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Memorial built posthaste after USS Stark tragedy

Jacksonville Beach resident instrumental in its creation

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Former U.S. Navy chaplain Bill Perry had just finished his daily jog at Mayport Naval Station when news of the Iraqi missile attack on the USS Stark flashed across his TV screen.

It was late Sunday afternoon, May 17, 1987, and Perry, a retired captain, was in his second year as Mayport's base chaplain.

"TV was a lot different then, 17 years ago," Perry recalled Monday in an interview at Mayport's Memorial Park, site of the 17th annual USS Stark remembrance ceremony.

"Information wasn't as instantaneous as it is now. The details were still sketchy. There was a certain sense of disbelief."

The Stark, a Mayport-based guided-missile frigate on peacetime patrol in the Persian Gulf, was struck by two Exocet missiles in an incident then-Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger termed a "ghastly error" by an Iraqi jet fighter.

Fires raged for hours on the crippled Stark, some reaching temperatures of 3,500 degrees, Perry said.

The death toll was 37. Seventeen of the dead had family in Jacksonville. Fifteen

of the 37 were under the age of 21.

"By Monday morning, we began trying to piece together what had to be done," Perry, a 27-year Navy veteran, recalled as he stood near the bronze Stark memorial, which lists the names of the 37 deceased sailors.

At that point, a lot of the Navy procedures [for casualty assistance] didn't apply to this situation. A lot of what the Navy does now is the direct result of what evolved out of Stark."

Perry said news outlets such as CNN were reporting the names of the dead and missing



photo by JOHNNY WOODHOUSE

The bronze memorial, which lists the names and rates of the 37 sailors killed on the USS Stark, was unveiled Aug. 1, 1987, when the frigate returned to Mayport from the Persian Gulf.



photo by JOHNNY WOODHOUSE

Chief Petty Officer Richard Jacobs tolls the USS Stark's quarterdeck bell during a remembrance ceremony Monday at Mayport Naval Station for 37 of his former shipmates. Jacobs was on his first deployment when the Stark was struck by two Iraqi air-to-sea missiles in 1987.

before the Navy released its official casualty list.

Huddled in the base's Family Service Center, grieving family members held grim vigils for lost loved ones. Perry remembers tending to "a mountain of details" the Monday after the ship was attacked.

Then on Tuesday, May 19, President Ronald Reagan called for a national day of mourning, and ordered flags flown at half staff.

On Friday, May 22, Perry remembers driving to the base for the Stark memorial service, attended by President and Mrs. Reagan, and passing road signs that read, "God bless the Stark."

"By Tuesday of that week, the eyes and ears of the nation were focused on you folks," Perry told a gathering of people at Monday's memorial service, several of whom are survivors of Stark crewmen.

"Seventeen years ago we promised we would never forget, and we haven't."

People such as Perry, former Mayport commanding officer Capt. John Mitchell and Rear Adm. Michael Kallares, former commander of Destroyer Group 12, made sure of that.

Within days after the memorial service, Mitchell met with retired Rear Adm. John Gavan of Jacksonville Beach.

Gavan, who attended Monday's service, suggested the Navy commission a memorial for the Stark "in bronze and stone" that could be placed on the pier, where Mayport ships dock when returning to port.

"I wanted them to come down the gangway and see the memorial in front of them and know we don't forget," Gavan said Monday.

"When the President was here, the Stark was the center of attention. But a month later,

who would remember? I thought, Right then, I started to get this thing together."

An artist aboard the destroyer tender USS Yosemite designed the Stark memorial's bronze plaque. Seabees with Construction Battalion Unit 420 built the stone pedestal on which the plaque rests.

The memorial was unveiled Aug. 1, 1987, the day the Stark arrived back at Mayport, following its six-month deployment.

Chief storekeeper Henry Blowney and gas turbine electrician Gary Goodale unveiled the marker at dockside in front of wives and family members.

The memorial was stationed at the dock until the memorial park was completed at Mayport. The park also includes a separate memorial to 23 sailors who died on the carrier USS Saratoga (CV-60) during the Persian Gulf War.

Cavan, 86, was a fighter pilot on the USS Saratoga (CV-3) during World War II. The converted battle cruiser was torpedoed twice in 1942 and hit by kamikaze planes in '45.

Cavan came to Mayport for a reunion of VF 12 pilots in 1979 and decided to retire in Jacksonville Beach in 1980.

He was the outgoing president of the Mayport Council of the Navy League at the time of the Stark incident.

"It took us less than two months to have that memorial built," he said.

"I vowed that they would not be forgotten."

Perry spent seven years as a parish priest before joining the Navy in 1969 during the Vietnam War.

He said he never intended to make the military a career, but sea water seeped into his veins.

"Like the kids in my youth

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group who got drafted, I was going to serve three years. I left 27 years later," he added.

"I went to sea every pay grade. I have a lot of sea time. I sailed to where the Stark was hit. We took the families out to sea for a memorial service after that first year and gave everybody a yellow rose."

During his speech Monday, Perry, who resides in Alexandria, Va., where he has presided over Stark memorial services at Arlington National Cemetery, said he felt "humbled to be here to honor those to whom honor is due."

"Seventeen years. It seems like yesterday," added Perry, who was stationed in Naples, Italy, in 1990, and met the Pope in Rome.

Perry said Pope John II once told the commanding officer of the USS Capodanno that the definition of standing watch in the Navy is being "a guardian of peace."

"If ever your neighbors ask you what your son or husband was doing on the Stark when they died," Perry told the gathering Monday, "the answer is they were standing tall as guardians of peace. The Pope said so."

When the Stark pulled into Mayport Aug. 1, 1987, after undergoing repairs in Bahrain, Rear Adm. Kallares, who was instrumental in returning the Stark's quarterdeck bell to

Mayport in 2002, said he had the deepest respect for those who died on the ill-fated frigate.

"There is no such thing as divorce from shipmates," Kallares said in 1987.

"The world may forget what we said here today, but we will never forget what they did."