

Ferry Good Deeds

NY Waterway's Record of Rescues Underscores Riverine Revival



NY Waterway ferries assisted in the Miracle on the Hudson rescue, ten years ago this month.

Last week marked the tenth anniversary of the Miracle on the Hudson -- the dramatic landing of a disabled passenger jet in the frigid waters between Midtown Manhattan and Weehawken, New Jersey. But sometimes overlooked in the nostalgic reverie about heroic aeronautics by US Airways pilot Chesley Sullenberger was the role played by an armada of rescue boats that plucked more than 150 passengers and crew from the river, where life expectancy amid January temperatures would be measured in minutes, rather than the hours it might have taken to assemble and dispatch from the Police and Fire departments a fleet of vessels large enough to aid so many victims. First among the ad hoc flotilla that converged on the scene within seconds of the plane touching the water were ferries operated by NY Waterway, which plies multiple routes between New Jersey and Manhattan each day.

In this context, NY Waterway has become an unofficial emergency responder of first resort, simply because it has a fleet of large, fast boats, piloted by seasoned crew, which are able to arrive at the scene of an emergency on the water almost immediately upon receiving a call for help.

Such was the case a few days before the Christmas holidays, on December 19, when a distraught woman climbed onto the seawall next to the Battery Park City Ferry Terminal (near Vesey Street and the Esplanade) shortly after 9:30 pm, and began screaming. The woman (whose name has not been released) was spotted by the crew of the NY Waterway ferry, as it approached the dock.



NY Waterway Captain Ken Recine and Deckhand Travis Brumfield who intervened to prevent a suicide on the Esplanade on December 19.

Captain Ken Recine pulled the *York* up to the seawall, and shone a spotlight on the woman. He also radioed to alert NY Waterway ticket agent Anwar Khalifa (who was inside the terminal), and called for help from New York Police Department's Harbor Unit.

While Mr. Khalifa dashed to the woman's side, and put his arm around her to prevent her from jumping into the Hudson, Captain Recine and his crew swept the surface of the river with searchlights, to confirm that she was not trying to alert them to someone else having fallen into the water. The Captain then docked, while Deckhand Travis Brumfield ran to help Mr. Khalifa comfort the woman until police arrived. Officers from the Harbor Unit later confirmed to Captain Recine that the woman had

admitted to them being despondent over a relationship that had recently ended, and that she was planning to commit suicide.

A similar scene played out 13 months earlier, at the same location, when Captain Dave Dort, piloting the ferry *Thomas Kean*, rescued a man who had attempted to end his life by jumping into the river. Directed by Captain Dort, Deckhands Gregorio Pages and Pietro Romano lowered a device known as a Jason's Cradle (a roll-up ladder that is anchored to the boat's deck and then dropped into the water) and pulled an emotionally disturbed cab driver from the Hudson. The 2017 rescue was Captain Dort's second save in two years: In July 2016, he and Mr. Pages pulled another man from the river near the West 39th Street terminal.

In the 32 years during which NY Waterway has been operating, its crews have rescued almost 300 people from the waters of New York Harbor. They also helped to evacuate more than 150,000 people from Lower Manhattan in the hours after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That day marked the second time that NY Waterway had come to the aid of Lower Manhattan in the wake of a terrorist attack. After the 1993 World Trade Center bombing knocked out PATH service, ferries temporarily became the only way to cross between Downtown and New Jersey.

The company has also helped to make a difference in less dangerous, but still-urgent circumstances. During the 2003 blackout (which rendered both PATH and NJ Transit trains inoperable), the NY Waterway's fleet actually ferried more people than it had on September 11, 2001 -- carrying more than 160,000 commuters back to New Jersey in a single day. And as far back as 1990, when a Nor'easter storm flooded the PATH tubes beneath the Hudson, NY Waterway offered a temporary stopgap that kept the New Jersey suburbs connected to the City center.

In recent years, NY Waterway has also hit its stride financially. After starting out with a single boat in 1986, the company grew slowly for decades. It briefly flourished for several months after the World Trade Center attacks, when the PATH system was out of commission. But once rail service beneath the Hudson was restored, ridership and revenue for the ferry network plummeted. This forced the company to sell many of its routes and part of its fleet to a competitor, who continued to operate under the NY Waterway brand.

Years of slow rebuilding, however, enabled founder Arthur Imperatore to reacquire these routes and vessels in December, 2016, timing that coincided with the company's

30th anniversary. Shortly afterward, NY Waterway began expanding, by commissioning new boats. The latest of these will join the company's fleet in the first half of this year, and three more are now under construction. NY Waterway's resurgence has been buoyed, in large measure, by the construction of tens of thousands of units of new housing along the Hudson River waterfront in the last ten years, in communities directly across the water from Manhattan.

This success is remarkable, given that NY Waterway benefits from almost most none of the lavish government support that comparable ferry operations enjoy. The NYC Ferry network launched by the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio, for example is slated to benefit from up to \$300 million in subsidies over the next five years, which translates into a premium of more than \$6.60 for each trip, nominally priced at \$2.75.

There have been some limited exceptions to this status quo: New Jersey has agreed to forgo sales tax on tickets for NY Waterway ferries, and the company received compensation during periods when ferries were used to replace PATH service, such as the months following September 11, 2001. (NY Waterway is currently taking part in another such temporary arrangement, as the Port Authority shuts down PATH service between Lower Manhattan and Jersey City on weekends for the next two years, and uses ferries to make up for the outage.)

But there is no permanent, direct government support for NY Waterway of the kind that the NYC Ferry program (operated by a rival company, Hornblower) enjoys. This disparity has broad policy implications for the future of Lower Manhattan. According to the Regional Plan Association, trans-Hudson commuter volume will grow by 26 percent (or roughly 100,000 additional trips per day) between now and 2040. With the PATH and NJ Transit rail systems already operating in excess of their design capacity, while the Port Authority bus network long ago outgrew its hub on the west side of Midtown, there is no clear option for accommodating this additional burden, other than ferries.

The PATH and NJ Transit systems (along with the Port Authority bus network) each receive more than \$100 million per year in direct government subsidies. On the other end of the spectrum, at least one private-sector entity, Citigroup, have taken steps to solve the worsening commuter crush by running proprietary ferries to Lower Manhattan, open exclusively to its own employees. Between these poles, NY Waterway continues to operate as a public amenity, entirely dependent on its customers to cover expenses.

But this model appears to have hit its stride. NY Waterway is now the biggest privately owned ferry network in the nation, operating a fleet of 34 vessels (with

docks served by an additional 80 buses), and carrying more than 30,000 passengers across the Hudson each day.

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