

Q&A with Jessica DuLong, author of SAVED AT THE SEAWALL

Why, 20 years later, is it important to understand what happened in New York Harbor on September 11, 2001?

It's amazing that this story still remains so widely unknown. With remarkable resourcefulness and ingenuity, mariners saved an untold number of lives and transported nearly half a million otherwise stranded people off the island in an entirely unplanned evacuation.

The rescuers displayed not only compassion, but also creative problem-solving and community solidarity. They turned a deadly, chaotic situation into an efficient and successful rescue operation. These events offer plenty of lessons about how people confront disaster, and who we are at our core as humans. While some might set apart these mariners as heroes, I consider their heroic actions as examples of choices that *each* of us has the capacity to make—choosing to use the tools, skills, and ingenuity at our disposal to help others.

Recognizing the boat lift as a landmark event in our history is critical to our understanding of the hope and humanity that's possible amid disaster. The record of what happened in New York Harbor that day seems even more essential in this period when facts feel increasingly imperiled.

This current reckoning in our country has rekindled interest in uncovering our nation's forgotten and obscured history. Many Americans have a new appreciation for James Baldwin's understanding that history "is literally present in all that we do." This attention reminds us of our responsibility to document and share historical truths with future generations.

The events of September 11, 2001 upend some common assumptions about human limitations, in ways that are heartening and instructive. The story of how mariners managed this massive, unplanned evacuation brings an uplifting, silver-lining element to our understanding of one of the most horrific days in recent United States history. It highlights who we are when we're at our best, offering an antidote to divisiveness and fear — an especially constructive message for people to hear right now. We owe to our children stories like these, which exemplify compassion, solidarity, and goodness.

How will the COVID-19 pandemic affect this 20th anniversary?

Rising vaccination rates mean that many are emerging from quarantine. But new variants make it clear that the pandemic is not yet over. Even once the infection rate finally slows worldwide, we will be dealing with the fallout for many long years to come.

Unlike the terrorist attacks that ruptured our world in an instant, on a single day, no singular anniversary signifies the beginning—or will signify the end—of the pandemic. We commemorate anniversaries because we need them. As Hope Edelman recently wrote in the *Washington Post*, "Grief is cyclical, especially around anniversary dates." Anniversaries can bring about a decline in

functioning among mourners, and they can give us outlets for solidarity in the face of collective trauma.

In the days and weeks that followed September 11, 2001, people rattled to the core with fear and loss came together to mourn. That togetherness offered healing and comfort. But during the pandemic, many of those grieving lost loved ones (an estimated 4.5 million-plus Americans) have done so in isolation, without the rituals that soothe us.

As a nation, we have been unable to properly grieve our losses. I expect that cumulative grief and trauma will complicate our experiences of this 20th anniversary. The outcry that followed the senseless murders of nearly 3,000 people will be forever changed now that we're a nation grieving more than 600,000.

What inspired you to write this book?

When an editor encouraged me to write a book documenting the boat lift, I was wary of immersing myself in chronicling one of the darkest single days in American history. Yet, I felt a deep responsibility as a journalist, a historian, a first responder, a witness, a survivor, and a patriot to document and tell this story. What I wound up discovering was light amidst the darkness. That day, a series of lifesaving, selfless acts performed by everyday people transformed New York into a place of hope and wonder, revealing the reflexive human compulsion to aid those in need.

What are the dominant themes that emerged in your interviews with mariners and evacuees, civilians, military personnel, government officials, first responders, and volunteers?

The rescue was entirely unplanned and yet extraordinarily effective. With all the perspective granted by hindsight, it's difficult to grasp the levels of shock and threat that the rescuers confronted that morning as the scope and scale of the attacks escalated. For the first few hours the people who knew the least about what was going on were those closest to the World Trade Center site, especially those actually inside the twin towers. Rumors mushroomed, and of course there was mayhem. To understand the depth of the fear and confusion, you have to imagine being there and having no idea what could possibly happen next. That terrorists could use passenger-filled planes as missiles to fly into buildings was inconceivable at the time; that the twin towers could collapse was unfathomable.

Still, from the moment the first plane struck, mariners made a beeline toward danger and didn't let up until they'd delivered everyone they could to safety. No drills or top-down oversight guided their actions; they and the other rescuers saw what needed to be done and found ways to do it. They took this action not out of heroism but out of recognizing a need and their ability to meet that need. Everything came down to shared humanity; people who had the capacity to help did so in any way they could.

What role did the New York Harbor's close-knit community play in the boat lift's success?

It was instrumental to mariners' ability to execute this impromptu rescue. The crews knew their boats, knew these waters, and knew the other captains and crews collaborating to make this

possible. Community members readily shared resources—lending anything they could to support the ad hoc operation. And they trusted each other’s professionalism to get the job done.

Not until 10:45 AM, after the evacuation was well underway did the Coast Guard call for “all available boats” to report to Governors Island. Coast Guard leadership made the remarkably wise and humble decision to support the efforts being made, offering assistance rather than forcing top-down management. They trusted mariners to make safe choices even as many broke rules and norms. So much of the communicating, decision-making, and coordinating was done on the fly.

Captains and crews applied their skills and knowledge in highly competent ways. Crews with emergency training performed triage and administered first aid. Many vessels served double duty as makeshift ambulances, assuring the injured had priority when disembarking and coordinating their handoff to ambulances on shore.

This whole operation was accomplished along a waterfront that, with few exceptions, was not set up to receive large vessels or to load passengers. The rescuers converged on key locations and simply made do as best they could. Along the Battery, where there was no place to tie up, tugboats nosed to the seawall and used engine power to hold their position while evacuees boarded. In some places, deckhands tied boats to trees.

Just south of North Cove, near the World Financial Center, a firefighter with the FDNY Marine Division used a torch to cut an opening in a steel railing to provide better access to and from a fireboat. In South Cove, just south of the World Trade Center, an NYPD Harbor Unit sergeant systematically ripped off some wooden fencing that impeded evacuee access to boats. He went down the whole row, plucking fences off with his vessel, so that people could board more easily.

Tug crews painted bed sheets to indicate their destinations so that evacuees could choose from among these makeshift “ferry” routes. And when the rescue operation shifted into a supply mission, the waterfront was transformed — people passing bags, boxes, and buckets down long lines from boats to land, harked back to the days of break-bulk cargo, when everything was loaded and unloaded by hand. Tools that people didn’t know they needed until the heat of the moment seemed to just materialize. Creativity, improvisation, and mutual support made everything possible that day.

How have the events of 9/11 and the process of writing this book changed you?

For years now I’ve been swimming in the trauma of this day, reliving the catastrophe anew while reporting, interviewing, and writing. Some days it’s been hard to see past all the horror stirred up by these events. And yet, I’ve also been immersed in the story of how new, often unlikely alliances formed on September 11th, during this massive, spontaneous rescue where people who *could* help their fellow citizens *did* so, without hesitation.

The stories in the book illuminate the resounding goodness that rises up in the face of the darkest evil. Knowing that such compassion and creativity can occur on that kind of scale in the same instant as hatred and evil has widened my perspective about human potential.

**To schedule an interview with Jessica DuLong or for more information,
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