

Guarding Liberty: Coast Guard crews watch over unusually quiet New York Harbor

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NEW YORK - Approaching the central harbor from Staten Island, the Statue of Liberty shone bright, and the topmost peaks of the city skyline glistened in the morning sun.

In between the skyscrapers, the needle top of the Empire State Building pierced the sky.

It was a perfect morning on the water in New York Harbor.

But it wasn't.

The Empire State Building should not have been visible between the other buildings. For the first time in more than 20 years, that icon of architecture once again dominates after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center twin towers only a block from the harbor.

The attack shut down the bustling harbor for three days, but it has since reopened on a limited basis to commercial travel. Cruise liners are still barred, and hours for recreational boating are restricted.

Keeping watch on this limited activity are Coast Guard units from up and down the East Coast, including stations on Cape Cod and in New Bedford.

Serving as the command ship for all of the Coast Guard's harbor security forces is the white-hulled Tahoma, a 270-foot cutter from New Bedford.

A 3-inch cannon is on the bow of the ship. Other weapons were on board and ready for use, and guards armed with automatic rifles patrolled the decks. More than a quarter of the Tahoma's 100 crew members, including its skipper, call Cape Cod home.

There was little maritime traffic. A half-dozen giant tankers waited to unload their cargo. The Staten Island ferry and other commuter boats headed to and from Manhattan. The only other vessels were tugs hauling barges to be loaded with building debris, or a dozen city police, state police or Coast Guard boats patrolling the harbor.

Even tour boats to and around the Statue of Liberty remain shut down. The Hudson River is relatively quiet.

Guarding Liberty

The Tahoma is the command center for Operation Guarding Liberty, the Coast Guard's mission to provide security for vital sites around New York Harbor.

The ship is anchored in about 50 feet of water, some 1,000 yards from what used to be the Trade Center, now known as Ground Zero.

There, construction cranes remove debris at the still-smoldering epicenter of the wreckage.

Beneath the cranes, smoke and dust billowed, and glimpses of the skeletal remains of one tower lurked behind piles of smoking rubble.

Commander Gary Smialek is the captain of the Tahoma, and in charge of a fleet of Coast Guard ships and boats in New York Harbor that once numbered 30. That contingent has been whittled to 20 as some boats called in for security duty have been sent back to their home ports.

In addition to the security his forces provide, there are 124 Coast Guard Port Security personnel, specially trained and heavily armed, who travel all over the world to protect American assets, usually Navy vessels.

This is the first time any of those units have been deployed in U.S. harbors. A similar unit is now stationed in Boston Harbor as well.

The assignment was, Smialek said, difficult for everyone at first.

The ship arrived the night of the attack, in almost total darkness. All of lower Manhattan was without power.

"Initially, we thought it was going to be a rescue, but that never really happened," Smialek said. "We were prepared for anything, picking up bodies, pulling victims out of the water. We didn't know."

The next morning was appalling.

"It was a war zone, like Hiroshima. I don't know how to explain. It was quiet, smoke billowing through the city."

The skipper decided to anchor a safe distance from the World Trade Center, just in case.

"We anchored closer to Ellis Island. We were concerned about other buildings collapsing," he said. "We were so near, and yet so far."

The Tahoma's sister ship, the Campbell, also from New Bedford, is stationed just east of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, connecting Staten Island and Brooklyn. The Campbell makes sure nothing passes by its station without proper permission from the Tahoma. The Juniper, out of New Bedford, and the Monomoy, from Cape Cod are also in the harbor.

Protection and spot inspections

"We inspect cargo and crew manifests," Smialek said, adding that stolen property, or foreign crew members who do not have proper immigration or naturalization clearance, are the most common discoveries.

"It may not be what we're looking for, nothing terrorist oriented, but we're enforcing federal laws," he said.

The inspection process is not as time-consuming as one might think. An average inspection, Smialek said, takes about two hours. Spot checks are done at random, all over the harbor.

New, fast Boston Whaler "Raider" boats, with center consoles, twin 175-horsepower outboard motors, a 50-caliber machine gun mounted forward, and two M-60 machine guns at port and starboard, guard the approach to the Navy hospital ship Comfort, berthed upriver near cruise ship docks.

Now serving more as a resting area for relief workers, police and firefighters than its initial mission - to care for those injured in the attack - the boxy, white ship, with huge red crosses painted on its

hull and superstructure, remains a vital asset and is protected by camouflage-uniformed members of the Coast Guard's Port Security Unit 120, from Ft. Eustus, Va.

Asked how fast the heavily armed, 25-foot boat went, the coxswain on the "Raider" just smiled and said, "Uhh, we can catch a lot of people."

Asked if they had actually had to apprehend people since the terrorist attack, another crew member said no.

"Only a couple of boaters and fishermen who didn't know the river was shut down," he said as he laughed and leaned on the 50-caliber machine gun.

On the trip from the Tahoma to the Comfort and back, the empty harbor-side passed by. Police boats bobbed at anchor, a helicopter perched near the edge of a pier, but there was little activity.

On shore an occasional security guard passed by a warehouse. A police car drove around a building. Helicopters buzzed overhead.

But there were no people on the piers, no one fishing, no one enjoying the view, or the warmth of a late September sun.

Constant monitoring

Back inside the Tahoma, routine watches were kept, and all was still, save for the gentle rocking motion of a ship at anchor. On the bridge, video monitors displayed images of the bow and stern, laptop computers hummed, tracking vessels or doing other work. Radios crackled occasionally.

Outside, armed guards patrolled the bow and stern, and a lookout on the bridge with binoculars was steadily checking port and starboard.

Even though the Tahoma was close to the collapsed buildings, there was no noise, no smell, little to remind one of the nearby scene of tragedy.

On shore, in a small harbor called North Shore Marina, the Coast Guard launch tied up. It was where people involved in the rescue effort could go to a four-deck cruise boat operated as a service center by the American Red Cross.

"You don't stop, do you?" one worker asked a woman bringing in a fresh canteen of coffee.

"Well," she replied with a friendly smile, "you're still going, aren't you?"

Refreshed by coffee and cold sodas, the Coast Guard launch picked up some Port Security personnel to take back to the Tahoma, and shoved off.

"I have no desire to go back," said Chief Boatswains Mate David McLaughlin, a reservist with the Coast Guard's Atlantic Strike Team from Ft. Dix, N.J. "I don't want to see it, or see any more TV about it," he said, as he turned the small launch toward the New Jersey coast.

From the stern, the Statue of Liberty's golden torch caught the sunlight, and the Tahoma's white hull with the crimson slash of the Coast Guard gleamed.

It was a beautiful sight, except that the Empire State Building emerged once again from where it had once been hidden by the World Trade Center towers.