

'Yes, they were heroes'



President Reagan and his wife, Nancy, offer condolences to the family of Jeffrey Curtis Sibley of Metairie, La., after the memorial service at the May-

port Naval Station. The president embraces Sibley's sister, Cynthia Sibley Goodwin, as Mrs. Reagan hugs Sibley's mother, Gloria Sibley.

President honors fallen Stark crew as nation grieves

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As Jacksonville and the nation grieved for 37 crewmen who died aboard the USS Stark, a solemn President Reagan called on mourners yesterday to "keep faith with their sacrifice" by supporting continued U.S. military presence in the Middle East.

Speaking to a tear-choked crowd of about 1,100 in an aircraft hangar at Mayport Naval Station, Reagan assured the friends and relatives of those killed that the sailors were heroes who "made themselves immortal by dying for something immortal."

He urged family members and friends to carry on after their loss, singling out Senior Chief Petty Officer Gary Clinefelter of Mayport as an example of courage in the face of tragedy.

"He had volunteered to work at the coordinating center here for the families when he received word that his own son, Seaman Brian Clinefelter, previously listed as missing in action, was among the confirmed dead.

"I need to keep working," Reagan quoted Clinefelter as saying after hearing the grim news. "He stayed on his post; he carried on."

After his somber speech to an audience that included about 500 relatives of Stark crewmen from across the nation, Reagan and first lady Nancy Reagan took 30 minutes making their way through the crowd, offering private words of comfort to the mourning families.

Reagan, dabbing tears from his eyes with a white handkerchief, and Mrs. Reagan moved through the first 20 rows of the crowd, moving to the hangar's exit and speaking to family members in rows nearer the exit.

The president's 13-minute speech capped a nationally televised memorial service for the seamen killed aboard the Mayport-based guided-missile frigate, which was hit by Iraqi missiles Sunday while cruising in the Persian Gulf.

The service was a highly emotional event that left even the toughest-looking sailors tearful.

Sobs and wails rang through the muggy air inside the hangar. A lone bugler played taps and there were the echoed cracks of a 21-gun salute.

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— Bob Self/staff

President Reagan and first lady Nancy Reagan wave as they leave Mayport Naval Station following the memorial service.

Reagan remembers sailors

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Many in the crowd, arms around each other, began crying before the service began. Some young wives carried bouquets of roses, others rocked young children on their laps.

"I think it is probably the most touching event that has occurred in my lifetime," said Rep. Charles Bennett, D-Fla., a World War II veteran.

The ceremony drew top local, state and national dignitaries, including Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, Navy Secretary James H. Webb and Florida's two U.S. senators, Lawton Chiles and Bob Graham.

Though the mood was clearly more spiritual than political, Reagan used the occasion to restate his administration's commitment to maintaining a military presence in the Persian Gulf to protect commercial shipping and deter Soviet opportunism.

"Peace is at stake here, and so too is our own nation's security," Reagan said. "Were a hostile power ever to dominate this strategic region and its resources, it would become a choke point for freedom — that of our allies and our own. That is why we maintain a presence there."

In addition to the crippled Stark, which is anchored in port in Manama, Bahrain, the United States has six Navy ships in the Persian Gulf.

Reagan, standing beneath a replica of the Stark insignia with the slo-

gan, "Strength for Freedom," dismissed suggestions that danger in the war-torn region should force the United States to extract its remaining forces.

"To retreat or withdraw," he said, "would only repeat the improvident mistakes of the past, and hand final victory to those who seek war, who make war."

Those who spoke at the hourlong ceremony tried to reassure the bereaved families that, although the missile attack has been called an accident, the sons and husbands killed in the incident did not die in vain.

"[God] tested them and found them worthy of himself," said Lt. Cmdr. James R. Kelly, a military chaplain. "As gold would be proved in a furnace, so were they."

Reagan also tried to put the deaths in perspective. Early in his speech, the president voiced a series of questions heavy on the minds of his audience: "Why did this happen? Why to them? Could anything be worth such sacrifice?"

He went on to answer that those who died did so for the cause of freedom, and to keep other young men from having to die in the future — and, in doing so, became heroes.

"They do live now in a world where there is no sorrow, no pain," Reagan said. "And they await us. And we shall all be together again."