

Unified Response: An Inside Look at 300 Coast Guardsmen responding to Potomac Plane Crash



U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer 2nd Class Lance Ide, left, and Petty Officer 3rd Class Corbin Singleton, boatswain's mates at Station St. Inigoes, respond to the aircraft collision on the Potomac River, Washington, Jan. 30, 2025. The Coast Guard responded to the incident with local, city, state and federal partners. *Photo credit: U.S. Coast Guard | Petty Officer 3rd Class Christopher Bokum*

WASHINGTON — On the evening of January 29, while most of the city slept, hundreds of Coast Guardsmen from across the East Coast deployed to the Potomac River, ready to face the unimaginable.

Crew members launched from Coast Guard Station Washington and

arrived at the freezing river as a commercial jet and Army helicopter lay shattered.

For those directing first responders from the command center at Sector Maryland – National Capital Region, managing the unimaginable is a part of the job.

“Having also responded to the Key Bridge collapse last year, this aircraft collision was another heartbreaking reminder of how quickly tragedy can unfold,” said Sector Maryland – National Capital Region command center chief Lieutenant Stasia Ellis. “Our thoughts still go out to the families who lost loved ones. Coast Guard first responders demonstrated exceptional courage and dedication, working tirelessly alongside our partners to bring answers and closure to those affected.”

By 5 a.m., Station Philadelphia was traveling over 100 miles to Washington in support of the mission.

At dawn, response boat crews from Stations Curtis Bay, Annapolis, Oxford, Crisfield and Coast Guard Cutter Sailfish were on scene.

In a unified effort, 278 Coast Guard service members and Auxiliarists from 33 units across the East Coast responded to the incident with an urgent mission – search, recover, and bring closure to a nation reeling from disaster.

Within hours after the incident, Sector Maryland – National Capital Region and subordinate commands stood up an Incident Management Team at Station Washington to coordinate the mission and streamline real-time communications.

“We came from over 70 miles away that morning before sunrise, not really sure what to expect on-scene,” said Petty Officer 3rd Class Corbin Singleton, a machinery technician with Station St. Inigoes. “Whether it was search and rescue or enforcing the safety zone, we were determined to help and

support the mission however we could.”

As Singleton and his crew supported the mission from the water, Captain Patrick Burkett, commander, Sector Maryland – National Capital Region, welcomed the acting commandant, Admiral Kevin E. Lunday, and the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Kristi Noem, to meet with first responders at Station Washington.

Shortly after 10 a.m., Lunday and Noem were underway visiting the wreckage site on a Station Washington small boat.

“There were a lot of moving parts that morning as traumatic as it was, but I am so incredibly proud of our team’s efforts throughout this response,” said Burkett. “From the moment the accident took place, we’ve been here to support the American public.”

The Coast Guard rapidly integrated into the incident unified command to support local, city, state, and federal partners.

Beyond search and rescue, the Coast Guard’s objectives included ensuring the safety of the public and first responders on the water, aiding in victim recovery efforts, assisting salvage operations, and supporting the National Transportation Safety Board’s incident investigation.

“We put all available resources to bear on this response,” said Burkett. “We had many Coast Guard small boat stations and cutters arrive at the scene that morning and days after. We called in additional crews to help from Sector Delaware Bay to make sure we kept a 24/7 presence on the waterway and support by any means we could.”

A week after the accident, a total of 11 small boat stations and five cutters were deployed, including support from two Coast Guard sectors, Coast Guard headquarters, and the Coast Guard Auxiliary.

"We worked together as a unified command," said Burkett. "Everybody has their responsibilities from our responding units to the agencies in the unified command. We worked as a team to ensure we got the mission accomplished. This is what we do. This is what we train to do. That's why we train with our partner agencies here in the greater Washington area to prepare for these types of tragedies."