

One Rescue Still Defines Upgrading of Water Unit

By LIZ ROBBINS

Capt. Richard Johnson and Firefighter Tom Sullivan were having coffee in the kitchen with six other members of their fire company, Marine 1, on that frigid Jan. 15 afternoon two years ago when the electronic alarm blared insistently through the firehouse on the pier.

Seconds later came the computerized call to get up the Hudson River. A small plane, at least according to initial reports, had crashed in the water.

Upon hearing it was a jetliner, Captain Johnson quickly did the math. He split his eight men onto two crafts: three on Marine 1 Alpha, a 27-foot, two-year-old fast-response boat, and five on the John D. McKean, a 55-year-old, 129-foot fireboat.

Firefighter Sullivan, Captain Johnson and Helmsman John Rizzo all jumped in Marine 1 Alpha, and as Firefighter Sullivan put on his gear, the boat raced 45 miles per hour north toward the Intrepid Museum.

Five minutes and 40 blocks later, Firefighter Sullivan was throwing life preservers off the small deck to shivering, shell-shocked passengers standing on the partly submerged left wing of US Airways Flight 1549.

Then he hoisted Beverly Waters, a 47-year-old businesswoman, onto the bow, the start of his boat's involvement in the epic rescue. The entire event, seen as a miracle at the time, turned into a defining moment for the New York Fire Department.

The speed of the first responders underscored the importance of a plan already developing in the department: upgrading its marine unit with faster, more diverse and more agile boats.

"You got to get there fast," said Firefighter Sullivan, 44, a 17-year veteran of the Fire Department who traces his experiences in the Hudson to when he scraped barnacles off boats as a teenager in Stony Point, N.Y.

"Whether you are going to do just recon or whether you get your hands in there to help them, you got to get there fast," he said.

"You get control of the situation, and call for help if needed. That was one of the reasons we were so effective that afternoon."

After some deft maneuvering by Helmsman Rizzo, passengers from the plane's left wing were on the boat — about 10 in the bow and another 10 or so in the stern and cabin — even though the craft is supposed to hold only 16. Some 20 minutes after arriving on the scene, the overloaded Marine 1 Alpha safely left them at a triage center at the Circle Line terminal. Emergency Medical Service recorded 20 people from Marine 1 Alpha being treated.

Firefighter Sullivan then infused a little humor into the proceedings.

"Welcome to New York," he told them.

"What do you mean?" one male passenger shot back. "We just left New York," the man added with a grin and an expletive thrown in for good measure.

The Fire Department, Coast Guard and Police Department marine operations, and most of all those on the jetliner, were fortunate that day. The harbor was swarming with ferries from NY Waterways ready for commuters when the plane crash-landed about 3:30 p.m. Commercial boats, Captain Johnson estimated, probably rescued about 85 percent of the 150 passengers and 5 crew members on the flight. Captain Johnson still marvels at the chain of events.

One of his men, Lt. Thomas Piambino, had reported early to work, giving him just enough people to launch two boats.

"Had the other officer not been there, I probably wouldn't have made that decision," Captain Johnson said on Thursday. "It would have been one boat or the other." He weighed the ability to handle mass casualties against the immediacy of the rescue. "I knew we needed speed," he said.

Seven people usually work the large fireboat, not five, he explained. Two more would have also helped the fast-response boat, Firefighter Sullivan said.

The John D. McKean, churning at 14 miles an hour, focused on se-



BILL CODY/F.D.N.Y.

The fireboat John D. McKean and the fast-response boat Marine 1 Alpha with US Airways Flight 1549 on Jan. 15, 2009. At right, Firefighter Tom Sullivan, in Fire Department coat, and, partly obscured at rear left, Beverly Waters, whom he rescued. "He pulled me up like it was nothing for him," she remembers.



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curing the tail of the sinking plane after the passengers had been rescued, and towing it to shore before it would sink in the middle of the channel.

"Both boats responding simultaneously, that's what we'd like to get to at some point," said Captain Johnson, 53, a 29-year veteran of the department. "That day, the big boat was needed greatly. The situation would have been totally changed at 9 o'clock at night after commuting hours, when you wouldn't have had the commercial vessels out there."

But it turned out Marine 1 Alpha was the perfect boat for the job. Helmsman Rizzo had to navigate against the plane's wing even while the current was flowing swiftly at nearly 3 m.p.h.

He had to shut down the engines when two passengers suddenly jumped off the wing, fearing that they would not be rescued in time, and started swimming toward the motors. Captain Johnson had to help Firefighter Sullivan lift passengers from the icy wing to the icy deck, with spilled oil floating in the water

below, all while listening to radio dispatches and sending his own.

"We're firefighters," Captain Johnson said quietly on Thursday at Marine 1 headquarters in Lower Manhattan. "We're used to working with what we've got."

But with the department's new fleet and an order to have backup boats at all times, staffing issues could become more of a concern.

The department's new crown jewel, the Three Forty Three, replaced the McKean on Sept. 11, and is docked near Marine 1 Alpha outside the fire company's temporary headquarters, at Pier 40. (A new marine firehouse is being built at Pier 53).

The Three Forty Three is a state-of-the-art, 140-foot craft, with 10 computer operating systems, the capacity to pump 50,000 gallons of water from its hoses and a cruising speed of 20 m.p.h., its engines as calm as a lullaby. It also has counterterrorism features like a chemical safe room.

Every morning, the seven men on the day shift take it out for a tour up the Hudson.

Aboard the Three Forty Three on Thursday, the Hudson sparkled in memory near where Capt. Chesley B. Sullenberger III splash-landed Flight 1549.

"I've had two memorable days in my career, and this," Firefighter Sullivan said of Jan. 15, 2009, "is No. 2 on the list." The most memorable was Sept. 11, 2001, when he was on the McKean, rescuing people fleeing from the World Trade Center towers. Rescuing the US Airways passengers, he said, "was a totally different story, heartwarming."

Beverly Waters, the first person he rescued, remembered

clutching her seat cushion while shivering in knee-deep water on the wing. She saw the hulking ferries nearby and could not, in her shock, figure out how she would climb into one.

"Then I see this little boat coming around," she recalled by telephone from her home in Charlotte, N.C., on Thursday, "and I said, 'I hope that's the one that's coming over here.'"

When the little boat approached, Firefighter Sullivan helped women and children first, then others without lifejackets.

"He pulled me up," Ms. Waters said, "like it was nothing for him."