

The USS IOWA is Back in the Fight

How LA Fleet Week and the Battleship IOWA Museum Contributed to USNS MERCY's COVID-19 Mission to Los Angeles

BY RADM MIKE SHATYNSKI, USN (RET)

One of the Navy's two hospital ships, the USNS MERCY, recently deployed for seven and a half weeks to support Los Angeles as one of the nation's hotspots in the COVID-19 pandemic. Just down the pier from the MERCY was one of the Navy's retired battleships, USS IOWA. The IOWA was once the most powerful warship afloat and still is the ultimate symbol of America to the world. While commissioned during World War II, Korea, and the Cold War, USS IOWA and her American sailors made the world safe for democracy. Today, IOWA has found a new way to serve, as the Battleship IOWA Museum, a 501(c)3 non-profit in the Port of Los Angeles, and as host for Los Angeles Fleet Week.

While the MERCY was in port in LA, the IOWA was doing even more. She served as the command post for the Navy's non-medical responders. While most Americans might be surprised to hear that a museum would play such a key role in a terrible disaster, it was not a coincidence. The IOWA, Navy and civilian responders had been practicing for this day for 5 years during LA Fleet Week. The Navy trains every day of every week and Fleet Weeks are no different. "Defense Support of Civil Authorities" or "DSCA" exercises happened behind the scenes during each Fleet Week and allowed our Navy to practice one of its core jobs, providing humanitarian assistance to America and the world in times of greatest need.

The MERCY deployed at the request of the City of Los Angeles and the State of California because of concerns that local hospital systems would be overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases and MERCY's medical providers and beds could provide critical additional capacity to support a high patient load. The massive 894-foot long, 1,000-bed floating hospital made from a converted supertanker moored at the Los Angeles World Cruise Terminal in the Port of Los Angeles in the community of San Pedro, CA.

The DSCA process for military missions to support civilian responders is complicated. Once local and state responders are overwhelmed and an emergency is declared, the state can request assistance from the federal government through FEMA. Once military equipment and personnel are assigned and deployed, the military response is coordinated at the lowest civilian-level of authority. Command and control of the Navy's response in Los Angeles for the MERCY's response was through US Naval Forces Northern Command (NAVNORTH) and US Third Fleet.

"This whole-of-government response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the direction of FEMA and in support of the State of California, Los Angeles County and the City of Los Angeles has been a one-of-a-kind mission," said the mission commander and Commodore of DESRON 21, CAPT Dan Cobian. "When tasked, our DESRON staff couldn't spell DSCA." In handful of days, the staff was completely integrated into the multi-agency response organization as the Navy's C&C element. According to CAPT Cobian, "We did what good SWOs do, we figured it out then planned and executed."

According the CDR Brian Sauerhage, the US Third Fleet DSCA Planner



The US Navy's hospital ship USNS MERCY passes by Battleship IOWA in LA Harbor as it deploys to provide emergency medical assistance during the nation-wide COVID-19 emergency. (Aerial photo by Dave Marsden)

for the MERCY's deployment, the smooth standup of the response for the emergency was natural. "We had worked with the civilian leadership in the City, County, and State during DSCA exercises during the past four LA Fleet Weeks," noted CDR Sauerhage. "It was just like we were getting together for another Fleet Week."

Larry Vasquez, LA Mayor Garcetti's Director of Military and Veterans Affairs, said that the relationships were already in place between the Navy and the responders in the Port and City of LA and emphasized, "You cannot surge trust." Once the City learned MERCY was deploying here, he discovered that the Port of LA and the Port Police were ready for her. They had already planned, exercised, and executed multiple visits by large Navy ships to the cruise terminal and adjacent pier in anticipation of just such a deployment.

While the Navy's medical responders aboard MERCY remained in a secure COVID-free zone around that ship, the Third Fleet, Navy Region Southwest, and other Navy responders aboard IOWA used the ship's Wardroom and Captain's Cabin as working and meeting spaces. CAPT Mike Mattis, the Officer-in-Charge of the Task Force LA Beach Detachment aboard IOWA exclaimed, "It was not lost to us that we were using the same table that President Roosevelt and the Joint Chiefs used during their time aboard IOWA for the Tehran Conference during WWII." He added, "It shouldn't be lost to history that IOWA was back in the fight."

Although the need to surge large numbers of patients to the hospital ship never happened, LA-area hospitals ultimately sent 77 non-COVID patients to the ship. While treating the patients, the MERCY's Medical Treatment Facility (MTF) performed 36 successful surgeries as well as a number of other procedures. The



Rear Admiral Bette Bolivar, Commander of Navy Region Southwest, delivers opening remarks during the "Defense Support of Civil Authorities" workshop during the 2019 LA Fleet Week.

MERCY and her MTF have proven time and time again that they could meet a challenge as formidable as what could have occurred during the early stages of the pandemic. During MERCY's 6-month deployment to Indonesia in 2004 in the wake of a devastating tsunami, her MTF treated 100,000 patients and performed 500 surgeries.

Though her patient load was low, the MERCY made a difference. "When the MERCY came into our port, she gave us a boost of confidence that we had the resources to take on this crisis," Los Angeles Supervisor Janice Hahn said. "When she left, she gave us a boost of confidence because she was no longer needed. We were able to handle this on our own."

Historically, the US Navy has been making official visits for celebrations in US port cities for over a century. These ship visits became formalized in the years between WWI and WWII. San Diego claims the first official "Fleet Week" in 1935 for the "California Pacific International Exposition" though Seattle counterclaims with 1934 and the "Seattle Potlatch of Progress and Fleet Week."

Los Angeles Fleet Week is much younger, having started in 2016 under the leadership of the IOWA's President and CEO, Jonathan Williams. According to Jonathan, Fleet Week allows Los Angeles to get to know its Navy and the Navy to get to know Los Angeles. Jonathan noted this is important because "Few Angelenos know that the port is the largest in America and that LA is a maritime city. One in twelve jobs in LA is directly related to trade across the seas and 90% of all America's economic traffic travels by sea with 40% of that through LA. America's Surface Navy enables that free trade to happen."

During LA Fleet Week, city leaders are educated in practical applications of the Navy's soft power through the DSCA events while the general public sees it through the Community Relations (COMREL) events like working parties for Habitat for Humanity projects and visits to the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. Approximately 250,000 Angelenos attend LA Fleet week each Labor Day weekend. Visiting Navy, Coast Guard, and allied Canadian ships are featured during LA Fleet Week but the centerpiece is the grand old gray lady, the USS IOWA.

USS IOWA opened as a museum in 2012 and is now ranked 5th in Los Angeles as both a museum and a tourist attraction, no small feat in a city with around 150 museums and 650 tourist attractions. Now, the Battleship IOWA Museum is transitioning into the National Museum of the Surface Navy as a permanent fixture in the City of Los Angeles to educate Angelenos about the hard and soft power of their Surface Navy embodied in ships like IOWA and MERCY. As the most powerful warship ever built, IOWA's 16-inch guns are clear symbols of America's hard power. As the Surface Navy's museum, IOWA is incorporating exhibits that document events like the MERCY's deployment to Los Angeles to represent the Surface Navy's soft power; providing humanitarian assistance, supporting international relations, and ensuring freedom of the seas.

RADM Shatynski is a retired Surface Warfare Officer who served on surface vessels ranging from small coastal riverine patrol boats to the battleship USS New Jersey (BB-62). He currently serves as chairman of the board of the Battleship IOWA Museum and is a co-founder and director on the board for the LA Fleet Week Foundation. For more info on DSCA, MERCY, COVID, and the IOWA, watch the first Surface Navy Museum Webcast at surfacenavymuseum.org.



Sailors aboard USNS MERCY man the rails and render honors to the Battleship IOWA while departing the Port of Los Angeles.



USNS MERCY redeploying to her homeport at Naval Base San Diego where she will remain ready for potential future tasking in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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