



Petty Officer 1st Class Jessica Wolchak, a boatswain's mate stationed at Coast Guard Station New York on Staten Island, N.Y., displays her Military Leadership Award medal April 24, 2009.

Flight 1549 responder honored with military leadership award

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When the call came in that a plane had just crashed on the Hudson River, Jessica Wolchak was taken aback but not surprised. At first it was reported that a small plane went down with six occupants who were standing on the wing, waiting to be rescued. Wolchak, a 23-year-old Coast Guardsman serving as the officer of the day (OOD) at Coast Guard Station New York, immediately called the crews of a 25-foot and a 33-foot response boat just returning from security patrols and diverted them to the scene of the plane crash.

While search and rescue is never routine, it is business as usual for the Coast Guard. So when Wolchak was informed minutes later that it was a commercial airliner carrying more than 100 passengers who were possibly still trapped inside the sinking aircraft, she realized the case would be anything but business as usual.

“We had a sea plane that had crash landed a few weeks before on the Hudson,” said Wolchak, recalling the day US Airways Flight 1549 ditched on the river. “They got that pilot out of that plane ok, so when I heard the initial call and was told there were six people on the wing waiting to be rescued, I didn’t think it to be anything too out of the ordinary. But as soon as I heard that it was a commercial plane, I knew the entire thing had changed.”

After the first two response boats had been diverted, Wolchak mustered all of the available personnel from her unit and told them to suit up to respond.

“It was controlled chaos,” she said. “We had people getting dressed out even before I mustered them. Boat coxswains would walk by someone in a dry suit and ask, ‘Are you on a crew?’ If not, they would say, ‘You’re on mine now. Let’s go.’”

She too was relieved of her duty as OOD by the command at the station and told to get underway becoming the third coxswain to arrive at the scene with a crew.

“By that time all of the people had been taken off the aircraft, but there was a lot of debris in the water,” she recalled. “We didn’t have an official count that all passengers were accounted for, so we still searched the water for survivors.”

By the time all was said and done, the Coast Guard would have rescued 14 of the 155 passengers and crew that had been onboard Flight 1549 in what would later be dubbed “The Miracle on the Hudson”. While Wolchak did not physically take any of the passengers onboard her own vessel, the 1st Class Petty Officer was hailed for her superior performance by her command, who recommended her for the Military Leadership Award as presented by the United Services Organizations of Metropolitan New York (USO).



Petty Officer 1st Class Jessica Wolchak prepares to moor a 25-foot small response boat after conducting security escorts with the Staten Island Ferry in New York Harbor April 24, 2009.

“She was an easy choice for this award,” said Lt. Patrick Gallagher, the executive officer of Station New York. “Even though she was already a top performer, she took the initial call for the plane crash and once relieved of OOD duty, got underway. For her to have set up the initial response and then to be underway within minutes to respond to the scene herself, it is a testament to her training and commitment to her job. There are very few out there who could have accomplished that mission.”

According to the award citation drafted by Gallagher, Wolchak has participated in hundreds of Homeland Security operations at both the national and international levels, in addition to serving as her unit’s rescue and survival petty officer. Through her efforts, the annual standardization inspection Station New York must undergo yielded no discrepancies. Wolchak also served as a training petty officer ensuring all personnel were adequately trained to respond to cases such as Flight 1549.

“Flight 1549 showed everyone here that all the training we do, we put it to use,” Wolchak said. “When I was out there I was mission oriented and focused, and things went smoothly without complications. That’s what I’ve been trained to do.”

Even though she spends a lot of time at work, Wolchak is pushed by her husband, Joshua Wolchak, and her three-year-old daughter, Annabelle, to go out and accomplish great things on behalf of her service.

“Josh has always been supportive and he loves the Coast Guard,” she said. “The day the airliner went down he knew I had duty, so we worked it out that he would go and get Annabelle from school. When he heard about it, he knew I was out there and underway. We cope day by day with all the time I spend here. You’re never really off duty when you’re in the Coast Guard.”

When not in the business of saving lives, Wolchak works toward earning an Associate’s Degree in Counterterrorism through American Military University and enjoys running as a pastime. She also brings Annabelle to work to show her what the Coast Guard is.

“She loves the boats,” said Wolchak. “When she’s here she’ll point to the water and say, ‘That’s Coast Guard water. That’s mommy’s work.’”

Wolchak, a Braintree, Mass. native, was invited to represent the Coast Guard along with women from the other branches of the military at an awards luncheon at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in New York City, N.Y., April 7, 2009, after being selected for the Military Leadership Award, an achievement she and her family are immensely proud of.

“It was an incredible experience,” said Wolchak as she kept a sharp watch on a Staten Island Ferry boat just leaving the Staten Island terminal. “To have stood on stage with women who have done things like served in Iraq and performed medical miracles and such – it was so wonderful to have met them. I felt incredibly honored to have been chosen and to have stood with heroes.”



Petty Officer 1st Class Jessica Wolchak, 23, serves as a coxswain on a 25-foot small response boat while conducting security escorts with the Staten Island Ferry in New York Harbor April 24, 2009.

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