NEWPORT NEWS, Va. -- The Navy’s Virginia Class Submarine Program recognized an important milestone April 12 with New Mexico’s (SSN 779) keel laying ceremony at Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding in Newport News, Va.

Virginia Class submarines are multi-mission platforms able to launch, support, and recover Special Operation Forces (SOF); strike targets far inland with precision using TOMAHAWK land-attack missiles; perform anti-submarine and anti-surface ship warfare; conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions; and provide assured access and battlespace preparation.

This event precedes another key event in the construction of New Mexico—pressure hull completion—by approximately one month.

The ceremony started with a prayer in Navajo from Mr. Frank Willetto. Willetto is a New Mexico native and former Marine Corps “Navajo Code Talker,” who saw service in the battles for Saipan and Okinawa during World War II. The highlight of the keel laying occurred when New Mexico’s sponsor, Cynthia Giambastiani, wife of retired Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Edmund Giambastiani, had her initials welded onto a plate that will be permanently affixed inside the hull of the submarine. Mrs. Giambastiani has been a strong advocate for the U.S. Navy submarine community for more than three decades, volunteering in organizations supporting submariners and their families. In July 2005, she received the Distinguished Public Service Award for her continuous dedication to military spouses and families. In July 2000, the Navy awarded her the Meritorious Public Service Award by the Navy for her selfless support of the submarine and Navy communities.

“Mrs. Giambastiani’s dedication to submariners and their families reminds us that the submarine community extends far beyond the waterfront,” said Virginia Class Submarine Program Manager Rear Adm. (sel.) Dave Johnson. “We are honored to have her as New Mexico’s sponsor.”

“The Navy designed the right mix of capability and flexibility into the Virginia Class,” said Program Executive Officer for Submarines Rear Adm. William Hilarides. “Modularity and open architecture will allow the Virginia Class to accommodate new weapons and payloads to defeat evolving threats for the foreseeable future.”

New Mexico, the sixth ship of the class, is being built under a teaming agreement between Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding, Newport News and General Dynamics Electric Boat. The submarine is on track to deliver in August 2009, eight months early to its contract delivery date.
New Mexico’s keel laying is the first of four major Virginia Class milestones upcoming in 2008. The fourth ship of the class, North Carolina (SSN 777), will commission May 3rd in Wilmington, N.C. Launched on February 21 2008, New Hampshire is scheduled to deliver in August – eight months earlier than its contract delivery date – and it will commission on October 25 at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, Kittery, Maine. This will mark the first time that the Navy commissioned two submarines of the same class in the same year since 1996 when the last of Los Angeles Class, USS Greeneville (SSN 772) and USS Cheyenne (SSN 773), joined the Fleet.