



Fireboat fleet proves an FDNY savior

Powerful boats fill vital role in protecting city's vast coastline

BY JONATHAN LEMIRE

IT IS THE EQUIVALENT of a fleet of fire engines floating on the water.

The 129-foot John D. McKean, otherwise known as FDNY Marine 1, can pump 14,000 gallons of water a minute — matching the output of 14 fire engines — as the 328-ton steel boat roars along the Hudson River.

The McKean is the centerpiece of a small squad of fireboats charged with patrolling the 562 miles of city coastline — and, as the weather gets warmer, their workload gets heavier.

"We're busier than we have ever been, and it's only going to get worse now that it's summer and people want to be near the water," said FDNY Chief of Special Operations William Siegel as he stood on the bridge of the McKean while giving the News a tour of the 53-year-old boat.

"We just have to make sure we get them when they've actually fallen in the water," Siegel said with a smile.

Founded in 1875, the FDNY's marine company currently operates year-round out of Staten Island's Homeport, the Brooklyn Navy Yard and a pier on Manhattan's West Side. There also are smaller firefighting craft based in Queens for the peak summer months,

Siegel said.

Marine 1, the busiest unit, actually consists of two boats: In addition to the McKean, which was designed to battle fires on ships and in waterfront buildings, the company last year received a smaller, faster boat that specializes in water rescues.

The diesel-engined McKean, which has a seven-person crew, sports a 48-foot-high tower and has six powerful water cannons. The smaller aluminum "fast boat" can reach speeds of 45 knots — approximately 50 mph — and more freely

navigate shallow waters.

The smaller boat has already made several rescues this year and has proven an invaluable addition to the fleet, said Lt. James Zodikowic.

"The boat gives us a lot more flexibility and, in all honesty, it just simply gets us to people in need faster," Zodikowic said. "Our divers that are now in the water much quicker, and every minute in the water — especially when it's cold — really counts."

Booming development along the West Side has increased the

workload for the McKean, but its finest hour remains the FDNY's darkest day. On Sept. 11, 2001, the boat raced to the burning World Trade Center and evacuated more than 200 survivors across the river to New Jersey.

After hydrants across lower Manhattan were rendered useless by the towers' collapse, the McKean was one of the few sources of water that could be pumped on the raging fire.

"The biggest advantage that day, of course, is that we sit on our water source," said Firefighter Tom Sullivan, gesturing at the harbor below the boat. "We didn't need a hydrant — and that allowed us to do our part."

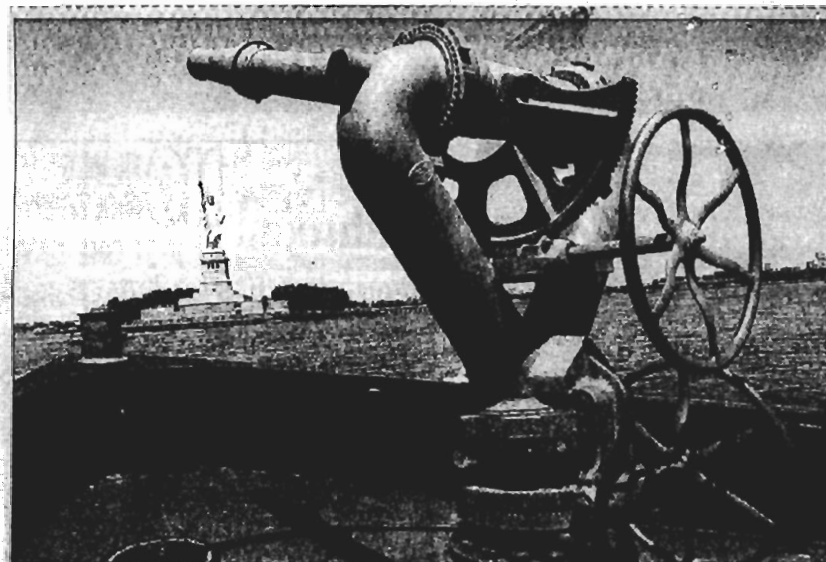
The face of the FDNY fleet will be changing by 2009, as the Fire Department will acquire two new state-of-the-art fireboats that will be faster than the McKean, have improved medical and hazmat facilities and be able to pump 50,000 gallons of water a minute. The boats carry a price tag of \$20 million each.

"These new [boats] will really help us handle everything from a rescue to a major incident," said Siegel. "They'll be things of beauty."

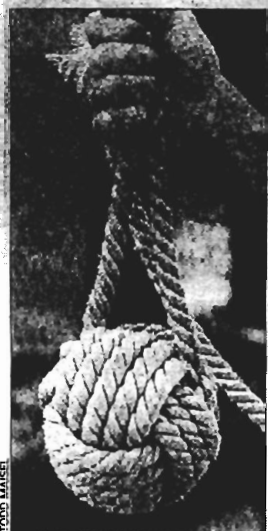
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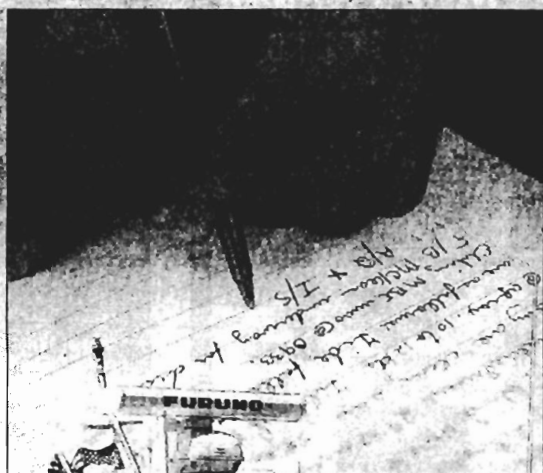
FDNY Lt. Thomas Piambino (top) aboard the McKean (closeup at L.), a fireboat that can pump 14,000 gallons of water a minute.



Lady Liberty keeps watch over the fireboat as the John D. McKean in turns watches over the 562 miles of city coastline, a workload that increases during the summer months.



Pilot Robert Spadaro writes in his logbook (above, r.) while aboard the McKean, the centerpiece of a small squad of FDNY fireboats. Above, a typical nautical knot found on the vessels.



Firefighter John Cashman jumps into the Hudson River during a mock rescue on board the FDNY Marine 1 (below), which can reach speeds of 45 knots and is able to navigate shallow waters easily. Proving to be an invaluable addition to the fleet, the boat already has made several rescues this year.

