

It began as a routine day. Then, without warning, two Iraqi missiles slammed into the USS Stark.



Thirty-seven men on the Mayport-based ship were killed. It was a loss shipmates still relive.

10 years later, impact lingers



On hand for a USS Stark tribute are (from left) Lawrence Barrow, Bill Morandi and George Panagos, crew members in the attack; Daniel Panagos, 12; Shirley Elliott, mother-in-law of victim Randy Pierce.

A wreath cast in sea, a bell tolls in tribute

By John Fritz
Times-Union staff writer

Bernard Seeley was standing watch at the helm of the USS Stark as it cut through the Persian Gulf 10 years ago today when he noticed a fog bank turn an eerie, pale blue.

A ball of light emerged from the mist and headed straight for the bridge of the Navy guided-missile frigate. Then, at the last second, it dove into the side of the ship.

The impact knocked the 18-year-old deckhand into a compass in the console behind him. "Everybody started screaming, you know. What the hell is going on? What the hell is going on?" he said.

Then, as the ship's collision alarm

sounded, the second missile hit.

What had begun as a routine day turned to instant terror. An Iraqi warplane had fired two Exocet missiles into the side of the Stark, killing 37 men on the Jacksonville-based ship.

Iraq, in the midst of a war against Iran, claimed that the nighttime attack was a case of mistaken identity.

In the ship's enlisted sleeping quarters, where most of the bodies eventually would be found, there was pandemonium.

The first missile, which was a dud, struck just 15 feet from where Cliff Sellers had been fast asleep.

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A plaque at Mayport Naval Station lists the 37 crew members killed by Iraqi missiles.

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Stark's crew to honor victims of Iraqi attack

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Knocked from his bed, he barely escaped before the second missile hit.

In the berthing area below him, Bill Morandi would have died if he had not climbed up one deck and, stumbling blindly, fallen into the ocean from the gaping hole that was blasted open.

"It was the day from hell," said Sellers, who has a large tattoo of the ship on his stomach as a reminder.

Today, aboard the Stark — saved from hellacious fires that day by the heroics of its crew — sailors will cast a wreath to sea in remembrance of their 37 fallen comrades. And as each victim's name is called out aloud, a bell will be tolled.

At Mayport Naval Station, a small crowd, including several former Stark crew members and the mother-in-law of one of those killed, gathered yesterday for a brief memorial service. It was capped off by a rifle salute and the playing of taps.

"It's a tough incident that happened, but it does allow us to use what we learned to make sure that in the future, in those situations, we'll fare a lot better," the Stark's current skipper, Cmdr. Michael R. Johnston, said as the ship recently steamed off the coast of Portugal.

The Stark attack immediately raised questions why the ship failed to defend itself.

In the end, the Navy's own scathing report concluded that key officers were absent from the bridge and defensive systems were unmanned, leaving the Stark a sitting duck.

"Stark never fired a weapon nor employed a countermeasure, either in self-defense or retaliation," said the report, which pointed out numerous mistakes made by the ship's officers and crew.

The captain and tactical action officer accepted responsibility, and both left the service.

The report said the Stark was hesitant to advertise a war-ready posture because it did not



A wreath will be cast from the USS Stark in tribute to 37 killed in an Iraqi missile attack in 1987.

want to risk provoking hostilities.

A Stark officer, for example, said he was reluctant to lock onto the Iraqi plane with fire control radar because it might be interpreted as a hostile act. This, even though the Navy's experience was that locking up an unidentified plane could cause it to alter course.

Morandi, a 21-year-old petty officer at the time, was sleeping before going on midnight watch when the missiles hit. The first one, followed by a call to general quarters, shook him from his sleep.

"There were a lot of us in the berthing compartment at the time. But we couldn't go out the main hatch because of the fire and smoke, and the escape hatch was blocked," the Orlando resident recalled. "Then the compartment started filling with water."

Left with no other choice,

Morandi and a two others donned emergency breathing hoods and climbed through the main hatch into the berthing area above, where the missiles had hit.

"I got disoriented," he said. "The smoke was getting in my hood. I ended up actually falling out the hole on the side of the ship. When I surfaced, I saw the ship cruising away over the horizon."

"I still didn't know what had happened. All this happened in the space of 15 minutes after the missiles hit," he said.

One of his companions made it out with him, the other didn't.

Over the next couple hours, Morandi found several other sailors who had gone through the hole. Together, they clung to life rings for 12 hours until they were rescued by helicopters.

Morandi, no longer in the

Navy, said it has been difficult to come to terms with why he was spared and others were not. "You wonder about things like that. But I think I've coped with it pretty well, overall," he said.

For other shipmates, coping did not come as easily.

Tim Porter was rescued from the ocean with Morandi. But his family considers him the Stark's 38th victim. He hanged himself three years later at a veterans hospital in Augusta, Ga.

Family and friends said he suffered flashbacks to the Stark and felt guilty because he survived and because he could not save his best friend, Terry Weldon.

Former Stark sailor Walter Thomas Taylor claimed the attack triggered hallucinations that led him to kill a woman and her 3-year-old daughter in Jacksonville in 1987.

Taylor, who was convicted of murder and is in prison, testified that he thought the woman was an Iraqi terrorist.

Prosecutors said the story was a convenient excuse.

But Taylor's attorney, Charles G. Cofer, said, "If he had not gone through that experience, there is no way this would have happened. I think the experience on the Stark was intertwined with what happened."

Cofer said he interviewed more than a dozen Stark sailors as part of Taylor's defense, and all were impacted differently.

"Most had problems sleeping. They had problems with their own mood swings. They had intrusive thoughts," Cofer said. "They could be working along and out of nowhere, they start thinking about the Stark and they'd be zapped back, reliving the experience in their minds."

Since the attack, Sellers said, he cannot sleep in the dark, strange noises wake him up and he continues to suffer nightmares. "I get up in the middle of the night and run for the door just like I did then. I relive it — the bodies, the faces," he said.

Sellers, who also has left the Navy, said he has been difficult to come to terms with why he was spared and others were not.

"If that first one would have exploded, I would have been gone," said Sellers, who immediately picked himself up and headed toward the ship's upper decks.

He had scrambled up one ladder and halfway up the next when the second missile struck, spreading fire everywhere. The sailor behind him was cut in two when a bulkhead buckled, he said.

Sellers, who lives in Palm Bay, said he spent the next 24 hours fighting fires and dumping missiles over the side before they exploded. The fires were still burning, he said, when he was evacuated.

Back in Jacksonville, families anxiously waited for word of what happened to their loved ones. Yellow ribbons sprung up everywhere.

Shirley Elliott, whose son-in-

law, Randy Pierce, was aboard the Stark, said the family was glued to the television for several days, waiting for any news and hoping.

Eventually, she said, some Navy officers showed up at the house. One was a chaplain.

"That's when I knew," Elliott said. But she had suspected much earlier that Pierce had not made it.

"Maybe God was preparing me," Elliott said. "Inside, from that Sunday, I had — I don't know what people call it — a sense of dread. I had a sense of dread I couldn't shake."

On the ship that day, Seeley, who was at the helm when the first missile struck, was headed to a lower deck to man his general quarters station when the second one exploded.

"All I remember is seeing little red balls of fire flying all over the place and people screaming. It was just completely dark and there was fire everywhere," said Seeley, who lives in Illinois.

Seeley said he, too, grabbed a hose and started fighting fires. Then he went to the flight deck and started treating the wounded. He helped the corpsman patch up some sailors and administer morphine, he said.

"A lot of guys were just phenomenal," Seeley said of the heroic efforts being made to save the ship. "You could tell, in that type of situation, who was a natural born leader."

"You could see the littlest E-1, the bottom of the barrel as far as a ranked guy, sit there as far as take charge of five or 10 guys or a fire party and get the job done," he said. "Or you could see somebody who is a lot higher in rank falter and cry like a baby. It's not something you're taught. It's just something you have."

Lawrence Barrow of Jacksonville Beach, a chief petty officer on the Stark at the time, said the one thing that sticks in his mind 10 years later is how quickly time passes.

"It just seems like last week or yesterday that this happened," Barrow said.