

On February 1, 1957, at about 6 p. m., an airplane of the Northeastern Airlines from LaGuardia Airport crash-landed on the Penitentiary grounds on Rikers Island a few minutes after taking off from the field. The plane apparently struck the ground in the section of the tree nursery and finally came to a halt in the middle of the field adjacent to the poultry farm. Shortly after the crash the plane was a mass of flames. There were ninety-one (91) passengers on the plane, of whom twenty (20) were killed as a result of the crash and explosion. This disaster required the implementation of the Disaster Control Plan of the institution as well as the mobilization of all resources then available on the Island. Through the utilization of inmates and all departmental personnel available at the time, a rescue operation was put into effect for the relief of victims of the plane crash. All survivors were taken from the immediate vicinity of the disaster and escorted to first aid stations at both the visiting room of the Penitentiary and the Rikers Island Hospital. With all available medical supplies and resources, first aid and emergency treatment were given to all the survivors until the arrival of disaster units from the New York City Department of Hospitals. On or about 11 p. m. of that day, all of the survivors were transferred to the New York City mainland where they were in turn sent to various hospitals in the city.

There is no question that collectively all of the departmental personnel and inmates who were drafted for rescue operations did a remarkable job which resulted in minimizing the loss of life and relieving the sufferings of the survivors. Everything that was done showed good control and organization on the part of all institutional personnel. It was a spirit of cooperation which extended beyond and above the normal course of duty.

Rikers Island Dramatized

The Department of Correction's participation in the Rikers Island plane crash was vividly portrayed on the television program of the Armstrong Circle Theatre (N. B. C.) Tuesday, May 14, 1957.

The crash focused attention on our department and afforded the public an intimate glimpse into the complexities of life within a prison; the decisions that must be made by correctional personnel during critical situations and the thinking and motivations of the incarcerated population. The drama was a forceful presentation of a phase of governmental administration not too well known by the general public.

The rehabilitation program at Rikers Island was also effectively portrayed and the Department of Correction

received long overdue recognition for its constructive work in the training and education of the inmates in its care.

Official Inmate Recognition

The Department recognized the rescue efforts of 57 inmates who took part in the rescue work during the Rikers Island plane crash. Of the 46 serving penitentiary indefinite terms, 30 were released and 16 received a reduction of six months by the N. Y. C. Parole Board. Governor Averell Harriman also granted commutation of sentence to 11 men serving definite sentences: two received a six months reduction; one workhouse and eight penitentiary definites became eligible for immediate release.

Departmental Awards

On May 15, 1957, Mayor Robert F. Wagner presented the department's highest award, the Medal of Honor, to Ass't. Deputy Warden James C. Harrison who was in command of the Rikers Island institution during the evening of the plane crash, in recognition of extraordinary performance of duty at that time.

Additional Department Meritorious Awards were presented by the Mayor to 43 other employees, (Chaplains, correction officers, civilians, doctors, nurses, etc.) who participated in the rescue work.



Presentation of Department of Correction Medal of Honor to Ass't. Deputy Warden James C. Harrison by Mayor Robert F. Wagner and Commissioner Anna M. Kross.