

Signals

Mariners rush to rescue airline passengers after plane crash-lands on the Hudson River

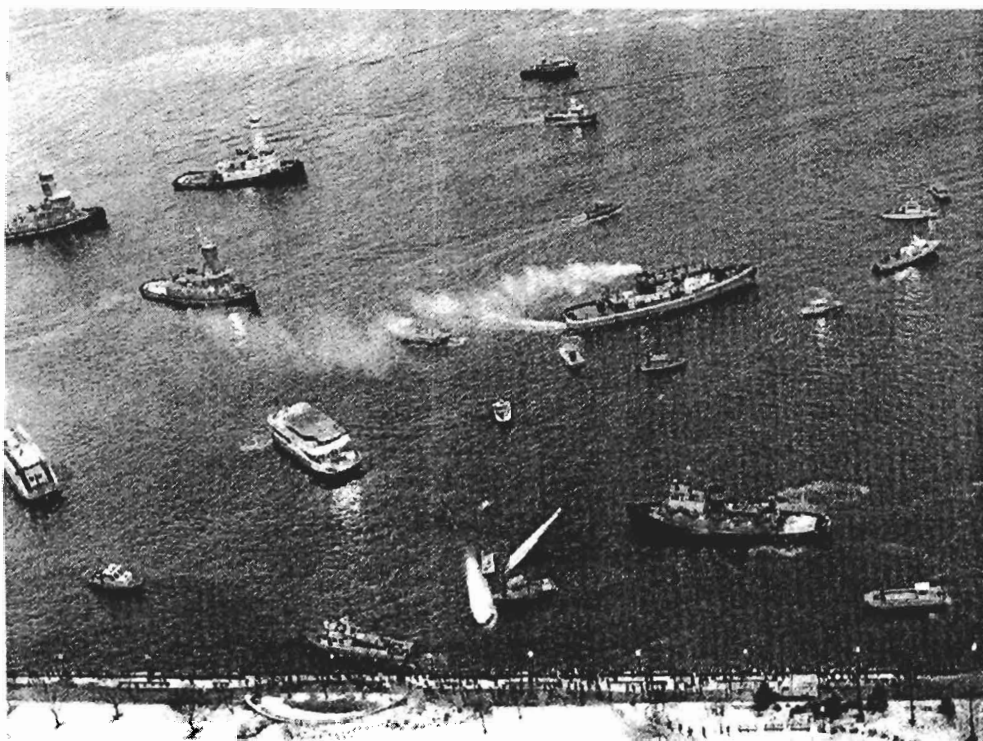
Knowledge of their vessels' equipment. A devotion to safety and rescue training. A little serendipity. A lot of courage and grace under pressure.

That combination prepared a contingent of professional mariners to respond to the US Airways Flight 1549 emergency in the Hudson River. Seven ferries and one fireboat rescued all 155 people who were

aboard the disabled airplane when it splash-landed on the river Jan. 15.

Among the first vessels on the scene was the ferry *Yogi Berra*. Two NY Waterway port captains, Vince Lucante and Michael Starr, jumped into the out-of-service vessel at Weehawken, N.J., as soon as they heard that a plane was in the water.

While Lucante navigated the 78-foot *Yogi Berra* alongside one of the



jetliner's life rafts, Starr was poised to pull the freezing-cold victims aboard. Starr readied the vessel's Jason's Cradle and immediately retrieved one man who had jumped or slipped into the current. An additional, rescue boats surround the plane that ditched in the Hudson soon after takeoff. Above, Capt. Michael Starr shows how he helped victims climb up the Jason's Cradle on the ferry *Yogi Berra*. Behind him is Capt. Vince Lucante who operated the ferry that day.

tional 23 people climbed 7 feet up the Jason's Cradle like a ladder.

"They were able to grab the line that's used for the davit and just pull themselves up," Starr said. "Once they got up to waist-high on the deck, you could just grab their belt and pull them into the boat."

Six other NY Waterway ferries and the New York City Fire Department fast boat *Marine 1 Alpha* transported all of the US Airways passengers and crew to shore safely. The amazing rescue was the finest hour for commercial mariners in recent memory. Several ferry officers and crew were interviewed on national television and hailed as heroes by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and New Jersey Gov. John Corzine.

The industry was delighted that professional mariners were in the spotlight for reasons other than vessel collisions, oil spills or diesel emissions. They even had the opportunity to teach television viewers about navigation challenges and safety precautions.

"You had to maneuver the boat with the current, because the plane is going downriver," Capt. Brittany Catanzaro, 20, said on CNN's "Larry King Live." "And you had to make sure there was no one next to you."

Catanzaro was the captain of the NY Waterway ferry *Governor Thomas H. Kean*, which rescued 26 people. The first vessel to arrive, the ferry *Thomas Jefferson*, picked up 56. *Athena*, normally a Block Island ferry but on loan to NY Waterway, carried 19 to safety. The ferries *Moiria Smith*, *Admiral Richard Bennis* and *George Washington* transported a total of 18.

Capt. Richard Johnson of *Marine 1 Alpha* said the river current was

Out-of-town tug assists NYC fireboat to secure sinking airliner

How do you tow a 100-ton jet airplane to a New York City dock before it sinks into the Hudson River?

Schedule a series of meetings involving all stakeholders? Call in government officials to conduct a full environmental assessment? Commission the industry's most modern heavy-lift vessels? *Fugheddaboutit!*

After everyone was rescued from US Airways Flight 1549, the U.S. Coast Guard needed to move fast to clear the sinking Airbus A320 from the river's shipping channel. That meant recruiting vessels that were already present and figuring out who could best send out a line pronto.

A pair of boats – each more than a half-century old – got the job done.

The only tugboat in the area was the 2,400-hp *Co*, which was headed downriver after delivering a deck barge at Peekskill, N.Y. Based in New Bedford, Mass, the boat is seldom in New York Harbor. Yet suddenly it was deputized by the Coast Guard to help.

"It wasn't routine, that's for sure," said *Co*'s master, Capt. Conrad Roy Jr. of Tucker-Roy Marine Towing & Salvage. "It was really impromptu. It was crazy."

At first, New York City fireboat *John D. McKean* attached three-quarter-inch lines to the plane's tail and passenger door. But those lines weren't robust enough and started breaking. The Coast Guard asked *Co* to

lend some proper towlines.

"They needed bigger gear," Roy said. "I gave them a 2 1/2-inch diameter deck line and shackle so they could shackle the eye around the tail. They were just going to use some bridles on the other door, but they couldn't get the door open from the outside."

The 3-knot current threatened to sweep the flotilla downriver past Manhattan, so the firefighters abandoned the idea of transferring both lines to their vessel's stern and adding extras. With just one line tied off the port bow and another off its stern, *McKean* began the delicate task of inching the partially submerged plane toward docks on the island's western shore.

"We were holding the plane on our hip," said Fire Department Capt. Richard Johnson. "The current was quickly bringing us past the southern tip of Manhattan, and we didn't want that, and the plane seemed to be sinking to some degree."

With the 129-foot fireboat struggling, the tug made up to *McKean*'s starboard side and began pushing gently.

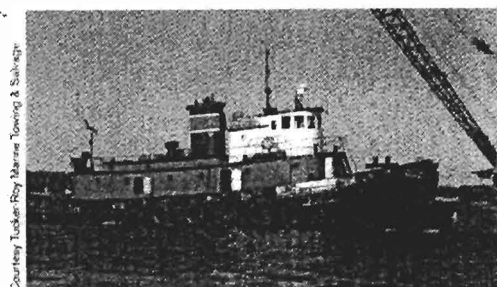
"I was jumping the tug in and out of gear to get them where they needed to be, and I couldn't go fast. Everyone was afraid of the lines breaking. We were just clutching 'slow ahead,'" Roy said. "When we got close to the dock, you realize how fast the current was running. We were flying toward the dock. I had to back down at half-reverse for a while."

Both captains said it was difficult to communicate with the other vessel because of

an abundance of radio chatter. The problem almost grounded the makeshift tow job to a terrible halt.

"Somehow we got spun around by the tug or by the current," Johnson said. "The (plane's) wing rose up and scraped the side of the pilothouse on the *McKean* and took out a rail and did some damage to one of our monitors."

As the configuration twist-



The 2,400-hp tug *Co* helped tow the sinking plane to the western shore of Manhattan. ed around, the fireboat fortunately began pointing straight at a dock with the plane still attached. Roy released his tug and allowed the fireboat to ease the plane to the pier.

"We worked with the current and just caught the southern tip of Battery Park. It wasn't pretty," Johnson said. "But we're obviously not towing vessels for commercial airlines!"

The 4,000-hp *McKean* is 55 years old. The single-screw *Co* is 58 years old.

Three days later, Weeks Marine Inc. and its 750-ton, 250-foot-long crane barge lifted the flooded airplane out of the water. Weeks' 11-man crew used divers to secure slings to the tail and both wings near the fuselage. The crane elevated the plane slowly, allowing water to drain out. After placing it on the barge, Weeks transported the plane to a Jersey City dock.

Dom Yanchunas

about 1 or 2 knots at the beginning of the rescue. It increased to perhaps 3 knots in a short time, however. Johnson's 27-foot quick-response SAFE Boat rescued 20 people. He and the ferry captains needed to approach the floating plane and life rafts cautiously.

"There was a lot of debris in the water, and we had to navigate very slowly because there were people in the water," Johnson said. "We put our bow right in the corner between the fuselage and the wing. We were able to apply our motors to keep our vessel in position."

The passengers scattered on that wing then walked back toward the fuselage to get on the fire department's boat. The moment was not

without difficulty, drama and danger, however.

"Our bow is 4 feet above the waterline, so the people had to make a little hop to get their chest on the bow, and myself and another firefighter pulled them in. We were able to grab their hand and then say, 'One, two, three, jump!'" Johnson said.

"But we had to cut the motors when the people started panicking a little," he said. "A couple of guys got impatient and they jumped off the wing into the water toward the back of our boat, so we had to shut off the prop as a precaution."

Marine 1 Alpha, with a three-man crew, has a total capacity of 16 occupants, so the fireboat sailed back to dock after taking 20 people

from that wing. Johnson said the ferries were in good position to evacuate people from the life rafts. One woman in the water had difficulty hanging onto a line from a ferry, and a police swimmer dropped from a helicopter and secured her, he said.

NY Waterway said its vessels rescued a total of 143 people. Adding the 20 on the fireboat, the total reported tally was 163, not 155, the actual number aboard the airplane. The discrepancy in the headcounts was never resolved.

The successful — and unprecedented — water rescue already has served as a lesson to the mariners involved. They may never be asked again to respond to a commercial

airplane in the water, but they can apply their experience that day to a future man-overboard emergency or a sinking vessel.

"It reinforces to the crew why we do drills and that you should do the drills and take them seriously," Starr said.

NY Waterway, based at Weehawken, constantly practices and evaluates its safety practices, including in-depth formal critiques of training sessions and daily informal conversations.

"The training is huge," Lucante said. "Besides the regulatory monthly drills that crews are required to do by the Coast Guard, we make sure our crews do it right. We keep an in-house record of the scenarios, and the captain will com-

ment on the scenarios. This is how everybody looks like a well-oiled machine."

Each NY Waterway vessel is equipped with a Jason's Cradle, said Capt. Alan Warren, the company's director of ferry operations. The hammock-like cradle allows crew to retrieve a person from the water from the main deck without placing additional people overboard.

"We spend a lot of money — \$6,000 a boat — for that cradle, not because it's required, but because it's the safest way to get someone out of the water," Warren said. "To have a second person go down that ladder, you might end up having two people in the water."

Robert Matticola, NY Water-

way's safety coordinator, prepared a one-page critique of the US Airways rescue. If they face a future mass-casualty incident, crews are instructed to do a quick "Scene Safety Assessment," radio the Vessel Traffic Service, be aware of the position of victims and other vessels and keep a survivor count. Finally, Matticola asked them to debrief promptly as to any crew injuries, damage to vessels or missing equipment.

"Do no further harm," is the critique's credo that was certainly followed on Jan. 15.

"We try to be perfect," Warren said. "We realize that we cannot be perfect, but on that day, we were perfect."

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