

'YES, THEY WERE HEROES'

Smaller Jacksonville service also honors Stark crew

By Kenneth Bohannon
Staff writer

As President Reagan led a memorial service yesterday at Mayport Naval Station for 37 USS Stark crewmen, a smaller but equally sincere crowd did the same in downtown Jacksonville.

And later in the afternoon, an even smaller crowd gathered in a private ceremony at a Jacksonville Beach church.

Downtown, trucks and buses driving past the city's war memorial at Bay and Market streets drowned out much of the words spoken by military veterans, but spirits apparently were undaunted.

A light southwesterly breeze bent the eternal flame of freedom.

About 200 spectators, many of them teary-eyed, gathered around the monument, which reads: "This flame of freedom is dedicated to all veterans who so valiantly served in the armed forces of this great nation to preserve freedom."

Many spectators described the ceremony,

simply, as "touching."

The crowd stood silently as color guards marched around the monument and rifle-men performed a 21-gun salute.

When two trumpeters in red sport jackets played taps, some spectators gave way to tears. Some saluted, some held their hands to their hearts, many bowed their heads and cried.

"Even though we didn't see those people out there, we felt with them very much," Joe Rogers, chief of veteran services with the Northeast Florida Veterans Council, said after the ceremony.

"We wanted to show the feelings of the citizens of Jacksonville. With three Navy bases here, we were very close to the individuals."

Rogers said the downtown ceremony was held for local residents who were unable to attend the invitation-only service with Reagan at Mayport. "We're just as concerned about them [slain sailors] and their loved ones," Rogers said.

"It's ironic that this happened the same weekend of Memorial Day," he said. "I think it's going to help bring into focus what Memorial Day really is all about. I think this will keep that more in public view."

Bill Wilder, chairman of the Veterans Council, said the veterans also wanted to show appreciation for the military men who are still alive and serving.

"It was our opportunity to reaffirm our commitment with those men who serve and are still willing to risk their lives for our freedom," he said. "The people of Jacksonville are solidly behind their efforts."

Lt. Franklin Johnson, a chaplain at Jacksonville Naval Air Station, said men at the base are feeling a "sense of loss, a sense of tragedy and a lot of 'Why?' There are a lot of questions as to why."

A proclamation by Mayor Jake Godbold said: "Mayport Naval Station and Jacksonville are home at this time for many families whose loved ones were lost, bringing this catastrophe closer to the people of this

community."

The proclamation declared yesterday to be USS Stark Memorial Day and reminded Jacksonville residents "to say a special prayer for the victims and their loved ones" on Memorial Day.

Many prayers were said for the men, and for Earl Ryals in particular, at a private ceremony at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Jacksonville Beach.

Ryals' widow, Susan, had arranged the private ceremony.

Mrs. Ryals also attended the Mayport memorial service along with about 1,100 other mourners.

"He made me feel proud of my husband," she said of Reagan's address before she entered the church. "I'm glad my husband died a hero."

Mrs. Ryals, who had been remarkably composed since the Stark was hit by Iraqi missiles Sunday, killing the 37 men and injuring 21 others, bent over in grief in the church.

With a gathering of less than 50, most of the pews were left empty. But emotions filled the entire church.

Ryals is one of two men who are missing and presumed dead. In his place at the service was a white cross draped with red flowers.

Faces of saints on the church's stained glass windows overlooked the ceremony. Mrs. Ryals leaned over the front pew, weeping. A supporter held her up and hugged her.

"This afternoon we are sad," the Rev. William Kelly said during the service. "At the same time, as people of faith we can accept this. We can accept the fact that Earl, or Pat, as his family called him, is in God's hands. He and the other men of the USS Stark are heroes."

"... They were not only defending their country, but keeping peace throughout the world."

— Stan Badz/staff

Private service held at church

Susan Ryals (left) and her mother, Joan Vertera, attend a service for her husband, Earl Ryals, at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Jacksonville Beach. Ryals, who was a signalman, is one of two crewmen on the Stark who are missing and presumed dead. As President Reagan led the nation in mourning yesterday at Mayport Naval Station, a smaller and equally sincere crowd did the same at the war memorial in downtown Jacksonville. Story, Page A-9.

