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## An Ill Wind on the Harbor

Survivors, Families Recall a Carefree Day and a Sudden Disaster

By David Snyder, Eric Rich and Susan Kinzie  
 Washington Post Staff Writers  
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### BALTIMORE

The Lady D was pulling restively at its moorings by the pier where the water taxis pull up to Fort McHenry last weekend when the passengers straggled back in the blustery breezes that had come up while they toured the fort.

On a near-tranquil day, one that is closer to the norm in the Baltimore harbor, the Lady D would have been safer than any mode of transportation they had known all weekend.

It would be safer than the highway that carried 6-year-old Daniel Bentrem's family on the 170-mile trip from their home in Virginia.

Safer than the flight that carried Andrew Roccella's almost-in-laws east from Illinois to share in the joyous weekend when he planned to propose to their daughter.

Safer than the half-circle around the Capital Beltway and ride up Interstate 95 that took Roccella and his prospective bride, Corinne Schillings, north from their homes in Northern Virginia.

Safer than a trip that began on the New Jersey Turnpike and took Joanne Pierce and her husband to join their daughter Lisa for a weekend.

But as the passengers strolled down the wooden pier toward the Lady D shortly before 4 p.m. March 6, a harbinger of something else that was making its way toward Baltimore already was whipping up choppy waves that set the water taxi to trembling.

The winding bottleneck that carries the channel up from Fort McHenry to Baltimore's Inner Harbor is as calm as a mill pond most of the time, protected from waves by narrowing shores and the twists of its path, and from the worst of the winds by the forest of tall factories and buildings that becomes increasingly thick as the water nears the city's heart.

But Fort McHenry sits downstream, at the confluence of two tributaries that roll together and form the broad lower portion of the Patapsco River. The fort's guns are positioned to command an expanse of water that lies unbroken to the horizon on all but the most crystal-clear days, when the distant Eastern Shore is a glimmer.

A storm that had been tracking across Maryland as they visited the fort now was building force across that broad fetch of water, roiling the normally passive sea into something more menacing.

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As the passengers shuffled on board, the worst of it was bearing down. And this taxi, built in the shape of a shoebox with twin pontoons that sit on the water as much as in it, was about to experience elements far more severe than the lakes and ponds for which it is best suited. The margin of safety created by the normally mild winds and waters of the Baltimore harbor was about to evaporate.

In a matter of minutes, it would take the lives of Daniel Bentrem, Andrew Roccella, 26, and Corinne Schillings, 26, who remain missing, and Joanne Pierce, 60. Two days later, it also would claim Lisa Pierce, 34.

The story of how they came to be together that Saturday afternoon and what transpired on board the Lady D is drawn from interviews with those who survived, relatives and friends of those who did not, other witnesses and official accounts.

The storm had formed without notable pretension early Saturday as a line of showers that stretched from western Pennsylvania to southeastern Indiana. By the time the showers reached the Maryland panhandle, a more powerful group of thunderstorms had emerged from Kentucky and Ohio, jumping ahead to lead the march east toward Baltimore.

By mid-afternoon, WeatherBug Network, a private meteorological firm, was tracking the gusts on wind monitors atop schools across the state:

3:03, Brunswick High School, Frederick County, 52 mph.

3:23, Damascus Elementary School, Montgomery County, 50 mph.

3:43, Patapsco Middle School, Howard County, 52 mph.

Dark thunderheads formed the backdrop to the downtown skyscrapers as the 23 passengers and two crew members boarded the Lady D for the 15-minute trip toward the Inner Harbor and Fells Point.

No one on board, of course, had figured braving a storm at sea into their weekend plans.

For Roccella and Schillings, the weekend was to be all about popping a question and presenting a ring.

The two had met almost six years earlier when both were Purdue University undergrads studying in Italy. After college, he returned home to Virginia to live with his parents in Vienna. And she moved east, taking an apartment nearby and a job with the Cato Institute in Washington. He bought a condo in Fairfax a few months ago, and they were deciding together how to furnish it.

Schillings joked that they'd been to 18 other weddings, and she imagined the haul of gifts that might rain down from all those couples if she and Roccella were to wed. All things pointed to a walk down the aisle, but the question hadn't been asked.

He'd slipped away with his mother, Eileen Roccella, to do secret shopping for an engagement ring. His mom had become "very close to Corinne. . . . They were already soul mates," said Raymond Krek, Corinne's godfather.

"So, when Andrew went out to get the ring, who would know best what his bride-to-be" would like? Krek said.

If she didn't know that he intended to present the ring and ask her father's blessing -- a formality, Krek said, for "he's one of us" -- Corinne was excited because her parents had come in from Homewood, Ill., and would join Andrew's parents to make a party of six for the trip to Baltimore.

Even as the storm gathered force far over the western horizon, it was a pleasant day with hints of spring in Baltimore, so they thought a ride out to Fort McHenry on the water taxi would be delightful. And, perhaps, after that, the ring would be next?

The taxi ride was a journey into history for the Bentrems of Harrisonburg, Va. George and Elizabeth home-schooled their three children -- Sarah, 8; Katie, 7; and Daniel, 6 -- and they incorporated trips like this into their education.

"They always teach their children about nature, geography, history [and] different plants and animals," said Karim Altai, who lives across the street from the Bentrems on the outskirts of Harrisonburg. "Not too many of us do that. We're so involved in our daily life we don't do that. But their life was their three kids."

Their house was full of music: the tentative note of a child at the piano, songs lifted from their Pentecostal church, First Assembly of God, and lullabies and folk songs learned in classes at nearby Eastern Mennonite University.

Their next-door neighbors, the Elyards, have a pool, so all the children learned to swim last year. "Sarah was not quite as good a swimmer," David Elyard said. "Daniel was pretty good, but he wasn't as good as Katie."

Their trip to Baltimore, in fact, was about their love of a particular song: "The Star-Spangled Banner," written by Francis Scott Key during the 1814 British bombardment of American defenders at Fort McHenry. As the water taxi drew near the fort that afternoon, the majestic bridge they saw spanning the Patapsco in the distance was named for Key.

Lisa Pierce had lured her parents to a weekend in Baltimore on the promise there would be time for sightseeing. She was escorting a group of students from the New Jersey Institute, where she worked, to a conference of the Society of Women Engineers. But, she told her parents, Joanne and Thomas Pierce, there would be plenty of time for fun if they drove down from Vineland, N.J., to join her.

"They were back and forth, at the very last minute, and then said, 'Okay, we'll drive down,'" said Leroy Thomas, associate dean for students at the institute.

Early Saturday afternoon, Lisa took advantage of a chance to escape her charges and keep the promise to her parents. They settled on a boat ride to see Fort McHenry.

Greg Pettibon, 23, noticed that the weather had taken an ugly turn by the time they headed back across the apron of lawn outside the fort, toward the pier and the boat that was to return them to downtown. Back in northwestern Texas, he'd always enjoyed watching a good storm roll across the vast, arid expanses, drenching land that seemed always thirsty.

As the crew dropped the mooring lines, lightning rippled the darkening sky.

"Good thing I brought an umbrella," Pettibon recalled thinking as he found a seat on the starboard side about amidships and watched other passengers fill the boat to capacity.

In the middle of Baltimore, a WeatherBug sensor clocked a 52-mph gust at 3:51 p.m. Two minutes later, a 50-mph blast swept through the University of Maryland's Baltimore County campus.

Robert Williams, 35, was more aware of the time than the weather as passengers settled down on the long benches that leave them facing each other with their backs to the water. He watched the clock on his cell phone, counting every minute because his car was parked back in Baltimore in a metered spot. He and his girlfriend, Julia Lauer, had eaten lunch in the Inner Harbor and decided on a whim to take a water taxi out to Fells Point. Now he feared that a parking ticket would be sitting on his windshield when they got back.

It was 4 p.m. The 90-horsepower, Honda four-stroke outboard came to life, and the boat backed away from the pier.

Down beyond the Key Bridge, more than five miles beyond the fort, on a peninsula festooned with industry and bucolically named Sparrows Point, another WeatherBug sensor picked up wind gusting at 55 mph at 4:04 p.m.

To reach there, it first swept past Fort McHenry, smacking the Lady D over like a toy.

### **A Box on the Bay**

The watermen who have worked the Chesapeake Bay have a particular way of talking about the winds that come hard and fast in advance of a cold front. They say it's "blowin' like stink."

The worst tragedy in the history of the bay's oyster fleet came when it blew like stink on Feb. 3, 1939. A waterspout triggered by a strong squall tore out of the fog on the Choptank River, sinking three boats and killing nine men just as quickly as the Lady D was flipped over last Saturday.

"Certainly, we're talking about a strong and unexpected blast of wind in both cases," said Pete Leshner, curator at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

The boats that went down 65 years ago -- one skipjack and two bugeyes -- were flat-bottom boats designed to work the bay but never to venture offshore. In the aftermath of the Lady D's capsizing, some brokers who provide insurance for the boating industry argued privately that lightweight pontoon boats belong on ponds and lakes and not on a body of water where it can blow like stink.

One boat insurance specialist, who spoke on condition that he not be identified, said he is unswayed by the fact that the pontoon water taxis are inspected and approved for use by the U.S. Coast Guard. He said he has refused them insurance on grounds that if they venture beyond the most protected backwaters they become vulnerable to the tempestuous vagaries of Chesapeake Bay weather.

"They simply do not belong on the bay," he said.

The Lady D was of a smaller class of pontoon water taxi, 36 feet long, 8 feet wide and powered by a single outboard rather than the twin engines the larger boats carry. Little more than a box set on a pair of pontoons, it had windows just above the shoulder height of a seated person that could be opened when the weather warmed.

In the summertime, the taxis plying to and fro on the Inner Harbor are as plentiful as water bugs.

## Into the Storm

The Lady D seemed in trouble the minute it left the dock.

Williams grabbed Lauer, 30, by the shoulders and said: "Listen to me very, very carefully. Burn the way out of this boat into your mind."

He showed her how to flip the windows open.

Pettibon gripped his seat and braced his legs as the waves and wind combined to rock the boat violently. "We started getting jostled really hard," he recalled, "to the point that people were sliding around and being tossed."

Capt. Frank Deppner, 74, was battling to regain the helm.

"He was having trouble keeping control of the boat," Williams recalled. "I know that he was really struggling with the position of the boat."

The boat swung wildly, suddenly turning sideways to the wind and the tightly packed procession of steep waves. As rain pelted down and thunder rumbled overhead, the pontoon on the windward side began to rise from the water.

Someone shouted, "Everybody over! Get over here," Williams recalled.

And almost all of the 25 terrified passengers rushed to the windward side, trusting their weight to settle the rising pontoon back into the water. But it wasn't enough. The pontoon kept rising, and without much to hold onto, they all crashed down to the opposite side.

Williams: "We all just went flying. That's when the screams began."

The violent collapse left a heap of people weighing down the low side of the boat, a sudden shift of more than a ton of humanity from which the Lady D had no hope of recovery.

In a flash -- 10 seconds, perhaps 15, to the best of anyone's recollection -- the boat was upside down.

Pettibon: "We were all just thrown together. It was incredibly desperate. You just had to get out. It was the most crazed, frantic feeling you can imagine."

The cabin filled instantly. It wasn't like the movies, where the water level climbs from the feet to the ankles and then the knees, Pettibon said. He took two gasps from an air pocket at the top of the boat and then began desperately feeling for a way out.

The windows had been closed, and visibility was no more than eight inches in the murky, dark green water.

Williams: "You lost sight of everybody and everything. Panic just set in."

Pettibon recalls thinking: "Greg, you're not going to make it out of this."

Williams: "Our main concern was not so much getting out of the cold water. Our main concern was

getting out of the boat."

Fumbling in darkness and gasping for breath, the trapped fought to break the windows and escape.

Williams and Lauer found their way, as did all four parents of Corinne Schillings and Andrew Roccella. George and Elizabeth Bentrem struggled out along with little Katie and badly injured Sarah. Thomas Pierce pulled his daughter to the surface. A group of tourists on leave from the Air National Guard made it out. The captain and his crew member were among the other survivors.

Pettibon recalled: "Getting out was almost like the grace of God. I finally found an edge that was a window. I think I was one of the last people to come out from the boat."

He clambered over a pontoon and saw other passengers already on the bottom of the upturned hull. But there were fewer, far fewer than had been aboard. He peeled off a sweater and plunged back in.

"I'd try to kind of bob down to find a window."

He thrust an arm into the cabin, feeling for limbs, bodies, anyone he could pull to safety. Instead, he reached only empty life preservers, seat cushions.

When Williams and Lauer made it onto the overturned vessel, he recalls someone noticing that little Daniel Bentrem was missing.

So were Schillings and Roccella. Joanne Pierce was dead, and two days later, Lisa would join her in death.

Pettibon climbed back onto the hull. Someone said a boat was coming. It was a Naval Reserve landing craft that set out after reservists saw the boat flip.

"When they pulled up, that was one of the highlights of my life," Pettibon said later. "It was like the heroes that show up at the end. The ramp lowers, and eight or nine guys are ready to jump in the water."

### **Beyond Survival**

Five days after they were pulled from the water, Williams, a financial analyst who lives in Baltimore, asked Lauer, who operates a children's clothing business out of her Baltimore home, to marry him.

"After all that, it just seemed like a no-brainer," he said.

*Staff writers Christian Davenport, David A. Fahrenthold, Darragh Johnson, S. Mitra Kalita, Susan Levine and Jamie Stockwell and staff researcher Bobbye Pratt contributed to this report.*

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