

Clues indicate Stark attack intentional

WASHINGTON — The CIA has collected evidence that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein may have paid a \$35,000 cash reward and allowed the use of a late model Mercedes Benz to the Iraqi pilot responsible for the "accidental" missile attack in 1987 on the USS Stark.

Thirty-seven U.S. sailors died in the attack on the Stark, and the Iraqis quickly apologized and offered \$27.35 million in compensation. The Stark was protecting shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf during the height of the Iran-Iraq war when it took two anti-ship missiles from an Iraqi warplane. One was a dud; the other exploded causing a fire that nearly sank the ship.

Based on CIA documents, Iraqi sources and Arab leaders close to Hussein, we have pieced together these details:

Hussein had been furious with the United States for several years about the American policy of neutrality in the long Iran-Iraq war. The volatile

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Hussein was further incited by White House admissions in November 1986 that the United States had sold several anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons to Iran.

Hussein ordered the deliberate attack on a U.S. ship, which had to appear accidental, according to our sources. To be certain of success, two planes were actually sent.

U.S. officials accepted the official explanation of the accident from the Iraqis, but harbored enough suspicions to ask Hussein to allow American investigators to conduct their own probe. Only minimal aid and information was provided the investigators by Iraq.

Within days of the attack, Hussein sent President Ronald Reagan a letter

laced with references to "heartfelt condolences" and stating that "sorrow and regret are not enough."

Hussein's track record over the years — his use of poison gas on his own population, his obsession to acquire nuclear weapons — has fostered a Middle East madman image.

We have reported that after trips to Baghdad, Hussein allegedly executed a Cabinet minister who irritated him; he stole a second wife from her husband who feared he'd be executed if he resisted; and almost had his oldest son executed in a fit of rage over a shooting incident in which his son killed a favorite bodyguard.

Other chapters in his volatile history support the theory that Hussein could have ordered the Stark bombing out of pique.

The story most repeated in Iraq to support the notion that Hussein is a man who gets what he wants concerns a Cabinet minister who several years ago suggested that Hussein resign to bring about peace with Iran. The unfortunate fellow was asked to step outside the Cabinet meeting. Hussein allegedly shot the dissident and returned to resume the meeting.

Another Hussein tale involves a top health official who was reportedly executed when Hussein found that medical supplies he had ordered arrived with old expiration dates. In another story, Hussein suspected that some military officers had burned down a building to disguise the fact that they were stealing supplies. Hussein responded by ordering execution for every suspect.

Hussein's chief weapon has always been terror, both in domestic and foreign relations. By banning typewriters, Hussein has also pre-empted dissent. On our recent visit, our modern hotel, with many amenities for the business traveler, would not allow guests to use typewriters unless they made carbon copies for Hussein.