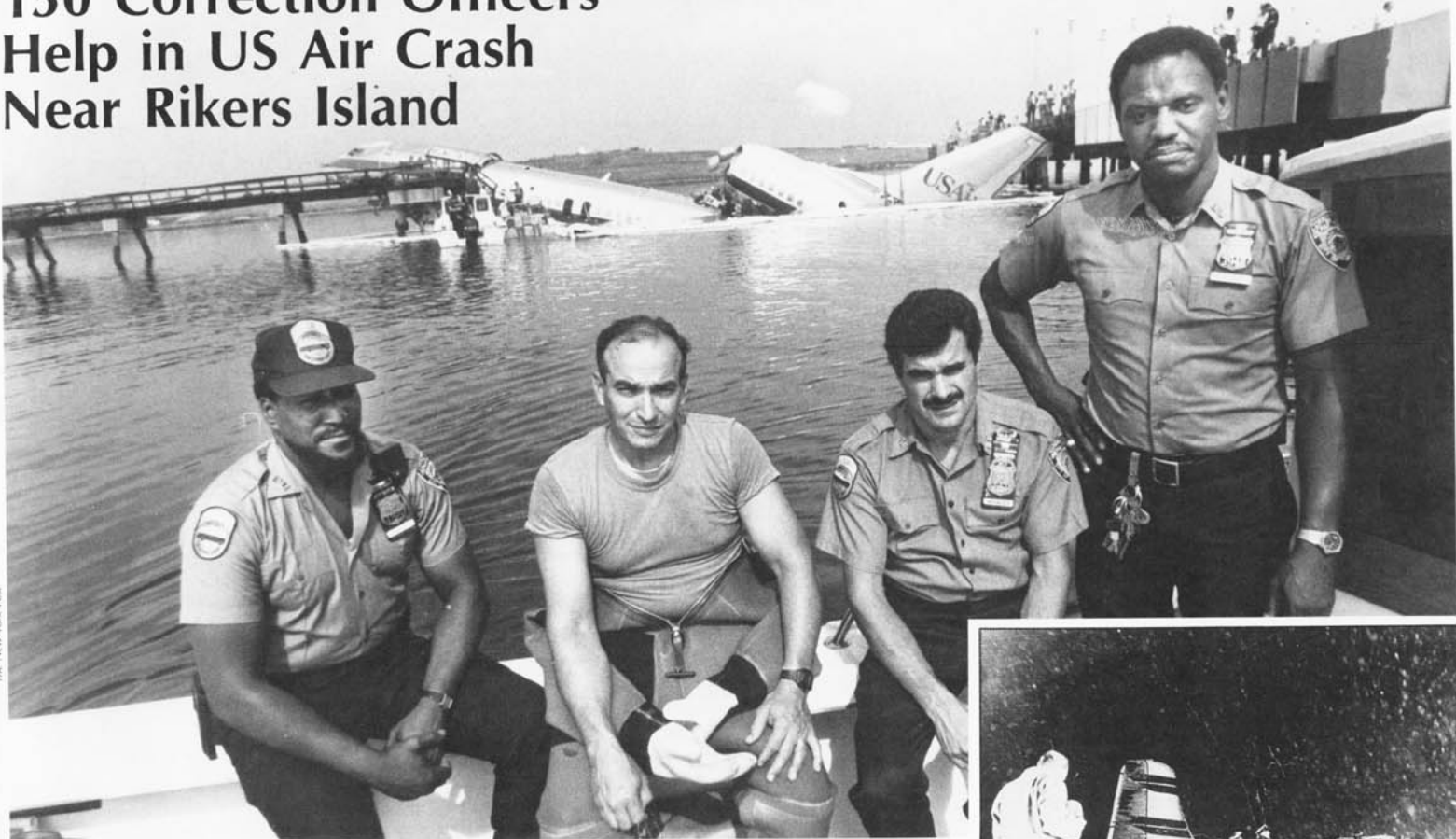




In The News

150 Correction Officers Help in US Air Crash Near Rikers Island



Above, members of the Department of Correction, Special Operations Division, who responded to the US Air 747 plane crash (background) at LaGuardia Airport. When a mutual assistance plan was set in motion with the Port Authority's emergency "Call 44," nearly 150 correction officers in department vehicles and two patrol boats responded. Inset, in 1957, Protestant Chaplain E. Frederick Proelss gives last rites to the victims of a DC-6A airliner, which crashed on Rikers Island near the Penitentiary (known as the James A. Thomas Center) minutes after take-off in a snow storm from LaGuardia.



UPI Inc., 1957

Within minutes after US Air Flight 5050 crashed into the East River off of Runway 13-31 at LaGuardia Airport, the Department of Correction's Transportation Division was alerted by Rikers Island Security to pick up officers from facilities on Rikers Island to help. This action was a part of Operation Low Key, a mutual assistance plan with the Port Authority police. The agencies had been rehearsing annually for such disasters for the past nine years. Supervising Warden James T. Garvey Jr. set the department's part of the operation in motion when he received reports of the down aircraft on Wednesday September 20. As rehearsed so many times, the department provided manpower to carry stretchers and buses to move people around the airport. The DOC also sent patrol boats and two divers [Correc-

tion Officers Robert Walton and Felix Aponte] to assist in the search for bodies—dead or alive. While the DOC's response was a great demonstration of preparedness with 150 correction officers responding, the disaster was not the worst case imagined by one Emergency Response Unit captain. "All you hear is that a plane went down and you think bodies," said Capt. Peter Meringolo. "It is scary to think of how many people, God forbid, could have been dead." Two bodies were later recovered from the plane and according to *Newsday's* account 30 or more passengers were rescued from the wings and 20 from the water as they were grabbing at the base of the pier. There were 57 aboard the plane. Because of Rikers Island location in the East River just off of LaGuardia Airport, there is a great need for con-

cern about airplane disasters. To many in the the department, the crash of US Air Flight 5050 was reminiscent of one that occurred on February 1, 1957 when minutes after takeoff from LaGuardia Airport a DC-6A aircraft went down on Rikers Island. The plane, bound for Miami and carrying 91 passengers, crashed just east of the House of Detention for Men (known as the James A. Thomas Center). Twenty passengers died in the crash. The Operation Low Key is a part of an elaborate rescue scheme worked out by the Port Authority police that involves the Police Department, the Fire Department, the Emergency Medical Service, the Red Cross and the Coast Guard. Plane crashes are assimilated in exercises held in October on Rikers Island and on LaGuardia Airport in alternate years.