

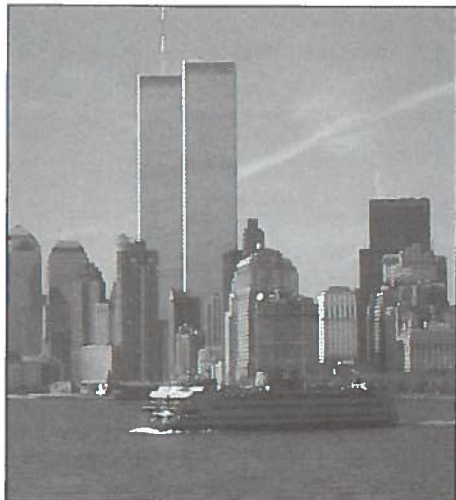
# MEBA Members Shine Through



**O**n that black day, iron-willed members defied the danger and sailed into a war zone determined to alleviate the suffering of a city under siege. For the MEBA members plying the waters around New York Harbor, the response was immediate when two airliners, guided by terrorists, tore into the World Trade Center on September 11.

## Staten Island Ferries

MEBA member Capt. Jimmy Parese was closing in on Manhattan Island on his 8:45 a.m. run with a boatload of passengers eyeing the curious smoke emanating from the North Tower of the World Trade Center. As the *SAMUEL I. NEWHOUSE* neared Governor's Island and began its final approach into lower Manhattan, Parese and Asst. Captain Phil Carroll gaped in horror from the pilot-house as terrorists continued their insidious assault on Tower 2 with a second strike. Mass confusion and shock became



Taken on the morning of Sept. 11, before the chaos.

the order of the day but Capt. Parese made a quick decision as the enveloping horror unfolded. Realizing that it would be a danger to dispatch his passengers onto a battleground, he made the call to deliver the ferry back to the safe haven of Staten Island. "It was absolutely the right call," reflected Reserve Capt. Jim Capelonga. Capt. Parese recounted that they "proceeded past the slips and through the Buttermilk Channel, and then through the Bay Ridge Anchorage. I was trying to avoid being out in the open for too long, and possibly becoming a target." The crew was able to keep 3,500 frantic passengers calm until they could safely offload them in St. George. Soon after, the *NEWHOUSE* made a beeline back to Manhattan to assist in the mass exodus. "The crew all knew what we were returning to, yet they all understood the importance to return," said Capt. Parese. The *NEWHOUSE* was the first boat to pull into the slip on the Whitehall side and they were met by thousands of hysterical New Yorkers desperate to flee the chaos. As they filled the boat to capacity, the first Tower came down and "a cloud of smoke, dust and ash blanketed the area, reducing visibility to zero." Panicked passengers instinctively lunged for the lifejackets under their seats preparing for a further calamity. The crew had to rely on radar to make their escape through the blinding smoke and debris. Deckhands attempted to restore calm to a full load of 6,000 filthy and frenzied passengers, but the onboard bedlam multiplied when a false report filtered in that a passenger had plunged into the water. The ash-caked vessel slowed to a halt as deckhands Richie Campanella and Mark Herman, through burning eyes, peeled the water searching for the non-existent man. Convinced that the boat was on fire and ready to sink, petrified passengers scrambled for the remainder of the life jackets...

Crewmembers aboard the three other Staten Island Ferries operating that day were also cast into a similar situation.

Aboard the *JOHN F. KENNEDY, GOV. HERBERT H. LEHMAN* and the *AMERICAN LEGION*, crews were brought face to face with the enormity of the circumstances. On the *LEGION*, Capt. Daniel Cruz was on his approach to Manhattan as the billowing smoke and debris obliterated all visibility and cloaked the slip in a wall of darkness. When it seemed impossible that the ferry could safely dock, a gust of wind blew in, temporarily

clearing the path. "We're gonna go in," the Captain announced as the crew prepared to come to the aid of thousands of desperate citizens clamoring to get off the island. Mate Billy Vogel recollected that the 3,000 passengers that piled onto the vessel were mummified in a layer of soot shuffling around



Capt. José Casais and A/C Jim Capelonga.

zombie-like - their trauma palpable. When they marched off the ferry in Staten Island, Billy had to prevent an orange sea of dazed passengers from mindlessly walking off with the lifejackets.

The Coast Guard immediately dropped their "12-hour rule" allowing NYC workers to toil well into the night and continue the incredible outburst of compassion on behalf of the stricken city. Many of the ferry members worked on fumes for over 18 hours seeking somehow to soothe the misery. Another member worked a 35-hour shift. "Everyone wants to help, but if you work 'em all there'll be no one to go the next day," Billy noted. In their off hours, many fleet members devoted their time to comb through the ruins of the Trade Center, in the flickering hope that survivors could be unearthed.

Over on the *KENNEDY*, Capt. Frank Peters and Asst. Capt. Eddie Squire were loading passengers from Manhattan as the second plane hit. Later on in the day, medical personnel set up an improvised shower aboard the boat and nurses attended to various afflictions. Eyewash was the primary service in demand.

# Dark Days In New York City



Capt. Bill McLane, Mate Wayne Speidel and A/C Mike Gansas.



1st A/E Steve Starr aboard the USNS COMFORT. (Photo courtesy of Bridget Morris-MSA.)

Capt. José Casais pointed out that soon enough the ferries were transporting fire equipment, emergency vehicles and armored trucks aboard, among other gear. On the Staten Island side, the supply depot that had been set up was indicative of an incredible and rapid organizing effort. Within three hours of the disaster they had coffee waiting for the workers and a basis for operations that would last for weeks.

Originally the ferries were slated for morgue detail but when it became apparent that there were no bodies, the fleet continued to support emergency teams at Ground Zero until the City was reopened by Mayor Rudy Giuliani the following week and access finally began loosening up. The ferries, which previously had carried personal vehicles in and out of Manhattan Island for the general populace, have since discontinued that service because of security concerns.

## Military Sealift Command – USNS COMFORT

On September 11, the Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS COMFORT, crewed by civilian mariners including MEBA members, lay at her berth in Baltimore, Maryland. First Assistant Engineer Steve Starr and an elite team aboard the floating first aid kit determined that they would begin readying the highly decorated ship for activation in case they were given the word. Starr began to fire up ship systems that had been relying on shoreside connections during their reduced operating status. His six-man team began prepping the boilers and readying the engine room to get underway. "The ship was scheduled to perform dock trials the following week," Starr pointed out, "so I began preparing the ship to run on her own steam, figuring that even if we weren't activated, I had just gotten a headstart on the following week." That afternoon, the vessel received the call from MSC brass that the COMFORT would be activated and deployed to New York on a mission of mercy. Starr had given the ship a three-hour headstart. The Military Sealift Command used the time needed to fire up the plant and to fill the additional billets required for a sea voyage. MSC got Chief Engineer Don Skurka to cut his vacation short and report to the ship to head up the engine department. The COMFORT is in ROS-5, meaning that she is prepared to sail within 5 days. However, within 21 hours after receiving her activation orders, the 14-year old vessel that had performed so admirably during the Persian Gulf War, was ready to go. "The seven-man, reduced operating status crew's focus on ship readiness was the sole reason we could get underway in less than 24 hours," Chief Skurka attested. "Steve Starr deserves all the credit."

Docked at Earle, New Jersey two days later to pick up additional supplies, the mission of the COMFORT was altered. Instead of serving as a hospital ship, it was converted into a hospitality ship to provide floating respite for emergency relief workers. At 8:30 p.m. on Friday the 14th, COMFORT pulled into its temporary new address, at Manhattan's Pier 92 near West 52nd Street. By Saturday, arrangements were being finalized to accommodate the swarms of rescue and relief workers who needed a breather

from the grueling labor being performed at the disaster scene. Chief Skurka noted that, "by Saturday morning, the majority of the engineering department had been awake for about five days. But the cause was worth it."

The size of three football fields, the COMFORT's 1,000 beds normally assigned to the infirm, were reserved for grateful Ground Zero heroes who needed a well-deserved rest. For the 16 days the ship received "guests," until the soup



Mate Billy Vogel aboard the KENNEDY.

kitchen was closed on the 30th of September, the COMFORT served 17,000 meals feeding over 6,650 guests. Guests included New York City police and firefighters, National Guardsmen, the N.Y. State Militia and volunteer relief workers. In addition, 4,400 pounds of laundry were cleaned, 1,359 medical massages were given by volunteer staff, and 500 "mental health consultations" were conducted. On the morning of the ship's departure, Oct. 1st, a message from Mayor Giuliani was piped aboard giving thanks to 335 military personnel and 54 civilian mariners - the gracious hosts of the COMFORT.

## Army Corps of Engineers Vessels

The Marine Division of the Army Corps was ready to move when the call came to rush to the relief of the devastated city. Crewmembers representing the New York, Wilmington and Philadelphia Districts were in town taking a safety course around the corner from the Trade Center when the first plane hit. It wasn't long before they flocked down to the fleet of Corps vessels to begin ironing out logistical nightmares. "All the personnel





Army Corps ships responding to the disaster.

there volunteered to help automatically," noted Joe Meyers from the New York District who was pulled away from the classroom. "Without a second thought, they placed themselves on duty." Initially, the Corps manned the Motor Vessels *HATTON*, *HUDSON*, *HAYWARD*, *GELBERMAN* and *DRIFTMASTER*, as well as the *M/V HOCKING* and *NEW YORK SURVEY BOAT #1*. They immediately deployed their boats as evacuation vessels. Fast-acting crews whisked thousands of stunned survivors across the water to Caven's Point, NJ, where relief stations were quickly set up. Corps personnel couldn't help but notice the glazed-over disposition of their passengers as they were ferried to safety. A three-pronged makeshift marina at Caven's Point divided offloading passengers into the unharmed, the injured and those in dire shape. On the return trips, the Army Corps vessels shuttled firefighters and emergency personnel to the scene of the disaster. They also delivered critical supplies to keep fireboats and fire trucks operational. Resupplying land-based personnel and equipment proved challenging because of the poor access created by the ongoing pandemonium and destruction. The New York District's Josh Daskalakis pointed out, "They were passing five-gallon cans by hand. There was no other way to access the site." Whatever was required was floated over. Supplies included drinking water, antifreeze, oil and equipment as large as forklifts.

The *HOCKING* became the command vessel and transported Congressmen, staff and Army Corps officials, including Chief of Engineers Lt. Gen. Robert Flowers, to survey the damage. The initial response vessels were later joined by a host of Corps ships including the *WAMPANOAG*, *CATAUMET* and the *COLVIN*. The vessels soon began transporting structural engineers and assisting in the removal of debris. The agency successfully dealt with two pier collapses and Corps planners began preparing for

an emergency dredging of the Hudson to permit barges transferring rubble to landfills to proceed unfettered. The dredge-ship *MCFARLAND*, out of the Philadelphia District, played a large role in clearing out the barge route and also continued critical transport of supplies and personnel. The Army Corps vessels' quick and ongoing support allowed emergency personnel on the scene to continue an unremitting response to the disaster area.

## FDNY Marine Division

The floating pumping stations known as the New York City Fireboats are a frequently forgotten commodity in a city surrounded by so much water. The aging fleet is often dismissed and left to wither away, remembered only when something bad happens on the Harbor.

On September 11, a recall was issued for all members of the fireboat fleet. Lt. Terrence Jordan and firefighters Robert Spadaro and Paul Coulbourne left Educational Day at Randall's Island and converged on the Brooklyn Navy Yard. They were met by Pilots Scott Hanson and Neil Yellen, along with vacationing Pilot Joe Gagliardi who had been plying the Hudson that day on a pleasure boat. It was there they got the word from Pilot Ed Mauro who reported that the World Trade Center had collapsed and that FDNY Marine Division Supervisor Captain Al Fuentes was missing in the vicinity of the debris field. The marine crew, joined by Engineer Paul Fornuto, Firefighter Sean McLoughlin, Marine Wiper Dennis Crowe and Safety Chief Sal Posavetz readied the *SMOKE 2*, a fireboat built in 1958, now only usable as a tender. Soon after, the Company picked up a distress call on the radio from Captain Fuentes who had sustained serious injuries and had become trapped under a shower of debris from what was once the World Trade Center – near West Street and Vesey. The *SMOKE 2* docked at the North Cove Marina behind the atrium of the World Financial Center Building. Two teams were deployed to search for Capt. Fuentes and any other "surface victims." "The scene was one of complete devastation," Lt. Jordan reported, "apparatus



The NYC Fireboat *FIREFIGHTER* at her berth in Staten Island.

destroyed and on fire, complete silence with the exception of sporadic falling debris..." Somehow, they stumbled upon Capt. Fuentes amid the carnage. His head and shoulders were protruding from the debris with his lower extremities fastened beneath the rubble. After the team carefully extricated the Fire Dept. official from his would-be grave, Pilot Gagliardi squeezed through the window of one of the two twisted burning ambulances on the scene in a quest for crucial medical equipment. He was able to recover enough supplies for the team to stabilize the ailing Captain and dress his wounds as best they could. Fuentes had sustained broken ribs, severe head trauma, trauma to his lower extremities and a punctured lung. As they carried him back to the *SMOKE 2* on a makeshift gurney, the decision was made to avoid Manhattan hospitals that were likely inundated. Radioing ahead, they made sure Capt. Fuentes was met at the Jersey City Hospital where immediate treatment and continued rehabilitation incredibly allowed him to return home – less than two weeks later.

Following that ordeal, Lt. Jordan and his team returned to the skeleton of the once-great Towers to paw through the wreckage and continue their heartbreaking search for survivors. Meanwhile the fleet's oldest fireboat, the *FIREFIGHTER* built in 1938 had assumed a position by Vesey Street and commenced operations to combat the hellish blaze that was further ravaging the war zone. The *FIREFIGHTER* is the most decorated boat in New York Harbor having been honored with the Maritime Administration's Gallant Ship Award in 1973. During that mission the crew heroically combated an inferno on the water that erupted when the *SEA WITCH* collided with the crude oil tanker *ESSO BRUSSELS*. Now the ship was battling a raging fire threatening to spread beyond the devastated 16-acre complex. The century-old water mains in lower Manhattan couldn't sustain the damage incurred by the attack and were rendered inoperable. New York City Fireboats proved to be the only source of water for the first 72 hours as the small and aging fleet worked round the clock to beat the blaze back. The *FIREFIGHTER* connected four water supply lines to land-based fire engines and began the absolutely critical flow of water pumped out of the Hudson. "They didn't even know where the water was coming from," Pilot Gagliardi remembered. He reported that, "a separate five-inch non-friction line was run from the *FIGHTER*'s aft manifold directly to the standpipe connecting to the Verizon Building." They began pumping at 11





Marine Engineer Ronnie B. West.

a.m. on Sept. 11th and maintained their vigil and vital operations for ten days. The four pump, 134-foot twin-screw fireboat is capable of spouting out 20,000 gallons of water per minute at 150 psi. A grueling workload with antiquated equipment stretched the fireboat to the edge of its limits. "Every single pump needs an overhaul," Chief Engineer Dan Reddan moaned weeks later. "The pumps took a beating – a beating." Inside the vessel it was steaming. Lack of shoreside electricity to the DC powered vessel prohibited air conditioning or even a working refrigerator on the boat. The overheated engineers had to use a cooler full of ice in the engine room to cool down the bearings.

The other fireboats in the fleet continually met equipment challenges as well. On the JOHN D. MCKEAN, the boat experienced generator problems from the get-go. A flexible coupling (the connection between the motor and prime mover) broke while they were underway necessitating a welding job. The JOHN J. HARVEY, a boat that finished its service in 1991 and was recently saved from the scrap heap was pressed into service. Numerous problems plagued the noble crew of this floating museum and the diesel electric plant shut down after 36 hours. The pumps on the SMOKE 2 proved inoperable and the 43-year old fireboat was sent back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The 40-year old reserve boat GOV. ALFRED E. SMITH was also feeling its age. The KEVIN C. KANE, only nine years old, was able to join the FIREFIGHTER on the front lines. The 52-foot fireboat can only match a quarter of the FIREFIGHTER's water capacity, yet its age has allowed it to become the workhorse of the fleet.

Double crews manned the fireboats. For the first several days, the Marine

Division toiled 24 hours on/24 hours off, though many worked the first two days straight. They used much of their time off to join search teams in a quest for their missing brothers. On one occasion, while rummaging through the "pit", Dan Reddan's day ended when he was surprised by a Brown Recluse Spider, one of six poisonous kinds of arachnids in the U.S., whose bite left him battling potentially fatal symptoms. On another day while sifting through the twisted wreckage of the World Trade Center, the men of Marine Company 9 came upon "an apparition so astounding" it made them do a double-take. In a series of e-mail dispatches reprinted in Easton, Maryland's *Star Democrat*, Dan Reddan noted, "There are three sets of matched beams in a cross configuration, the center one wrapped in swaddling bombed-out clothing. It is all backlit with sunlight from the street and opening three stories up!" Surrounded by a desolate wasteland, the crosses induced an inspirational hope not experienced in some time by dispirited New Yorkers. That hope was essential for the Marine

Division as they attended the endless funerals for their comrades in the weeks to come.

Ten days of continuous pumping finally quenched the advance of the worst of the runaway fires facing the grid around the Towers. The response of the fireboat fleet saved the

Verizon Building, which was proclaimed structurally sound enough to stand.

On Sept. 20th, the MCKEAN took over the FIREFIGHTER's Vesey Street position and the 63-year old boat, its riveted hull worn down and in desperate need of plating work, headed back to its berth in Staten Island. The boat hasn't been out of the water for repairs in over six years. Though the poorly funded FDNY Marine Division is often ignored, its heroic crews exploited the maximum capabilities out of the ancient fireboats with staggering resolve and sheer know-how.

## Postscript

During this horrendous and significant time in our nation's history, the eruption of human kindness and solidarity to fellow Americans was truly gratifying. MEBA Brothers and Sisters were part of this outpouring of humanity with their unbelievable tenacity and relentless response to adversity. The heroic accomplishments of our members on the Staten

Island Ferries, USNS COMFORT, Army Corps of Engineers vessels and the NYC Fireboats were a beacon of light in the dark days of September 2001. They have further deepened the rich heritage of our proud Union.

## THANKS, FELLAS

The following is a December 4 editorial reprinted with permission from Easton, Maryland's *Star Democrat*. It was penned by Denise Riley who is married to retired MEBA Chief Engineer William J. Riley.

Five men who were in town to attend a two-day safety training course at the Calhoun Marine Engineering School, were at the bar at the Rustic Inn in Easton's Talbot Town shopping center Friday evening. All five are marine engineers who work on the New York City Fire Department's fireboats or on the Staten Island ferries. All five also happen to have done duty with firefighting and other rescue efforts at the Twin Towers after the terrorists' September 11 attack and in the weeks since. They were answering our questions about their experiences and how they view the situation now. They were low key and modest in their responses. They worry about their fellow firefighters who are now showing signs of health problems from exposure to the cement dust and chemicals at Ground Zero. At least one was awaiting the results of his own physical. They worry that some Americans appear already to have forgotten what happened to New York City, to the Pentagon, in a field in Western Pennsylvania - and to the nation - on September 11. The men mentioned other MEBA members with whom they have worked at Ground Zero. They talked about the sorrow of attending memorial service after memorial service for firefighter and police comrades who died in the 'Twin Towers' collapse. As we talked, the bartender placed a fresh drink in front of each of the men. Then she gestured to a customer seated at the far end of the bar, explaining that he had paid for their round of drinks. Each of the five got up, went over and shook the man's hand. The customer said quietly that he couldn't help overhearing the talk of their efforts at Ground Zero and of how so many people came together in that time of national crisis. Himself a Gulf War veteran, he explained, "I just wanted to thank you for what you did."

-MEBA members at the Rustic Inn Tavern that day included Pilot Ted Lukawski (FDNY Fireboats), C/E Dan Reddan (FDNY Fireboats) Mike O'Toole (MEBA Delegate, S.I. Ferries), and Staten Island Ferry engineers Ron Roaldsen, Bruce Kirkland and Tom Monahan.



Pilot Joe Gagliardi and Chief Dan Reddan aboard the FIREFIGHTER.