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THE NEW YORK POST, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2001



STEPPING OUT: Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, Mayor Giuliani, GOP mayoral hopeful Mike Bloomberg and Gov. Pataki join in the march. Reuters

Pride on parade for Columbus Day

By DOUGLAS WIGHT and IKIMULISA SOCKWELL-MASON

The 57th annual Columbus Day Parade was a bittersweet celebration, with people cheering Italian-American heritage while honoring the hero firefighters and police officers slain in the Twin Towers attack.

In previous years, the finest and bravest marched in uniform. This time, just an engine and ladder from the Fire Department made the long haul north.

Manhattan mailman Bob Singleton, 45, said the crowds were noticeably hushed at the appearance of the scaled-down fire and police contingent.

"The atmosphere was more somber when they went past," he said.

The Fire Department lost 343 members in the attack that destroyed the World Trade Center; the NYPD lost 23 officers.

Mayor Giuliani walked at times with Gov. Pataki and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, taking an hour to walk the entire route. Mayoral candidates Michael Bloomberg, Mark Green and Fernando Ferrer marched as well.

During a pre-parade breakfast at Gracie Mansion, Giuliani applauded the organizers for going forward with the parade.

"We do that in honor of the people that we've lost, the people that are sacrificing now by putting their lives at risk in order to protect us," he said, referring to the strikes in Afghanistan.

"We should exercise that freedom and not be afraid."

Jon Giometti agreed. The North Carolina doctor hoisted his 2-year-old daughter onto his shoulders where she waved both Italy's flag and Old Glory.

"It's important for us to show our support," he said. "We have to show we're not afraid ... and show our pride."

Erin Ryan-Pazienza, 40, of Eastchester, said: "I canceled a trip to St. Louis and passed on tickets to Shea Stadium, and I'm a little tired of being afraid to live my life."

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