

A Living Legacy, USS John Basilone is Commissioned



Amy Looney Heffernan and Ryan Manion give the command to “man our ship and bring her to life” during the commissioning ceremony for USS John Basilone (DDG 122) in New York City. (MC2 Colby A. Mothershead)

By [Lt. j.g. Julian Jacobs](#), Nov. 12, 2024

NEW YORK – On Saturday morning, nestled between the USS Intrepid, New York’s Hell’s Kitchen, and the cruise terminal, the Navy’s newest Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, USS John Basilone, was brought to life.

Commissioning ceremonies, as described by Carlos Del Toro, Secretary of the Navy, are a time-honored tradition dating back to 1775. Now, 249 years later, the USS John Basilone became the 74th ship of her class and the second ship to bear

the namesake of John Basilone.

Throughout the week leading up to commissioning, the crew of the USS John Basilone spent time learning about the life and legacy of Gunnery Sgt. John Basilone, the only Enlisted Marine to earn the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross during World War II.

While John Basilone and his beloved wife Lenah Mae (Riggi) Basilone didn't have children, GySgt Basilone's niece, Diane Hawkins, has taken up the mantle of representing her uncle's memory and his heroism. While exploring the history behind her uncle's actions, a Marine Corps representative sent Hawkins a bottle of black sand, a vial taken from Iwo Jima, the beach where her uncle gave the ultimate sacrifice. That bottle included a recommendation to retrace her uncle's footsteps. In her remarks, Hawkins recounted traveling to Guadalcanal, where Basilone and his regiment defeated a much larger Japanese force, to the Philippines, where he earned the nickname "Manilla John," to Australia, where he received the Medal of Honor, and to Iwo Jima where he perished "with his boys." Through her journey, Hawkins learned more about the man behind the myth and gained a deeper appreciation for his legacy. Most importantly, she recounted John's love for his wife, Lenah Riggi, and how Basilone outranked Riggi: "It was Lenah who was in charge." Hawkins closed her remarks by thanking the crew of DDG 122, saying that those who comprise John Basilone's legacy are delighted to have this magnificent ship become part of his legacy "to the service to this nation."

Unique to this Navy event was the presence of Marines from John Basilone's historic 1st Battalion, 7th Regiment, and the references and speeches related to USMC culture throughout the event.

Continuing on themes of sacrifice, the ship's sponsors Ryan Manion and Amy Looney Heffernen, both from Gold Star families,

spoke to the grief that comes with loss and the responsibility to uphold the memory of the fallen. Heffernen notes that she believes her late husband, Navy Seal Brandon Looney, was “cut from the same cloth as John Basilone” making her presence and participation in the life of the USS John Basilone all the more meaningful and humbling. Standing before the crew, Manion, sister of fallen Marine Travis Manion, noted the towering shadow over the crew of the Basilone, the shadow of a man who made the ultimate sacrifice and built a profound “legacy of service” in his wake. Heffernen recounted moving her way through grief with a quote, “No one is dead until the ripples they cause in the world fade away.” It is evident from the passion, dedication to service, and commitment to excellence shown by the DDG 122 crew that John Basilone won’t fade for generations to come.

In his principal address, Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro spoke about the role of the sponsors of a ship. According to naval tradition, a ship’s sponsor “guides her and her crew” through her time in service, offering his gratitude that Manion and Heffernen will forever be the connection between “this ship, her crew, and the nation.” He talked about his connection to New York, having grown up just blocks from where the ship sits today, the same pier where the USS Bunkley (DDG 84) commissioned under his command. Paying tribute to Basilone, Secretary Del Toro took a moment to spotlight Marine Sgt Dakota Meyer, a Medal of Honor recipient for his heroism in Iraq, resulting in a standing ovation to the Marine.

Del Toro recognizes the “rapidly evolving” global security environment for DDGs like the John Basilone. He remarked that today’s world differs from the American Revolution, World War II, or even his active duty tenure twenty-three years ago. Today, ships of the same class as the John Basilone are over the horizon, defending America and her allies from the threat of “Iranian-aligned Houthi attacks” in the Red Sea. Making it clear that there is “nothing ordinary” about what is being

asked of America's Sailors and Marines since the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel, Del Toro reminded the crew of the USS John Basilone and event participants that "Service is not an obligation, it is a privilege, a chance to be part of something greater than ourselves and uphold the values that define us as a nation."

Referencing a history of sacrifice, the perils of the future, and the hope for the present, the crew of the former USS Basilone (DDE 824) passed the torch as John Basilone's living legacy as sponsors Ryan Manion and Amy Looney gave the order to "man our ship and bring her to life."

Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers are the backbone of the U.S. Navy's surface fleet. These highly capable, multi-mission ships conduct a variety of operations, from peacetime presence to national security, providing a wide range of warfighting capabilities in multi-threat air, surface, and subsurface. Flight IIA DDGs host dual helicopter hangers, allowing for expanded anti-submarine, anti-surface, and anti-air warfare capabilities through integrated operations with helicopter squadrons.

The mission of CNSP is to man, train, and equip the Surface Force to provide fleet commanders with credible naval power to control the sea and project power ashore.

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For additional information about the ship, visit USS John Basilone (DDG 122), <https://ussbasilone.org/uss-john-basilone-ddg-122/>.