

# THE STAR OF THE SHOW

## USS JOHN F. KENNEDY PAYS A FINAL CALL ON NEW YORK

Richard H. Wagner

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Aircraft carriers tend to steal the show. Aside from the fact that they are the centerpiece of the American fleet, their sheer size is impressive and there is excitement in the mere thought of powerful aircraft taking off and landing on such ships. USS JOHN F. KENNEDY (CV 67) has starred in Fleet Week several times (1990, 1992, 1993, 1998, 2001) and has played a central role in naval reviews in New York many other times (e.g. 1986, 2000). Unfortunately, with the Administration proposing to retire her and with the City continuing to ban nuclear powered-ships, this year's Fleet Week may have been the last time that an active American carrier will have graced the harbor.



*Big John receives a warm welcome. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*

Although sometimes referred to as part of the KITTY HAWK-class, KENNEDY is considered by the Navy to be a single-ship class. Like KITTY HAWK (CV 63), KENNEDY is a conventionally-powered, larger, and

improved version of the FORRESTAL-class. However, there are differences. For example, KENNEDY's stack is slanted to starboard to carry exhaust gases away from the approach path to the flight deck. There are also slight differences in the size and angle of the flight deck.

Entering service on 7 September 1968, most of KENNEDY's deployments have been to the Mediterranean or to the waters around the Middle East. In 1989, F-14 Tomcats from the KENNEDY shot down two Libyan MiG 23s that were approaching the battle group in a hostile manner. Two years later, KENNEDY was actively employed in the First Gulf War. Following that, KENNEDY's aircraft patrolled the no-fly zones over Iraq. Most recently, KENNEDY deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

KENNEDY was taken off the active list on 1 October 1994 and assigned to the Naval Reserve Force. The plan was to keep the ship operational and available for deployment while at the same time acting as a training center for reservists who would spend two weeks onboard. However, the plan never worked out. The ship was needed for deployment on a regular basis and, thus, could not function as a reserve training center. In addition, the Navy found that it did not have enough

available reservists to form more than a small fraction of the crew. Accordingly, the ship was returned to active status in 2000.

The Navy League tour of the KENNEDY began on the hangar deck. U.N. diplomats and their military attaches dressed in a variety of uniforms also milled around as guides were assigned for the VIP tours.

Half of the hangar deck had been taken over by the Marines. No Marine detachment has served onboard a carrier since before the Millennium and, indeed, these Marines from Marine Expeditionary Unit Two Four (24th MEU) had come to New York to act as a Marine presence during Fleet Week. The cavernous hangar deck gave them room to display their equipment including a cannon, a truck, a missile launcher, armored personnel carriers, and small arms, as well as to give demonstrations of unarmed combat.

The Marines cheerfully explained their equipment to the visitors. However, from time-to-time a casual comment like "I carried one of these in Fallujah" or "One of these got hit by an IED when I was driving but it kept on going," reminded the visitors that this equipment and these very young looking men were the real thing.

Someone asked about the reception our troops are receiving from the Iraqi people. "Most of the people there seem to like us but they don't show that on T.V." Is it going to work out in Iraq? "That's above my pay grade." The smile faded as he looked off. "I just don't know. I hope so. I don't want to have to go back."

The forward half of the hangar deck was nearly empty since the KENNEDY's air wing was not onboard.

The few aircraft scattered around the hangar deck and above on the flight deck had been brought onboard for public display purposes. Indeed, one of the helicopters was marked "ENTERPRISE." Our guide explained that the ENTERPRISE's (CVN 65) helicopter squadron had probably never participated in Fleet Week and, thus, they were onboard to experience New York.

One of the aircraft from the air wing remaining onboard was an F/A-18 Hornet. Comparing it to a Tomcat, a pilot commented, "It may not be as good in a dog fight but it is a dream to fly." The Tomcat, which is no longer deployed on KENNEDY, "doesn't have the same technology." Eagerly looking forward to the arrival of the Super Hornet, another pilot said, "It has the engines of a Tomcat and the technology of the Hornet."



*Photos on previous page: Top: An F-18 Hornet. Bottom: An E-2 Hawkeye on the flight deck of the KENNEDY. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*

The issue on everyone's mind is whether KENNEDY will be around to receive its complement of Super Hornets. "The President wants to scrap her but the Congress doesn't," a crewman noted. Our guide, as well as several other crewmen, attributed the proposal to retire KENNEDY early to the long term effects of having been in the reserve fleet. "They just didn't spend the money on her that they spent on the active carriers. As a result, everything kept breaking and she failed a review a few years ago. After that, they relieved the captain and we have had several captains. The one we have now [Captain Dennis Fitzpatrick] is very smart and he's fixed everything," our guide explained. However, as if the gremlins had heard this boast, the aircraft elevator stalled as the Navy League group rode up to the flight deck.

While there have been a number of modernizations and refits over the years, attempts to skimp on KENNEDY's maintenance pre-date her time in reserve. For example, in 1991, then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney canceled the planned Service Life Extension Program modernization of KENNEDY. Congress attempted to override that decision but did not vote enough money and an overhaul was done instead. Similarly, the refit planned for this Spring has been canceled. However, the Administration's budget proposal is not based upon the condition of the KENNEDY but rather proceeds on the theory that the country does not need 12 carriers.

Although KENNEDY remains in the budget-cutters' crosshairs, morale onboard remains good according to several officers. Still, one officer commented, "We just want to know one way or the other."



*The wheel of the KENNEDY was once on President John Kennedy's yacht. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*