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Horrors of 9/11 raise spirits for march on 11/11

By NEIL GRAVES

The hand-held signs along the Veterans Day Parade route said it all: "Land of the free, thanks to the brave," and "Thank you for our freedom."

And the hundreds of veterans who marched up Fifth Avenue yesterday basked in the communal celebration, New York's first chance to salute our armed forces since the Sept. 11 attack.

Parks Commissioner Henry Stern said he had attended Veterans Day parades throughout the Koch and Giuliani administrations, and the 2001 edition was the best.

"This is the largest I've seen in 15 years," said Stern. "People all over America are being reawakened to the importance of our country and the people who defend it."

Deputy Police Inspector William Callahan, who has seen 10 such parades, agreed: "The crowd is a lot bigger than it normally is," he said.

Ed Cavaliero was carrying the POW/MIA flag for the Vietnam Vets Chapter 23 of Ridgewood, Queens.

"It's an honor to carry this flag," said Cavaliero, 53, of Howard Beach. "We're doing it in memory of everyone who made the supreme sacrifice. Like Vernon Cherry of Ladder 118. He died at the World Trade Center.

"They called him the Singing Fireman. He was a friend of my brother's."

The Twin Towers were on everyone's mind.

"I had to come because of what happened on Sept. 11th," said Sandra Kay, 53, of Madison, N.J., who was waving a small flag. "I never come to these, but now I appreciate things so much better."

A smattering of World War II vets — some in their 80s — were decked out in their faded original uniforms. Ex-Marine Anthony Stea, 81, of The Bronx, climbed out of a slow-moving van, hooked his crutch to his left arm and marched with some Vietnam vets.

"They were going too slow," said Stea of the van, as he kept perfect step despite the fact that he's still nursing a 1944 wound from Guam.

Nicholas Zillas, 77, who had no fewer than eight medals and numerous ribbons on his chest, was waving an American flag as he stepped lively.

"I'm marching to show everybody that they owe lots of respect for every man and woman over there [in Afghanistan]," said Zillas, of Flushing, as he snapped brisk salutes to the clapping throng.

Ex-Navy man Rudy Poblete, who was standing at the corner of 29th Street, treated himself to a jam session as he wailed on a clarinet to whatever tunes the approaching SUNY Maritime College Band was playing.

"I've been playing since I was 10 years old," said Poblete, 64, a disabled vet from Brooklyn. "I played with the U.S. Navy Band for 21 years."

He then excused himself and segued into "Anchors Aweigh" with the maritime high-steppers.

Even the diehard sports fans turned out. "This is more important," said Greg Packer, 37, of Huntington, L.I. "This is the representation of America. The Yankees waited, the Emmy Awards waited and the Jets can wait."

Today is the Veterans Day holiday.

Federal, state and city offices and courts are closed.

Post offices are closed. There is no regular mail delivery, except for Express Mail and special delivery.

Financial markets are open; banks are closed.

Public schools are closed.

Alternate side-of-the-street parking rules are suspended.

There will be no garbage collection, recycling pickup or street cleaning.

Subways and buses, Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North commuter railroad are operating on regular weekday schedules.

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