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Mariners rush to rescue airline passengers after plane crash-lands on the Hudson River [Dom Yanchunas](#)

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.

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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 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 Moira Smith, Admiral Richard Bennis and George Washington transported a total of 18.

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



Rescue boats surround the plane that ditched in the Hudson soon after takeoff.



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. (Associated Press/Alexandre Valerio Dom Yanchunas)

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 comment 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."