

Fate put sailor off USS Stark

By Don Yaeger

Staff writer

"It could have been me. It could have been me."

As Bernard Martin listened yesterday to President Reagan eulogize the 37 men killed Sunday in the attack on the USS Stark, those words kept coming back.

"It could have been me."

Martin was discharged from the Mayport-based guided-missile frigate less than 20 hours before the ship was hit by two Iraqi missiles. He was handed an airline ticket for home. His four-year commitment to the Navy had ended.

Before he walked down the Stark's gangplank for the last time, Martin helped a close friend and fellow gunner's mate, Petty Officer 3rd Class Daniel Homicki, move into the bunk that had served as Martin's home since the Stark went to sea Feb. 5.

When the carnage from the attack was finally sorted, Homicki was found dead.

He had been sleeping in Martin's bunk.

"He [Homicki] wanted to move from his rack into mine because the guys around me were so great," Martin said after yesterday's memorial service. "Had I been on the ship, I would have been where he was."

The Waynesboro, Ga., native was officially discharged from the Navy yesterday, two hours after Reagan's address to about 1,100 mourners at Mayport Naval Station. He was a petty officer 3rd class, a gunner's mate.

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Bernard Martin

Discharged shortly before attack

'It could have been me' haunts sailor discharged before attack

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For a day, Martin was on a list of Stark crewmen missing and presumed dead.

The fire that raged through the ship destroyed all crew records, Martin said, and when the Navy attempted to account for all those aboard the Stark, he was still on the roster.

The confusion, aided by bureaucracy, continued for several days.

Martin had not been able to contact his wife, Brenda, and family before the first list of missing or dead sailors was released.

"They didn't know I was alive until Monday," the 21-year-old sailor said. "When I got them on the phone, they were hysterical."

He did not get to see his wife or parents, Harvey and Connie Walker of Hephzibah, Ga., until yesterday when he joined them at Mayport to honor his fallen crew mates.

Martin left the Stark, the only ship he had served on during his Navy career, last Saturday while it was in Bahrain. He was joined in

departure by three other sailors who also were going home.

As the ship went to sea, Martin departed for Italy on the first leg of his journey home. In Italy, he was greeted by his former chief on the ship, who told him of the Stark's plight.

"I waited in Italy for two days to get more information," Martin said. "I couldn't believe it. Nobody could believe it. These guys were all my friends."

During the last week, he said, he has run the gamut of emotions — from the ecstasy of heading home, to the emptiness of hearing his friends had died, to the frustration of knowing he could not have saved them even if he had been on board.

"I've been crying a lot," he said. "I'll admit that. I guess there was a reason for me not being there. I'm lucky God looked out for me and sent me on my way. It's a scary feeling, really."

"It could have been me."