

ICS Instrumental at *Grey Shark* Fire

by Assistant Chief William Seelig, Chief of the Special Operations Command,
and Battalion Chief Joseph Abbamonte

On March 14, 2015, the Master of Vessel, Captain Victor Tarasov, reported that the *Grey Shark* had developed engine trouble and was directed by its owners to return to New York City for repairs. The next night, the *Grey Shark* lost its second engine, putting it at the mercy of the mid-March Atlantic Ocean. Winds were whipping at 20-25 knots, with five- to nine-foot waves and swells up to 14 feet. With no ability to maneuver, the ship was pounded by the waves. The cargo on the trailer deck shifted under the harsh conditions and a loaded trailer broke free and overturned on top of another vehicle, causing a fire.

The *Grey Shark* crew stretched hose-lines in an attempt to extinguish the fire, but members were unsuccessful and had to withdraw from the space. The Captain then ordered the ship's CO2 system activated, which partially knocked down the fire. The crew had used all their SCBA bottles during the initial attack and, therefore, were unable to perform final extinguishment with the hose-lines and extinguishers. The ship remained dead in the water, drifting east at two knots per hour.

The fire smoldered more than 24 hours. When the crew detected rising temperatures in the hold, they released more CO2 into the area. During the next day and a half, the *Grey Shark* had restored power to one engine, but the wind and sea conditions prevented her from making headway. The crew again added CO2 to the hold when the temperatures rose and attempted to cool the area by operating hose-lines into the air vents from the weather deck. An ocean-going tug and a United States Coast Guard Cutter were sent to assist. At daybreak on March 17th, the tug, *Eileen McAllister*, took *Grey Shark* under tow and proceeded north. USCG command and control was passed to the Sector New York.

At 1115 hours on March 17th, Chief of Marine Operations, Battalion Chief Michael Buckheit, received a call from the USCG, Sector New York. The USCG reported a ship on fire that was en route to the New York Harbor. The *Grey Shark*, a 360-foot Panamanian-flagged RORO (roll on/roll off) had left New York Harbor on March 11th, loaded with vehicles and humanitarian supplies bound for Haiti. A total of 13 crew members were onboard the vessel.

Chief Buckheit called FDOC, Chief of Special Operations Command, Assistant Chief William Seelig, and the on-duty Marine Battalion Chief, Battalion Chief Joseph Abbamonte. Chief Abbamonte reported to Sector New York to represent FDNY and assist the Coast Guard as a subject matter expert. Sector New York activated their Incident Management Team (IMT) and formed a Unified Command, consisting of USCG, FDNY and the ship's owner and agent.

As Chief Abbamonte started to gather information on the ship's crew and status of the ship's systems and cargo, word was received that an explosion had taken place aboard *Grey Shark* and temperatures in the hold were rising. At this point, the Captain of the ship ordered all remaining CO2 that was reserved for the engine room to be re-routed and put into the fire area. The ship took on a five-degree list and the USCG started to formulate a plan in the event the crew needed to abandon ship. With no remaining CO2 onboard, Chief Abbamonte recommended removing the hose-lines that were operating through the vent cowl and completely sealing the hold.

The *Grey Shark* was towed to Gravesend Bay, just South of Coney Island. The IMT at Sector New York decided to have the ship anchor overnight, while a plan to fight the fire the following morning in daylight hours was developed.

The decision was made to have the vessel towed to the Homeport Pier in Staten Island in the morning where the fire would be fought pier-side in lieu of conducting an "in-stream" operation with the vessel anchored in Gravesend Bay. This strategy would facilitate easier access to the vessel and a much safer operation for FDNY units.

photo courtesy of Battalion Chief Joseph Abbamonte, Marine Battalion

photo by Staten Island Dispatcher Steve White (retired)



Under whipping winds and high waves, a fire broke out on the trailer deck of the *Grey Shark* when cargo shifted and a loaded trailer broke free and landed on top of another vehicle.



This air recon photo was taken days later after the ship was brought into a repair facility in New Jersey. Firefighters were unable to open the stern ramp during the fire. The vehicles shown on deck were inside the ship on the lower deck at the time of the fire. No vehicles were on the deck during the fire.

At 1230 hours on March 18th, the vessel was towed from Gravesend Bay to the Homeport Pier by the *McAllister* tug, with FDNY Marine units and a USCG vessel providing an escort. The vessel arrived at 1330 hours and was tied up along the north side of the pier. Non-essential ship's crew were taken off the ship, leaving the ship's Captain and Chief Engineer onboard to assist with the operations of any required ship's systems. At 1400 hours, FDNY commenced fire assessment and mitigation operations.

FDNY operations

With Chief Seelig serving as Incident Commander (IC) in consultation with Deputy Assistant Chief Richard Howe, Staten Island Borough Commander (Deputy IC), and Deputy Chief John Hodgins, Division 8 Commander (Operations Chief), an attack plan was formulated. Staten Island Box 8039 was transmitted at 1109 hours with the following FDNY resources dispatched to the scene:

Engine Companies: Engines 155, 159, 153 and 160

Ladder Companies: Ladders 77, 78 and 81

SOC Units: Engine 165, Rescue 5, Squad 1, Marine 9, 9A and 6 and Rebreather 1

Chief Officers: Car 11, Staten Island Boro, Division 8, Battalion 21, Battalion 22, Battalion 48 (Staging), Rescue Battalion, Haz-Mat Battalion, Safety Battalion and Marine Battalion

Special Units: Planning Vehicle (Engine 262), FieldComm, Engine

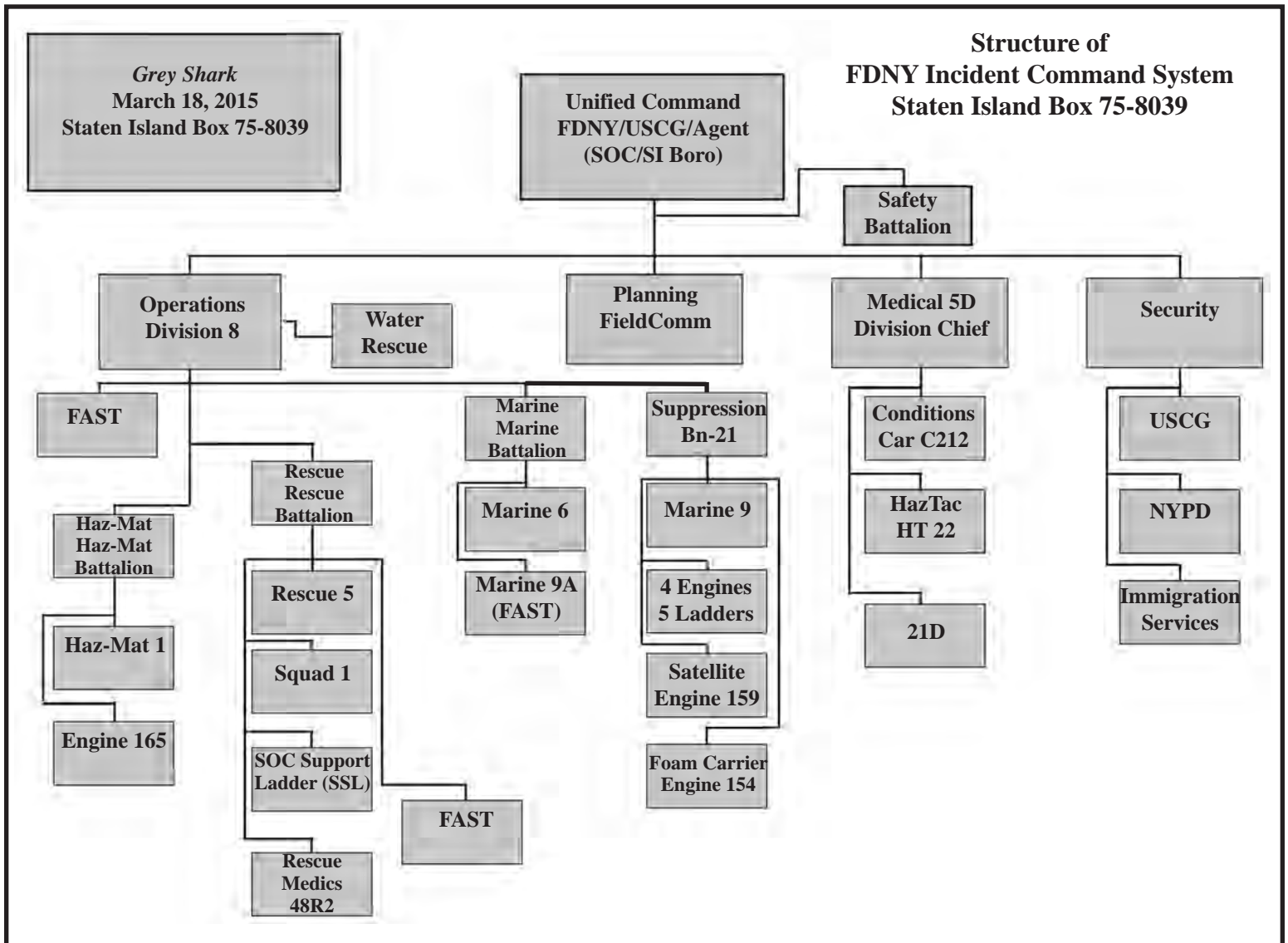
156 (Water Rescue), Satellite 5 (Engine 159), Ladder 87 (Vent Support), Engine 154 (Foam Carrier), CTU-1

EMS Resources: Division Chief 5D, DC 551, Conditions 212, HTB, HazTac 22, 48 Rescue, 21B

An Operations Section was established with Chief Hodgins serving as the Operations Section Chief. Four groups were established under the Operations Section--Haz-Mat, Rescue, Marine and Suppression Groups.

Haz-Mat Group, under the command of Battalion Chief Steve Fitzgerald, included the Haz-Mat Battalion, Haz-Mat 1 and HMTU Engine 165. Prior to entry by other FDNY units, Haz-Mat 1 members conducted air monitoring to ensure that the atmosphere below deck was not in the explosive range. Haz-Mat 1 and HMTU Engine 165 provided continuous air sampling and monitoring throughout the operation to ensure the safety of FDNY units operating below deck.

Marine Group, under the command of Battalion Chief Joseph Abbamonte, included the Marine Battalion, Marine 9 and Marine 9A. Marine 9 was re-assigned to the Suppression Group. Chief Abbamonte took a position on the ship's bridge with the vessel's Captain to ensure that FDNY had control of all the ship's systems and provided any and all information that the Captain and Chief Engineer could provide to ensure the safety of FDNY personnel operating onboard. Marine 6 provided the escort for the *Grey Shark* when it initially was towed to the Homeport Pier and remained on the



scene to provide an alternate water supply if needed. Marine 9A served as an on-water FAST unit in the event a member fell overboard or required evacuation from the water side of the vessel.

Rescue Group, under the command of Battalion Chief Rich Blatus, included the Rescue Battalion, Rescue 5, Squad 1, Ladder 77, Rescue Medics 48R2 and the FAST unit--Ladder 81. Rescue 5 and Squad 1 members stretched a 1¾-inch foam hand-line below deck via a stairway from the main deck, located and extinguished the fire and conducted primary searches in all accessible below-deck areas. Due to the extensive number of vehicles below deck--many of which had fallen over and shifted while underway in heavy seas--the task of searching the below-deck area proved to be difficult and time-consuming under moderate heat and zero visibility conditions.

Ladder 81 served as a FAST unit, staged on the deck of the ship in the vicinity of the access stairway to the lower deck. In addition to Ladder 81, another FAST unit--Ladder 78--was staged at the Command Post on the pier.

Suppression Group, under the command of Battalion Chief William Reilly, Battalion 21, was charged with providing the required water and foam supply for the operation. Marine 9's boat, *Fire Fighter II*, was the primary water supply for the entire operation. Marine 9's quarters are located on the Homeport Pier, adjacent to where the *Grey Shark* was moored, so it was decided to leave *Fire Fighter II* at her berth and stretch approximately 400 feet of six-inch hose from the fireboat to pumpers located on the pier adjacent to the *Grey Shark*.

While moored at berth, the *Fire Fighter II* is capable of pumping up to 50,000 gpm, so providing the necessary water supply for the operation was no problem. A foam carrier also was set up on the pier and provided the foam hand-line that was stretched below deck by the Rescue Group to extinguish the fire. A back-up hand-line also was stretched and manned by units in the Suppression Group in case it was needed below deck to back up the original hand-line.

Medical Group, under the command of Division Chief Marylou Aurricchio, included Deputy Chief Christine Mazzola, Conditions Car C212, HazTac Battalion, HazTac Ambulance HT22 and Rescue Medic Unit 48R2. On arrival, the Rescue Medic Unit was assigned to the Rescue Group and operated on the deck of the ship, adjacent to the access stairway, in full gear and ready to be deployed below deck if needed. The remaining units in the Medical Group staged on the pier adjacent to the ship, ready to deploy if needed. Luckily, there were no major injuries requiring medical treatment at the incident.

Security Group included members of the USCG, NYPD and Immigration Services. Immigration Services was required because the ship's crew was composed of foreign personnel and the Homeport Pier was not equipped to handle an international entry. The crew had to be escorted from the ship and held in a secure location during the entire operation. An MTA bus was ordered to the scene as a secure location to hold the ship's crew under the control of Immigration Services personnel.

The **Planning Section** consisted of the Field Communications staff, who operated out of the Command Vehicle, which was brought to the scene by Engine 262. FieldComm personnel provided the communications link to FDNY dispatchers, monitored the Electronic Fireground Accountability System (EFAS) and provided progress reports throughout the incident.

The **Safety Officer** on the scene was Deputy Assistant Chief Paul Cresci, Chief of Safety, who operated from the pier, overseeing the safety aspects of all operations. Battalion Chief Doug Gehrt was assigned as the Safety Battalion Chief. Chief Gehrt worked with the Rescue Group on the deck of the ship and played a key role in

controlling and tracking all members going below deck. Safety also monitored communications and atmospheric conditions with Squad 1 during entry.

Per Chief Cresci's recommendation, Engine 156 was special-called to the scene as a Water Rescue Unit. Their purpose was to provide for the safety of members pier side as they boarded and disembarked from the vessel. Marine 9A provided the same protection on the water side of the vessel. Members operating pier side or boarding a vessel in bunker gear are required to wear a proper personal flotation device (PFD). It is recommended, where possible, that bunker gear be removed prior to boarding the vessel and hoisted aboard for re-donning by the member once on the ship's deck. Again, a proper PFD was required to be worn while boarding and disembarking.

Lessons learned/reinforced

- Fighting a fire aboard a ship is a time-consuming, labor-intensive and dangerous operation. All possible options to extinguish the fire should be explored before committing members to operate below deck. In most situations where there is no life hazard, members should not be committed to operate below deck unless the fire location is known and fire is of a minor nature. In the case of this fire, the location was known to be directly adjacent to the access stairway and also known to be of a smoldering nature.
- When dealing with a fire on a ship "in stream," the best option is to bring the ship to a berth to fight the fire. The logistics of gaining access to the ship with personnel and equipment "in stream" is exponentially more difficult than having FDNY units operating from a pier. The final decision regarding whether a ship on fire can be brought to a pier rests with the USCG Captain of the Port.
- Most ships coming into New York Harbor are foreign flag vessels with crews whose command of the English language is limited at best. When the crew member with the best English language skills is identified, he should be kept in the bridge with the ship's Captain/Master and FDNY Battalion Chief assigned to that position to help with communications between the FDNY and crew.

Conclusion

Ship fires occur very infrequently and are an operation that most units are not accustomed to battling. Although the number of FDNY resources assigned to this incident turned out to be more than actually was required, it was felt that it was best to have them available on-scene, in case the situation accelerated or turned out to be worse than anticipated.



About the Authors...

Assistant Chief William C. Seelig (top) is a 37-year veteran of the FDNY. He is the Chief of the Special Operations Command. Prior assignments include the Chief of Rescue Operations. He is an original member of the FDNY Incident Management Team, serving as an Operations Section Chief. Holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Manhattan College. He writes frequently for WNYF. **Battalion Chief Joseph Abbamonte** (bottom) is a 20-year veteran of the FDNY. He is assigned to the Marine Battalion. Prior assignments include Battalion 27 and the Haz-Mat Battalion. Holds a BA degree from SUNY, Old Westbury, and a 100-gross ton, Near Coastal Masters License from the USCG. This is his first article for WNYF.

