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9/11 from the Wheelhouse

The 82-foot “Janice Ann Reinauer” swayed back and forth while tied up at the Red Hook terminal in Brooklyn, New York. It was early on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, and the rising sun against a blue sky was a good sign for the day’s weather. The twin-screw tugboat, powered by two Detroit Diesel engines, had a dark-black hull with stripes of a burnt-out orange and red paint on the bridge of the boat – to make it stand out among all other vessels. She was built in 1967 and acquired by Reinauer Transportation Co LLC in 1979.

Mark Griffiths, the 35-year-old captain of the “Janice Ann” was ending his two-week tour and preparing to hand over the vessel to the oncoming captain and crew. He had plans to head home to his family in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Griffiths – only one year older than the tugboat – and his crew of three were sitting around on the boat waiting for the new crew to arrive later that morning when he received a call at approximately 8:00 a.m. It was his supervisor from the company office in Staten Island, NYC ordering him to head to New Jersey, pick up a barge, and bring it to New York.

“I had already let the mate, who lives in Boston, go home early because we weren’t supposed to have any other jobs, and the other crew was set to roll in around 11 o’clock,” Griffiths said.

“That was a mistake,” he admitted.

The “Janice Ann” typically ran with a crew of five: the captain, mate, engineer, and two deckhands, but today they would have to do their job without the mate. So, Griffiths took his

position in the wheelhouse steering the tug south to New Jersey, accompanied by his engineer and two deckhands on board. Griffiths recalled that they had grabbed the barge and were returning to New York when they began hearing a series of “Mayday” calls on the radio.

Although the captain and crew didn’t understand exactly what was going on around them at first, they would quickly come to realize that commercial airliners had flown into both the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center. Although the buildings had been hit at 8:46 a.m. and 9:03 am, the calls over the marine radio didn’t begin until sometime before 11 a.m., by which time both towers had collapsed.

On the chance, the attack on the towers was part of a coordinated effort, at 11:02 a.m. the Coast Guard put out an emergency call to all vessels operating in and around New York to proceed to the nearest port. Nobody was sure whether a vessel might be part of an attack. Griffiths recalls hearing the orders over the radio to dock his barge: “If you have a barge, you need you to stop, wherever you are, and you need to try to dock your barge in any available berthing.”

Griffiths said that he and his crew quickly dropped their barge off at Port Elizabeth, New Jersey – the largest terminal on the East Coast. Free of the barge, Griffiths and the crew of the “Janice Ann” could have easily remained at Port Elizabeth and awaited their relief crew’s arrival.

As a heavy thick cloud of dust and smoke from the collapsed buildings engulfed the island of Manhattan, crowds of terrified people made their way to Battery Park at the southern tip – where they were trapped. “There was no way to get out,” Griffiths recalled. “The city shut down – everything. No subways, no cars, no taxis.”

Realizing the only escape for the crowds of people would be via boats or helicopters, the call went out on the marine radio to all ships in the area to assist in evacuating the people from Battery Park. “I was just thinking about going home to see my wife and son,” he said. “I had already booked my weekend; I was ready to go.” But he knew it didn’t matter, because everything was shut down, and he wasn’t even sure when the relief crew would show up.

Barely a captain for one year and having a wife and four-year-old son at home, Griffiths realized he and his crew had a long day ahead. Pam Griffiths was home in Rhode Island with son Ryan, and, like many other Americans, was anxiously watching the news. “There was no way to communicate, so I was worried about Mark and didn’t know if he was safe or not,” she said.

After hearing the calls over the radio from the Coast Guard, Griffiths said the president of the tugboat company called over the radio to explain the situation. He told him to do whatever he could to help transport people from Manhattan. Little did Griffiths and his crew realize they would end up participating in the largest marine evacuation in history – larger than the evacuation of Dunkirk during World War II, which rescued approximately 340,000 encircled Allied troops from the French shoreline and delivered them to England to fight another day.

“It was voluntary, but I wanted to help,” Griffiths said. “A guy actually ended up coming off another boat to help our crew.”

The “Janice Ann” - along with over 150 tugboats, ferries, charter boats - filled the waters near the tip of southern Manhattan. Making their way from all points of the compass, they arrived at Battery Park, where on any other day tourist boats would normally take visitors to Liberty Island to see the Statue of Liberty.

While most Americans watched and listened to the news as the terrorist attacks unfolded, Griffiths had a front-row seat from his wheelhouse as he approached the devastated ruins of Manhattan. Griffiths described the scene onshore as quite a mess as they approached the bulkhead of the Battery Park wall. The smoke was heavy, drifting down on the boats. The “Janice Ann” was quickly covered in a film of dust from the collapsed towers.

“I just nosed up the tug and they had some police organizing the crowds,” he said. “All these people were going to different areas, some were trying to get to Brooklyn, and some were trying to get to New Jersey.”

Griffiths waited at the wall as people swarmed onto his tugboat and the other boats. Although not designed to carry passengers, his tugboat was able to take on between 30 and 40 people. The trip across the river to New Jersey was a short ten minutes, followed by another ten-minute trip back to Battery Park. The day was hectic and blurry, but Griffiths estimates he completed at least a dozen, if not two dozen trips that day. They transported people from a little after 11 a.m. to about 10 p.m. that night. Over ten hours straight.

“I didn’t realize it at the time, probably not ‘til more stories came out, but, man, we moved a lot of people,” Griffiths said.

As a new captain, he remained calm, cool, and collected as the “Janice Ann” and all of the other vessels transported an endless flow of people from Manhattan. As if to convey it wasn’t a big deal, Griffiths said it was a little busy, but nothing compared to New York Harbor on the 4th of July.

The United States Coast Guard estimates that nearly 500,000 people were rescued from Manhattan by boat that day, but to Mark Griffiths, he was just one of many captains doing their jobs.

New York City was not the only place that suffered tragedy on September 11. While Griffiths and his crew were transporting survivors to New Jersey, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon in Washington D.C. at 9:37 a.m. and United Airlines Flight 93 crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Today the terrorist attacks of September 11 have become an integral part of American history. Every year on September 11, Americans reflect on the lives lost and honor those who responded.

It's Friday, October 8, 2021 – just over 20 years later, and Griffiths still works as a tugboat captain for Reinauer. “The ‘Janice Ann’ was sold to another company. I work on the ‘Josephine’ now,” he said. Recalling that day from the bridge of the “Josephine” – anchored in New York Harbor – he says the harbor is back to its bustling self, with even more ferries and sailboats than before the events of September 11, 2001.

He pauses for a minute: “Hold on a second [indistinct radio chatter]. I’ve got to listen to the radio in case someone calls, but the volume has to be low enough, so it doesn’t aggravate me.”

He continues “As I look out there now, I can count a dozen sailboats around the statue where I’m anchored. It’s a little different now.”

Indeed, it is a little different. Nothing like that day of complete terror and chaos, 20 years ago.

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