

Remembering USS Stark

From staff

Dozens of people attended the annual ceremony of remembrance at Mayport's Memorial Park on May 17 to honor the Sailors who were killed aboard the guided-missile frigate USS Stark (FFG 31) 17 years ago. The guest speaker was retired Rear Adm. John Gavan.

On May 17, 1987, while on patrol in the Persian Gulf, 37 Sailors died when two Iraqi missiles struck Stark. Despite the severe damage inflicted on the ship, the heroic efforts of Stark's crew saved the ship. Stark was decommissioned here in 1999. In order to preserve the tradition once the ship was retired, the Naval Order of the United States, North Florida Commandery, assumed sponsorship for the memorial service.

Mayport's Memorial Park was established August 1, 1987, with the dedication of the Stark monument. It was directly through efforts of Gavan and then-Naval Station Mayport Commanding Officer, Capt. John Mitchell, that the park came to be.

During the ceremony, Gavan related the story of the memorial. He told attendees that immediately after the attack and homecoming of USS Stark, the base was filled with well wishers, local and international media and dignitaries. Then-

President Ronald Reagan even came to Mayport to relay his condolences to the crew and family members. And then it was over and the media was gone and the dignitaries were gone.

"I kept asking myself, 'What happens now?'" Gavan said. "I couldn't accept that these Sailors would be forgotten. I contacted Capt. Mitchell and asked him if he knew any Navy regulations prohibiting the installation of the memorial on Bravo Pier. He got back to me the same afternoon. There were no regulations."

Gavan said they started the project by contacting the repair ship USS Yosemite that happened to be in port for a short time.

"They said 'You tell us what kind of a plaque you want, we'll build it for you,'" he remembered. "The Seabees - 'Tell us what kind of podium and we'll build it and install it.'"

The Navy League Mayport Chapter provided designers and sketches for the plaque and it was all installed on Bravo Pier, the normal homecoming pier of USS Stark.

It was left at Bravo until construction on the pier made it necessary to move it. That is when funds were allocated to build the park off of Maine Street and move the plaque and podium to its current residence.



USS Stark survivor ITC Darryl Allen rings the USS Stark quarterdeck bell for each fallen Stark crewmember.

-Photos by Paige Gnann