

USS New York Arrives For Commissioning



by Bill Bleyer

Even though many of the crew had stayed up late the night before to join New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg in watching the Yankees play in the World Series, November 2 began like every other day for those aboard the *USS NEW YORK*. There was the announcement of “reveille, reveille!” over the public address system and the trill of the bosun’s whistle at 4 a.m. But there was also something special that day, a fitting tribute to the amphibious assault ship’s heritage: a recording of Frank Sinatra singing “New York, New York.” It was the day that the Navy’s newest warship - with its bow stem containing 7.5 tons of steel salvaged from the fallen Twin Towers - was to enter its namesake state for 10 days of public visitation and its commissioning into the active fleet.

The *New York* is the seventh Navy vessel to carry the name going back to a Revolutionary sailing gondola (a gunboat) and continuing with a 19th century frigate, a 74-gun ship of the line, a screw sloop, a Spanish-American War-era armored cruiser and a World War I-era battleship.

The 684-foot, \$1.2-billion *New York* is formally known as LPD 21 because it is officially a “landing platform dock” in Navy jargon. It is the fifth member of the San Antonio Class of amphibious ships. Another four are being built, including two named for the other Sept. 11 sites: the *USS Arlington*, named for the attack on the Pentagon; and the *USS Somerset*, named for the field in Pennsylvania where United Flight 93 crashed after passengers overwhelmed terrorists. It has a permanent crew of 359 Navy and Marine personnel and is designed to carry up to 800 additional Marines and their equipment.

The ship was built at Northrop Grumman Ship Systems’ shipyard in Avondale, LA. Construction began in August 2004 with 1,200 workers who stayed to finish the project after Hurricane Katrina hit the facility in August 2005. The *New York* was christened March 1, 2008. Her motto is “Strength forged through sacrifice. Never forget.”

The vessel was already in the works before Sept. 11, 2001, but after the terrorist attacks, the Defense Department agreed to a request by then-Gov. George Pataki in September 2002 to name the ship *New York*



Officers and men stand ready to greet USS New York arriving in New York Harbor.

to honor those who died in the attacks. It also arranged to have the steel from the World Trade Center melted into the bow stem and the ship’s emblem to be a silhouette of the Twin Towers.

The crew members said they are thrilled to be aboard a vessel with a Sept. 11 connection. “It’s wonderful being on this ship,” said the chaplain, the Rev. Laura Bender of Lake Ronkonkoma, an 11th-generation New Yorker and one of about 10 Long Islanders in the crew of 359. “The ship, for me, is a symbol of how life always comes from death and strength comes from adversity. I really feel we are sailing the World Trade Center home and there will be a lot of healing just by moving past Ground Zero and saluting the site and receiving a salute back from the fire department.”

The bosun, Fred Tiedemann of Woodside, a 26-year Navy veteran who oversees the deck equipment, said he has served on a dozen ships but said this one is special.

“I’m from New York, and I know some of the people who went down in the towers,” he said. “It’s going to be pretty special” returning the seven and a half tons of steel to Manhattan. “It means a lot to the crew.”

For Lt. Melissa Proud of Glen Cove, the supply officer, the *New York* is her second ship in a decade in the Navy. She joined the ship more than a year ago while it was still under construction. She said the *New*

York and its sister ships are the first to have “sit-up bunks,” which give the crew enough space to sit up in the beds that are stacked three deep.

The lower levels of the ship are largely occupied with a hangar bay filled with two helicopters and vehicles from tanks to a Humvee (high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle, successor of the jeep) can be stored, along with two amphibious air-cushioned troop carriers powered by a pair of giant propellers that are launched from a floodable well deck.

The stern flight deck accommodates Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft and three types of helicopters.

The *New York* passed under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and entered New York Harbor at 7:10 a.m. escorted by four NYPD helicopters and a phalanx of Coast Guard and police boats as sailors and Marines manned loaded machine guns around the decks.

With its crew and temporary contingent of 200 Marines from the 26th Expeditionary Force lining the rails in a brisk, cold wind, the *New York* exchanged



The new USS New York, its bow stem containing 7.5 tons of salvaged Twin Towers steel, received deserved salutes from all onlookers.

whistle blast salutes with a passing Staten Island ferry. Then it was greeted with the traditional plumes of red, clear and blue water spouting from four waiting city

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fireboats near Liberty and Governors Islands. "It's fantastic," said the captain, Cmdr. Curt Jones, a Binghamton native. "It really does feel like we're coming home."

At 8:12, the ship – flying a special flag presented by the Port Authority depicting the Twin Towers – halted in the Hudson River off Ground Zero to honor those lost in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Two whistles were sounded, the crew saluted and seven Marines on the fantail of the ship fired a 21-gun salute. Firefighters and onlookers on shore acknowledged the tribute while aboard the ship the head of the September 11th Families' Association, Lee Ielpi, had tears in his eyes. "I'm thinking of my son," Ielpi said of Jonathan, 29, a firefighter and father of two killed on 9/11, as well as all those who gave their lives that fateful day. "It's a good day. We're smiling through our tears."

The warm welcome of crowds lining the Battery and other spots up the Hudson thrilled the crew and Marines from Camp Lejeune, N.C. One Marine, Daniel Vieira, 21, of Lake Ronkonkoma, NY, who enlisted two years ago and was making his first deployment at sea, said, "I'm proud to be on a ship that honors those who had fallen on 9-11."

Before docking at Pier 88, next to the aircraft carrier *Intrepid*, the ship steamed up the Hudson almost to the George Washington Bridge to show off its sleek radar-deflecting design and then turned south to its temporary home before returning to its homeport of Norfolk, VA. After two McAllister tugs nudged the warship alongside Pier 88 and deckhands sent heavy dock lines ashore, the voice of the *New York's* officer of the deck rang out across the wide pilothouse. "Moored!" boomed Lt. Richard Zabawa of Saratoga Springs, one of the more than 30 New York State residents serving on the namesake craft. With Zabawa's announcement at 9:59 a.m., everyone on board let out a collective breath. The ship had completed its two-week voyage from a Louisiana shipyard with stops in Norfolk and Camp Lejeune to the Big Apple for its commissioning without a hitch.

The following Saturday, shortly after noon, a command rang out at Pier 86 in Manhattan: "Bring the ship to life." With that, crew members in dress blues ran to stand at attention at the rails, radar antennas began to rotate, black smoke poured from three funnels, sirens rang, the horn blared and the *New York*, docked across the water at Pier 88, became part of the active U.S. Navy fleet. It was a ceremony evoking emotion, pride and patriotism and full of references to Sept. 11. It featured dignitaries from former Mayor Rudy Giuliani to Gov. David Paterson to keynote speaker Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, who said, "This ship carries memories

of Sept. 11 and the lives cut short." She called the vessel "a symbol of our unshakeable resolve."

The private ceremony was attended by 3,000, with about a third being relatives of those who died on 9-11. It began at 11 a.m. sharp with the ship's executive officer, Cmdr. Erich Schmidt, stating that "today our ship is complete."

Chaplain Laura Bender asked for a moment of silence "for those whose lives were changed" by Sept. 11. She said of the ship, "She is not only the navy's newest ship, she is a symbol of the strength and resolve of our nation. We've brought the ship to life, she said afterwards. And I hope that we've brought life back to those who were affected by the tragedy of 9-11."

Paterson recalled that it was at the same spot on the pier adjacent to the Intrepid Sea Air Space Museum seven years ago that the then Secretary of the Navy announced that the ship would be named for the Empire State. "This is a great day for everyone who believes in freedom and justice," he said. Referring to the roughly 3,000 people killed on Sept. 11, Paterson said, "Their spirit is embodied in this new ship. With Twin Towers' steel in the bow," Paterson said, "it is not just named for New York. It is New York." He said as the ship travels the world, "we're sending a message that Americans are not covered by evil."

Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, said, "Today we witness the birth of another memorial to liberty." He praised the ship's inaugural crew – known as 'plank owners' in navy jargon – as people whose "legacy will live on" and others who will serve aboard over the ship's estimated 40-year lifespan. "The murderers of 9-11 thought they would bring us down," Mabus said. "The *New York* is a visible demonstration of our resilience as a people. The *New York* is America's ship."

Among those in attendance were 10 members of the family of third class petty officer Nicholas Atkins of Roanoke, Alabama, for whom the *New York* is his first ship assignment. His mother, Linda, said, "We wanted to show him our support and support the country." It was their first visit to the Big Apple and they played tourist at Ground Zero and other sites before loading up on *USS New York* souvenirs at the pier.

Mabus declared the ship to be commissioned at 12:03 p.m. and Capt. Jones told Schmidt to "hoist the colors." A large American flag was run up a wire behind the ship's foremast. Jones then read his orders for assuming command. Mayor Michael Bloomberg then helped set the first watch aboard, saying that over the



Mrs. Dotty England, wife of Secretary of Defense, Gordon England, christening the U.S.S. New York.

ship's expected 40-year lifespan hundreds of sailors would be aboard and "all of them will sail under the name of our great city and state."

Then at 12:07 p.m., crew members clad in dress blue uniforms ran to man the rails, the ship's matron of honor, Dotty England, commanded, "Bring the ship to life" and the gray warship decked in red, white and blue bunting became animated. Navy and Marine aircraft flew by over the river in dramatic salutes. "Captain, *USS New York* is manned and ready," Schmidt announced.

Concluding the 85-minute ceremony, Jones said that for 60 percent of the crew, it was the first shipboard assignment. Mentioning the World Trade Center steel, Jones said, "It cuts the water for us. It reminds us every day of what we do and why we do it." And speaking to the 911 responders, he said, "New York now has the watch. Never forget."

Among those at the ceremony were members of the Northport Division of the US Naval Sea Cadets, a



USS New York leaving its temporary berth near New York Harbor reviewing stand.

federally chartered organization for young people who train with the Navy and Coast Guard. Two months ago the Navy agreed the division would carry the name of the *U.S.S. New York*. After the ceremony, Cadet Michael Kiesel, a freshman at St. Anthony's High School in Huntington, said, "The *USS New York* represents America's global strength and presence. Yet we can never forget that it is also a symbol for all of those who gave the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq and Afghanistan. And we can never forget those civilians who, on that day back on September 11, 2001, sacrificed their lives for their families."



U.S.S. New York under construction in Northrup Grumman shipyard.