RESCUES FROM THE ATLANTIC:

THE GOLDEN VENTURE INCIDENT

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A journey that began 11 months before ended June 6, 1993, off a beach in Queens, New York, when the freighter Golden Venture dropped its frightened cargo of approximately 300 Chinese immigrants into the 52°F waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

THE JOURNEY

The journey began in July 1992, when some of the Venture’s passengers set out from Thailand aboard the NAJD II. The journey was halted for six months when the ship broke down in the Indian Ocean. The rest of the passengers sailed from Bangkok in late March aboard the Golden Venture, which was on its way to Kenya to pick up some of those stranded from the NAJD II. The Venture then sailed around Africa, across the Atlantic, and north to the Rockaway Peninsula.

It has been reported that people paid as much as $30,000 apiece for the voyage. The human cargo was divided and stuffed into two cargo compartments—each about 25 feet by 40 feet—where passengers ate, slept, and went to the bathroom. Passengers were given one meal a day—a small portion of rice and vegetables.

Allegedly, the captain of the Golden Venture purposely beached his vessel to discharge his cargo, not realizing that he was beached on a sandbar 200 yards from shore. As the immigrants left the ship they were met by darkness, 52°F water, and six-to-eight-foot waves.

RESCUE OPERATIONS

At 0221 hours, reporting a "freight-er crash into a party boat, 100 persons in the water," the first call was re-
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received by the City of New York (NY) Fire Department's Queens communications office. The location given was 169th street and the ocean front. Queens dispatch immediately filled out the box alarm assignment, providing a response of three engine, two ladder, three heavy rescue, and two marine companies. In addition, the rescue liaison unit, two tactical support units, the 47th battalion, the marine battalion, and the 13th division were dispatched. Within three minutes and 21 seconds of the initial phone call, the above units were assigned, acknowledged, and responding. Access to the location was limited, consisting of only a two-lane dirt road, running parallel to the beach, with one entrance at each end.

As the first units arrived and climbed the dunes, they were met by an eerie sight. The freighter was in darkness, with no deck lights—only small, almost nonvisible bow lights. Through the fog and sounds of the pounding surf, responders could hear the voices of the immigrants as they abandoned the ship.

Approaching the beach and using flashlights, firefighters could see people coming out of the surf line, many of them bobb ing up and down in the waves. Some of the immigrants were holding on to empty two-gallon plastic jugs for flotation. Many had their only possessions, inside plastic bags, clutched tightly under their arms. A fierce current was carrying many of the victims farther out to sea and away from rescuers.

Members of the first-arriving fire department units immediately entered the water and began pulling survivors out, trying to reach the immigrants before they were washed out to the jetties. About 1,000 feet west of the freighter, firefighters removed two lifeless victims from the surf and initiated cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Upon EMS personnel response, these two victims were removed by Coast Guard helicopter and transported to a hospital, where they were pronounced dead. Two others who were removed from the surf also eventually succumbed at area hospitals, and still two other victims were found floating in the surf the next morning.

With the arrival of the three heavy rescue units and the two tactical support units, the fire department's rescue operations were expanded. Members in protective exposure suits and divers' dry suits entered the water, using tag lines for safety, and began to remove victims from the pounding surf. Simultaneously, members placed into operation two inflatable rescue boats with gasoline engines. These boats were constantly being pounded by the heavy seas during the operation. Conditions were such that a 22-foot Coast Guard boat and a smaller New York Police Department boat were overturned in the surf. Luckily, their crews were brought to shore safely.

Firefighters left the beach only to return with victims pulled from the waters surrounding the freighter. At
first the victims were brought to the shore, but eventually the surf became too treacherous, so the small boats brought their passengers to awaiting Coast Guard and police boats beyond the breakers. These two boats are credited with rescuing at least 40 people from the water.

The fireboats Alfred E. Smith, Marine 6, and the Firefighter, Marine 9, arrived and placed their small, 13-foot, gasoline-powered boats into the water. Firefighters in these boats continued to remove victims from the waters and assist those passengers who were still leaving the stranded freighter. Forty-five people were rescued by these two craft and brought to the safety of the larger Coast Guard vessels.

At one point members of Rescue Co. 4 were about to board the freighter to try to calm the immigrants down in an attempt to alleviate the uncontrolled evacuation taking place. The police department reported that some of the Chinese might be armed and dangerous, so firefighers did not attempt to board.

Throughout the operation, Coast Guard and police department helicopters used powerful searchlights to light up the Golden Venture and the surrounding waters to assist emergency personnel in victim search.

Police and Coast Guard small boats also performed many rescues during the operation. In addition, members of the Roxbury, Point Breeze, Rockaway Point, Gerritsen Beach, Broad Channel, and West Hamilton Beach fire departments sent personnel and equipment. (These are some of the remaining volunteer fire departments still operating fire and ambulance services within the confines of the city of New York.)

As the immigrants were removed from the ocean, they were turned over to police, immigration, and EMS personnel in a designated area on the beach. From there they were triaged and either transported to area hospitals or removed to detention centers to await federal hearings. More than 150 EMS personnel treated 295 refugees at the scene. Another 27 refugees were transported to hospitals.

LESSONS LEARNED AND REINFORCED

● Incident command. The incident command system must be set up and utilized to its fullest. An interagency command post should be set up, with representatives from all responding agencies present, to coordinate the activities of the many agencies involved in the operation.

● Sectors. Geographic and functional sectoring at this type of incident is a must. Sectors should be marked with barrier tape and some form of identification. Portable signs designating the command post and other areas proved valuable at this incident. Operations sectors should be of manageable size, and personnel operating within these sectors should remain, if at all possible, within these areas—and not wander from sector to sector.

Fire department inflatable rescue boats with gasoline engines proved invaluable to the rescue/recovery effort. With the surf becoming rougher as the operation progressed, these units brought victims to Coast Guard and police craft instead of directly to shore. Crows from the highly maneuverable inflatable rescue boats and from FDNY's two 13-foot Boston whalers rescued at least 85 people from the water.
These sectors should be under the command of one person, who should be clearly identified. Three additional battalion chiefs were special-called to handle sector assignments at this incident.

- **Exposure identification.** At incidents such as this, the command post should be set up opposite an identifiable area of operations, in this case the bow of the vessel. The command post then became exposure 1, the area immediately to the left of the vessel became exposure 2, the area behind the stern became exposure 3, and the area to the right of the vessel became exposure 4. This helps ensure that everyone operating at the scene uses the same exposure identification. Remember, the command post is exposure 1.

- **Lighting.** At remote operations in darkness, provide as much lighting as possible for operations and support areas. Use portable lighting to define boundaries where possible. The Coast Guard and police helicopters were used to light up the vessel and the surrounding waters at this incident. This proved invaluable: When people were seen climbing down the ladders from the freighter, the small boats were directed toward them. In addition, flares were used to define the landing area for the helicopter when it removed the two victims from the beach.

- **Communications.** The use of command channels at large-scale operations helps to manage operations more efficiently. Sector commanders can talk directly with the command post on a channel other than the one being used by operating units. When this system is instituted, the sector commander must have an aid to monitor the operations channel and transmit messages to units operating within the sector. Keep portable radios charged as per manufacturers’ instructions.

  During this operation, portable radios became waterlogged and failed to operate properly. At large-scale and prolonged operations, make provisions for additional radios and batteries to be brought to the scene to be used either as replacements or as additional communications. FDNY carries additional radios on the field communications unit for such use. This unit responded to the incident, set up the command board, and handled the communications sector of our incident command. When portable radios become extremely wet at operations, they may have to be taken out of service for proper repair and/or servicing. Replacements have to be provided.

  Interagency communications have to be effective at these large operations. Accomplish this by utilizing the various agency representatives stationed at the interagency command post, transmitting messages through them for delivery to another agency’s representative. Communications with the Coast Guard were handled through the marine companies, who used the marine band radios located in the pilot house of the fireboat. Information then was relayed to the command post on the beach. Clear and concise directions should be broadcast to responding units via apparatus radios at frequent intervals. This will ensure that units responding at different times receive the information.

- **Staging.** At large operations where personnel rather than apparatus are needed, establish staging as early as possible. The only road leading to this operation quickly became clogged with unnecessary apparatus and vehicles. Thus, rescue apparatus were parked far from the location where apparatus and equipment were needed, and equipment had to be hand-carried to the point of operation.

  The staging area should be placed under the command of an officer and clear response directions to this area given to units as they are assigned to the operation. This will leave the area immediately adjacent to the operations clear for essential vehicle placement. After equipment is unloaded, vehicles no longer needed should be returned to staging. If possible (situations will vary), chauffeurs should remain with their apparatus in case additional equipment located on the apparatus is needed at the point of operation.

Daybreak revealed the numerous marine craft and aircraft utilized in this large, multiagency response. Refugees were moved to a designated area of the beach secured by police and immigration personnel, where they were triaged and treated by emergency medical personnel. Two hundred ninety-five refugees received on-scene treatment and 27 more were treated at area hospitals.
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- **Equipment.** Members operating in boats should be equipped with the proper gear. Life jackets and antiox- sure suits were necessary at this incident: Members operating without such suits quickly became cold and fatigued.

Units that carry special equipment should notify the dispatcher if such equipment is not available on the apparatus as soon as it is placed out of service. Dispatchers then can update their listing of special equipment and the unit that has it.

- **Medical monitoring and rehabilitation.** Emergency medical personnel should be aware that rescue workers can become victims at any moment and thus should not be consumed by the enormous rescue efforts taking place. At incidents such as this one, members should be monitored for hypothermia and exhaustion. Company officers and sector commanders should rotate members to guard against these conditions. Members thus relieved should report to a rehabilitation sector, where they can be examined and returned to operations when and if able.

At this operation, provisions were made to recall additional dive personnel from home to relieve personnel who responded to the first alarm. Operations were concluded prior to the time these members were to report, and their services were not required. The Salvation Army set up and operated a canteen, serving hot beverages and food, to assist in the rehabilitation process.

- **Logistics.** At this operation, additional gasoline and oil mixtures were needed for the motors on small boats. Provisions were made to have an engine company respond to the quarters of Rescue 2 and pick up a boat, a motor, and additional supplies of gas and oil for anticipated use at the scene. Squad One also responded with the technical response vehicle, which carries an inflatable boat and gasoline motor. On arrival of these units, gasoline and oil were brought to the beach and centrally located. Units operating in the small boats were notified via radio that these supplies were available on the beach.

Personnel from Squad One were assigned the task of assisting with the refueling process. In addition, the FDNY technical services division activated recall procedures so that its tool room would be open and staffed to supply whatever tools and assistance were required. The executive officer of this division responded directly to the incident to coordinate this aspect of the operations. He also was prepared to issue checks to be used for the purchase of supplies from local vendors, if needed.

- **Immediate notification.** Notification to all affected agencies must be made immediately. Procedures regarding interagency notification should be in place and followed.

At this incident, there was a 20-minute delay in notifying an agency required to respond immediately. If operations are to be successful, all equipment and personnel that may be needed should be mobilized as soon as possible.

Since the night of June 6th, three more victims have washed up on the beach, bringing the total number of deaths to nine. It is anticipated that more victims will be found.

This operation was a well-coordinated effort between many agencies. Nearly 300 people were rescued and cared for that night through the efforts of the following agencies: City of New York Fire and Police departments, New York Emergency Medical Services, United States Park Police, United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, United States Coast Guard, Salvation Army, New York City volunteer fire departments, and New York City volunteer ambulance corps.

In addition to highlighting the operational capabilities of the many agencies operating within New York City, this incident once again has brought to national attention the problem of illegal immigration. This case involved the smuggling of Chinese immigrants by ruthless gangs who place the immigrants into a form of slavery—there the immigrants remain until they earn enough money to pay for the voyage. Stricter legislation to try to combat this growing problem can be expected.