

BRAVERY AT THE WTC

BY MARK REUTTER

Through seamless coordination and cool professionalism, employees at PATH (Port Authority Trans-Hudson) protected about 4,000 commuters from walking into a maelstrom of collapsing debris caused by the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11. The heroism of PATH employees stands as one of the most inspiring stories of that horrific morning—and one of the least known.

A trainmaster, the deputy director, a terminal supervisor, and a dozen conductors, trainmen, and motormen all acted within minutes of the attack to safeguard five trainloads of commuters from New Jersey. The railroad also evacuated the World Trade Center terminal with a rescue train shortly after the second hijacked jetliner crashed into the South Tower.

As a result, there were no reported injuries or casualties on the PATH system, which is one of the busiest transit railroads in the country. About 80,000 people a day used the two-platform, four-track loop terminal at the very bottom of six levels of shopping and parking below the twin towers. Today the station lies heavily damaged and closed to all but emergency workers.

PATH is the successor to the Hudson & Manhattan Railroad—the “Hudson Tubes”—that opened in February 1908 between Hoboken, New Jersey, and 23rd Street in Manhattan. A downtown line consisting of two single-track tunnels was completed in 1909 between Exchange Place in New Jersey and Church Street in Manhattan. The H&M was subsequently extended westward to Newark, using Pennsylvania Railroad trackage, and northward to 33rd Street. A plan to continue north in Manhattan to Grand Central Terminal never materialized.

At its prime, the third-rail H&M connected the Hudson waterfront terminals of the Pennsylvania, Erie, and Lackawanna railroads with Manhattan island. Additionally, it exchanged passengers and mail with the Pennsylvania’s main line at Manhattan Transfer. In 1926, the line carried more than 110 million passengers, but steadily lost customers after the opening of the Holland Tunnel (1927), George Washington Bridge (1931), and Lincoln Tunnel (1937).

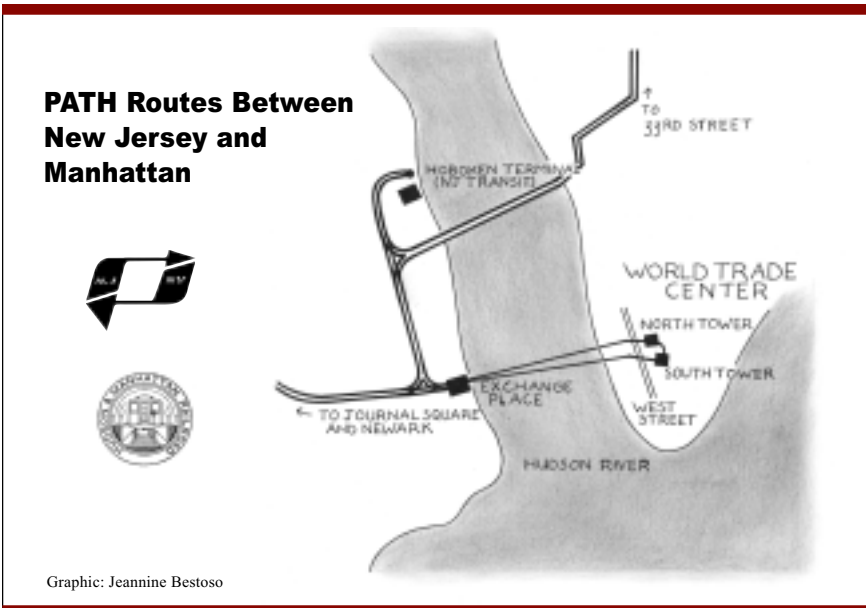
In 1962, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey assumed control of

the bankrupt H&M. The public agency not only replaced the worn-out rolling stock with modern air-conditioned equipment, but used H&M's valuable terminus property in Lower Manhattan to build what would become the celebrated 110-story Twin Towers. From its low point in the 1960s, PATH enjoyed a renaissance thanks to the boom on Wall Street and the investment in commuter rail by the state of New Jersey.

With this background in mind, the following is a reconstruction of the operational sequence after the first hijacked plane crashed into the North Tower at 8:46 a.m. It has been pieced together from various sources, including the *Newark Star-Ledger* and the United Transportation Union (UTU), which represents about 150 PATH conductors, dispatchers, and tower operators.

Richie Moran, trainmaster for the PATH system, was monitoring a police scanner at PATH headquarters at Journal Square, Jersey City, when he heard a report of an explosion at the WTC. It was about 8:47 a.m. Donna Martinez, the PATH terminal supervisor at the WTC, called Moran to say she smelled smoke in the station. Meanwhile, Victoria Cross-Kelly, PATH's deputy director, was at a breakfast meeting in the underground WTC concourse. When she saw people running, she went to the street level and saw debris raining down from the North Tower. She immediately called Moran and told him not to discharge any passengers at the WTC station until further notice.

It was now about 8:52 a.m. A train from Newark was approaching the station and arrived about 8:55 a.m. It had about 800 passengers aboard. Its doors opened



to take on New Jersey passengers, but all inbound passengers were ordered to remain on the train.

A train from Hoboken then entered the station. Raymond E. Arenas, UTU general chairperson, was the conductor. Smoke was seeping down onto the platform from the concourse. A police officer rushed up to Arenas and said, "Get us out of here!" Arenas relayed this message to Moran in Journal Square, who instructed him to keep the doors of the train closed and to depart the station immediately.



Stock photo of PATH train at World Trade Center station. (Port Authority)

The Newark train had just pulled out ahead of Arenas's train and nobody was left on the platform. On the upstairs floors, Port Authority staffers and police escorted passengers and storekeepers to street exits as quickly as possible.

About 9 a.m., a rescue train was dispatched from New Jersey. At 9:03 a.m., the second hijacked jet struck the South Tower, sending a massive fireball, smoke, and debris showering into the streets around the WTC. Thirty-seven more minutes would pass before the Federal Aviation Administration grounded all domestic air flights.

At 9:10 a.m., the rescue train was dispatched from New Jersey. At 9:03 a.m., the second hijacked jet struck the South Tower, sending a massive fireball,

At 9:10 a.m., the rescue train had reached the platform, carrying only a motorman and conductor. It picked up about a dozen remaining PATH employees and a homeless person who had to be coaxed on the train. It departed at 9:12 a.m. Three incoming trains, carrying roughly 2,500 passengers, had been stopped at the New Jersey entrance of the tube at Exchange Place. They were turned back and out of harm's way.

By now, bodies were falling from the burning towers. Among those trapped in the North Tower was Neil D. Levin, executive director of the Port Authority, whose office was on the 68th floor. Levin had been preparing to meet with Fred V. Morrone, the Port Authority's police superintendent. Morrone was last seen heading up the stairs in a rescue effort. Both men perished when the building collapsed. In all, the Port Authority lost 74 employees, including 14 police officers involved in the rescue.

As stunned Port Authority engineers regrouped in PATH headquarters at Journal Square, they realized that the collapsed towers had buried the WTC station under a punishing load of steel and concrete. (It was later calculated that between 1.2 and 1.4 million tons of rubble had been dumped from the leveled towers.) The subsequent collapse of a Marriott hotel and 6 World Trade Center pummeled the basement structure with even more weight.

The WTC site had been built below water level. To hold the Hudson River at bay, engineers had dug a 70-foot-deep trench around the entire 16-acre construction zone. A steel-reinforced concrete “bathtub” wall was built to withstand the water pressure and to surround the PATH station with a waterproof boundary. But as water started to leak through the tubes into New Jersey, engineers began to wonder whether the enormous wall had been breached. For several days there was no way to know for sure because the emergency entrance hatches on West Street were blocked by rubble. After the debris was moved about September 16, firefighters from Ladder Companies 7 and 14 dropped down to the tracks. They waded through water up to their waists before they reached the PATH station.

They found much of the station platform still intact, although there were huge gashes in the ceiling that had crushed three cars of an out-of-service PATH train. Adding a surrealistic touch, the emergency lights on the escalator to the station concourse shone out in the Stygian gloom.

Although the rescuers did not find evidence that the retaining wall were cracked, water continued to rise on the New Jersey side. Two engineers from the Port Authority entered one of the tubes with an inflatable raft. They were able to paddle from Exchange Place part way down the 5 percent grade before they had to turn back because the water was at the tunnel’s ceiling. It was theorized (and fervently hoped) that the water was coming from fire hoses and burst pipes at the WTC site. But the threat remained that if the bathtub wall failed—or any part of the mile-long, cast-iron-lined tubes collapsed—river water would gush into New Jersey, which is 24 feet lower than the Manhattan side of the tunnels.

Thus began the dangerous task of trying to drain the flooded portals. On September 17, about 15 divers and 50 construction workers started laying 12-inch pipe into the tunnels from Exchange Place. The work was completed at 3 a.m. on September 21. Within 32 hours of start-up, the water was under control. Close to four million gallons of water had been successfully pumped from a distance of 1,500 feet horizontally underground and lifted 65 feet for discharge.

A person involved in the operation called it “an awesome, difficult job” done under enormous time pressure. “People went beyond what they thought they were capable of,” he said. “Because it was based on throwing together the equipment that was available, we had no idea whether the system would work or not.”

But it did. The portals were dry by about October 1. (Pumping has continued in the tunnels.) The entrances at Exchange Place were then plugged as a safety precaution against possible future flooding. Whenever the tunnels are reopened, workers will first have to chip away about 20 feet of solid concrete.

PATH is now operating three services: Hoboken-33rd Street, Hoboken-Journal Square, and Newark-Journal Square-33rd Street bypassing Hoboken. Exchange Place is closed. Ridership on the uptown line has nearly doubled since September 11,

with 50,000 people a day going to the 33rd Street station.

New York Waterway is using every boat it can find to expand ferry service for New Jersey commuters from Hoboken and Jersey City to Lower Manhattan. The boats go past the former dock near the WTC to temporary facilities at Pier 11. The Port Authority is renovating Pier A, on the Hudson just north of Battery Park, to serve as an interim ferry terminal.

If and when PATH service will be restored to Lower Manhattan is dependent on the eventual fate of the site. Leonard Silverstein, whose syndicate leased the trade center for 99 years from the Port Authority for \$3.25 billion last July, has expressed a desire to rebuild the towers, but there is vast uncertainty as to what shape the plans may take. The Port Authority has vowed to rebuild the PATH station either at the present site or, if too damaged, a block east at Church Street, the site of the original H&M terminus of 1909. "Restoring PATH service downtown is a priority for the whole region," the agency asserted.

The proposed new station would be the centerpiece of a new transportation hub that would replace the complicated maze of corridors and stairways between transit lines and provide New Jersey commuters with easier access to New York subways. The projected price tag—as much as \$1.7 billion.

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Forty-five days before the terrorist attack, home-bound commuters from the World Trade Center district rush off the ferry at Hoboken Terminal. (Mark Reutter)