



# Mooring Balls and their Trailing Pick-up Ropes

by **Diver "Z"**

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**S**mack in the waters of New York Harbor and the Hudson River are huge mooring balls with two hundred foot trailing lines that float.

The pickup line is designed to be attached to a ship waiting for a dock to open on shore. There are hundreds of these buoys on east coast waters. **IT IS THE ONLY WAY FOR A SHIP TO TIE UP EASILY AND SAFELY IN A DESIGNATED SPOT.**

The danger of these buoys is to be avoided at all times, as the trailing line is a danger to other ships. That is what happened here.

Diver "Z", one of the most impressive experienced divers in the area, had to dive under a ferry boat at midnight in the middle of New York Harbor and "free up" one of these monster buoys. The pickup line had wound around the prop, dragging the enormous buoy under with it. **This created tremendous tension on the lines.**

Diver "Z" really knew the dangers.

And here is his story.....

*It all began at The Brooklyn Barge with a "Diver Z" performance which was a huge success.*

**Here's The Big Dive, direct from Z.**

A daylong dive presentation took a lot of juice out of me, I am thinking about a good dinner and a good nights sleep.

My truck is loaded with dive stuff - regulators, full-face masks, powerful lights, wireless communication, a remotely operated underwater vehicle, cameras, and more.

I am ready for any action.

Suddenly my phone rings. I picked up and asked, "What's going on and where?"

I'm being briefed. A mooring line was wrapped around one propeller of a 200 ft. long dinner boat.

The message is: just cut that line free and the vessel will go back to the dock.

"Ok, so the dinner boat has one engine that is working right?" I asked.

The Coast Guard already evacuated passengers.

Before I get myself into the frenzy I shout: "Do we have that job on the dinner boat?"

"Let me give you a call back in a few minutes to confirm", he says. and we hung up. I keep driving, the phone gets me again, so does the thunder, and heavy rain, and the wipers are fighting their battle - left/right, left/right..

"Ok, we got the job, now to Dobbs Ferry.

A speedboat is on the way.

The mission is on, now there is no way out.

The heavy wind tears off my jacket. I'm soaked in a matter of seconds. A headlamp is navigating the dolly wheels over the bumps, through the gate, and on the dock. I'm bouncing on the dock as the river is thrown in every direction. Lighting is pretty strong, I can see far out when it strikes. Rain is like a power washer. As the boat turns in I begin to see a red side light of the approaching vessel, now the green one.

There is not a second to waste. All hands on deck! His first mate is a big help. We are all set.

I'm soaked. The boat takes off towards to Verrazano Bridge for a long ride. Better say it feels like a bull ride as the boat jumps in every direction, all my equipment is slamming on the back of the boat, I'm sitting down in between all that and assembling the equipment piece by piece to be ready. It is a crazy job, being outside, at the stern, my air tanks are bouncing loud and I'm catching what I need at the moment and putting it together with precision - my life will rely on it later.

Water is splashing over the front glass as the vessel is cutting through the mighty Hudson, into the night.

We are flying into the dark night, seeing little in front of us. Seeing very little in front of us, our eyes are piercing through the darkness to spot for other vessels, or anything else that may be in the way. The skipper is an excellent captain and knows the river. He handles the boat like a Sunday morning ride to the deli. He has got it!

I go back outside on the stern, sit and bounce down and every now and then I experience weightlessness until I land hard back on my butt when the boat takes a jump. Now I'm suiting up to my trusty worn out neoprene with holes and tears from many different missions. The weather slowly lightens up, the downpour is now rain, and the wind is a breeze.

For now, I can enjoy the scenery of New York City. We have about 15 minutes to get to where the vessel is trapped at the mooring. I see the Verrazano Bridge in the distance. The last gate when leaving the NY harbor waters and the first one to welcome mariners back from their voyages. City lights are well behind us and we now entered the dark zone again.

Here we go, we are in the mooring field! It is more like a minefield, where giant steel balls the size of a little Smart car are bobbing on the surface.

They have no lights and when you see one, it is almost too late. Each of those lonely quiet giants has strong connections - something to be aware of. Connections with the depths of the River as they the heavy chain goes down to a giant anchor down below. Tugboats, big ocean-going barges, occupy this field and some of those balls are waiting for the companion of another vessel. There it is!!! We arrived. I see a big, I mean a really big passenger vessel, 3-story high. Captain behind the wheel confirms, "This is it". I'm a little shocked; our 35 ft. fast boat is nothing next to this 200 ft. monster.

We are pulling in, slowing down and just now we all feel how choppy the water is. Up and down ... up and down ... catching the right moment, the skipper takes a jump and I see him calling for anyone aboard the dinner boat. My equipment is good to go, I'm suited up, ready for anything. Another of our crewmembers

is like a pro deploying the diver communication system. We go over the signals in case the comms go wrong, and lastly our lifeline signals - series of pulls as a simple or emergency resort of keeping in touch.

I jump on the boat getting to know the crew and Captain. We walk the

stern of the vessel and look over the edge. Dark waters are curling up against the stern, swell up a little and the water is speeding down below the vessel. "Nothing will stop the Mighty Hudson," I say. The current is strong, actually very strong. We get to the port side - here we go! The big steel-mooring ball is up against the transom pulled down about one third of its size under the boat! That is a lot of force to pull down this mooring.

Ok, let's do it, I'm all geared up, lights, gloves, checking the air, my lifeline is clipped on, fins all well. Last talk face to face - "I will get off the transom, you drag me over while I will try to swim." My mask goes on. Strapping it very tight this time as I'm trying to imagine and predict the current; lights are on and here I go. As soon I splash I have to hold on to the swim platform against the river. Life line tension goes on and off we go. I swim all I got, breathing like a racehorse. The skipper pulls, I swim and land up against the stern of the trapped vessel. I'm pinched against the flat transom by the hand of the Hudson on its way to the ocean.

I'm breathing so heavily that I cannot catch my breath. I'm getting light headed, I have to calm down. This is the time for the comms check and I hear a comforting voice from the other side "loud and clear, over."

I position myself where we think the propeller is and my hope is to go under and catch myself on the rudder as the first stop on the way to my job site. "Ok, give me a 5 ft. slack, I'm going in, going under." "Copy". I had no idea what a true meaning - going in/going under - those sayings really hold. Until I got pulled, dragged under the boat with a vicious turbulence of the current as it speeds up below the hull into the darkness. I was immediately going under, being pushed deeper than I wanted. Shining my lights through the murky curtain, inflating my buoyancy vest, I hit the rudder hip on, and I'm grasping on to it.

I feel relieved. Ok, now I'm secured, I'm buoyant, but still I feel I'm pulled down, I breathe heavily, too heavily I'm exhausted just from this little trip. I say another 5 ft. slack. Now I'm approaching the back of the propeller but all I see is bundles of line, I catch myself on it and start to have a first look. I do not get it. This is far from a job site, it is a disaster zone!!! I see a line between the rudder and propeller filling empty space of about 3 feet so wedged in that it bites itself into the edges of the rudder and the prop I'm battling the current and trying to size the bundle up, my hands do not go around that creation. The line continues around the prop, where I can see only a part of it like it is being choked, showing just the tips of the blades, then goes behind around the shaft, and ... continues to the darkness in the direction of the other engine across the boat. It is as thick as my arm. I brace myself catching my legs at the rudder and head forward stretching my arms to touch the line in front of me. It feels like a steel when I touch it. An enormous strain is put on this line!!! I worry - if anything goes - and any part catches somewhere on me, those forces would not even register my body to be in the way. I go to the second prop. I'm holding onto that steel-like line. My body is pinched to it and I go like one of those squirrels over the telephone line. Head first. My lights are piercing the darkness, and there it is. The second cluster. I have to stop and adjust my equipment. My mask is getting flooded as the water lifts it up and washes my glass from inside as well, my tank is pulled aside. I'm trying to assess the situation, and what I see is a perfect copy of where I just came from. As an addition, there is a heavy thimble at the edge of the rudder and I can finally see where it all started. A heavy line was left on the mooring bridle and now it's doing its rigorous job of holding the vessel in place. Gotcha!!! I'm now realizing that all this is to pull down that big steel mooring ball. I'm afraid to come close to anything despite the current pushing me to hold on to just that! If anything goes ... I'm thinking again.

I'm breathing heavily from fighting the current that for a moment I'm losing it, and feel that I'm getting CO2 poisoned. I have to calm down. Now! "Com check com check over?" "Loud and clear" I hear, "I'm ok loud and clear" I reply. This is the line of comfort I get down here. Ok, coming up, pick up the slack. I bobbed on the surface securely pinched against the boat. Swapping the tanks and getting the plan of the attack. "So Z, how is it?" I'm being asked. I have no idea what to say. Then I go to the cabin and still in shock from what I saw I asked: "Hey captain, are we at the right boat?" He looks at me with a smirk: "Yea, why?" "Well, we are not doing it, there is nothing we can do." Captain yells "so Z, how is it?" I looked

at him: "It is bad, very bad. I mean you are screwed here. I cannot touch anything, tension is all over the place, the line clusters are as thick as a body of a man!!!"

Then I got back to senses and I say ok, let's get a new tank, I will go in and maybe the more I go in the edges will wear off. Getting long serrated edge knives, hammer, cordless underwater grinder, and with all these hanging off like candies I'm going back in. The first stop at the rudder and got there in no time (ha-ha), swept under like a piece of dust into a central vacuum, catching a breath and now I'm landing on the prop blades. First cuts into the bundle, and after a few minutes my forearm goes numb, holding myself, cutting, breathing heavily, it is too much; I have to change the strategy. Let's cut that steel rod. I'm making first cuts into it, and as I got almost through the first strand the line is starting to unwind and parting slowly, I unclipped the knife from me and holding just the end tip of the handle and the first strand goes completely, I hear a loud steel bang. Wow! A little tension relieved, the vessel is coming to life. Cutting takes too long; I'm trying the grinder. I had no idea that this tool has a crush on this line and loves it! It is going a lot easier. I'm careful again to watch each strand unravel, followed by a loud bang. It is like watching lightning and thunder. One after another I get to the very last strand. I'm switching back to the knife. Now it's scary, I'm bracing myself, I got 2000 psi of air, just in case I get caught and swept to the unknown, this is plenty of time to breath underwater. I check all my gear that nothing dangles, or is caught anywhere. Ok, action! I checked the comms. Cutting the first line is almost done. Little by little I move the blade, it is amazing how strong the line is. Now!!! A loud bang and I can see the end rushing somewhere to hide into the darkness of the water.

Ok, the vessel is steady. I confirm with the surface and I'm moving on to starboard prop. I asked the captain to move the rudders maybe that would help to free some of the bundles. The grinder goes into action and line-by-line gives away. Now that big bundle is free. I pushed it away and it starts its own journey way into the deep waters. It is moving fast. I'm staying here for a moment and feel grateful for being up here while the bundle is going down without me. Starting to see propeller and two air tanks later the starboard prop is free and engine check proves that it works. I'm exhausted, ready for a break, this was three hours already. The current is at its maximum now and I'm going to rest, in my wet wetsuit laying on the floor for half an hour just to gain strength to tackle the real deal. I fall asleep immediately.

I'm hugging the running generator in the engine room to get rid of the terrible cold I woke up into. I'm cold, very cold doubting myself to go back in. Minutes later I found myself back under the vessel, this time with the current at its slack!

This is the last dive I'm hoping for, surrounded by an enormous tension of twisted and stretched lines. Each of the strands holds the unpredictable direction of unstoppable power if I make the cuts in a wrong sequence. In a moment the vessel will be set free from the mooring.

I start with the main line connecting the vessel to the mooring line thimble. This line is arm thick. I start strand by strand, each goes with the boat talking back, metal is squeaking and bang announces every cut through.

I'm at the last cut planning correct body position so that I do not go with the line rushing away. Looking for an easy spot where I can land safely after the cut to drift away with the boat.

The grinder is spinning and I'm carefully watching the wheel disappearing into the line. Last cuts are made with the knife. I'm feeling comfortable with my position. Watching the line strands giving away, trying to predict that thimble action. Bang!!! That was an unexpected loud bang steel on steel. I pushed away holding on to the propeller for a moment trying to see if I'm all one piece and what really happened.

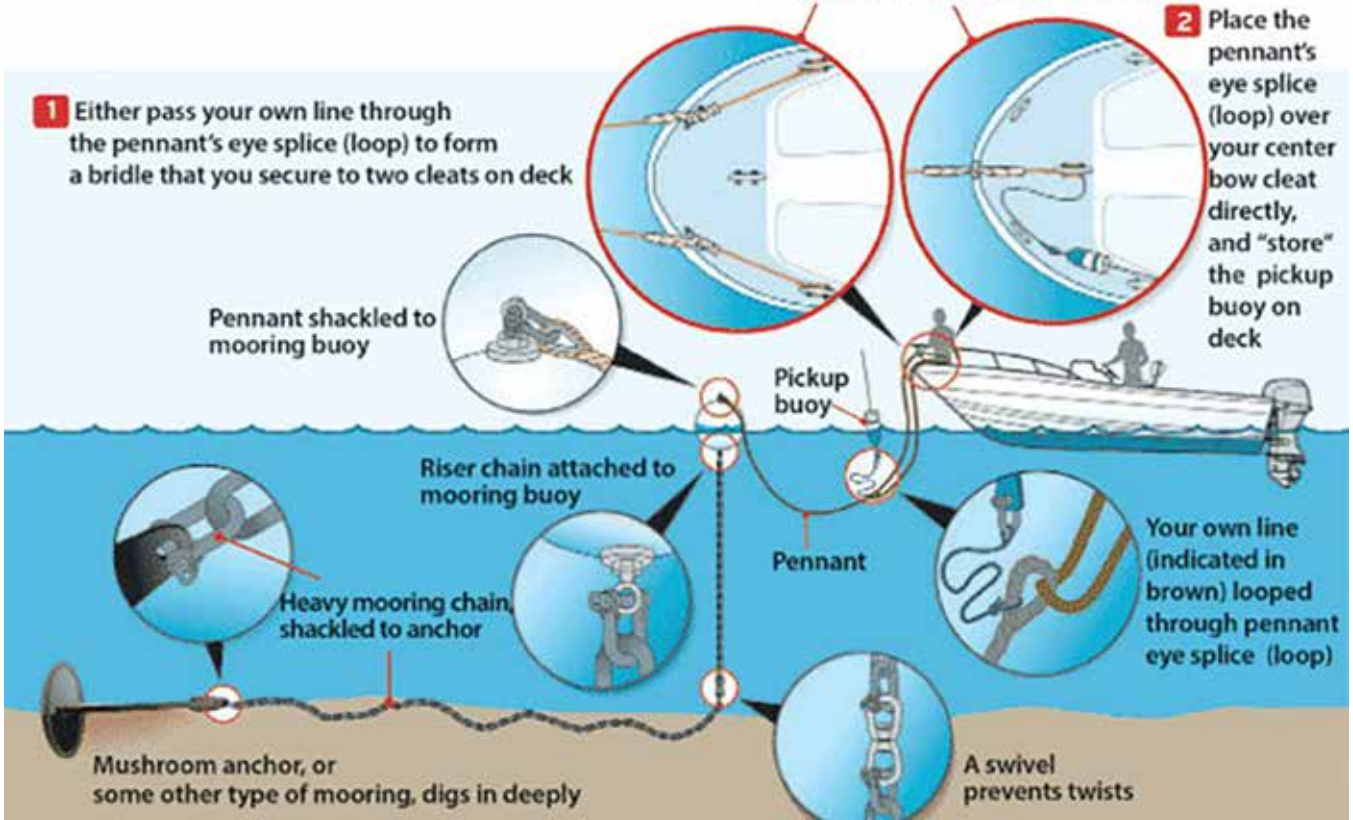
I see the line is cut, hanging down from the prop and the thimble is gone! I announced: "Coming up - over." "Copy that, all clear".

I see the boat separated from the huge mooring ball which is finally afloat at its full majesty and the boat is just a few feet away. Slack tide! Going back down to wrestle the rest of the line on the prop - this time it is a grinder job and the current is very mild. Got it, go it all!!! Last few pieces with hammer and chisel.

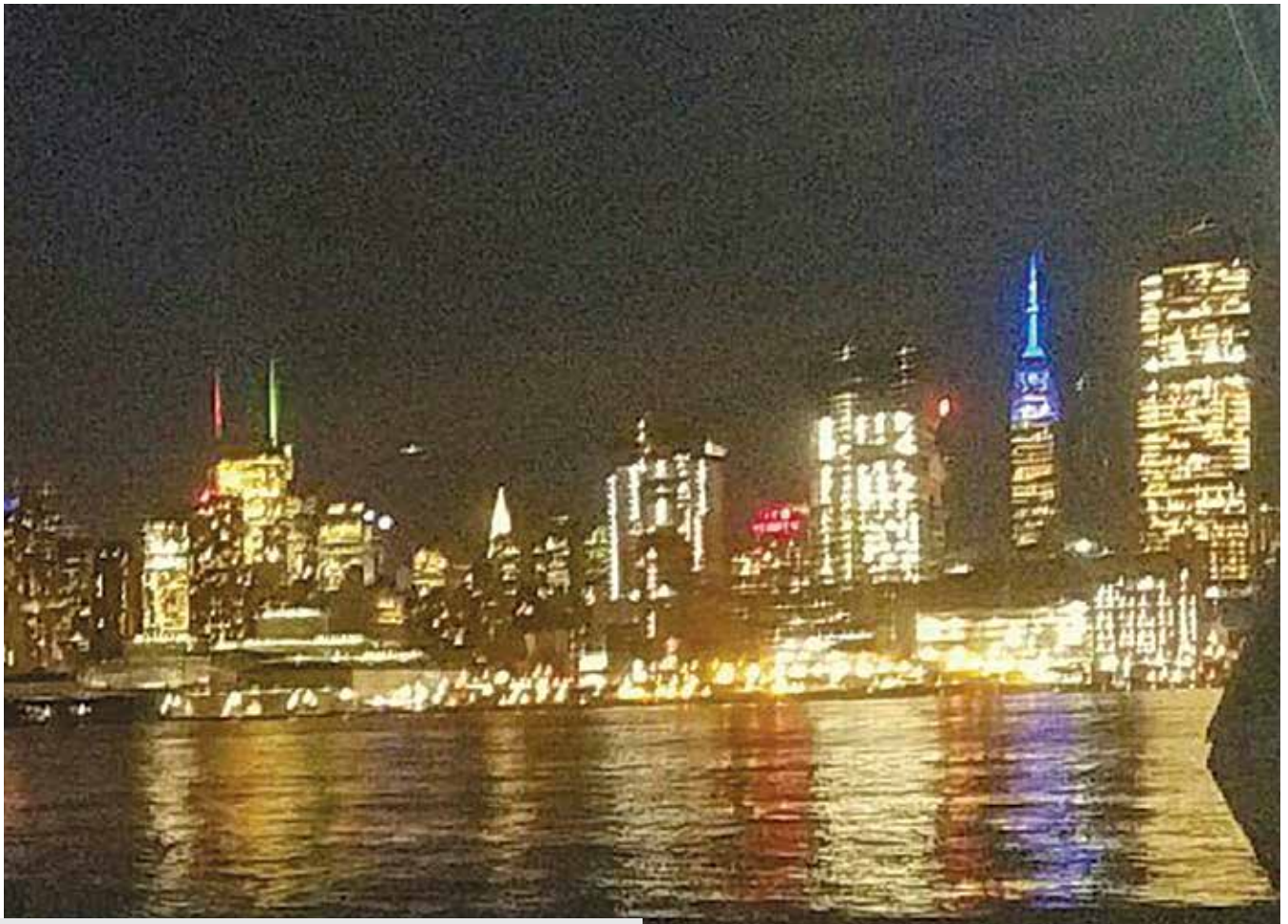
YOU HAVE TWO CHOICES WHEN SECURING YOUR BOAT TO A MOORING LINE

**1** Either pass your own line through the pennant's eye splice (loop) to form a bridle that you secure to two cleats on deck

**2** Place the pennant's eye splice (loop) over your center bow cleat directly, and "store" the pickup buoy on deck







I feel joy, big joy as I see small pieces of the line going away, and now I'm working in such a comfort that makes all that previous nerve-wracking time seem obsolete. Done! I'm letting all my tools drop down hanging on the lines from my gear and the last inspection of both propellers confirms there is no line anywhere in sight! Daylight makes it much easier. I can easily swim under the vessel. Just in time, the current here comes fast without giving much of the heads up. I say: "Coming up, all done!" "Copy coming up." Best words ever!

And once again I made a stand against the odds and found a compromise with the mighty Hudson. The accomplishment and joy are in my heart, climbing back on our fast response boat.

Everyone is relieved after a whole night battle. I'm grateful for an excellent team supporting my work in every possible way. We shake hands, engines are back in operation and the big once trapped vessel is on its maiden voyage.

Morning view of the New York City is a beautiful sight. I get to see just a bit of Manhattan before going for a nap. I'm so tired, dead tired, my forearms are in pain, crashing for a sleep on the floor of the transom in my wetsuit on top of my gear, I hear the rumble of the engines and splashing of the waves, and all I can think of is: We got it!!! The impossible just happened right in front of my eyes.

