

Ship Report Transcript

Wednesday, September 11, 2024

By Joanne Rideout

All rights reserved. No use without permission. © 2024. Joanne Rideout/The Ship Report.

It's time for the ship report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. Well, today is September 11th, 2024, and it's the anniversary of the day in 2001, 23 years ago, when the U.S. was attacked by terrorists, who hijacked airplanes that crashed into the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.. Another plane believed to be headed for the White House or the US Capitol building crashed in a field in Pennsylvania after passengers overpowered the hijackers. These events, of course, shocked the world.

And I can say, as someone who grew up in the New York metropolitan area and watched the news coverage from the other side of the country, nothing was ever the same after that.

As this event slowly recedes into the wide scope of history and many other tragic happenings seem to be happening now that eclipsed its importance for us, I like to remember, each year, something about this tragedy that is beautiful, inspiring and hopeful. If you've been listening to the Ship Report for a while or are just a maritime history buff, you may have heard of something called Operation Boatlift, which happened in New York Harbor as the tragedy of 911 was unfolding there.

After the towers fell, mariners heard a call from the Coast Guard on VHF radio, calling all available boats to come to the aid of the hundreds of people stranded on the south end of Manhattan Island. The response was incredible. And that's what today's show is about. The source material for the show comes partly from an amazing short film called Boatlift.

I'll include a link to it when I post the podcast on my website. You can find this film, Operation Boatlift, on YouTube. It's free and it's among the most moving 11 minutes you'll ever spend watching a film about actual history. I defy you to watch it without choking up.

It's about human nature at its best. About the best we can be. I grew up in metropolitan New York, and New Yorkers are pretty famous for being cranky. Under normal circumstances, New Yorkers can be very kind of get out of my face. But when things hit the fan, they're also famous for pulling together and doing extraordinary things. This is what I like to remember about 911 that we have the capacity to pull together and be there for one another. I'm hoping we remember this during difficult days to come. But for now, let's enjoy a look at humans at their best and know we all have it in us to do the right thing when it's needed.

“I thought I was watching a movie. Towering Inferno at first. And then I walked through a close and I noticed it was the World Trade Center. I was compelled because I a Type A person, they can't stand by and watch other people suffer. And to me, they were suffering. They wanted a utopia island, and there was no way for them to utilize the island other than the water. And I had noticed when I was watching the television, I saw a lot of, you know, the ferries going up into ships and taking people off. I was just fine. We could do the same thing. I could take people on my boat, get in there, take them where they have to go. And that's what we did.”

Narrator: On the morning of September 11th when the towers came down. Millions of people ran for safety. Hundreds of thousands of them ran south to the water's edge.

“That's when they realized that Manhattan is indeed an island and that they were trapped. They were feeling helpless. And that's the worst feeling in the world. What was the person on the ground going to do? Buildings were down. The people lay on the rubble of the building. Firemen. Civilians. My wife was there. And I turned around. I said, I've got to go do something just like that. And she looked at me. She says, What are you going to do, you maniac? I says, I'm going to take the amberjack up into the city and help. She says, But what if they're attacked again? That's something I have to live with. I says, I have to do what I have to do. I says, And nobody can stop me right now.”

Narrator: Every mode of transportation out of Manhattan was shut down. All the subways were shut, Tunnels were all closed. They closed the bridges. They closed everything immediately. Boats, usually an afterthought in most New Yorkers minds, were for the first time in over a century. The only way in or out of lower Manhattan, all available boats.

“This is the United States Coast Guard boarding the boat in New York. Anyone want to help with the evacuation of Lower Manhattan?”

“When I call came on the radio. They were coming. I was uncertain of who was going to respond. About 15, 20 minutes later, there were just boats all across the horizon, converging on the lower part of Manhattan. When we came out of the dust cloud, I'd never seen so many tugboats all at once. It was just like a fleet of tugboats headed to Manhattan. If it floated and it could get there, they got all their eggs and boom. I mean, and they were zooming across this water. Ferries, private boats, party boats. I worked on the water for 28 years. I've never seen that many of those come together at one time, have had one radio call. And it just came together.”

And those were excerpts from the film “Boatlift.”

Governors Island, by the way, is a small island in New York Harbor that is near Lower Manhattan. According to Wikipedia, following the September 11th attacks in New York City, more than 500,000 people were unable to leave Lower Manhattan due to the closure of bridges and tunnels throughout the city. Within minutes of the first plane hitting the first tower, multiple fire boats from the New York City Fire Department rushed to the scene. The United States Coast Guard coordinated a large convoy of merchant ships, tugboats and ferries boatlift to evacuate the stranded and injured victims. More than 150 different vessels and 600 sailors helped evacuate victims and delivered supplies in the days following the attacks. According to the Coast Guard. The mass evacuation of more than 500,000 civilians following the attacks, “moved more people from the island than the 1940 evacuation of allied troops from France.”

I've thought about this film a lot and what it shows us about how we can pull together, not apart, how we have that capacity to find the best in one another. I hope we can hold these thoughts now going forward into what is certain to be a tumultuous fall season. We are still the same basically good people we were before we entered into what has become one of the most divisive periods in our history as a nation. I hope we can remember who we are. This seems like a time when we need it most.

You've been listening to the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. You'll find ship schedules and a podcast of this program on my website at shipreport.net. Ship Report podcasts also on Apple and Spotify. You'll find marine weather and links to ship schedules and more on my Ship Report Facebook page. Transcripts of the show are available with podcasts.

Thanks for listening and have a great day.