FIRST IN HER CLASS

THE LOG VISITED USS SAN ANTONIO (LPD 17) WHEN SHE RETURNED TO NEW YORK TO REPRESENT THE NAVY ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11

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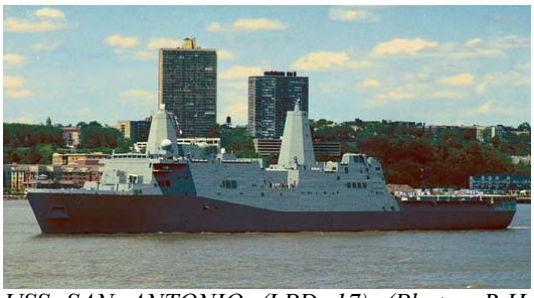
On the wall of the crew mess on USS SAN ANTONIO (LPD 17) is a mural of the World Trade Center Towers with a smaller painting inserted of the three firemen raising the Stars and Stripes after the attack. With this spirit inspiring the crew, it was altogether appropriate for SAN ANTONIO to represent the Navy in New York for the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attack.

As the ship proceeded up the the North River to the Passenger Ship Terminal on the morning of 11 September 2006, her crew manned the rails as she passed the World Trade Center.

Later in the day, two sailors, Senior Chief Storekeeper Santiago Barrera and Master Chief Engineman Alan Wilkey, re-enlisted at the World Trade Center site. “I’m not from New York, but when we got to the bottom of the World Trade Center site and I saw the memorials, the power of the moment really hit me," Barrera said. "I got very emotional.”

"Many service members volunteered because of September 11th," Commander Brad Lee, SAN ANTONIO's commanding officer said. "To have two members of the San Antonio crew renew their commitment to the Navy at Ground Zero is incredible. It's a solemn occasion and something they will remember for the rest of their lives."



USS SAN ANTONIO (LPD 17) (Photo: R.H. Wagner)

Following evening colors on 11 September, the sailors and Marines paused for a moment to remember the victims of the attacks five years earlier. As darkness fell, search lights at the World Trade Center site shone into the sky producing a ghostly image of the two towers. More than one member of the ship's company commented on the solemn beauty of this sight but they quickly returned to preparing for the next day's activity.

"Many of the Sailors and Marines in the Navy were in High School during the September attacks and now they are serving their country, representing the resolve of the American people," Commander Lee noted. "These Sailors and Marines are America's finest and like SAN ANTONIO's motto in the shadow of 9/11, America will 'Never Retreat, Never Surrender."

On a less somber note, the next day, the ship, in cooperation with Lift Up America, participated in a program to feed the less fortunate. Ten semi-trailers with 300,000 pounds of food were distributed to 5,000 families. Eye examinations were conducted and eye glasses and hearing aids were distributed. The ship was opened for tours by some 600 inner city children. In addition, Sailors and Marines performed volunteer work throughout the five boroughs during the ship's visit.

The ship's call in New York also afforded *The Log* an opportunity to look her over. SAN ANTONIO is the lead ship in a new class of amphibious assault ships that will include USS NEW YORK (LPD 21), now under construction in Louisiana. (*See The Log*, Spring 2006, at p.5). The ship is 684 feet long with a beam of 105 feet. Her displacement is approximately 25,000 tons full load. Unlike previous "Gator Freighters," the impression that one gets walking around SAN ANTONIO is that this is a very spacious ship - - nothing seems cramped or overcrowded. Her enclosed masts and angled surfaces - - designed to reduce her radar profile - - add to the feeling that this ship is a giant step beyond her predecessors. Indeed, this 12-ship class is intended to replace four different classes of amphibious warfare ships encompassing some 40 ships.

The mission of the SAN ANTONIO is to transport Marines and their equipment. To this end, the ship has accommodations for 699 Marines but can accommodate up to 800 Marines on a surge basis. While far from being cruise ship accommodations, the new "Millennium berths," among other things, allow the occupants to sit up in bed. The enlisted Marines have the same type of berths as the Sailors and eat in the same mess with the Sailors.. The only difference in berthing is that the Marines have red curtains on their berths while the Sailors have blue curtains. Along the same lines, the Marine officers and the ship's officers use the same wardroom. Everyone eats the same food as there is only one galley onboard.

The bridge on SAN ANTONIO is spacious and uncluttered. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

In keeping with her mission, SAN ANTONIO's armament is defensive in nature. She carries two Mk 31 Mod-1 RAM missile launchers for anti-aircraft defense, one located at each end of the superstructure. Near the missile launchers are two Mk46 Mod-1 30mm guns. These guns were originally developed for the Marine Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle and are being tested for shipboard use on SAN ANTONIO. If found useful, it will create the type of joint synergy so sought by the Department of Defense these days. The guns are remotely controlled and can fire 250 rounds per minute. They have a range of approximately 4,000 yards and are intended for close-in defense against high-speed targets. SAN ANTONIO recently tested her guns during a simulated attack by five remote-

controlled speed-boats and was able to destroy them all. A similar test is being done on another ship using the Phalanx CIWS to determine which system is better suited for this purpose.

While the current weapons systems are defensive, the designers of SAN ANTONIO made provision for adding to her arsenal in a way that would radically alter the ship's role should the Navy decide to expand her mission and if Congress allocates the funds. Forward of the superstructure and behind the anchor capstans, sufficient space has been left for 32 vertical launch missile cells. These cells would be similar to those now on cruisers and destroyers and could launch Tomahawk cruise missiles and other such weapons. If these cells are ever added, they would give the SAN ANTONIO a powerful offensive punch.

Since her commissioning earlier this year, SAN ANTONIO has been primarily engaged in testing. As the first ship in the class, all of the systems have to be checked to see whether they work as well in reality as the designers thought they would. All of the officers and sailors interviewed by *The Log* seemed very pleased with the ship's performance. This is not to say, however, that experience has not produced various minor suggestions for improving the next ship in the class.

One test that met unanimous approval was the landing of the MV-22 Osprey on the ship's flight deck. Still in the developmental stage, the Osprey is a tiltrotor aircraft that can land vertically like a helicopter and fly horizontally with the speed of a fixed wing aircraft. It is designed to carry 24 Marines, 10,000 pounds of equipment internally, or 15,000 pounds externally at speeds up to 375 miles an hour. The SAN ANTONIOs were impressed by the aircraft's ability to quickly change from vertical flight to horizontal flight.

In addition to aircraft transportation, the SAN ANTONIO is designed to land Marines and their equipment by sea. Her huge stern door opens to allow two LCACS (Landing Craft Air Cushion) to enter and exit the ship. Designed to skim across the water at 40 knots, one of the LCAC operators on SAN ANTONIO asserted that he has taken his craft up to 80 miles an hour. Because these craft travel at such high speeds, troops cannot stand exposed to the elements as they did in World War II Higgins boats. Instead, a personnel module capable of carrying up to 180 Marines is secured to the deck.

Because the ship is designed to support the Marines as well as to transport them, it has a state-of-the-art hospital. So that casualties will receive attention as quickly as possible, the hospital is located immediately adjacent to the aircraft hangar, which opens onto the flight deck. Thus, casualties can be brought quickly from helicopters landing on the flight deck to the hospital without having to traverse a maze of decks and corridors. The hospital includes a digital imaging system that can transmit images to specialists located far from the ship. Because she has such high tech systems, the ship carries only one medical officer, assisted by a number of Corpsmen.

SAN ANTONIO's engine room is also state-of-the-art. It is unmanned and remotely controlled from a room located not far from the bridge. While not as high tech as the bridges on QUEEN MARY 2 or USCGC KATHERINE WALKER (WLM 552), the bridge on SAN ANTONIO features touch screen controls and modern systems such as GPS. The designers elected not to use pod drives as on QM2

and KATHERINE WALKER. Rather, the ship is propelled by a traditional propeller shaft arrangement powered by diesel engines. This is a more reliable arrangement but three tugs were needed to berth the ship at the Passenger Ship Terminal.

The engine room is monitored remotely. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

It is easy to like LPD 17. Her lines are impressive and place her squarely in the 21st Century. Moreover, she appears to have been well-designed for her current mission with adequate space for expansion so as to meet the requirements of future missions. Clearly, this class was an appropriate choice for the next USS NEW YORK.