles from Gimli, Manitoba.

BOB: (To MAURICE who is doing calculations) We might make Winnipeg.

MAURICE: It’s only 45 miles to Gimli, and that’s a long runway.

BOB: (Into headset) Uh, Center, is there emergency equipment at Gimli?

CONTROLLER: Um, negative emergency equipment at all. Just one runway available, I believe, no control tower, and no information on it.

(ALL look at each other in the cockpit for a moment, deciding what to do.)

BOB: Winnipeg has the emergency services. (Into headset) Okay, then. We would prefer Winnipeg.

CONTROLLER: Fine, One-Forty-Three, continue on your present heading.

BOB: (Into headset) And how far are we from the field now?

CONTROLLER: You are 35--- no, correction, make that... 39 miles from Winnipeg.

BOB: (Into headset) Roger.

CONTROLLER: What is your altitude now, One-Forty-Three?

MAURICE: (To BOB) Um, Eight-thousand, five-hundred.

BOB: (Into headset) Eight-thousand, five-hundred.

(Lights dim on CONTROLLER)

(RICK points over BOB’s shoulder out the windshield. MAURICE is still calculating)
BOB: We’ve got the airport in sight!

MAURICE: Bob. (Pause.) We can last maybe another 20 miles... That’s 15 miles short of the runway... We’re not going to make Winnipeg.

BOB: (Into headset) Center, how far away are we from Gimli?

(Lights up on CONTROLLER)

CONTROLLER: You’re approximately 12 miles from Gimli right now.

BOB: (Becoming frantic, scanning the horizon) Uhh, where is it?

CONTROLLER: On your right! Turn right to a heading of three-four-five for Gimli. I would say you have 10 miles to fly!

BOB: Okay. Fine. We’re going to go there!

(RICK stands up to grab BOB and MAURICE by the shoulders. CONTROLLER dims.)

RICK: (Solemnly) I’m going to go check up on my family. You guys don’t need me up here, right?

BOB: (Softly) No. no. We’re okay. (RICK exists)

MAURICE: (After a pause) We’re going to have to gravity drop the landing gear.

BOB: Because we don’t have sufficient hydraulic pressure, yeah.

MAURICE: Here it goes.

(The landing gear is heard falling into place, but an alarm sounds shortly thereafter.)

MAURICE: (Reaching to silence the alarm) The nose landing gear is not---

BOB: I know! I know.

MAURICE: 5 miles to touchdown.
BOB: Runway in sight.

MAURICE: *(Looking distressed.)* We’re too close. It’s going to be too steep. Too fast.

BOB: Yeah. I know.

MAURICE: We don’t have enough altitude to make a full circle back to the runway.

BOB: *(Deep breath)* Well... I guess I’ll just slip it.

MAURICE: Has that ever been done in a commercial plane? I haven’t performed that maneuver since flight school.

BOB: I’ve never actually done it before, but Rick used to do it when we were glider pilots all the time to increase drag and lose altitude without gaining speed. I’m just going to slip it down until we’re almost on the runway, and then I’ll straighten it out. Here we go!

*(BOB wrestles the controls to the left as their bodies shift to the right. A cacophony of alarms begin to sound from the panel.)*

MAURICE: Yes. We’re dropping altitude quickly.

*(A speaker in the panel announces “Five-hundred.”)*

That’s 60 degrees bank! *(Looking out the left window)* Watch your wing! We’ve got this!

BOB: Is that... What is that?!

MAURICE: *(Craning his neck to see ahead)* There’s something on the runway! It looks like... there are some people, and cars. They’re racing! I think it’s a drag strip!

BOB: It’s the wrong runway! I see the right one over there, but we can’t make it!

*(A speaker in the panel announces “One-hundred.*”)

MAURICE: This is it!
(A speaker in the panel announces “Fifty,” then “Forty.”)

BOB: (With clenched teeth) There are two kids on the runway!

(A speaker in the panel announces “Thirty,” then “Twenty.”)

MAURICE: Let’s hope the gear’s down!

BOB: Come on! Come on! Come on! Touch down already!

MAURICE: We’re too fast!!!

(A speaker in the panel announces “Ten,” then the main landing gear is heard touching down. BOB and MAURICE jolt vertically in their seats.)

(BOB and MAURICE lean forward as the nose gear collapses) Oh no, no, no, no!

(BOB and MAURICE jolt forward, bracing on the panel, as a horrid scraping is heard.)

BOB: (Sitting back up and pressing with his feet) I have to keep steering with the differential breaks! We can’t hit those kids!

MAURICE: We’ve got smoke in here!

(The loudest, fire warning, alarm sounds as BOB and MAURICE jolt forward as the plane stops scraping along the runway.)

BOB: (Relieved) Passenger evacuation checklist!

(MAURICE grabs some papers while gasping for air. BOB begins flipping switches and repeats the checklist items.)


(All alarms are silenced, but the sound of gas and fire are still audible.)

Checklist complete. (Coughing)

BOB: Time to get out of here.
(BOB and MAURICE clear their laps of papers and leave the cabin, as lights dim. ATTENDANT stands in a pool of light, away from the cockpit scene.)

ATTENDANT: All aboard Air Canada Flight One-Forty-Three survived with only minor injuries. The aircraft, nicknamed “The Gimli Glider,” returned to service later that year. During the investigation, dozens of pilots tried to recreate the events you just witnessed in flight simulators, but they all fell miles short of the runway. Captain Robert Pearson was known to say about the day’s events, “Some things were just meant to happen.”

(Blackout)

Fin.