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Fleet Week annual naval review begins in NYC

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NEW YORK: The annual naval tradition known as Fleet Week began on Wednesday, with a pared-down parade up New York harbor of six American warships, but no foreign entries.

USS Hue City, a powerful Aegis-type missile cruiser, and the helicopter carrier USS Wasp bookended the customary "parade of ships," signaling the start of the 20th annual event. The tradition brings about 3,000 sailors, Marines and Coast Guard members to the city for a weeklong visit.

As the parade, accompanied by a flyover of Navy and Marine Corps jet aircraft, ended about noon, the ships deployed to assigned berths to welcome public visitors.

The Wasp, officially an amphibious assault ship that carries helicopters, a crew of 1,700 and 500 combat-ready Marines, docked at Pier 90, the cruise ship port on the Hudson River, while five other warships went to the former Stapleton naval base in Staten Island.

A seventh vessel in the parade was the New York-based Coast Guard Cutter Katherine Walker, named for a lighthouse keeper's wife who maintained the Robbins Reef light off Staten Island for 33 years after he died in 1886, and was credited with saving as many as 50 seamen's lives.

Navy officials say ship assignments to Fleet Week are dependent on their availability considering other military priorities.

Cdr. Dan Bates, a spokesman for Fleet Week, said he was not certain whether any previous event had as few as seven ships. "But it probably is one of the smallest," he said.

Last year's event was also low-key, with fewer ships and only one foreign naval visitor, a British ocean survey vessel. Previous gatherings had included warships from Britain, Canada, France and other nations, and until 2005, an American aircraft carrier.

That tradition ended with the retirement of the USS John F. Kennedy, the Navy's last conventionally powered carrier, in 2005. City policy bars nuclear-powered ships in the harbor, which effectively keeps the Navy's other carriers from making port calls here.

This year's Fleet Week was also the first in which the USS Intrepid, the World War II aircraft carrier turned military museum, was not present to serve as official host ship.

The carrier, a heroic Pacific war campaigner that survived multiple Japanese kamikaze and torpedo attacks, was towed from its Hudson River berth last December for an 18-month, stem-to-stern overhaul and is now up on blocks in a Bayonne, New Jersey, drydock.

The only foreign flavor in this year's Fleet Week was provided by the missile destroyer USS Winston S. Churchill, named for Britain's World War II prime minister, whose mother was born in Brooklyn. One member of the Royal Navy is always assigned to the Churchill's crew.

In addition to public tours of the ships, the event will feature Marine Corps demonstrations of helicopter-supported raids, fast-roping assault techniques, weapons displays, Memorial Day parades in several area cities and towns and a Navy Band concert in Times Square.