

# A Bit of Arthritis Aside, a Fireboat Chugs On After 65 Years

By IAN URBINA

To some it may seem that New York City never changes, that its institutions evolve at their own ponderous speed while those of smaller and perhaps younger cities move nimbly into the future, or at least the present. Those who believe this, rightly or wrongly, would be reassured by the story of a thick-hulled fireboat and its sometimes bumpy efforts to chug into the 21st century in the waters around Manhattan.

The boat, the 134-foot Fire Fighter, was launched in 1938 and is still very much in service. To board it is to experience life when the television and the air conditioner were making their debuts at the World's Fair, and when the New York Fire Department was ushering in two-way radios and ushering out volunteer firefighters. It was a time when fireboat crews navigated entirely by charts — as the crew of the Fire Fighter did until last month.

That's when the Fire Fighter was equipped with cutting-edge navigational software. A few weeks later, the Fire De-

partment was ready to show it off, so a reporter was invited to the harbor on a sparkling spring morning to see it work.

And work it did. Too bad about the mysterious smoke in the engine room, the sparks in the pilothouse and the failure of the electrical system.

"Uh, Cap," a sheepish voice radioed from the engine room, interrupting the show-and-tell cruise off of Staten Island, "I think you might want to come down here."

Minutes later, the captain, Thomas C. Whyte, was back in the pilothouse, explaining the interruption: contractors had spilled flammable solvent the night before, and this was causing machines to release thick fumes.

"O.K., where were we?" he asked.

Not where he wanted to be. At that moment, Edward J. Mauro, one of the ship's pilots, stepped forward. "We're going to have to use a backup battery to keep the computer running," he said. "For some reason,

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Angel Franco/The New York Times

The Fire Fighter, a 65-year-old fireboat, recently updated its navigational system with a Panasonic ToughBook notebook computer and state-of-the-art navigation software.

## Arthritis Aside, an Old Fireboat Is Fitted for the Future

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we've got zero electricity."

That's when the power strip behind the wheel started sparking.

"What the —" said a firefighter bounding downstairs to find the source: Again, they said, contractors had bumped a knob, causing the generator to throw too much current, frying the power strip.

"All right, so she's also got a little arthritis," Captain Whyte said with a wry smile.

The steel-hulled boat is said to be the world's oldest working fireboat. But thanks to \$25,000 raised from Firehouse Hunks calendars, Fire Department logo apparel and donations, the diesel-electric boat arrives much faster than it used to because it was recently outfitted with a Tough-Book notebook computer made by Panasonic and Marine Navigator software designed by MapTech.

And indeed, once it got going, after the fumes and the sparks and the brief electrical failure, it purred like a harbor Porsche, giving the crew plenty of chance to show off the equipment, both new and old.

"With this software, you can easily shave 10 minutes off of our arrival time," Captain Whyte said. "It'll also ease the pandemonium in the wheelhouse since one guy is doing nine jobs at once."

To drive the point home, Pilot Mauro launched into rat-a-tat-tat description of a typical pre-software emergency call: Suit up. Lift anchor. Dodge small watercraft. Slalom around parked yachts. Squeeze up narrow waterways. Finesse the radio dial. Figure out what happened. Keep one hand on the wheel. Keep one eye forward and 15 knots ahead. Unfurl the 2-foot-square nautical map to chart the course. Check the red binder with the tiny font and calculate in your head waterway currents and depths. Remain calm. Now, if it's nighttime, do all this with the lights off. Otherwise, the glare inside the pilothouse is blinding. Oh, and get there five minutes ago. Lives depend on it.

"You tell me if technology helps under those pressures," he said.

But as with any institution moving haltingly but relentlessly toward the new, not everyone was persuaded.

"I'm an old-schooler, I guess," said Robert Spadaro. A firefighter whose seafaring career spans 5 years with the marine division of the Fire Department, 10 years with various tugboat companies and 6 years with the Staten Island ferry, he swears by paper charts, foghorns, VHF radio dispatchers and, most of all, local knowledge of the waters.

But Pilot Mauro cites experience.

Had the boat had the software when T.W.A. Flight 800 exploded over the Atlantic Ocean off Long Island in 1996, it would have taken two minutes, not two days, to get the maps needed to navigate those distant waters, he said. Or when a boater fell overboard in thick fog two winters ago, the computer could have marked the exact spot and adjusted for water speed and direction. Instead, the pilot had to backtrack using an inexact "Williamson turn," the mariner's equivalent of a U-turn.

The computers, which were purchased and donated by the Fire Department Safety Fund for the department's five main fireboats, have already averted some close calls. Last October, when the Fire Fighter was making a test run of the new software, it arrived at an abandoned pier that had been burning all day near Kearny, N.J., on the Hackensack River. Nautical maps showed one petroleum tank set back from the shore. Just in case, Pilot Mauro checked the computer's data bank of aerial photos. They revealed a far more serious threat: 15 to 20 petroleum tanks less than a half-mile away.

Still, the crew is quick to explain that the ship's true virility lies in its vintage components, despite the oc-

casional kinks.

Take the "worm gears" on the top deck, for example. On many new fireboats, water cannons are mounted on hydraulic swivels, Mr. Spadaro explained. "When you're in a clutch, manual is good," he said. "A worm has enough common sense to fix these," he added, playing off the gears' nickname.

The ship is also built with thicker steel than is used in most fireboats today, Mr. Whyte said.

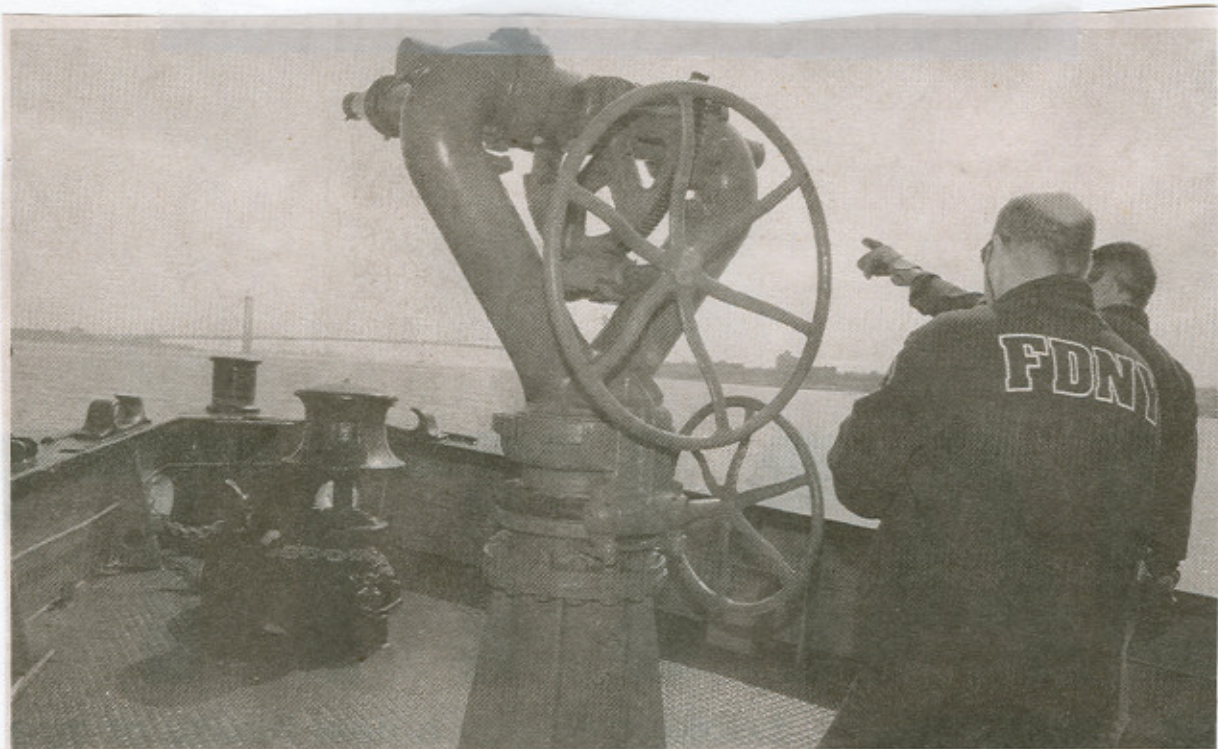
"What you have here is basically

two cans and a string," Mr. Whyte said, placing a gentle hand on the brass-topped pump-order telegraph. "The thing is too simple to break." If more pressure is needed in one of the boat's eight water cannons, you pull a string, it rings the engine room and you turn the lever down, telling them how much water you want, he explained. Two flights down and two-thirds of a century away from the pilothouse, Ronnie B. West worked in the ship's engine room. He stood in front of "the Frankenstein board,"

named for its old-fashioned levers and rickety switches.

"State-of-the-art 1930's," Mr. West said, pointing to the ship's colossal 16-cylinder diesel engines, which allow it to draw 20,000 gallons of water per minute, 20 times the pumping power of an average fire truck.

"Computers are helpful," he said, raising his voice above the clatter of a massive fan belt that had started spinning. "But the job is mostly the same down here. You've got to keep it running."





Photographs by Angel Franco/The New York Times

In New York Harbor, Firefighters Michael Krol and Robert Spadaro, far right at top, at the Fire Fighter's water cannon, which is rotated manually rather than on a hydraulic swivel. The boat's chief engineer, Ronnie B. West showed off "the Frankenstein board," a control panel he calls "state-of-the-art 1930's."