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U.S.S. New York Crew Recalls Its Own 9/11 Ties

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ABOARD U.S.S. NEW YORK, off New York — Most were middle school students, but some were construction workers, police officers or members of the military when two planes slammed into the World Trade Center eight years ago.



Rachel L. Leslie/U.S. Navy

Marielena Derasmo, 22, a petty officer third class in the Naval Reserve, on the U.S.S. New York, was in her first day of high school on 9/11. Many crew members were in middle school that day.

A Voyage Bearing a Memory (October 30, 2009)

As they have traveled toward New York together, the crew of this ship has traded stories of that day, with personal details fleshing out the standard narrative of disbelief, sorrow and outrage.

One told of learning about the attacks on the first day of high school and fearing for the safety of relatives. Others spoke of rushing from a nearby construction site to assist with the rescue efforts; of deciding to enlist while combing through the rubble; and of watching quietly as the nation's leaders assessed the damage and plotted their response.

The memory of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, hangs heavy over the U.S.S. New York, which has been described variously as a tribute to the victims and an instrument of their vengeance. Steel salvaged from the World Trade Center is forged into the bow of the ship, which bears a crest featuring a phoenix rising from the twin towers and the words "Never Forget."

The group of sailors and Marines who have been guiding the warship to New York City, where it is due to dock on Monday, before its formal commissioning later this week, includes many New Yorkers who requested the assignment. Some had already enlisted before the attack. Others said it was the incentive they needed to sign up for the military. Still others said it never factored into their decision.

It is not a constant topic. The ship arranged a showing of two 9/11-related films one night, but no one came to watch. And some on board fell back instinctively on military bravado or boxing-movie metaphors when discussing the events. ("You can sucker punch us, or whatnot, but we're going to come right back at you," for instance.) But it is a topic on which many on board are willing to let their guard down, a bit.

Steve Cochrane, a petty officer second class in the Navy Reserve, saw the attack unfold on television. That night, Officer Cochrane, then a police officer in Westchester County, drove down to the area with some other officers. They climbed onto the rubble and began digging

though it. He remembered the steel still being hot to the touch. Retelling the story brought tears to his eyes, which he wiped roughly with the back of his hand.

“While on the pile, I looked around and said, ‘Never again in my backyard,’ and I started looking for jobs in the military,” he said.

On Sunday, the ship idled about 10 miles off the coast of Long Island, while the crew spent the day ferrying business executives, military officers and defense contractors on board by helicopter. The guests were given tours of the ship and will spend the night in cramped living spaces, sleeping in three-level bunks normally used by Marines (though several, including the Jets owner Woody Johnson and the former Navy secretary Gordon R. England, will receive the roomier accommodations used by senior officers).

Among the visitors was Jennifer Adams, chief executive of the Tribute WTC Visitor Center, which features an exhibition about the ship.

“To the families in our community, it means a tremendous amount,” she said. “It’s a symbol that the spirit of their loved ones will be remembered.”

As she explored the ship, Ms. Adams was greeted enthusiastically by the crew, many of whom, she noted, were in middle school at the time of the attacks. She said that survivors and victims’ relatives will be giving crew members tours of the trade center site after the ship arrives in port. (There was to be a 21-gun salute at about 8 a.m., when the ship neared the trade center site..)

“Our role is really to help educate the crew here to understand the events of 9/11,” she said.

Lance Cpl. Joseph T. Anderson, from Levittown, N.Y., is one of those who needs no refresher. He was down the street, standing on a piece of steel on the 63rd floor of a skyscraper he was helping to construct, when the planes hit. He could not hear the sound of the explosion over the din of the construction site, but learned soon afterward from a co-worker what had happened.

As he raced toward the trade center, he learned that his brother, who worked on the 105th floor of the south tower, had managed to escape as the building was collapsing. Lance Corporal Anderson stayed for more than a month to help clear the site, at first looking for survivors and later for bodies. His job was to cut and load the steel. “It was all mangled and wrapped around everything,” he said. Six years later, in 2007, he enlisted in the Marines because, he said, he would have regretted not having done so. Now, with his first tour in Iraq behind him, Lance Corporal Anderson, 29, felt lucky to have been assigned to the U.S.S. New York, which, he said, shows America’s perseverance in the face of adversity.”

Sept. 11 was the first day of freshman year of high school for Marielena Derasmo, 22, who is from Yonkers and is now a petty officer third class in the Navy Reserve. She was at Mass when the students learned that planes hit the buildings. Two uncles worked there, and it was a while before she learned that, by luck, one was late to work that day and the other had stepped out for a cup of coffee shortly before the attack.

Cmdr. Curt Jones, who grew up in Binghamton, N.Y., was already deep into a military career when the trade center was attacked. At the time, he was an aide to the deputy commander of the United States Strategic Command in Omaha. Hours later, he found himself in a room with President George W. Bush, quietly observing as a response was planned.

“Being in the presence of the president as that is going on and unfolding is somewhat surreal,” said Commander Jones. “You know you are living history.” He continues to live it. He is now in charge of the U.S.S. New York.

“I realized,” he added, “why I’m in the Navy.”