Blessing The Fleet

by Peter B. Fleischer
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A thousand feet from land, at the edge of the Canarsie Pier in Brooklyn, looking across the gentle chop of an inland sea at an uninhabited tree covered island, Patie Ventre cast a memorial wreath into Jamaica Bay. A cannon was fired. The American flag was raised. The National Anthem was sung.Ventre is the Commander of the United Inter-Yacht Clubs Association, and this was the 47th Annual Blessing of the Fleet.

Rabbi Cecil Walkenfeld, a Chaplain with the New York City Department of Corrections offered his blessing, "Let man and boat work together to successfully navigate our way". Father Angelo Pezzullo of Nativity Church in Ozone Park joined him. He asked God to bless "all those who protect this country by sea, make their livelihood from the sea, and use the sea for enjoyment."

Under powder blue skies, a warm sun and with a steady off-shore breeze, representatives of eighteen Jamaica Bay yacht clubs formed a maritime procession lasting two hours. In turn, powerboats, sailboats, and hand-powered craft floated past the reviewing stand on Canarsie Pier. Passengers and crew aboard the ships stood at attention, saluting, most of them in formal dress white, a few in navy blue and white. It was an impressive display of pomp and protocol.

As the lead boat from each club passed the reviewing stand, the ecumenical clergy team offered each fleet their blessings. Two hundred feet down the pier a ten gauge cannon was fired.

Commander Ventre stood at a reviewing stand or "Bridge" with Vice Commander Richard Brew and Rear Commander, Gaetano "Tom" Polito. A team of five judges from the New York Police Department Harbor Unit, the US Park Service Police, the National Park Service and the owner of Canarsie Pier's Sunset Landing judged each ship in the fleet for seamanship and procedure. Clubs were judged based on attendance.

Powerboats have an interesting history in Jamaica Bay. The legendary bandleader Guy Lombardo raced powerboats in its waters. Its many channels, basins and islands provided hiding spots to rumrunners during Prohibition. The Hudson River Yacht Club located in Padergat Basin was founded in 1873.

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The Fleet's half-century-old traditions stem from a post-World War Two emphasis on safety in a Jamaica Bay that had only been recently transformed from a military base to a haven for recreation. Additionally, many club members had served in the military and were eager to maintain their navy traditions - discipline, respect and duty.

The genesis of the oddly named United Inter-Yacht Clubs Association dates to the early 1930's. At that time, Robert Moses' plans to construct a "Belt" Parkway threatened havoc to the dozens of boat clubs that lined the bay's northern edge. The clubs organized to coordinate their response to Moses' plan and eventual construction of the circumferential roadway and bridges. In the end, many clubs folded and others were forced to move.

Today the association continues to work together on matters of mutual interest. The group strongly opposed the recent closure of a Jamaica Bay Coast Guard facility citing safety concerns. With their membership highly devoted to fishing, they closely watch matters that impact the bay's environmental health.

Commander Ventre of the Brooklyn Yacht Club was the first woman to become a fleet captain. A dynamic and optimistic leader, she sees the need for her organization to work more closely with the estimated one hundred boat clubs in a twenty-five mile radius of New York City. Ventre brings inclusiveness to her association that augurs well for the growing, diverse use of the harbor. Though a power boater, she welcomed the participation of the kayak oriented Sebago Canoe Club. Of particular importance to the commander was the presence of a Coast Guard vessel for the first time in recent years.

Peter B. Fleischer, currently writing a book on the New York City waterfront, was formerly a transportation and environment policy advisor to New York City Mayors David Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani.