

Water under the bridges

Patrolling the Hudson and East rivers is a gruelling task for the NYPD: Harbor Unit

NEW YORK — Decomposing bodies, junked cars, shipwrecks, silver bars, circus animals, torpedoes, guns and drugs. The police divers who patrol the Hudson and East Rivers find some crazy items in the waters around Manhattan.

“The bodies are the worst. We recover them all around New York, up to 70 a year. Most are suicides. They jump from bridges. In the springtime the undiscovered bodies from over the winter come up to the surface.”

It’s Thursday morning at the South Street Sea Port. Detective Karl Zarr stands at the helm of his boat as he describes his daily routine so casually, you’d think he worked in an insurance office.

“You never get used to it,” he said. “It’s probably the worst part of the job.”

The five radios onboard crackle in unison around him, spilling out a jumbled mix of police jargon.

The Harbor Unit is the oldest division in the NYPD. In 1858, 12 officers were assigned to protect merchant vessels docked in the bay from pirates. Times have changed. Now the threat is terrorism.

Since September 11, 2001, the 150 patrollers have beefed up their operations.

“We go on a lot of proactive missions, we show up by surprise in places to show we’re here,” he said as the Statue of Liberty passed by in the distance.

The unit’s 30 boats are



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equipped with radiation detectors. Underwater cameras can detect bombs and drug shipments attached to a boat’s hull or attached to bridge footings.

Detective Zarr takes me to where a helicopter and an airplane collided in mid-air over the Hudson River on Aug. 8. Several weeks after the disaster, NYPD divers are still on site to make sure there’s no debris left on the riverbed.

The radios crackle louder. A man apparently fell into the water by the Verrazano Bridge. Within five minutes the NYPD has a helicopter in the air. Ambulances and patrol cars are already on their way by road. We spend a few minutes scanning the surface of the water before calling a false alarm.

Nearby, a boat filled with divers from the Scuba Unit anchors for a routine mission. “It’s like going into a fire, they don’t see anything,” Zarr explained. “They dive in the worst conditions.”

Divers who work in New York’s murky waters have between one and three feet of visibility, just enough to check their oxygen levels. It’s not so much the pollution as the 2,200 tons of sediment brought down by the Hudson

River every day.

Back on the surface, Detective Brian Singer, 33, told me they find things underwater by their sense of touch, feeling their way along with their hands. This is his seventh year as a diver with the NYPD. “We set up a grid with rope on the bottom to guide us,” he explained. He and his colleagues can go as deep as 100 ft. in these waters.

They retrieve bodies, firearms, boat anchors and cars. Lots of cars. At various times in New York’s crime-filled past, the river bottoms were practically parking lots. A big cleanup was done in the 1980s, “but they’re still everywhere, it’s New York after all,” he said.

Divers work in pairs for safety reasons and can stay underwater for up to an hour. They use positive pressure masks to stop polluted water from getting into their gear. They’re completely dry when they exit the water. The training for this job is grueling and has a 91% dropout rate.

What’s the strangest thing this diver has ever pulled out of the water? “Um, I’d rather not say,” he told me. “We don’t really see what we pull out, we just bring things up to the surface,” he said. Even down in the dark depths around New York, there’s no place for fear for people in Singer’s line of work.

“It’s part of the job, you have to dive according to your limits,” he said.

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Scuba divers have only 1-3 feet of visibility in New York’s murky waters — and often can’t see what it is they are pulling up.

Headline goes here okay

There may be no one on the planet who knows the Hudson River better than Columbia University scientist Frank Nitsche. This Swiss geophysicist was invited to New York to undertake the biggest mapping project in the river’s history, where he spent four

years taking sonar readings.

“The goal was to create a detailed map because the most recent research was done in the ’40s,” he said. The \$1.7 million project will allow New York to develop its coastline. Nitsche found 170 boat wrecks whose locations he

won’t reveal because of interest from treasure hunters. He also found a mountain of garbage near the George Washington Bridge that dates back to World War II when city waste was dumped directly into the river. There’s a whole other New York down there.



PHOTOS BY MARIE-JOËLLE PARENT/SUN MEDIA

Detective Brian Singer, has been a diver on the NYPD Scuba Unit for over six years, even though it’s a gruelling job.

Boat anchors

Countless cars

A submarine

...and of course, bodies and firearms.

A giraffe that escaped from a zoo

An ice cream truck

A dining room table

A grand piano

170 boat wrecks. Some, like the Princess Anne steamship, date back to the 19th century.

FOUND IN THE HARBOUR

Some objects found at the bottom of New York’s rivers:

● In 1903 a **boat** sank with its cargo of **silver ingots**. About **6,000** have been recovered since then, but there are still **1,600** that haven’t been found. They’re worth about **\$26 million today**. Amateur treasure hunters are still trying to find them.

● A **train** fell from a bridge in 1865. It’s still on the river bottom.

Source: New York Magazine

