

# A Sea of Heroes

*When an unthinkable act of terror brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001, the city's maritime community became a rescue squad, ferrying frightened and wounded people off the island and out of harm's way.*

BY BETSY FRAWLEY HAGGERTY

**I**t was a normal, beautiful Tuesday morning," says Pete Johansen, thinking back to the early hours of September 11. Johansen, who is senior director of marine operations for New York Waterway, was headed to the city for a meeting via his company's 8:40 a.m. ferry from Weehawken, New Jersey to Wall Street. By then, the private ferry company had already transported 11,000 of the 17,000 people who commute by water from New Jersey to Manhattan on most mornings.

Like many of his fellow passengers, Johansen was enjoying the sunshine and the view as the boat made its way south on the Hudson River. "For some reason, I looked up," he recalls, "as the first plane hit the World Trade Center. We were just north of the towers. People cried out and covered their eyes in disbelief. I immediately called my office to alert people there'd been a terrible accident and the World Trade Center was on fire. I wanted us to be prepared to help if necessary."

The boat he was riding on continued to Wall Street, and passengers, though stunned by what they had seen, disembarked and headed to their offices. Johansen stayed aboard and directed the captain to go to the ferry landing at the World Financial Center, just a few hundred yards north and west of the burning tower. As they approached, the second plane hit. "Everyone knew then that it wasn't an accident," Johansen says solemnly.

New York Waterway immediately began taking people back to New Jersey—at no charge. One by one, a dozen or so of the company's 400-passenger boats came into the dock and left fully loaded. "We probably evacuated about 5,000 people in a half

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SPIRIT CRUISES & THE U.S. COAST GUARD

hour," Johansen estimates. Then the ferry terminal itself had to be abandoned when the World Trade Center's south tower collapsed at about 9:59 a.m., spewing thick smoke and heavy rubble throughout the area. People fleeing the site headed north and south along the sea wall. So did the ferries and

scores of other rescue boats.

Boats of all types steamed en masse toward the tip of Manhattan as the Coast Guard issued a call for vessels to help evacuate people. "It must have looked like the invasion of Normandy," says Linda O'Leary, vice president of American Waterways Operators, a tugboat industry trade association. Fifty or so tugboats barreled in from their berths in Staten Island, New Jersey and Brooklyn; police boats, Coast Guard vessels, small workboats, dinner cruise boats and private craft also joined the effort. The 70-year-old retired fireboat *John J. Harvey*, which is owned by a group of historic ship enthusiasts, was among them.

"It was an amazing scene," says Huntley Gill, one of the *Harvey's* owners. "It was what I would imagine the river looked like in the 1940s with tugs covering every bit of shoreline. We saw all these people clambering to get aboard the boats, climbing over fences, leaving their high heels and briefcases behind." The *Harvey* tied up to some trees near the sea wall at Battery Park City and began loading people. "The sad thing was," says Gill, "is that there wasn't a single cleat, a single opening in the fence or a single ladder along the waterfront."

Boat crews had to improvise. Some boats went bow first into the sea wall; others pulled alongside as deckhands jury-rigged gangways. It wasn't easy for anyone, says O'Leary, who helped people

Right: A luxury yacht, turned service vessel, cruises past the Statue of Liberty, carrying a sign telling displaced Lower Manhattan residents how to get assistance.

Below, left: A Coast Guard vessel patrols New York Harbor as smoke pours out of the World Trade Center rubble.

Below, right: Responding to tightened security requirements, an armed federal agent rides in the wheelhouse of a New York Waterway commuter ferry.

Opposite page: Yachts, tugboats and ferries approach the Lower Manhattan sea wall to begin evacuating refugees from the World Trade Center attack.



Betsy Frawley Haggerty



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board some of the tugboats. “You had all these very stunned people, many who’d never been aboard any kind of boat in their lives, trying to get on boats that were never intended to carry passengers. The crews were terrific,” she continues. “One group handed out little mint lifesavers to calm people; a pair of deckhands lifted a pregnant woman aboard another boat and found a chair for her to sit in. There were heart-wrenching scenes everywhere.”

“One fellow I helped,” says Darren Vigilant, who ferried several boatloads of people to New Jersey in his 23-foot Chris Craft, “was completely white—from soot and from shock. He said he’d walked down from the 80th floor and the building collapsed 20 seconds after he got out. He was barely able to speak.”

For a time the only way out of Manhattan was by water—all bridges, tunnels, subways and trains were shut down—“and droves of people, I mean thousands of people were walking north,” says Steve Schwartz, regional director of Spirit Cruises, a dinner boat company that operates out of the Chelsea Piers sports and entertainment complex at 23rd Street and the Hudson River.

“When I saw all those people,” Schwartz continues, “I made a decision to put our three Spirit cruise boats into service as ferries. Between 12:30 and 6 p.m., we made 18 trips and carried 8,000 people across the river to New Jersey—all free of charge.”

Other companies did the same. *Horizon Princess*, a 600-passenger charter boat, and three luxury dinner boats from VIP cruises, transported about 4,000 people from Pier 63 Maritime, just north of 23rd Street. New York Waterway continued to run full-capacity ferries from several locations, including its West 38th Street terminal, and Circle Line tour boats at West 42nd Street pitched in as well. “I think anything that floated was out there helping,” New York Waterway’s Johansen says. By day’s end, according to the U.S. Coast Guard, about one million people had been evacuated from Manhattan by boat.

As the sea lift concluded, many in the maritime community thought their involvement in the rescue effort had come to an end. “As it turns out,” says Steve Schwartz of Spirit Cruises, “that was only Chapter One.”



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Manhattan artist Tomas Cavallero spent four days at Ground Zero on the John J. Harvey.



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A pair of New Jersey police officers rides the ferry home after assisting rescue efforts.



Huntley Gill

A crew noses a rescue boat into the sea wall.



**F**or the crew of the *John J. Harvey*, Chapter Two began soon after they picked up their first load of passengers. “A fire department boat radioed as we were heading out and asked if we were able to pump water,” says Tim Ivory, the boat’s chief engineer. “I gave them a thumbs up, and they asked us to come back and help.”

With her riveted steel hull and five engines, the 130-foot *Harvey* was the most powerful of the New York City Fire Department’s boats when she was launched in 1931. She was the first with internal combustion engines and was able to pump 18,000 gallons per minute—the equivalent of five fire trucks. In active service until 1995, she was declared surplus and auctioned—for scrap—in 1999. But the historic ship buffs who put in the winning bid had other ideas and restored her to full operating condition within a matter of months. In June 2000, she was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the owners—there are 12 of them—continued their restoration efforts.

“We used to wonder if the fire department would call us up if there was ever a big pier fire,” says Ivory. “It was sort of a fanta-

sy, so we asked a chief who was a friend of the boat. ‘It will never happen,’ he said. ‘A: You’ve got liability problems; B: You’ve got union problems. Don’t even think about it.’” That conversation, Ivory recalls, took place just a week before the *Harvey* was pressed into service.

Still, when the fire department called, the all-volunteer crew was ready. They tied up to the sea wall near two active New York City fireboats and set about attaching fire hoses to valves that hadn’t been opened in years. “We had to use a sledgehammer on some of them,” says crewmember Tomas Cavallero. The *Harvey* stayed on site, working as a large floating fire hydrant, from Tuesday morning until Friday night when water pressure was restored to Lower Manhattan. Until then, the three fireboats provided the only water available at the site.

“No one in their wildest dreams ever imagined something like this,” Ivory says as he thinks back on his four days aboard the fireboat at Ground Zero. “We wanted to be put into service, but not like this. When we give tours we tell people that the *Harvey*’s



Hamley Gill

A John J. Harvey crew member uses a ladder to disembark.



Ron Kraut

The historic fireboat John J. Harvey on station near the World Trade Center site.



Betsy Frawley Haggerty

Staff from Spirit Cruises rides Chelsea Screamer to carry food to rescue workers.

Right: Chelsea Screamer, loaded with food and staff, departs from the Spirit Cruises West 23rd Street home base.

Below, left: The remnants of the World Trade Center make an eerie sculpture.

Below, right: A firefighter gets ready to go back on station.

Opposite page: Flags, flowers and pictures of missing persons adorn a fence beside the harbor in Staten Island.



Betsy Frawley Haggerty



Huntley Gill



U.S. Coast Guard

most famous moment was fighting the fire on the ocean liner *Normandie* when she burned at her dock during World War II; now it will be September 11. Being there gave us a real sense of belonging, but it was bittersweet. It is nice that the boat was capable, and nice the fire department gave it a chance, but I am sorry it had to be this.”

At Spirit Cruises, Chapter Two began when a group of prominent New York restaurateurs approached the cruise line, and said they would provide hot food for the rescue workers if Spirit, which has large food preparation and refrigeration facilities on its boats, would provide a vessel and the staff to serve food. Spirit said yes and docked its largest boat—*Spirit of New York*—near the Trade Center site and began serving free, hot food to firefighters, medical personnel, construction workers and others on site. The program, dubbed “Chefs of Spirit,” was serving about 20,000 portions every day and was still going strong as of October 1, according to Spirit’s Steve Schwartz. “The boat has been a refuge,” says Schwartz. “One morning I

came down and found 100 rescue workers sleeping on the top deck during their break.”

*Chelsea Screamer*, a bright yellow 50-foot, 54-passenger speed boat, became *Spirit of New York’s* tender, bringing meals and staff back and forth several times a day. “This boat is called the *Screamer* because it normally gives fast tours of New York Harbor and kicks up a spray of cold water that makes kids scream,” says owner Sean Kennedy. “But this week, we are running slow, helping out anyway we can.”

In the first hours of the disaster, *Screamer* evacuated people from Lower Manhattan, and later ferried paratroopers in. Kennedy, who grew up in Biloxi, Mississippi, remembers helping out as a child when hurricane *Camille* devastated the Gulf Coast in 1969. “In some ways,” he says, “this seems like the aftermath of a hurricane, but it’s different. A hurricane is an act of nature, and people can accept that, but there is nothing natural about what happened here, so people are a lot more disturbed by it. The people here are not just working on a rescue, they are trying to find evidence of terrorists.”



Betsy Frawley Haggerty

Captain Sean Kennedy, owner of Chelsea Screamer, lent his boat to the rescue effort.



Huntley Gill

Tugboats crowd the sea wall in Lower Manhattan.



Spirit Cruises

Rescue workers enjoy a break and a hot meal aboard Spirit of New York.



In the weeks following September 11, New York Harbor has begun to limp back to life, although the atmosphere is distinctly military. Coast Guard boats patrol in Boston Whalers armed with large machine guns; cutters and other vessels stand guard at entry points. Both pleasure and commercial boats have significant operating restrictions. The fear, of course, is a ship explosion that might paralyze the entire harbor. "These waters served us well during this disaster," says tug representative Linda O'Leary, who also sits on the New York Harbor Operations Board, "and we can't afford to lose them." In the first 24 hours after the attack, 90 threats to waterfront structures were made, O'Leary notes, asking, "Which ones do you ignore?" The restrictions are difficult for everyone, she acknowledges, but argues they are a small price to pay for security.

Many boaters are making the best of a difficult situation. A few recreational boats have ventured out on the weekends. New York Waterway is again operating its commuter ferry service—now with uniformed security personnel aboard. Tour

boats like Circle Line and even Spirit Cruises have begun limited operations.

But the toll is high, both financially and emotionally: When commercial operators ask, will they be able to resume full schedules? And who will reimburse them for the expenses and business losses engendered by the attacks? When will it be OK to go fishing again or race a sailboat? And how will mariners who witnessed the tragedy and its aftermath ever get over it? Esly Pineda, a deckhand who has worked for New York Waterway for 12 years, is struggling with that question. Smiling as he greets ferry passengers the week after the attack, he stands quietly on deck as the boat approaches Lower Manhattan, trying to come to grips with his own feelings and the gaping hole in the skyline. "When that first tower fell," he says, "I was looking right at it. I will never forget the sound, like 100 helicopters in my ear. I still keep hearing it. I can't sleep at night. But I keep coming to work because that's what I am supposed to do." ■



Spirit Cruises

Spirit of New York became a rescue-workers' canteen, providing 20,000 portions a day.



Betsy Frawley Haggerty

Darren Vigilant used his 23-foot Chris Craft to carry boatloads of people to New Jersey.



U.S. Coast Guard

An exhausted rescue worker naps near the disaster site.