

Deep commitment

Divers who searched the frigid, murky harbor after the Seaport Taxi tragedy put duty before all else.

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Water is ordinarily a firefighter's friend.

But for the team of Baltimore Fire Department divers who plumbed the muddy, near-freezing depths of the Patapsco River over the past two week period after the fatal capsizing of the water taxi Lady D, the water was a treacherous, demanding foe.

No amount of monthly dive training in pools, quarries or reservoirs could have fully prepared the volunteer dive team for the dangers it faced during the 10-day effort of 12- to 14-hour days to recover the bodies of three Seaport Taxi passengers lost in the waters off Fort McHenry.

From the day of the capsizing, March 6, until Monday, when the last of the three bodies was recovered, the Fire Department divers repeatedly jumped into the frigid, swirling waters, descending in zero visibility to a mushy, silt-covered bottom. They battled numb limbs and burst eardrums and tested their nerves as they rooted through the mire in the slim, and grim, hope of locating the missing. Even their welcome returns to surface were fraught with risk, as they maneuvered around a tricky cable connected to the underwater robotic rover whose sonar images told them where to search.

"You're risking your life going down there," said Kenneth Hyde, a dive team member since 1993.

But again and again they went, until all the victims were accounted for.

The first in the water after the taxi capsized was not a diver, but Robert Sebeck, the man who pilots the team's boat.

He and his partner were on the first fire boat to reach the overturned Lady D. Their target: a woman passenger who was floating face down in the water nearby.

Wearing only a life vest, Sebeck jumped in. He hoisted the unconscious woman up by the back of her pants and attempted to climb back on the fire boat. But the boat's ladder snapped, sending him and the victim back into the water. A police boat arrived and guided the woman to a nearby Naval vessel, where reservists began CPR.

A shivering Sebeck finally made it aboard his boat and promptly collapsed. But he quickly regained his strength when a Naval reservist shouted that they had "a little girl in full [cardiac] arrest," Sebeck said. It was 8-year-old Sarah Bentrem. He and his partner raced her to shore; today, she remains in critical condition at [University of Maryland Medical Center](#).

Her 6-year-old brother, Daniel, was not as fortunate. He and two other Lady D passengers - Corinne Schillings, 26, of Washington, and Andrew Roccella, 26, of Vienna, Va. - were the only three water taxi passengers not recovered from the water that day.

Finding the missing was now the divers' mission. But they had no idea what they would be up against.

Harsh conditions

"Most of our training is in 30 to 40 feet of water," said Phil Bildstein, a diver for 14 years. The focal point of their

search, the Northwest Harbor of the Patapsco River, went as deep as 70 feet in places. Its mid-March temperature: 36 degrees.

Some of the divers used scuba equipment; they dove with tanks attached to their backs and masks strapped to their faces. Most of them, however, performed what they called "helmet diving," entering the water wearing 80-pound suits that covered everything but their heads and hands.

To breathe, they clicked on a helmet that was attached to a line delivering air from tanks stored on their boats. For their hands, they slid on specially equipped gloves connected to their suits. Often, the frigid water seeped into the gloves, numbing their hands.

With flippers over their feet, divers would step off the back of a boat and follow the cable that attached Tyco Telecommunications' hulking 400-foot ship to the company's sonar-equipped, bottom-roving robot.

Given the conditions, most dives lasted 20 minutes to 30 minutes. In the disorienting, murky water, most divers would descend with their eyes closed. Some hummed as they descended. "You can't see anything," Bildstein said. "It's like looking through a pot of coffee. You can tell there's light on the other side but you can't distinguish anything."

The cord to the robot below carried 3,000 volts of electricity, but it also provided a guide for divers, who would follow it down and land on the 8-foot-tall device at the bottom of the Patapsco. The harbor currents, though, frequently twisted divers' lines around the cable causing snags that prevented an easy return to the surface.

That's what happened to Bernard "Bean" Muller.

On Saturday, March 13, Muller made a dive to investigate a shape that officials thought might be one of the missing passengers.

Muller, 46, has been with the Fire Department for 24 years, and a diver for longer. His descent was fairly typical. But once on the bottom, Muller's dive took an extraordinary turn: the shape located by the sonar was indeed a body. He had located who they believed was Corinne Schillings.

What happened next exemplified the difficulty - and danger - of the recovery mission.

As Muller began to ascend, his line became snagged, said Bildstein, who was working as Muller's assistant on the surface. And suddenly, his dive suit's inflation gear kicked in, as the body pressed against him.

As his suit filled with air, he struggled. The weight of his helmet flipped him upside down, nearly 20 feet from the surface. Two emergency divers, Samuel Burrell and Kenneth Hyde, dove in to help.

By the time they reached him, Muller had passed out. The inflated suit had pressed the collar that affixes the helmet against his neck, cutting off his breathing. He lost consciousness, and Schillings slipped away.

His fellow divers untangled Muller's line, sending him shooting to the surface feet first, Bildstein said. He floated on the surface "like a balloon," Bildstein said. "It was the worst scenario I can think of."

They pulled the unconscious diver onto the boat and punctured his bloated suit with a knife to release the air. Bildstein removed his helmet and began to administer CPR.

Muller survived - and returned the next day.

A breakthrough

Baltimore Fire Chief William J. Goodwin held a meeting on the morning of Sunday, March 14, at the fire boat house at Fort McHenry. He told the divers they were going home.

At first, the news relieved Hyde. He was scheduled to be the first diver that day. But the news was also dismaying. "I think on Sunday morning we were all feeling like we didn't complete the job," said Hyde, 38.

As the divers filed out, Goodwin's assistant burst into the room to tell the chief he had a call. Goodwin left, then returned in five minutes with a look of disbelief, firefighters said.

"He said, 'They've got two definite hits,'" Bildstein said, meaning likely locations for the missing passengers. "He gave us the option. Everybody was like, 'Let's do it.'"

Hyde made the first dive later that day.

"It was tough getting back in the water after what happened to Bean," Hyde recalled. "I was up to 3 a.m. thinking about having to dive after [that]."

For a week straight, the dive team had crawled along the Patapsco's bottom finding only tree stumps and boat ropes. One diver, Burrell, stayed down for over an hour; he emerged unable to feel his hands or feet. "Hypothermia is the fear," said Hyde, whose longest dive was 52 minutes.

This dive, though, had taken only 15 minutes before he found Andrew Roccella. The dive team pulled him slowly to the surface near 2:30 p.m.

Bildstein followed later that same day with a 30-minute dive. Directed by his dive team on the surface, he jumped from the rover and crawled toward Daniel Bentrem. Bildstein carried the boy to the surface near 4:15 p.m.

"The first time I actually saw him," the diver recalled, "was when I passed the child to the guys in the boat."

As the day came to an end, Schillings, the first victim to be found, was still missing.

She, though, was recovered the next day by diver Joe Yingling, not far from where the others had been found.

The dive team, Bildstein said, was relieved after the third victim was found, happy for the families who had recovered their loved ones, and glad that they had completed the mission they started.

Bildstein, who is married and the father of 3-year-old twins, said he told his children that he had been away helping people lost in the harbor.

"They were happy to know that daddy had helped those people find their way home," he said.