

Missile strikes Mayport-based frigate in Persian Gulf

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The spokesman had said earlier yesterday that only one missile scored a hit. But he amended that statement later in the night to say it was possible that both had hit the ship.

He said the Stark had been struck at the main deck level on its port side, forward of the main superstructure, leaving the frigate with "a 10-foot to 15-foot diameter" hole in its side.

The missile or missiles set off a fire that took several hours to control, Sims said. Because of the amount of water pumped on the fire, the Stark was described as dead in the water and listing.

Sims also said that the command ship LaSalle, which directs the Navy's Mideast Task Force in the Persian Gulf, was steaming toward the stricken vessel. The LaSalle carries several helicopters that can be used for medical evacuation, Sims said. The spokesman said casualties who were airlifted from the ship would be flown to Bahrain.

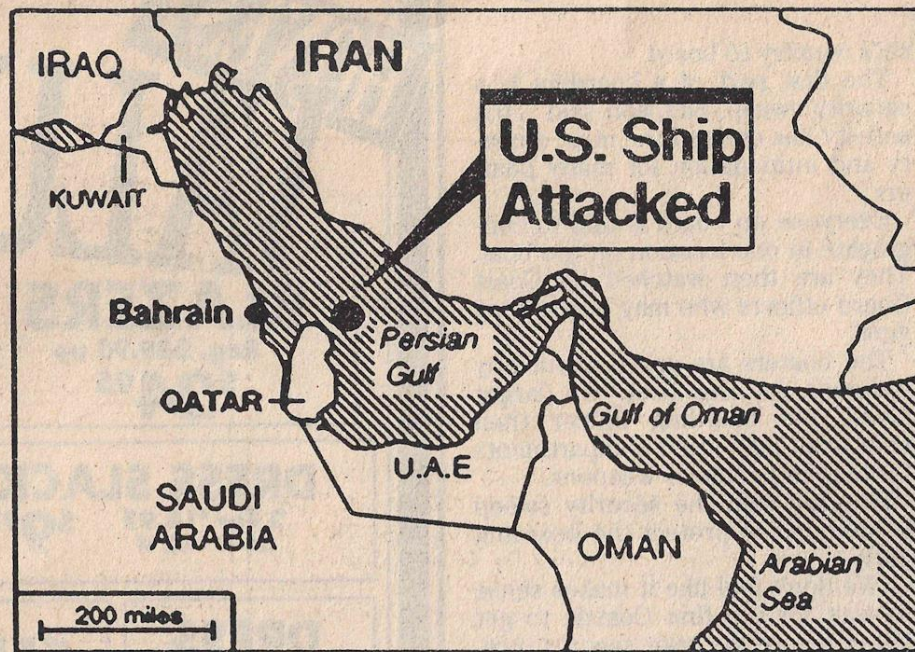
The frigate carries a normal crew of about 180 sailors and officers. The entire crew is based at Mayport Naval Station, spokesman Art Riccio said.

The Pentagon sources, who asked not to be named, said one of the first reports received from the captain of the ship had indicated there was one fatality.

"The information is sketchy, but at this point we continue to believe there was one fatality," one official said.

At the White House, spokeswoman Liz Murphy said Reagan was notified by National Security Adviser Frank Carlucci at 3:30 p.m. and had received written updates.

The attack was the first to involve a U.S. warship since the Iran-Iraq war began almost seven years ago.



— Associated Press

Shultz said the State Department strongly protested the attack, which "underscores once more the seriousness of the Iran-Iraqi war... and underlines once more the seriousness of the tensions that exist in the Middle East."

Shultz, addressing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, said: "We know the source of this missile... and we demand a full accounting."

At the State Department, spokeswoman Deborah Cavin said: "We have strongly protested the attack to the Iraqi ambassador in Washington and instructed our ambassador in Baghdad to make a similar protest there."

"We believe this was a mistaken attack" on the part of the Iraqi planes, Sims said. "There is no indication of any deliberate, hostile intent."

"It appears to be a case of mistaken identity. We don't know why it happened. But the State Depart-

ment has already registered two protests."

The Stark, an Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigate, was commissioned into active service on October 23, 1982. The ship is assigned to Destroyer Squadron 8 and is under the command of Cmdr. G.R. Brindel, the Pentagon said.

The ship, which left Mayport on Feb. 5, was scheduled to spend six months of routine deployment in the Persian Gulf, said Capt. Brent Baker, spokesman at the Navy Atlantic Fleet Headquarters in Norfolk, Va.

The ship is designed as an escort for Navy battle groups and is equipped with surface-to-surface, anti-submarine and surface-to-air weaponry. The vessel carries a Phalanx close-in weapon system to shoot down enemy missiles fired against it.

There was no immediate indication yesterday whether the ship had detected the incoming missiles or

tried to take evasive or defensive action.

"But even if it was tracking [the two fighters], there was no reason to suspect an attack," Sims said.

"We have our defenses [on board], yes," he continued. "But this is very difficult to defend against if you don't expect anything."

"The ship was on routine patrol in international waters. It was nighttime. And the two Iraqi aircraft were on what appeared to be a routine aerial patrol."

The missile that struck a ship — identified as an Exocet — is the same type of missile that was used to such devastating effect by Argentina against the British navy during the battle for the Falkland Islands. The British frigate Sheffield was set afire and sunk by such a missile.

The task force is responsible for patrolling the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf, primarily to keep an eye on U.S.-flag tankers and cargo ships plying the busy waterway.

The task force's work has taken on increased importance over the past year as Iran and Iraq have both stepped up their attacks on commercial shipping. Iran and Iraq have been fighting a bloody war for almost seven years now, and both sides have sought to cripple the other's maritime commerce.

In a related development in the gulf, a Soviet oil tanker leased to Kuwait hit a mine Saturday night, blowing a large hole in the hull, marine salvage executives in Bahrain said.