

Fort Schuyler Maritime Alumni Assoc., Inc. MARINER



FIRST AND FOREMOST, SINCE 1903

"Mayday, Mayday.

This is the Sea

Lion. We are

sinking. Men in

the water. Water

in the wheelhouse.

This is our last

transmission.

We're going down."

— VHF transmission
January 15, 2014
at 1620 hours.



All that remained above water of the 1,400 horsepower, 38-foot Tugboat Sea Lion, and her last remaining crewmember. Photo Credit and © 2014 Bjoern Kils, www.bjoernkils.com

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SEA LION



**"THERE IS A TUGBOAT TAKING ON
WATER SIX MILES DUE NORTH OF US.
GO GET THEM!"**

That is what Michael Gove and I heard being shouted down to us from Mark Wanderer on the wheelhouse of the *Pilot Boat New York* in the late the afternoon of Wednesday, January 15, 2014. As we sped off in our *Pilot Boat America*, Sandy Hook Pilot Robert Dobrowolski hopped aboard to assist. We took off like a bat out of hell.

While en route, Mike readied the rescue equipment aboard, while Rob ran the radios and assisted Mike. I concentrated on getting us there. The fog allowed us only three hundred feet of visibility, so our only means of getting there was by using our AIS (Automatic Identification System) transceiver and radar. The radar only became useful when we were 1.5 nautical miles away, but even then, the radar target could have easily been mistaken for a wave. The thirteen minutes it took for us to get to location felt like an eternity.

"Mayday, Mayday. This is the Sea Lion. We are sinking. Men in the water. Water in the wheelhouse. This is our last transmission. We're going down."

Those are the words we will never forget. At that moment, we knew every movement and every decision meant life or death. When we heard that transmission, we were five minutes away from the crew of the *Sea Lion* yet. I held the throttles so hard, just hoping for another couple of RPMs. The adrenaline was palpable.

As we approached the scene of the Tug Boat *Sea Lion*, I

quickly laid on the whistle, letting the people know they were not alone anymore.

We had visual sight of the *Sea Lion* at approximately three hundred feet. Visibility was severely restricted due to fog. As we arrived, the forward one-third of the vessel was visible, while the other two-thirds was already submerged; only a portion of the wheelhouse and bow were above the water. The four souls were clinging for their lives onto any structure still afloat. The vessel was sinking at an alarming rate. If we were two minutes later, we might never have found them. Their AIS would have ceased and there would have been no radar target.

Floating debris was surrounding the vessel. I approached downwind of the vessel with caution, as it was our only chance to recover the men. Mike Gove and Rob Dobrowolski stood by on the bow and communicated with the victims. A lifesaving apparatus was thrown towards the vessel, and a crewmember jumped into the water to grab the device, and then was pulled toward the *P/B America* by Mike and Rob. He was recovered via the Man Overboard Recovery Basket / Transom Stairs. He was aboard!

The device was then thrown again, and two men grabbed the device, and were recovered in the same fashion as the first man. As the second two men were being recovered, the *NY Media Boat* arrived on scene. At that point, the *P/B America*

had drifted out of throwing range, precluding our immediate rescue of the fourth and final man. Mike and Rob tried to convince the fourth man to swim towards us, but he kept waving “No” and grabbing his chest. As I worked to maneuver the *P/B America* to get closer for another throw, the port main engine shut down, with immediate replication on the starboard main engine.

It was apparent that the propellers had been fouled. I immediately informed the *P/B New York* of our situation of being dead in the water.

The *NY Media Boat* then maneuvered into position to recover the fourth and final man. At the precise moment that the last man was recovered by *NY Media Boat*, the *Sea Lion* took her last breath and was claimed by the sea. The *NY Media Boat* requested permission, via radio, to transfer the fourth man to the *P/B America*, which I promptly granted. The *NY Media Boat* then came alongside the port side of the *P/B America* for the transfer. All four souls were safely aboard the *P/B America*. The recovered men were in obvious states of shock and early hypothermia. The fourth man was holding his chest, as he was in severe pain. I checked his vitals and checked for a possible heart attack situation, which at the time was a strong possibil-

ity, as we were informed by his crew members that he has a heart condition. A crew member requested a helicopter medivac for the man, which was immediately relayed to the *P/B New York*, but was dismissed by the Coast Guard due to zero visibility.

The *P/B New York* arrived on scene about ten minutes after we did, and became our Mission Control Center throughout every step of this Mayday. After the men were aboard, the *P/B New York* maneuvered to recover the *P/B America*. When we were made fast portside alongside the *P/B New York*, the recovered men were then transferred to that vessel, whose crew really shined. They were all ready to go, standing by. They had a triage area set up, with medical supplies, warm blankets and a change of clothes for each of the men. Tom Smith, of the Local 333 Union, had been a corpsman in the Navy. He immediately attended to the gentleman with the chest pains and administered oxygen. The rest of the crew made the men feel at home. After twenty to thirty minutes aboard the *P/B New York*, we successfully transferred the men to the 47-foot USCG Motor Boat.

By Thomas A. Sullivan, Class of 2008, SUNY Maritime
Sandy Hook Pilot Apprentice



Photo Credit and © 2014 Bjoern Kils,
www.bjoernkils.com

SEA LION

A Heartfelt Reunion Between Wittich Brothers Marine (Sea Lion Owners), and Rescuers Sandy Hook Pilots and NY Media Boat At the Marine Society dinner, April 7, 2014, NY Marriott Downtown Hotel



Linda Marra (Greater NY Marine Transportation), Steve Reiss (Wittich Brothers Marine), Capt. Wayne Karnas (Wittich), Thomas A. Sullivan, Class of 2008 (Sandy Hook), Devan Weber (Guest of Tom Sullivan).



Ed Burns, Capt. Tim Ferrie, Class of 1978, Bjoern Kils (NY Media Boat), Thomas Smith, Linda Marra (Greater NY Marine Transportation), Thomas A. Sullivan, Class of 2008 (Sandy Hook), Capt. Wayne Karnas (Wittich).

Both photos courtesy of the Marine Society of the City of New York

SEA LION



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas A. Sullivan graduated in September 2008. Shortly thereafter, he began working for Great Lakes Dredge and Dock Company aboard their Dredge Ship *M/V Dodge Island*. While working there for over five years, he quickly moved up the chain and obtained his Masters' license - Unlimited Upon Oceans in April 2013 at the age of 26. He began his five-year apprenticeship with the Sandy Hook Pilots in June 2013 and was just six months on the job at the time of this incident.

SANDY HOOK PILOT TEAM INVOLVED WITH RESCUE:

Also aboard P/B America:

- Michael Gove, of Local 333 Union
- Capt. Robert Dobrowolski, Sandy Hook Pilot, Class of 1999, Mass Maritime

Aboard P/B New York:

- Jack L. McCarthy, Pilot Apprentice, Captain, P/B New York, Class of 2007, USMMA
- Mark Wanderer, Pilot Apprentice
Who uttered the command to send the speedy P/B America to the scene, and who was Mate of P/B New York, which served as Mission Control Center for rescue procedure

Of Local 333 Union:

- Tim Haley, Chief Engineer
- Michael Gove
- Tom Smith
- James Signorin
- Dan Masse
- Greg Masse
- Mike Raucci
- Ross McNally
- Brian Matzkov



*P/B America, 55-foot, 24 knot, aluminum boat
www.sandyhookpilots.com*



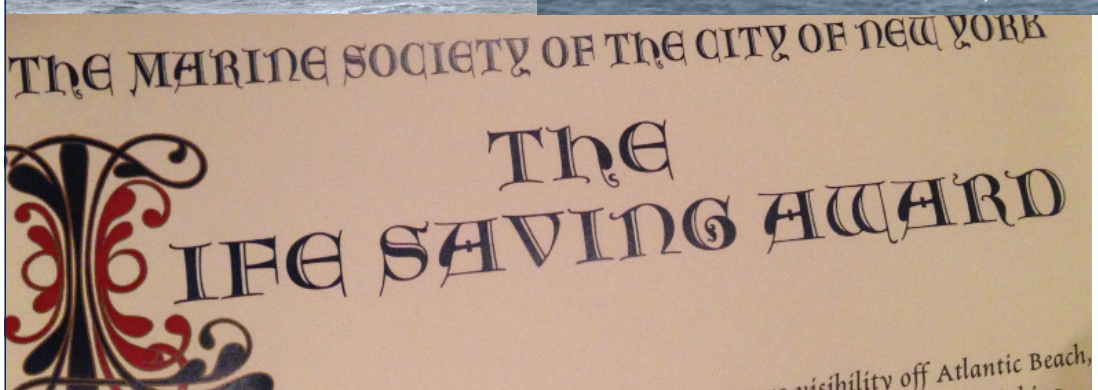
*P/B New York, 182-foot live-aboard vessel
www.sandyhookpilots.com*



Sea Lion, reportedly a 1,400 horsepower, 38-foot coastwise tugboat with model bow, anchor-handling tug with towing machine



Photo Credit & © Will Van Dorp, 2011



ADDITIONAL CASUALTY DETAILS REPORTED IN THE NEWS:

Ironically, the men in trouble on the *Sea Lion* were in this area (approximately three miles off Atlantic Beach near the East Rockaway inlet) after another tugboat *Pushy* went down just two days before following an interaction with a large swell. In fact, those on both boats claim a wave got the best of them.

"It is very unusual, but I don't know the answer. But it is unusual, no doubt. Very unusual," Capt. Dobrowolski said.

The first tugboat that sank left the 125-foot barge it was towing stranded by Atlantic Beach on Monday.

The men on the second tugboat *Sea Lion* were trying to figure out the best way to retrieve the barge.