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## A Quick Rescue Kept Death Toll at Zero

By MICHAEL WILSON and AL BAKER

The police divers found two women, going limp, with minutes to live in the frigid waters between New York and New Jersey.

"They were lethargic," said one of the divers, Detective Michael Delaney. "They were no help whatsoever. Their extremities were frozen cold."

He and the other diver, Detective Robert Rodriguez, shoved one of the women aboard a boat with the help of workers on board. Detective Delaney soon helped the other woman aboard as well.

That was the scene in the minutes after US Airways Flight 1549 slid into the Hudson River on Thursday afternoon after the crew reported that the plane had struck a flock of birds shortly after leaving La Guardia Airport.

For a moment after the water landing, it was a picture of eerie calm, the airplane floating on its belly in the center of the river near West 48th Street under a bright sky. A witness in a penthouse apartment called it a perfect landing, as if on cement.

But very soon the water was churned by an ad hoc flotilla of boats and ferries flying the flags of almost every city, state and federal agency that works the waters around New York City. They sped toward the slowly sinking jet, a rescue operation complicated by river currents that kept dragging the plane south, as its passengers climbed aboard the wings to await help.

The rescue began in the airplane itself, among the passengers. One passenger, Jeff Kolodjay, 31, said he and others helped the women and children off the plane and onto ferries. "There was a lady that was trying to crawl over," he said. "She had a baby on her shoulder."

The plane's pilot walked the aisles of the cabin twice to ensure no one was left behind before he exited, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said at a news conference.

Vessels from the New York Police and Fire Departments and the Port Authority of New York and

New Jersey worked with New York Waterway ferries, which sent 14 boats, and the Coast Guard in the rescue. "We sent as many boats as we had," said Alan Warren of New York Waterway.

The operation was not without improvisation: Four New York police officers commandeered a Circle Line boat picking up tourists and commuters at 42nd Street and hurried to the jet. Two officers stayed on the ferry and tied themselves to two detectives, John McKenna and James Coll, who stepped onto the wing and helped people onto rescue boats, the police said.

The divers were at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn when the call came over the radio of an airplane down.

A pilot at the field, Sgt. Michael Hendrix, 42, said that he imagined it was a small airplane, a routine job.

The pilot and the divers scrambled aboard a helicopter. Air traffic controllers gave them a special route to the Hudson River.

Sergeant Hendrix took the helicopter on a path that passed the Empire State Building and as he passed the skyscraper, he dipped the helicopter down. He saw the jetliner in the water — its tube floating and US Airways spelled out on its side. "I never, in a million years, expected to see US Airways in the Hudson River," he said.

There was debris in the water and a film of jet fuel coating the surface. Some of the plane's passengers were on the wings.

The helicopter hovered, making sure not to get too close out of concern that the winds from the rotor would push passengers into the water, Sergeant Hendrix said. The divers jumped from the helicopter not far from the water. About five to seven minutes had passed since the 911 call, Sergeant Hendrix said.

The divers saw the women fighting for their lives in the water.

The women were clinging to a ferry but were unable to get aboard as the water quickly numbed them. Detective Delaney entered the water without an air tank, but only his diving suit, mask and snorkel and approached a woman floating in a life vest, he said.

"She was very frantic," he said. "I just told her to relax and tell me what her name was." She feared the ferry she was holding onto would run her over, he said.

The second woman had panicked and fallen off a ferry, the divers said. "I swam over to her and helped her in," Detective Delaney said.

John Peruggia, 45, the chief of Emergency Medical Service for the New York Fire Department, was in a car in Queens, when he got the call of an plane crash.

The chief ordered 35 ambulances to a staging area in Manhattan, 25 of them for basic life support and 10 with advanced medical services.

By the time Chief Peruggia arrived to the staging area, passengers were streaming in — people dressed in suits and clothes for a flight to a warmer climate.

“All in all, on the New York side, we saw 88 victims of the plane crash,” he said.

A majority of the patients were in stable condition. “Mild signs of hypothermia,” he said.

Of the 88 who came ashore in Manhattan, 20 were taken to hospitals, Chief Peruggia said.

He said he saw no one bleeding and was stunned that some of those passengers did not appear to have been through an ordeal at all.

“A couple people I talked to, who were in business suits, I said, ‘Were you guys on the plane?’ because you would not know they were just in a plane that crashed on the Hudson River. They said, ‘Yeah, we were on it.’ ”

Chief Peruggia added: “One guy said, ‘I stepped out of the plane, onto the wing and then onto a boat that brought me to this building and then two of your paramedics took great care of me.’ ” The chief said he asked the man to go repeat that story for the mayor, who was standing nearby.

The rescue was described as remarkably smooth. Another witness, Fulmer Duckworth, saw the crash from his office at the Bank of America. He looked through binoculars and saw 70 or 80 people on a wing. “Actually, it looked like everybody was really calm, like on the subway platform when it’s really, really crowded and everyone’s standing shoulder to shoulder. Everyone was standing right up against each other on the wings.”

Honorio Hector Rabanes, a deckhand on the Thomas Keane, a New York Waterway ferry, summed up the just-doing-our-jobs underplaying of the rescue typical of many who spoke of it Thursday night.

“Basically, let me tell you, we were in the right place at the right time,” he said.

But he went on to describe the panic of the passengers: “When we got near them, we heard a lot of yelling. Once they saw us, they were still panicking. We saw two babies on the lifeboat and we tried to get them to pass them to us, but they couldn’t listen. They were just holding on to them tight.”