

USS New York comes 'home' to harbor



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AND JOHN
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ABOARD THE
USS NEW YORK
- The USS New
York, built with

steel salvaged from the fallen Twin Towers, entered New York Harbor Monday and paused for a moment in the waters off Ground Zero to honor those lost in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

A detail aboard the 684-foot, \$1.2-billion amphibious assault vessel fired a 21-gun salute from the fantail of the ship.

Firefighters and onlookers from the shore acknowledged the salute, while aboard the ship the head of the September 11th Families' Association, president Lee Ielpi, had tears in his eyes thinking about his son, Jonathan, 29, a firefighter and father of two killed on 9/11 - as well as all those who gave their lives that fateful day.

"I'm thinking of my son," Ielpi said, as he watched the ceremonial exchange Monday. "It's a good day. We're smiling through our tears."

The USS New York's bow was built from 7.5 tons of steel salvaged from the fallen World Trade Center. The ship officially "came home" at 9:59 a.m., when it moored at Pier 88.

It is in town for a commissioning ceremony Saturday.

Escorted by NYPD helicopters, one of the newest ships in the Navy fleet sailed under the Verrazano Bridge to a welcoming rainbow off Staten Island - and was acknowledged by fire boats shooting streams of red, white and blue water into the air near Governors Island.

"It's fantastic," Cmdr. Curt Jones said. "It really does feel like we're coming home."

The New York is one of four ships of its type currently either in service or ready for service. 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.

The USS New York is the latest in a long line of so-named ships dating back to a Revolutionary War-era gondola and including a 36-gun 19th Century frigate, a 74-gun ship of the line, a screw sloop, a Spanish-American War-era armored cruiser, a World War I-era battleship and a nuclear sub named USS New York City.

"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 morning aboard the USS New York began with reveille at 4 a.m., a tradition that Monday was followed by a fitting tribute to the ship's roots: a recording of Frank Sinatra singing "New York, New York."

Before docking at Pier 88, next to the aircraft carrier Intrepid, the ship ran up the Hudson to the George Washington Bridge, then turned around and returned to the pier Monday.

The ship's boatswain, 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."

VIPs and Sept. 11 first responders were flown out to the ship by Marine Chinook helicopters, including Ferg Foley, chief operating officer for American Defense Systems, a Hicksville defense contractor. On Sept. 11 he was the senior officer in Manhattan for the Army National Guard and spent two weeks coordinating the response at Ground Zero.

"It's amazing" to be onboard, Foley said, "just knowing that it has some of that steel from Ground Zero and that it represents the fighting spirit of the United States. You can sense the pride of the servicemen and women working on the ship."

For Lt. Melissa Proud of Glen Cove, the supply officer, the New York is her second ship in a decade in the Navy. She has been aboard for more than a

year. She said the New York and its sister ships are the first to have "sit-up bunks" that 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 two levels below where vehicles from a tank to a Humvee are parked, along with two amphibious air-cushioned troop carriers powered by a pair of giant propellers that are launched from a floodable well deck.

On the wide bridge Sunday, more than a dozen personnel navigated with charts and radar and other video screens, while one sailor steered with a small black wheel and Jones, the captain, watched from a padded chair on the starboard side. In the center of the pilothouse floor was the ship's emblem showing the Twin Towers and a phoenix rising from the ashes.