

# TOURING THE KEARSARGE

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Each year during Fleet Week, the Navy extends an invitation to the Council to have its members take VIP tours of some of the visiting ships. These guided tours frequently take the Navy Leaguers to areas of the ship not open to the general public. In addition, the Navy Leaguers do not have to wait on the long lines that often form for the public tours. This year, USS KEARSARGE (LHD 3), the "flagship" of the Fleet Week flotilla was one of the ships that hosted Navy Leaguers.



*KEARSARGE at the New York Passenger Ship Terminal. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*

The 844 foot-long KEARSARGE looks like a small aircraft carrier but is actually one of the many types of Navy amphibious assault ships. "Our mission is to load, transport and land Marines and their equipment in support of amphibious and expeditionary operations anywhere, at anytime. As the command ship of an Expeditionary Strike Group, KEARSARGE can command and support all elements of a

Marine landing force of more than 2,000 troops, an assault by both air and sea," said Captain Joseph Sensi Jr., USN, commanding officer of the KEARSARGE. As such, KEARSARGE is a key asset of the transformed Navy in that she can be used for what former CNO Vern Clark termed "sea basing" of Marines off world trouble spots and to project power from the sea by landing Marines.

KEARSARGE is a Wasp-class amphibious assault ship. She has a displacement of 40,500 tons fully loaded. Her two gas turbine engines power inter alia two propeller shafts that can give her a speed of more than 24 knots. She has a crew of 1,282 enlisted personnel and 80 officers. She also has facilities for 1,700 enlisted and 193 officer Marines. She served off Bosnia in 1995 and landed Marines that were part of the initial forces entering Iraq in 2003. Since then, she has been deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Global War on Terrorism.

This KEARSARGE is the fourth Navy ship to bear the name, which derives from a mountain in New Hampshire. The first was a steam sloop of war best known for her victory over the highly successful Confederate commerce raider CSS ALABAMA off Cherbourg, France in June 1864. The second was part of President Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet and was the only United States battleship not named after a state (BB 5). The third was a Ticonderoga-class aircraft carrier

(CV 33) that fought in the Korean War and which later served as a recovery ship for the early manned-space flights.

During Fleet Week, KEARSARGE was berthed at Pier 88 in the Passenger Ship Terminal. The ship's aircraft elevator had been lowered parallel to the second level of the terminal so that visitors could board the ship just as if they were boarding a cruise ship. Indeed, upon entering the hanger deck, the Navy Leaguers were confronted with the sight of a sumptuous buffet laid out in silver serving dishes on linen-covered tables. Has life onboard improved that much for the sailors and Marines? Apparently, not quite. Our guide informed us that the buffet was for a reception for the Mayor and other such notables later in the day.

The tour headed down a ramp toward the well deck. On the next level, we met a group of Marines who were displaying their equipment. There is no Marine detachment permanently assigned to the KEARSARGE. Rather, the ship might carry one unit on a given deployment and another unit on the next deployment. The Marines that were onboard for Fleet Week were from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and had recently returned from Iraq.

Among the Marine equipment on display was an M1A1 Main Battle Tank. This is the Marines only main battle tank and has a speed of 42 mph. (The speed is limited by a "governor," which rumor has it can be removed). It is armed with a 120mm smoothbore gun, an M240 machine gun, and a .50 caliber machine gun. Although the tank is huge, inside there is not much room. It is computerized and has electronic displays. However, as in World War II tanks, it is normal for the tank commander to stand in the turret with

the hatch open because, even with the modern electronics, the view is better. In Iraq, the ubiquitous rocket propelled grenades do not present much of a problem for the M1A1. However, the Marine showing us the tank shook his head saying that the improvised explosive devices have become quite powerful.

Also, in this equipment staging area was a group from the Naval Research Laboratory who were showing some of the items that they have developed for the Marines. One of these items was the Dragon Eye unmanned surveillance unit. This device looks like a model airplane but it is no toy. Rather, the six-pound, battery-powered plane can be carried in a backpack and assembled in the field. It is radio-controlled, contains a camera and can be launched by a squad of Marines to see what is over the next hill or in the next street. In essence, it brings aerial reconnaissance down to the small unit level.

Down an even steeper ramp is the well deck. This is the area where the KEARSARGE's landing vessels are stored and loaded. A monorail system, moving at speeds of up to 600 feet per-minute is used to transport cargo and supplies from storage and staging areas to the well deck. During a landing operation, the Marines and their equipment board the landing vessels, the area is flooded up to 10 feet so that the vessels are floating, and the large "sea gate" at the KEARSARGE's stern is lowered so that the vessels can depart.

Although she can accommodate traditional landing craft, the landing vessels on KEARSARGE normally are three LCACs (landing craft air cushion). These 87-foot by 49-foot hovercraft skim across the surface of the water at

high speed (46+ m.p.h.) and can carry their cargoes of up to 75 tons forward onto the land. As such, they are very versatile. Indeed, because they "fly" over the water, LCACs can reach more than 70 percent of the world's coastline, while only about 15 percent of that coastline is accessible by conventional landing craft. However, they probably would not be used in landing on a "hot beach" because they are not armored and their air-fan propulsion systems are relatively vulnerable. A crewman explained that in such a situation, the plan would be to have airpower and naval gunfire neutralize the beach before the LCACs went in. An interesting plan in view of the lack of ships in the fleet capable of providing naval gunfire (*See The LOG*, Spring 2006, at p.15) and the plan to reduce the number of aircraft carriers in the fleet (*See The LOG*, Spring 2005, at p. 13). But then, maybe no one will try to defend a beach again.

Up the ramps to the flight deck to see the other way that KEARSARGE projects power ashore - - aircraft. KEARSARGE can carry 45 CH-46 helicopters. However, the normal mix of helicopters is: 12 CH-46E Sea Knights; 4 CH-53E Super Stallions; 4 AH-1W Super Cobras; 2 UH-1N Hueys; and 2 MH-60 Night Hawks (a.k.a. Seahawks). In addition, 6 AV/BB II Harrier jets are usually carried to provide air support for the Marines. During Fleet Week only five aircraft were displayed on the Flight Deck. Two were Navy Seahawks used primarily for search and rescue work among the ships of the Expeditionary Strike Group. The three others were helos that have long been a part of the Marine arsenal: a Huey, the versatile Vietnam-era workhorse; a Super Cobra gunship, a design which has been providing fire support since Vietnam;

and a Sea Knight, which has been airlifting Marines and their equipment dating back to 1964. While the designs are older than most of the men who fly them, the flyers pointed out that the electronics have been improved and that the bugs had been worked out of the designs which gives them confidence in their machines.

From the flight deck one could see one of the ship's two Sea Sparrow surface-to-air missile launchers mounted on the forward part of the island. KEARSARGE is also equipped with Rolling Airframe Missile (RAM) launchers and Phalanx close-in weapons systems (CIWS gattling-type guns) for antiaircraft protection. For protection against small surface craft, there are 25 mm chain guns and .50 caliber machine guns.



*The bridge. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*

Next, it was up a series of ladders in the island to the bridge. A group of military attaches from the United Nations vied with the Navy Leaguers for space on the crowded bridge. Although KEARSARGE joined the fleet in 1993, she has been upgraded so as to have modern systems such as GPS. Still, in comparison to the high-tech bridges on USCG KATHERINE WALKER (WLM 552) (*see The LOG*, Winter 2005, at p.

24) or the bridge on FREEDOM OF THE SEAS, the KEARSARGE's bridge looks a generation behind. It should be noted that this bridge is used only for navigation; the aircraft are controlled from a separate facility located in the aft end of the island.

Down the ladders to the KEARSAGE's large hospital, which is designed to provide care for troops returning from the battlefield. It can also be used for disaster relief in support of humanitarian missions (KEARSAGE provided such relief after the earthquake in Turkey in 1999) and refugee evacuations (KEARSAGE evacuated American citizens and foreign nationals from Sierra Leone in 1997). The hospital can support some 600 patients and is second only to the Navy's ready-reserve hospital ships in medical support capacity.

The final stop on the tour was the crew mess and associated galley. The gleaming stainless steel galley was essentially identical to those found on cruise ships. After all, both must be utilitarian as they are both used to cook for seatings of hundreds, if not thousands, of people at the same time. While the dining area lacked the sea views of the QUEEN MARY 2's casual dining area, it was not oppressive. Indeed, the sailors and Marines appeared to be enthusiastically digging into the large portions piled on their plates.

What is most impressive about KEARSARGE is that so many things are done onboard. Among other things, the ship provides living space for nearly 2,000 Marines, she transports their equipment and supplies, she carries tanks, cannons and ammunition, she disembarks the Marines by air and sea, she provides air support, she fuels and repairs those aircraft, and she provides

extensive medical facilities. All of this is in addition to meeting the daily needs of over 1,000 crew members.