

Diver recovers final victim in capsizing of the 'Lady D'

Washington woman, 26, was to be engaged to man lost in accident

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Diver Joe Yingling descended to the Patapsco River's murky bottom yesterday fully aware that he would find the last of three bodies missing since a Seaport Taxi capsized 10 days ago in high winds off Fort McHenry.

When he landed on the silt-covered bottom 51 feet down, Yingling, 37, crawled on hands and knees in zero visibility toward an object that had been identified by sonar. After searching for three minutes, he found the body of Corinne J. Schillings, 26, of Washington.

Ten days after the first Baltimore firefighter splashed into stormy waters off Fort McHenry to help a passenger from the water taxi accident, Yingling emerged yesterday as the last. By returning Schillings to shore near 3:30 p.m., Yingling's 18-minute dive completed a mission that required 35 dives and the help of nearly 80 Fire Department personnel and \$50 million in high-tech assistance from three private companies.

"I report to you Corinne is going home," said Chief William J. Goodwin Jr. "Our job is complete."

In the end, the Baltimore Fire Department did more than provide closure to victims' families. It brought peace to a city.

Schillings' parents, Karen and Denny Schillings of Homewood, Ill., released a statement yesterday thanking Goodwin and the divers and the companies that lent the sophisticated sonar equipment that delved the Patapsco's muddy waters.

"We are very grateful for the recovery of Corinne and look forward to bringing her home," the statement reads. "This brings our family a measure of closure to this tragedy and will allow us to focus on grieving for the sudden and heartbreaking loss of Corinne and Andrew Roccella."

Roccella, 26, of Vienna, Va., was one of five victims lost in the capsizing of the water taxi, the Lady D. He and Schillings were to be engaged. They were on the boat with their parents, all of whom survived. The couple met in Florence, Italy, while studying abroad in the summer of 1998.

Missing along with Roccella and Schillings was 6-year-old Daniel Bentrem of Harrisonburg, Va. The bodies of the boy and Roccella were found Sunday.

Sarah Bentrem, Daniel's 8-year-old sister, remained in critical condition at University of Maryland Medical Center yesterday. The children were on an outing with their parents and another sister who were among the survivors.

"Chief Goodwin, the Fire Department and the divers have been truly inspirational in their efforts," said James Piper Bond, president of the Living Classrooms Foundation, the nonprofit organization that owned and operated the Lady D. "We offer our deepest sympathies to the family."

Bond spoke by phone yesterday, shortly after returning from the funerals in New Jersey of the first two confirmed victims.

Services were held for Joanne Pierce, 60, of Vineland, N.J., who was pronounced dead after being pulled from the water on March 6, the day the boat flipped, and her daughter, Lisa Pierce, 34, of Lyndhurst, N.J., who died March 8 at Harbor Hospital.

A rapidly moving thunderstorm struck the 2-ton pontoon boat shortly after it left its Fort McHenry dock about 4

p.m. Gusts overturned the 36-foot boat as its captain, Francis Deppner of Middle River, attempted to steer it back to shore after receiving storm warnings from the National Weather Service.

Rescuers from the nearby Naval Reserve Center and the city's fireboat unit responded within minutes and pulled 22 people from the water. Seaport Taxi has not been operating since that day "out of deference to the families," Bond said. He was unsure when the water shuttle would resume.

The successful recovery efforts in the search for the three missing passengers over the past two days followed eight frustrating days of diving on tree stumps, mounds of mud and other debris that had appeared on sonar devices lent by Tyco Telecommunications' Baltimore location, Marine Sonic Technology of White Marsh, Va., and SeaTrepid Inc. of Pottstown, Pa. The search was nearly called off early Sunday.

"We had zero targets to look at" on Sunday morning, Goodwin said. "I had said we would go until we had no options."

Then the phone rang at the fireboat station at Fort McHenry that has served as headquarters for the search. Marine Sonic Technology's side-scan sonar device had two new targets. They turned out to be Bentrem and Roccella. Tyco's underwater robotic rover found Schillings' body yesterday.

Veteran firefighters Phil Bildstein and Kenneth Hyde, both 38, made the dives that brought Bentrem and Roccella home. As in Yingling's retrieval of Schillings, the divers tied a rope under the victims' arms and around their waists. As they ascended along another rope, each diver guided the bodies to the surface.

Bildstein, a father of two, said he tried not to be overwhelmed by emotion as he ascended with the small body of Daniel Bentrem.

"You try not to think about what you're doing," Bildstein said. "Once I got up, me and the other guys with children called our own kids right away."

Yingling said the divers were eager to end the ordeal for the victims' families. When Schillings was found, the mood was one of elation tempered with sympathy.

"I'm so proud of these guys," said Mayor Martin O'Malley. "They never ever gave up."