



— Photos by Stuart Tannehill/staff
Diana Pierce comforts daughter Randi, 17, as taps plays at a ceremony remembering the sailors who died aboard the USS Stark 15 years ago. Diana's husband, Petty Officer 1st Class Randy Pierce, was among the 37 who died.

Memorial recalls attack on USS Stark, fallen crewmen

By Rachel Davis
Times-Union staff writer

The first missile pierced the steel hull of the USS Stark tearing a 10-by-15-foot hole in the port side before ripping through the crew's quarters.

The live warhead spun through the frigate's barber shop, the post office and the corner of the chief petty officers' quarters before resting against the starboard hull. It left a path of flaming debris, shrapnel and missile fuel burning at upwards of 3,500 degrees.

The second missile hit just seconds after the first, exploding on impact and engulfing the crew's sleeping quarters.

A decade and a half ago 37 men were killed when two Exocet missiles fired from an Iraqi Mirage F-1 fighter jet accidentally struck the Navy warship operating at nighttime in the Persian Gulf. The crew was at the midway point of a six-month, peacetime deployment from Mayport Naval Station.

The Iraqi pilot evidently mistook the Stark for an Iranian tanker. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein apologized for the accident and agreed to pay compensation to the families of the seamen and reparations for the damage to



The memorial honored the 37 crewmen who were killed when two Exocet missiles fired from an Iraqi Mirage F-1 fighter jet accidentally struck the USS Stark that was on a six-month, peacetime deployment in the Persian Gulf.

USS Stark: Service marks anniversary

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the ship.

"We heard the loud crash," said Petty Officer 1st Class Christopher Jones, who read scripture at yesterday's 15th anniversary memorial service at Mayport. "It sounded like a loud car crash."

The crew was instructed to their battle stations, but fire prevented Jones from getting to his so he followed his instincts by tending the wounded.

Crew members worked into the early morning to contain the fire that burned so hot that materials and equipment spontaneously combusted. Another ship, the USS Waddell, arrived about 1:30 a.m. with additional oxygen in breathing apparatus cannisters used by sailors fighting the fires.

Thick, black smoke filled the compartments choking the life out of the Naval warship.

The fight to keep the ship afloat lasted for 48 hours, until the Stark crew had won. The torn and tattered ship limped back to port in Bahrain, an island in the Persian Gulf.

The ship was decommissioned in 1999 at Mayport.

Men stationed aboard the Stark in May 1987 have since scattered. Seats at the small ceremony in Mayport Memorial Park yesterday were filled mostly by base personnel, retirees and friends of the Stark crew. Some crew and family members still living in Jacksonville also were in the audience.

Kristin Shannon, married to Joseph Watson when the ship was attacked, has a death certificate that says Watson died of smoke inhalation. But she knows very little beyond that about what happened to him. They had been married almost 18 months and it was their first long-term separation.

While on the six-month cruise Watson would visit new places, shop for exotic

souvenirs and enjoy Navy life at sea. He was supposed to come home.

Shannon had made it through month one, month two, month three of the deployment, and then her sister knocked on the door of her base home to break the news.

"Rather than the whole experience, I remember snapshots," Shannon said. "You think about the exact time you heard about it, the exact meal you had."

Pictures of a smiling baby and a man with a youthful face also help Randi Pierce, now 17 years old, remember her father, Petty Officer 1st Class Randy Pierce. He also was supposed to come home.

"I have a lot of pictures, and when I look at him, I remember," Pierce said. "It puts me at peace, I guess, to come here. I still miss him a lot, but I don't miss him as much when I'm here."