

Prologue

Manhattan is an island. This geographic detail seems less important than it once did, as the rough wooden waterfronts shown in crinkling photographs have given way to glamorous financial-services offices, high-end apartments, and stylish shops and restaurants. The waterfront, especially around Lower Manhattan, has become a fun place for tourists, joggers, business-lunchers, and hand-holding couples. But hundreds of boats and barges continue to ply the waters around Manhattan. Tugs, the famous Circle Line sightseeing boats, dinner cruise boats, ferries, and other craft of every description form the background scenery for people standing on the shoreline looking out across New York Harbor. Beyond the fun and urban excitement is the workaday maritime world of diesel oil, coveralls, steel-toed shoes, and dirty gloves. The shift to commerce grounded in digital, virtual, and financial ephemera has not lessened the need for food and fuel around the city. These boats are not just decorative accessories placed on the waters to give tourists something to look at; they link the city to the regional, national, and global economies.

New York City's maritime setting came into sharp relief during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Anyone who watched tele-

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vision, read a paper, or fought through packed bandwidth to try to get on the Internet knows what happened. Early reports told of a small plane striking the North Tower (World Trade Center 1) at 8:46 A.M. In fact, as we would learn, this was not a small sightseeing plane but rather American Airlines Flight 11—bound from Logan International Airport in Boston to Los Angeles. At 9:03 A.M., when United Airlines Flight 175—also en route from Boston to Los Angeles—struck the South Tower (World Trade Center 2), the hostile nature of the event became widely apparent. Over the course of the next hour, two more airplanes were hijacked: American Airlines Flight 77 en route from Dulles International Airport in Virginia to Los Angeles struck the Pentagon at 9:37 A.M.; and United Airlines Flight 93 en route from Newark International Airport to San Francisco crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, when passengers tried to overpower the hijackers. In all, according to the 9/11 Commission Report, a total of 2,973 were killed, excluding the hijackers (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 2004).

That morning, every eye and every camera in the world, it seemed, was focused on the glowing towers and then, in turn, on their unbelievable collapses—Tower 2 at 9:59 A.M. and then Tower 1 at 10:28 A.M. And because most of us were watching the burning and disintegrating towers, and then the astounding, shimmering cloud of dust, we missed something remarkable happening nearby, along the shoreline of Manhattan, from Chelsea Docks on the West Side Highway around to the Staten Island Ferry terminal and up the eastern waterfront.

Some people were not just watching the towers or watching the skies for more planes. Mariners' eyes move constantly, taking in the water, other boats, and the shoreline. And in that gaze, they saw a need they could help meet. Across New York Harbor, different ideas flashed like sparks, which ignited a collective understanding when boat operators and waterfront workers realized that they had the skills, the equipment, and the opportunity to take definite, immediate action in responding to the most significant destructive event in the United States in decades. Their spontaneous convergence toward the downtown area succeeded in moving hundreds of thousands of evacuees from around the southern reaches of the island.

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On its own, this would be an amazing story—a Dunkirk-style evacuation in an improvised fleet, without any significant accidents. Indeed, several people whom we interviewed for this study specifically referred to the event as “like Dunkirk,” invoking reference to the successful 1940 evacuation of several hundred thousand soldiers from France over several days during World War II. But the remarkable story continued on the other side of the Hudson. Once on the New Jersey side, evacuees had nowhere to go. Some people still in New York City were hesitant to get into boats, fearing they would be stranded. One of the tour boat operators got his business partner—a bus company—to pick up evacuees and take them to transit connections; soon, other bus agencies began mobilizing independently to help in similar ways. It did not take long for boats to begin to return to Manhattan with emergency workers and supplies, and, as the evacuation wound down, some boats stayed in service to shuttle anything the response workers needed. Others helped out however they could while docked nearby. The dinner boat *Spirit of New York* offered its facilities to weary rescue workers, and the *John J. Harvey*, a retired fireboat, used its vast pumping capacity to support firefighting efforts. An ad hoc transportation system evolved, carrying passengers and equipment and supporting the “official” rescue efforts.

None of these efforts was planned. Instead, the waterborne operations were improvised and spontaneous: the emergent invention of the necessity of the moment, as people taken by surprise pulled together, defined the disaster in their own terms, and determined a way to help. It is far too trite to say that lessons can be learned from this event: Every disaster offers lessons. But understanding the evacuation—and all the elements of people and organizations that made it possible—has larger implications for the entire practice of disaster management in the United States and beyond.

In this book, we examine how maritime workers identified what they had to do and how their interpretation of what was needed helped connect them to others who were working with their own understanding of what was happening on the morning of September 11. Most of them had never been involved in any water evacuation from Manhattan or anywhere else, although a few had been involved in the much smaller boat lift of people after the 1993 bombing of the

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Twin Towers. None was aware of any plan in place for such an event, yet they simultaneously understood that their skills were relevant.

Our goal is to examine how people, as individuals, groups, and formal organizations, pull together to respond and recover from startling, destructive events. When foresight, planning, and practice are defeated, what do people do next? As we show, the participants in the boat evacuation reinterpreted their new surroundings and started acting, relying on tacit knowledge and latent resources to adjust to a damaged landscape. They were “regular” people, average citizens, or members of what may formally be called civil society. What can they teach us about not only surviving but also thriving in the face of calamity?

In many disasters, events that seem larger than life are dealt with and managed, mostly, if not always most visibly, by the actions of ordinary people, extending their knowledge, skills, and resources to address small elements of a big, perhaps catastrophic, problem. In some cases, these are people charged with official responsibilities who go beyond what they had expected they would ever need to do. Others are people who never considered themselves disaster responders yet step up to the plate. The people we include as examples in this book epitomize stories we heard again and again, told a little differently on occasion, from a different part of the harbor or with a different color of narrative, but with remarkable similarity nonetheless. We discuss the conditions that allowed and even fostered the evacuation to unfold the way it did and explore the ways that people who were physically separated from one another began to share a sense of what was needed. We show, in particular, that handling a disaster is not something that happens apart from the community; it involves everyone. Our vulnerability to disaster is threaded through the social and physical systems of our towns and cities; our resilience and recovery potential is found in those same systems, animated by the enthusiasm of private citizens to cross over into activities that are generally considered “official.”

We heard repeatedly in our interviews such comments as “We just did what needed to be done” or “We did what we had to do,” not only from mariners but also from the people with whom we discussed their stories. A few weeks after the attacks, for example, we encoun-

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tered a group of bicycle couriers who wanted to help at Ground Zero. They were rebuffed by officials—perhaps rightfully so, given their skill sets and the hazardous environment at the pile—so instead they delivered sandwiches and coffee around the secured perimeter of Lower Manhattan. They took what they had—a resource (a bike), a skill (quickly navigating the city by bike), a network (an organization of street-wise cyclists)—and identified how it might be useful, even if just for a short time. As one of the mariners we talked with said, if you had local knowledge, at least at the beginning, the opportunity to find a way to help was available.

Such actions raise obvious potential objections and concerns regarding risk, liability, and security. Could a person sneaking in be a threat? Of course. In some settings, such as Israel, there is a strong danger of secondary attacks after a bombing, specifically targeting response personnel. Still, the overwhelming history of postdisaster helpers shows that security incidents have not occurred after disasters, even in settings where they might be expected. It is impossible to estimate the number of volunteers who came to New York City, but they came from all over the country, and from around the world. Many of them were first responders—fire, police, emergency medical technicians (EMTs)—who responded to the call of professional kinship. They did not necessarily know the city, but at least they had expertise. Professional emergency managers worry more that lay helpers will get in the way or that their well-intentioned but uncoordinated efforts will cause a breakdown in control, waste scarce resources, or crowd the areas so that qualified responders cannot gain access. But in the maritime operations on 9/11, very little evidence suggests that such problems occurred. In desperate situations, there may be no option but to let volunteers do their work. And indeed, in many cases, the work of spontaneous volunteers bringing particular skills, knowledge, and resources enables the formal responders to succeed.

Our many conversations with those who helped that sunny, mild, tragic, inspiring day led us to conclude that managing a disaster means tackling an enormous event in bite-sized chunks. The mariners we spoke with were stunned by the enormity of the crisis and the grim and sorrowful novelty of what they were seeing. But although the attacks brought unprecedented destruction to New York City, in

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their actions, waterfront workers and others throughout the city did not approach it at that scale. How could they? Regular people, by definition, are regular. Instead, they brought their usual knowledge and skills to the disaster, shattering the enormity of the disaster itself into smaller pieces that they could pick up. It was just that *a lot* of them did it, all over the city.

All disasters are cases of the ordinary achieving the extraordinary—in the case of the boat evacuations, with tremendous success. The principal insight that we hope readers take away from this book is that people have more capacity than they think. People can do a good job helping out in disasters just by being themselves, by finding or making a chance to help. It suggests that what we need as a society is resilience grounded in diverse institutions, industries, and skills, a resilience that is energized by a willingness to assemble those fundamentals into new systems. While a disaster appears to be something best managed by officials with technical expertise, the fact is that most disaster-related tasks are everyday tasks. Lifting boxes, loading trucks, answering phones, delivering coffee, sharing food and blankets, sweeping up broken glass—these, too, are disaster jobs that anyone can do. And because a disaster by definition affects an entire community, practically everyone has something he or she can do that could be helpful.

Particularly since Hurricane Katrina, the popular press has questioned the competence of local populations to manage themselves in disaster. Supposed postdisaster chaos, violence, or social collapse generates calls for more immediate military involvement in a disaster area. While undoubtedly there are legitimate roles for law enforcement and the valuable personnel and materiel of military units, assuming that only those units are suitable for the postdisaster environment is likely to undercut the quick application of local resources. Indeed, the success of the waterborne evacuation of Manhattan on September 11 in part depended on the willingness of the U.S. Coast Guard, harbor pilots, and harbor police to allow for a decentralized response. Even with an eye for security and safety, they were still able to recognize the value of an improvised citizen response to the terrorist attack.

Planning is always essential, and no one would argue that formal emergency management agencies do not have a mandate to think

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ahead. At the same time, however, as a nation we have moved toward ever more tightly controlled disaster environments in which the roles of any and all responders are specified in advance and volunteers are registered ahead of time. We seem to have forgotten that improvisation is an important element of any disaster response. The success of our formal responses often depends on latent capacities in our own communities. In the response to 9/11, we saw large-scale, decentralized, emergent, grassroots efforts across the New York metropolitan region to help survivors, to treat the injured, to get people home, to put people in contact with their worried families and friends, to find them a place to stay if their homes were damaged or full of dust or without utilities. The waterborne evacuation of September 11 contradicts any doubts about what people can achieve in a disaster.

The cliché is well known and often told: September 11, 2001, began like any other day, and that was as true for us as disaster researchers as it was for so many others. Neither of us was in New York on that crisp, clear, surreal day. Jim was on his way to work at the Disaster Research Center (DRC) at the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware, when the first news came over the radio that a small plane had struck the World Trade Center. Tricia walked the half block down the street from her apartment to the office. By the time each of us arrived, the first reports of the North Tower being struck had begun to emerge in the news. Each of us thought back to earlier that summer when we had individually made the long elevator rides up the towers: Jim up World Trade Center 1, or the North Tower, and Tricia up World Trade Center 2, or the South Tower. Jim had visited the city's new and state-of-the-art Emergency Operations Center located in World Trade Center 7, just across the street from the Twin Towers. Afterward, he had joined colleagues for dinner at Windows on the World, very much enjoying an expensive bleu-cheese burger and not particularly enjoying his first—and to this day only—martini. It had been a successful visit, with interesting discussions with emergency officials at the top of their game. Tricia, after many visits to New York City, had finally relented to make the touristy trip up to the Top of the World Observation Deck with her teenage nephew visiting from the Canadian prairies. She had smiled with nostalgia

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for her own first visit to New York years earlier, when she had looked around in amazement at the expanse of skyscrapers, people, and buzz of city life that is Manhattan. And she had conceded her own awe as she looked out from above at the incredible view of a city she loved.

As Jim parked his car and headed into DRC, and as Tricia headed for a computer, the second plane struck. Suddenly what had been a strange accident became something exponentially larger. Like the rest of the world, we were still grappling with *how*. But as researchers working at a center with decades of experience studying the early phases of disaster, this question also led us to ask *what* we as researchers needed to focus on. Jim ran across the parking lot. The scene at DRC must have been just one example of millions of similar scenes: phone calls, people trying to put together the pieces of news they had heard from various sources. In what seems an obvious oversight in retrospect, DRC did not have a television set, so everyone went across the street to watch the news at the University of Delaware's media center.

As disaster researchers, our task—at least at first—was to observe what was happening. Since this kind of fieldwork begins with gathering preliminary information from the media, we took notes based on television coverage to determine who seemed to be involved. Who were the main decision makers whom we would later attempt to interview? Where would we find documents or logbooks that tracked shifts in information as it became available to public officials? What would be some principal locations to visit once we made our way into the field? We did not know what we might find, of course. The key was to keep an open mind, to be alert for the features of the unfolding events that would best help expand our understanding of disaster management.

And then we sat awestruck. What was already a disaster suddenly expanded into an urban calamity. We cannot really say that it was unparalleled, since cities are regularly devastated by natural or human forces. But the gruesome novelty of the attacks, the surprising completeness of the towers' collapses, and their sequential pummeling of the surrounding neighborhood brought a new dimension to modern disaster. And all of it was unfolding live in front of an international television audience.

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We kept on taking notes. Before graduate school, Jim had been a merchant marine officer, and his service aboard ship made noting the time of events an automatic task. In looking at his notes, you can see without even reading them when the first tower collapsed, signaled by the suddenly hasty penmanship as he scribbled what he saw. Tricia, who was DRC field director at the time, switched into “work mode.” Perhaps that came naturally with a stoic farm upbringing, but there was some comfort in being able to fall back into the research steps and tasks that would be necessary to quickly deploy a team.

Stepping outside to walk back to the office, the silence of the town was unsettling, too, in its own way. By then all the nation’s aircraft had been grounded, so there was none of the usual noise from the skies. Even the street traffic was quiet, as though people were driving on their tiptoes, sneaking their cars along the roads. Shocked as we were by what we had seen, even though it was on TV, training and well-learned procedures for disaster fieldwork provided the starting points. DRC’s director at the time, Kathleen Tierney, had attended a meeting in Buffalo the day before and was stranded there after her plane, like all other aircraft in and entering U.S. airspace, was grounded. She was trying to contact our funding agencies while simultaneously trying to find a car rental location that still had a vehicle so she could drive home to Delaware—a story that was repeating itself around the United States. A 2:00 P.M. conference call with Kathleen, Jim, Tricia, faculty members Joanne Nigg and Benigno Aguirre, and DRC founders Russell Dynes and Enrico L. Quarantelli confirmed that DRC would send a team. Jim and Tricia kept trying their own contacts as well as those suggested by others. They mobilized the graduate and undergraduate students to canvass the media for names, addresses, phone numbers, and locations of emergency-response activities and also to scout out how to get access to New York despite the closure of many roads, bridges, and rail lines. We already had a project underway on studying resilience in communities—what makes a community less likely to have a disaster or more likely to recover from one? What, then, would we find in New York when we got there?

At this point, of course, we did not know exactly what we were looking for. We knew the basic parameters of community resilience,

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but we did not know how these would play out in the specific situation that was unfolding in the city. The first stage of disaster fieldwork is just basic fact-finding. Conditions on the ground, interpreted through the education and interests of the scholars, shape the subject and scope of the ongoing research. But we needed to get to New York because it is important, in disaster fieldwork, to get to the disaster area quickly. As much as possible, we want to see emergency operations in real time, to know the context of challenges confronted and decisions made. We were trying to get in touch with the emergency officials we knew, by phone and e-mail, but not surprisingly there was no response. Although we did not know it at the time, New York's Emergency Operations Center had been abandoned early in the crisis, so no one was there to get our calls or see our messages, even if their communications lines had still been up. After a flurry of phone calls, a team of five DRC researchers arrived in New York City two days later. Jim and Tricia stayed on for a week and then made repeated trips over much of the next two months. Thanks to the incredible generosity of time and spirit of our emergency management contacts who had miraculously survived the attacks despite their proximity to them, we were given tremendous access to response meetings, operations centers, staging areas, and even Ground Zero.

A year later, we returned to conduct in-depth interviews with more than sixty key responders and decision makers, learning more about the many examples of improvisation that bolstered the effectiveness of the response and that had impressed us during our fieldwork. During the quick response research and later, during the interviews, we heard accounts about the boat evacuation and resolved to follow up on it if we could. Our in-depth research on the boat evacuation began in 2005.

Since that time, we have interviewed one hundred people with direct or indirect involvement with the waterborne evacuation. Most of these people were mariners, waterfront workers, harbor pilots, and Coast Guard officials. Others were ferry company office staff, emergency response workers, or people who had worked with the bus operators who eventually helped get evacuees closer to home. We focused on the helpers rather than the evacuees themselves, in part because evacuees were difficult to locate as time passed and in part

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because of the focus of our study. It is difficult to know how many helpers participated in the boat evacuation or subsequent maritime responses or their level of involvement (over nine hundred people were awarded medals or ribbons by the U.S. Department of Transportation for their involvement, including participants from some fifty organizations). It is even more difficult to count how many people participated in the shore-side operations that complemented the mariners' efforts. Still, we talked with a large and diverse group of participants who provided a rich understanding of the event.

At times, we conducted interviews by telephone; years after the disaster, some of the key participants had moved on to other states. But most of our interviews took place on their boats, in offices, in restaurants, and on the waterfront. As part of the interviewing process, to refresh the participant's memory and to provide a source of reference, each interview was conducted with a nautical chart of the harbor spread out in front of us. There, we could look at geographic features and indicate the movements of people and boats throughout the evacuation and boat lift, gently encouraging our maritime responders to mark up the charts with a Sharpie despite their inherent aversion to writing in ink even on photocopies of these important navigation sources.

We visited places where evacuees embarked or were disembarked, sometimes with those we interviewed (again, as a way to refresh their memories). We rode a number of the ferries and water taxis, timing the passage and the time it took to load and unload passengers (for example, it took *The Little Lady* about fifteen minutes to make the round trip to Liberty Landing) to feel confident in the number of evacuees that had been cited in various sources. We reviewed hundreds of photographs, newspaper articles, news accounts, e-mails, and segments of videotape, most of which were generated on the day of the attacks or within the weeks that followed. We augmented our interviews with eighteen conducted by David Tarnow, a historian who compiled an oral history for the South Street Seaport Museum two months after the attacks. In this work, we have developed the most comprehensive documentation of the evacuation available, and we have been careful to use these varied sources of information to triangulate or check the information we heard in our interviews, just

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as we compared the information we heard across interviews. Many of the mariners were excellent narrators of their involvement. The quotations we use in this book are drawn from our interviews with these participants unless otherwise noted.

We would be remiss if we failed to note the tremendous generosity of these participants. Their willingness to share their stories and experiences from that memorable day made this project possible. These were individuals who stepped up to help—like so many others on 9/11—and in this project, they recognized a potential opportunity to help again. But we also believe that they appreciated a story less told. Considerable attention has been directed at the commendable efforts in the Trade Center Towers, at Ground Zero, in the planes, and at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, the site of one of the other attacks. The story of the boat evacuation and subsequent supply lift is a lesser-known story, so the participants were happy to share it. For this, we are thankful.*

* Missing from this work, notably, are the stories of those in the harbor community who did not participate in the evacuation. Anecdotally, we heard of boat workers who opted to return home that morning rather than join those who were deploying to evacuate others or those who chose to evacuate their families by boat and remain with them rather than leaving them. We strongly believe that their responses should not be diminished alongside their counterparts who did respond by participating in the evacuation. We cannot be certain we would not do the same, opting to return to a spouse at home or evacuate and remain with two young children as the devastating events unfolded. It would be easy for someone to conclude that his or her boat was too small or that the waterfront was already too crowded for his or her efforts to be of any significance. We attempted to interview several maritime workers who were in the vicinity and did not participate in the evacuation but were unsuccessful in securing their participation. This work would have benefited from their stories and a greater understanding of how people opt out or self-organize for very different ends. Our purpose here is not to mythologize the evacuation and boat lift at the expense of those who chose a different path but rather to understand how such a response became possible alongside other paths.