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USS STARK MEMORIAL SERVICE

Praise for ill-fated frigate

Mayport CO, Navy staff detail exploits of Stark crewmen in aftermath of tragedy

BY JOHN WOODHOUSE
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Capt. Matt Schellhorn was a lieutenant commander-select on the USS Stark when the Mayport-based frigate was struck by two Iraqi air-to-sea missiles while on peacetime patrol in the Persian Gulf.

An Iraqi F-1 Mirage mistakenly took the 445-foot-long Stark for a Iranian tanker and fired two Exocet missiles into its port side, killing 37 sailors in their berthing.

Schellhorn, now the commanding officer of Mayport Naval Station, said his lasting impression of that traumatic night 15 years ago last Friday is of a united crew battling to save a severely wounded warship.

"As I think about the 17th of May, 1987, and the ship that was raging with fire and engulfed in smoke, I think of the crew who fought to keep her afloat," said Schellhorn Friday during a ceremony of remembrance for the 37 Stark casualties at the base's Memorial Park.

"It's important to remember in the aftermath of the tragedy that a determined and heroic crew fought for hours and days to save their ship — a ship that set to sea again."

Schellhorn was the officer-in-charge of a helicopter detachment on board the Stark in May 1987. He said he was in the ship's wardroom where officers take their meals when the missiles hit at 10:30 p.m.

"My sleeping quarters were a little aft of where most of the troops spent their night and where the missiles went through," said Schellhorn, adding that he knew a speech like the one he gave Friday was an eventuality when he became the base CO last August.

"I think the biggest thing I wanted to stress was the pride I have in the folks that serve with me. To go back and remember that day is tough. Maybe I skirted the issue a tiny bit [in the speech], but that was my way of getting through



photo by JOHNNY WOODHOUSE
Diana Pierce holds her daughter, Randi, as her son Logan listens to Taps being played at Friday's ceremony.

the ceremony."

Schellhorn's wife, Joyce, was five months pregnant when the Stark was in harm's way in 1987. He feels the incident was tougher on his family than on him, personally.

A green-and-white striped Navy Commendation Ribbon pinned just below Schellhorn's aviator wings is a constant reminder of his service on the ill-fated guided-missile frigate.

In memory of the father he never knew, 14-year-old Logan Pierce of Jacksonville Beach wears the Stark's hull number on his Fletcher High School baseball uniform.

Pierce's father, Petty Officer 1st Class Randy Pierce, a data systems technician, died on the Stark when Logan was just 33 days old.

"I wear No. 31 because of the ship," said Logan, who played center field and pitched for Fletcher's 13-3 junior varsity baseball team this spring.

"I even have a video of my mom being interviewed the

month it happened. It was pretty tough for her."

Diana Pierce, her son, Logan, and daughter, Randi, 17, attended Friday's ceremony for the fourth year in a row.

As a former Stark crew member rang the ship's bell for each of the 37 fallen sailors, Diana Pierce's hands shook when her late husband's name was called.

She held her crying daughter in her arms as echo Taps were played near the end of the hour-long service.

Schellhorn, whose daughter is in the same graduating class at Fletcher as Logan Pierce, helped lay a ceremonial wreath near the Stark monument, dedicated 15 years ago this August.

Petty Officer 1st Class Christopher Jones, an '87 Stark crewman now stationed on the USS Kennedy, helped lay the ceremonial wreath at last year's service.

Jones, who is serving shore duty while the Kennedy is deployed overseas, was invited to read a scripture passage at Friday's ceremony.

"This was the largest turnout I think we've ever had," said Jones, who was a 20-year-old deck seaman on the Stark in 1987.

Jones said he was on the second deck, also known as the mess deck, when the missiles came in. He was at movie call, but to this day cannot remember what movie the ship was showing that night.

"I want to remember but I can't," said Jones, a barber whose battle station was at the forward part of the ship when general quarters were sounded.

"I never made it to my battle station because the missiles hit the middle of the ship and you couldn't get forward.

"So I went aft with my fire party and helped treat the wounded. I saw some pretty gruesome stuff."

Like Schellhorn, Jones, an 18-year Navy veteran, said the catastrophe brought out the best in his shipmates.

"It did remind me of how good friendships and family are," said Jones, who will leave



photo by JOHNNY WOODHOUSE
Members of Navy Band Southeast perform Friday morning near the USS Stark monument at Mayport Naval Station. The base held a ceremony of remembrance for the 37 men who died on the Stark in 1987. Their names are listed on the monument.

the Navy in two years after serving on three different carriers.

As Schellhorn mentioned in his address, the Stark returned to service in the early 1980s, and participated on several Mideast deployments before being decommissioned at Mayport in 1999.

Vice Adm. Patricia Tracey, who spoke at Friday's service, said Navy firefighting tactics were altered because of the Stark incident, but did not go into specifics.

"It should be noted," Tracey added, "that not one [additional] death was reported 40 hours after the attack."

It's the memory of men

fighting fire, choking smoke and flooding that is forever etched in Schellhorn's mind.

"It rallied them into a single, unified force," he said before retired Capt. Peter Wynkoop, a former CO of the Stark, solemnly read off the names of the 37 sailors who perished and as the ship's bell tolled for each.

The bell, once situated on the Stark's quarterdeck, is on loan from the Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C.

Said Schellhorn: "We asked if we could get it down here for the ceremony and hold it for a period of time. We're going to hold it here until they need it back."