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Opinion: A peacetime armada echoes a wartime one

By Jonathan Russo and Steve Cohen

In the predawn darkness, an enormous armada of ships will gather south of the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge. Then, as the sun begins to rise, the vessels — some sporting 10,000 square feet of sails and cadets, and others housing missiles and more than 15,000 combat marines and sailors — will make their way into New York Harbor, past the Statue of Liberty and towards Manhattan.

But unlike the 400 ships that the British amassed in the same place exactly 250 years ago, these ships come in peace. And they are part of the extraordinary spectacle that is Sail250, part of the nation’s 250th birthday celebration of America’s founding.

On Saturday, New Yorkers will be treated to the largest peacetime armada ever assembled.

On July 4, 40 classic tall ships from 20 nations, scores of naval vessels from more than a dozen countries, and the world’s largest traditional ocean liner — Cunard’s Queen Mary 2 — will parade up the Hudson, turn around at the George Washington Bridge, and sail back down, paying their respects to the armada’s honorary admiral, a senior American naval officer stationed aboard a destroyer or carrier — its identity still a secret due to security concerns.

Pennant flags will fly, horns will sound, and thousands of sailors and cadets standing on their ship’s railing will render salutes. And accompanying them from above will be 100 aircraft led by the Navy’s Blue Angels.

Not surprisingly, this massive undertaking has required years of planning. And the person responsible for coordinating this impressive feat is a New Yorker: Maggie Sweeney. A Far Rockaway native and Navy veteran with more than 25 years of service, Sweeney has been working on ensuring that Sail250 comes off without a hitch since 2019. “My job is overseeing operations: making sure we have good, safe navigation; and good, solid, safe, structurally sound piers for the ships to berth at,” she said.

The procession will be led by the U.S. Coast Guard training ship *Eagle*, a 295-foot three-masted barque that has trained Coast Guard cadets since 1946. She carries 22,000 square feet of sail and has a core crew of eight officers and 50 enlisted members. Her main role is to train Coast Guard officers, and some 150 cadets are aboard during training cruises. *Eagle* is modest in size compared to some of the tall ships that will be visiting New York, with Peru’s *Bap Union* the largest at 378 feet with 36,620 square feet of sail.

After the parade, the ships will be docked throughout the city, with a few even having to berth in New Jersey. “I think the biggest difficulty is avoiding complacency. We are essentially building a city, an international city within the busiest harbor of the world. And each ship has its own unique characteristics and security needs and operational functions,” said Sweeney.



The military components of the armada have not been publicly identified, but Sweeney points out that she has to coordinate with representatives from more than 50 nations, states, and municipalities; and another 50 nonprofit organizations. A key objective, she reminds everyone, is to ensure that the public has open and free access to these remarkable ships; and that the sailors, marines, and cadets visiting New York get to explore and appreciate the city.

Our fight to gain independence from England included the largest armada ever assembled, and it delivered 32,000 troops to crush the rebellion — in New York Harbor. Who could have ever imagined that 250 years later, the largest peacetime armada would again sail into this remarkable harbor, this time to celebrate independence and be dedicated to peace.

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