



ON A WING AND A PRAYER: HISTORY VS. HOLLYWOOD

By [Kevin Lang](#) | Published April 2, 2023



THE CAST VS. REAL LIFE

REEL FACE:



Dennis Quaid

Born: April 9, 1954

Birthplace:
Houston, Texas, USA

REAL FACE:



Doug White

Born: January 10, 1953

Birthplace: Vienna, West Virginia, USA

Heather Graham

Born: January 29, 1970

Birthplace:

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Terri White

Born: January 20, 1954

Birthplace: Louisiana, USA

Bio: Doug White's Wife

Wilbur Fitzgerald**Born:** September 15, 1948**Birthplace:**
Georgia, USA**Col. Joe Cabuk****Born:** June 14, 1941**Birthplace:** Louisiana, USA**Death:** April 12, 2009, Florida, USA
*(sudden cardiac death)***Bio:** Pilot who Died During the White
Family's Flight

Jesse Metcalfe

Born: December 9, 1978

Birthplace:

Carmel Valley, California, USA

Kari Sorenson

Born: August 15, 1966

Birthplace: Colorado, USA

Bio: Pilot Certified in the King Air who
Explained How to Fly the Aircraft

Anna Enger Ritch

Born: March 2, 1988

Birthplace:
Manila, Philippines

Ashley Harrison

Born: abt 1985

Birthplace: Stamford, Connecticut,
USA

Bio: Kari Sorenson's Girlfriend

Selena Anduze

Born: July 4, 1979

Birthplace:

St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands

Lisa Grimm

Bio: Air Traffic Controller at Miami Air
Route Traffic Control Center

Rocky Myers

Born: August 24, 1982
Birthplace:
Dover, Delaware, USA

Dan Favio

Birthplace: USA
Bio: Developmental Controller who
Called Friend Kari Sorenson

E. Roger Mitchell

Brian Norton

Born: February 18, 1971**Birthplace:**

Miami, Florida, USA

Birthplace: USA**Bio:** Fort Myers Air Traffic Controller
who Spoke to Doug White

HISTORICAL ACCURACY (Q&A):

Why did the real Doug White and his family charter a private plane?

Like in the Amazon Prime movie, the *On a Wing and a Prayer* true story confirms that Doug White, his wife Terri, and their two daughters, Bailey (16) and Maggie (18), had traveled to Marco Island in South Florida to attend the funeral for Doug's brother, Jeff, who had died from a heart attack. They chartered a private plane to fly them back to Monroe, Louisiana. The plan was to drop Doug off first in Jackson, Mississippi where he'd left his truck (the family lived in the community of Archibald, Louisiana). The twin-engine plane they boarded for the return trip was a King Air 200. The pilot was 67-year-old Joe Cabuk, a former jet pilot in the Air Force. -*The Christian Chronicle*



When did the real-life events take place?

An *On a Wing and a Prayer* fact-check confirms that Doug White and his family found themselves in the terrifying situation on Easter Sunday in April 2009. The real Doug White was 56 at the time. Actor Dennis Quaid was approximately 67 at the time of filming, more than 10 years older than White was when the real-life events took place.

What did Doug White do for a living?

As seen in the Amazon Prime Doug White movie, he was a Louisiana pharmacist. White had received a Doctor of Pharmacy from Northeast Louisiana University and eventually owned a pharmacy called Medi-shop in Mangham, Louisiana. His wife Terri was a competing pharmacist, which is how they met. Instead of continuing to operate as competitors, they merged their businesses into one pharmacy.

The *On a Wing and a Prayer* movie true story reveals that Doug White owned the King Air plane he was on with his family and had been leasing it to an air charter firm. He had purchased the plane in 2008 as both a business venture and a tax write-off. However, when the economy crashed that year, his plan didn't work out as he'd hoped.
-NBC News



At what point in the flight did the pilot die suddenly?

As depicted in the film, the pilot, 67-year-old Joe Cabuk, died of sudden cardiac death (similar to a heart attack) less than 10 minutes after taking off from Marco Island, Florida. "I looked over and his chin was on his chest," Doug White recalled. "He made a loud, guttural sound, kind of a groan, and his eyes rolled back, and his hands never left his lap. It was quick, it was sudden, and it was final." -AOPA

"I've got to declare an emergency. My pilot's deceased. I need help," White said over the radio. He didn't know why he had done it, but on a previous flight in the same plane, he had asked the pilot (not Joe Cabuk) what button to push to use the radio. The knowledge had now become invaluable. "I need to get this on the ground. I'm flyin' a King Air," he told the air traffic controllers. You can listen to a recording of [Doug White's communications with air traffic control](#). -CNN

After the pilot fell unconscious, did Doug White immediately yell for his wife Terri to come up to the cockpit?

Yes. In analyzing the *On a Wing and a Prayer* fact vs. fiction, we learned that Doug's wife Terri said that she was annoyed by his tone at first, thinking that he wanted a soda. She had been sitting in the passenger cabin with their two teenage daughters, Bailey and Maggie. Terri had been reading; Maggie, a student at Louisiana State University, was doing homework; and their younger daughter, Bailey, was trying to nap. When Terri entered the cockpit, Doug nodded his head to the left as if to say, "Look over there."

"Joe — his head was bent over, and spit was coming out of his mouth," Terri recalled. "And I — just instinct — I just started shaking his shoulder, saying 'Joe! Joe!' And finally, Doug said, 'Terri, leave him alone. He's dead.' And that's when my heart went into overdrive." -*The Christian Chronicle*

Is it true that the pilot lost consciousness as the plane was ascending?

Yes. In researching how accurate is *On a Wing and a Prayer*, we learned that it had only been about 10 minutes since take off, and the plane was still ascending to its cruising altitude of 10,000 feet when the pilot lost consciousness. The *On a Wing and a Prayer* true story corroborates that the King Air 200 continued ascending, traveling thousands of feet higher than it was supposed to be at. As for Doug White, who had some experience flying smaller, single-engine Cessnas, he had never gone higher than 7,000 feet. -*NBC News*

"King Air Five Five Nine Delta Whiskey, I'm declaring an emergency," White remembers telling the controllers. "I need to stop this climb, and I need a King Air pilot on the line." Air traffic controller Lisa Grimm told White to disengage the plane's autopilot. "We're gonna have you hand-fly the plane," she said. By the time he managed to disengage the autopilot and stop the plane's ascent, it had reached an altitude of "a little bit below 18,000" feet. -AOPA

Did Doug White's wife, Terri, try to remove the unconscious pilot from his seat?

Yes. Doug was concerned that the pilot's body might tip over onto the control yoke. In real life, the space was too small and his wife Terri and daughter Maggie couldn't move the 200-plus-pound pilot. Terri instead tried to pull his shoulder harness tighter to ensure he remained upright. Unlike what's seen in the [On a Wing and a Prayer movie](#), the pilot's body never tipped over onto the controls, sending the plane into a rapid descent. However, in the audio recording of Doug White's communication with air traffic control at Fort Myers, he does say, "I [gotta] keep this pilot off the control," indicating that the pilot's body was close to the yoke and Doug was concerned he'd tip onto it.

In the film, they're able to get the pilot out of his seat and Terri (Heather Graham) is depicted as sitting next to Doug in the cockpit, which never happened in real life. In fact, after being unable to move the pilot, Doug had Terri and Maggie return to the passenger cabin where they remained for the rest of the flight.

Was Doug White instructed to land the plane in Fort Myers?

Yes. Like in the Doug White movie, dozens of air traffic controllers hurried to reroute flights so that Fort Myers International Airport could accept the King Air that was now in the hands of White, a passenger. "You find me the longest, widest runway you can, ma'am," White told air traffic controller Lisa Grimm, who was an experienced pilot herself. -*CNN*

Top: The real Doug White stands in front of the King Air 200 that was involved in the incident.
Bottom: Dennis Quaid and Heather Graham portray Doug and his wife Terri in the movie.

Did Doug White have any previous flying experience?

Yes. The true story reveals that White had started taking flying lessons in 1989 and got his pilot's license in 1990. Having accomplished his goal, he didn't have the money to fly 2-3 times per week to stay sharp, so he gave up flying. At that point, he had logged 83 or 84 hours of flying. 18 years passed before he decided to take it up again in January 2009, having recently logged about 40-45 hours in the slower, less-complicated, single-engine Cessna 172. In total, he had not more than 129 hours of flight time in Cessna 172s prior to Easter 2009. This is significantly different than the movie, which depicts White (Dennis Quaid) as having piloted just "one discovery flight" where he nearly crashed and had to hand over the controls to his instructor. -FS

MaNiA

[On a Wing and a Prayer](#)

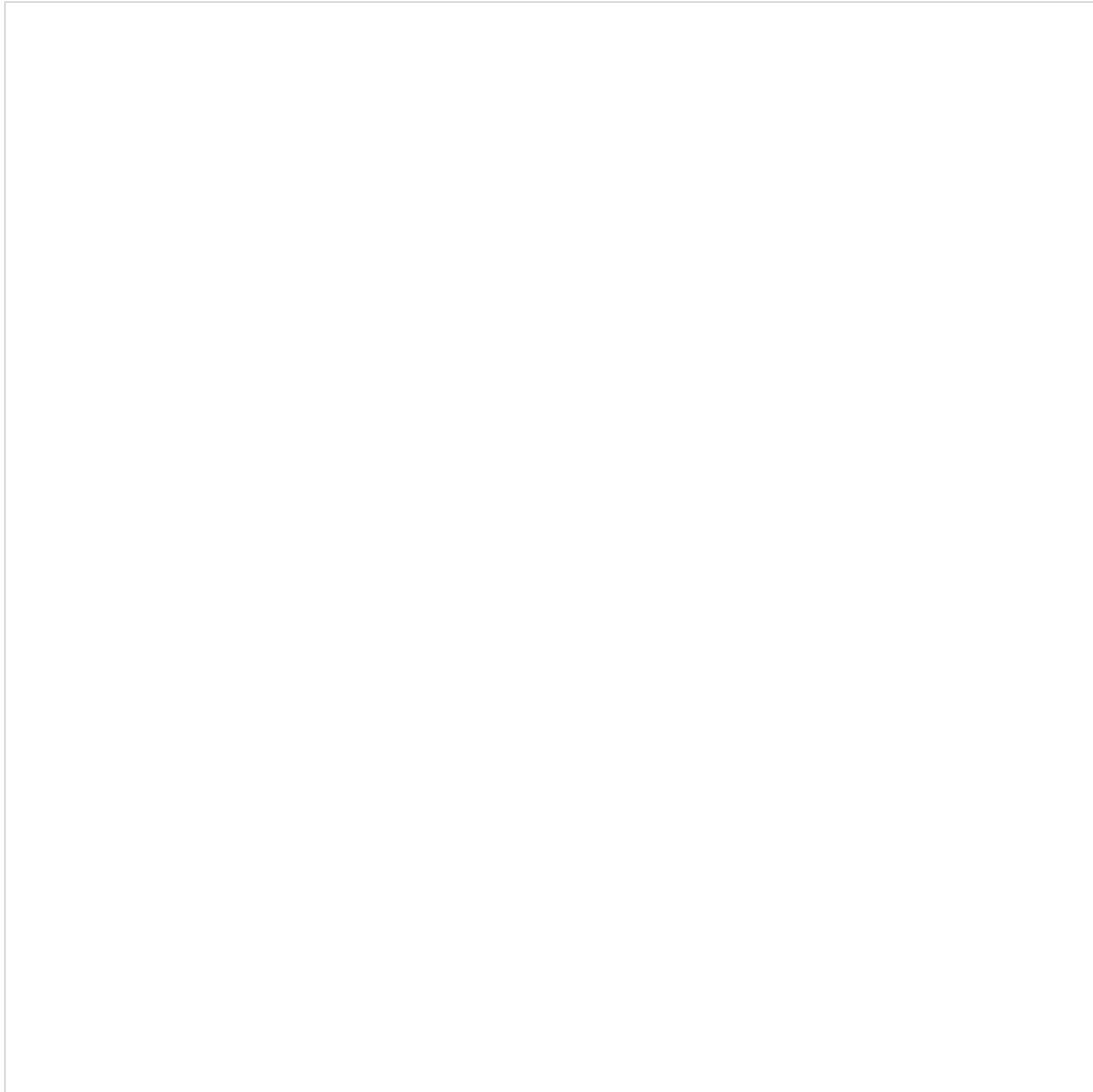
Did Doug White try to put the autopilot back on at one point?

Yes. In conducting our *On a Wing and a Prayer* fact-check, we learned that White did try to turn the plane's autopilot system back on. However, doing so started to steer the plane north toward the direction of Jackson, Mississippi, the destination that the deceased pilot, Joe Cabuk, had programmed into the system. -*NBC News*

Is the pilot portrayed by Jesse Metcalfe based on a real person?

Yes. As indicated in the *On a Wing and a Prayer* cast vs. real people section at the top of this article, Metcalfe's character, Kari Sorenson, is based on the real-life Danbury, Connecticut pilot and flight instructor who helped talk Doug White through landing the twin-engine plane. Like in the movie, Dan Favio, a developmental air traffic controller in Fort Myers, reached out to his friend Sorenson, who was certified in flying the King Air plane.

In order to keep things as simple as possible, Sorenson said that he told White only the most critical information that was needed to land the plane safely. "Doug learned to fly that plane in 20 minutes. I don't think you could have made the plane more complex or the pilot less experienced and have had a successful landing," Sorenson said at a 2010 ceremony in Orlando honoring White and those involved. It's worth noting that in real life, Sorenson did not talk to Doug White directly over the phone. He instead gave the instructions to his friend, air traffic controller Dan Favio, who relayed them to another controller, Brian Norton, who was the one talking to White (Sorenson never called the deceased pilot's cell phone to talk directly to White).



"These people saved my family from an almost certain fiery death," the real Doug White said of the air traffic controllers and the pilot, Sorenson, who talked him through landing the plane. -*CNN*

Had Kari Sorenson lost family members in a similar situation to the one that Doug White and his family found themselves in?

This is what Kari Sorenson (Jesse Metcalfe) tells Doug White (Dennis Quaid) in the movie as he's trying to help White get through the ordeal. Sorenson implies that he wasn't in a position to help his family and he "lost them." This is largely true. The real Kari Sorenson lost two family members in separate airplane accidents. His father, a pilot, was killed in a plane crash in White Plains, New York in 1981 when Sorenson was a teenager. Then in 1996, his stepfather was one of 230 people who perished when TWA Flight 800 exploded mid-air and crashed off Long Island. Despite these two tragedies, Sorenson still pursued a career as a pilot.

The movie dramatizes Sorenson's role a bit by having it be a cathartic experience for him to help Doug White and his family survive the ordeal. In the process, Jesse Metcalfe's character is able to exercise some of the demons he's been harboring ever since he lost loved ones in a similar situation. This idea that Sorenson has to come to terms with the loss in his own life and heal old wounds was invented by the screenwriter.

Did Doug White's daughter, Bailey, have an allergic reaction to peanuts during the flight?

No. In the movie, Bailey White (Abigail Rhyne) has an allergic reaction after she eats a chocolate bar, which her sister Maggie (Jessi Case) discovers was processed in a facility that uses peanuts. Maggie then has to desperately reach through a cargo net into the luggage area at the back of the plane to retrieve Bailey's EpiPen from her backpack. It might make for a dramatic moment in the film, but it never happened in real life.

Did Doug White fly into a storm?

No. The entire ordeal lasted about 50 minutes. The only significant turbulence that Doug White mentioned encountering in real life was when they took off and began to ascend through the clouds. At that point, their pilot, Joe Cabuk, was still alive and in control. In reality, Doug had blue and sunny skies during the ordeal. While landing at Fort Myers, there was "no wind." In one of the movie's biggest liberties with the truth, the family flies into a storm with thunder and lightning, which never happened in real life. They also never lost communication with air traffic control.



Did Doug White remain mostly calm throughout the ordeal?

Yes. One of the real-life air traffic controllers described Doug White as being "like the coolest cucumber" throughout the intense ordeal (*CNN*). White admitted there were moments when he got nervous, even if he didn't show it. "It was a focused fear," he said. "And I was in some kind of a zone that I can't explain" (*NBC News*). Dennis Quaid's character exhibits far more fear in the *On a Wing and a Prayer* movie than White did in real life.

As for his family, they weren't as calm. Upon learning the pilot was likely deceased, his wife Terri trembled, his 16-year-old daughter Bailey cried, and his eighteen-year-old daughter Maggie threw up (*NBC News*).

Are the two kids in the movie who listen to the situation unfold online based on real people?

No. In the movie, a young girl named Donna (Raina Grey), who wants to be a pilot like her father, listens to live air traffic controller transmissions online. She stumbles across Doug White (Dennis Quaid) communicating with a controller. Realizing the magnitude of the situation, she tells her friend Buggy (Trayce Malachi) to come over. They eventually ride their bikes to the airport and sneak in to watch the plane land. This part of the storyline, including these two characters, is entirely fictional.

Is Doug White's family religious?

Yes. The White family attended the Forsythe Church of Christ in Monroe, Louisiana. It's true they did a lot of praying during their perilous situation on the plane. Not long after the pilot died, Doug turned to his family and said, "You all start praying hard." -*NBC News*

"I mean, what could I do? Nothing, just sit there and pray and, you know, throw up," said the White's teenage daughter, Maggie. -*CNN*

It's no accident that the movie is called *On a Wing and a Prayer*. The Whites turned down previous offers to turn their story into a movie and finally decided to go with the filmmakers who were willing to create a faith-based film. "Faith in the life of a Christian is only increased, made stronger, when we go through trials and are delivered on the other side," said the real Doug White. "... When you are facing challenges and seeking God's help and then watch his deliverance, your faith is increased. Without tests and trials, there would be no need for faith." -*Harding.edu*

Terri White said that for a long time, she didn't understand the reason that God had saved them. "And then when they started talking about that movie, it clicked. I thought, that's got to be it, because it's a faith-based movie. And I'm hoping that it's going to open a lot of people's eyes and turn them around and make them Christians. That's my whole plan." -*The Christian Chronicle*

At the top is the family embracing in the movie, and at the bottom is the real-life White family, including (from left to right) Bailey, Doug, Terri, and Maggie. *Photos: Prime Video / White Family*

Did Doug White land the plane smoothly?

Yes. "It was a greaser, to be honest," he told *AOPA*. "It didn't jump or skip. It just set down and stopped in 3,500 feet or less. I asked which taxiway they wanted me to use." Unlike what's seen in the movie, there was no wind and White landed the plane on his first try. It was one of his best landings. Our *On a Wing and a Prayer* fact-check confirms that White didn't know how to stop the engines and shut the King Air 200 down after he landed. Fortunately, he received advice on how to do so over the radio.

How long were Doug White and his family in the air after their pilot died?

White and his family were in the air for approximately 30 minutes after their pilot fell unconscious from sudden cardiac death roughly 10 minutes after taking off. Their entire flight was not more than 50 minutes. The movie lengthens the flight a bit, in part by having White abort his first landing attempt due to a crosswind shifting the plane, which didn't happen in real life. He landed smoothly on his first try.

Did EMTs try to revive the pilot after Doug White safely landed the plane?

Yes. Numerous emergency vehicles, including police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks, were waiting on the ground as Doug White safely landed the plane on the 12,000-foot-long Runway 6 at Fort Myers International Airport shortly after 2 p.m. on

Easter Sunday 2009. Runway 6 at Fort Myers is unusually long because it had been used as a backup runway for the Space Shuttle in case it couldn't land at Cape Canaveral. In researching the *On a Wing and a Prayer* true story, we learned that EMTs spent 30 minutes trying to revive the pilot, Joe Cabuk, but to no avail. It was revealed later that Cabuk had died of sudden cardiac death, which is similar to a heart attack (both result in a loss of blood flow to the brain). -*NBC News*

Is it true that Doug White and his family had been given a less than ten percent chance of surviving?

Yes. At a ceremony in Orlando the following year, Doug White and his family reunited with the aviation experts who helped get them to the ground safely. The family was stunned to learn that they had been given a less than ten percent chance of making it through the ordeal alive. -*CNN*

WATCH Doug White ATC
Audio from King Air 200
After Pilot Dies

WATCH Doug White's Speech
and Reunion with the Air
Traffic Controllers

WATCH Doug White Interview
- His Story of How He Landed
the Plane After the Pilot
Died

WATCH On a Wing and a
Prayer Trailer

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