

Anguished wives wait for word on fates of husbands

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Staff writers

Yvonne Hanes, a Navy wife and mother of two, sat at home by the phone all Sunday night and yesterday waiting to hear whether her husband was dead or alive.

As of last night, she still did not know.

Her husband, Randall Hanes, 27, is a radioman aboard the USS Stark. And the only thing Mrs. Hanes knew yesterday was that 28 men aboard the Mayport-based ship were dead and 21 were injured after a missile attack Sunday by an Iraqi aircraft.

"All I know is what I'm hearing on the news," she said. "They don't tell us [wives] anything. I don't know why they're not talking. I don't care about their story. My husband might be dead, then again he might be alive or he might be injured. I'm sitting here not knowing. Just let me know if he's alive."

Mrs. Hanes' mood seemed to match that of many Navy personnel — they are tired of attacks in the Middle East with no retaliation by the United States.

"What are they [sailors] doing there if they're not going to fight back?" Mrs. Hanes said, her voice trembling. "They are just sitting targets and there's no reason for that. So 28 of them are dead. If my husband's not dead, he's going to be really hurt by that."

• A 19-year-old Waycross man has been identified as one of the 21 sailors injured. Story, Page A-4.

• Iraq's ambassador to the United States says Iraqi warplanes had targeted a suspected Iranian ship 20 miles from the frigate Stark. Story, Page A-4.

• Legislators react with caution. Story, Page A-5.

• Profiles of the Stark, its commander and the Exocet missile. Page A-5.

While Mrs. Hanes awaited word yesterday at her mobile home near the Mayport Naval Station, the Navy began notifying other families of crew members killed in the attack but would not release the names of those killed or injured.

"Everybody feels like they've received an unexpected punch in the stomach ..." said Navy Chaplain Bill Perry. "It's a very somber mood. Everybody is hurting. There's a lot of pain, a lot of sadness and a lot of head-shaking. ... If you wear the uniform, you feel the pain."

Others feeling the pain are Navy wives and sailors who said they do not believe Iraq's claim that the attack was an accident.

They worry that the United States

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is losing a reputation for being tough.

"I doubt very much that it was an accident," said Ron Davenport, an electronics technician with the Navy. "We need to give them a lesson or two about accidents. They're making us look like fools."

Petty Officer 3rd Class C.D. Hale, attached to Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron Light, said that when the Navy deploys, there is always a risk. Those aboard know that.

"You always know there is a risk," he said. "You always know something could possibly happen."

Hale said he was on the USS Eisenhower when the aircraft carrier was stationed off Lebanon in 1983 when the Marine barracks in Beirut were bombed by a terrorist driving a truck full of high explosives. More than 200 Marines were killed.

It is time to take action in the Middle East, Hale said.

"I was on a nuclear carrier over there and we didn't do anything," he said. "It would be nice to take some kind of action over there. A lot of those countries over there are getting away with an awful lot."

A woman whose husband was aboard the USS Saratoga said the Navy was like "a big family" and the family pulls together during crises.

The woman, who asked not to be identified, said all the Navy anxiously awaits word on those who were

killed and injured in the attack.

"Our biggest concern right now is the families left behind," she said. "A lot of these people don't know anyone here and they're alone now. If we were in war, you'd be mentally prepared for anything. But not now. I think we should have done something back. The president [Reagan] saying he's sorry about what happened doesn't help the families one bit."

Another wife, Paulette Cantrell, who works at the Rite Spot Restaurant in Atlantic Beach, said the attack upset her not only because she felt sorry for the families of the crew, but because her husband, Jimmy, is stationed aboard the Saratoga, which is scheduled for deployment to the Mediterranean early next month.

"It's times like this when I regret that my husband is in the service," Mrs. Cantrell said.

The mood was somber at the bar of the Fleet Reserve Association Branch 290 on Mayport Road, a few miles south of the Mayport base main gate, where Stark crewmen hang out when the ship is home.

"We've got members in this post who are on that ship and we're all worried about them," said bartender Mechel Chaon. "It's our ship. It's our guys."

FRA 290 President Ken Tull, a retiree with 30 years in the Navy, said he knew what the families of Stark crewmen were going through.

"The grief is in each of our hearts," he said. "That's not theatrics, that's true feeling. Our membership extends our sympathy to the entire crew and their families."

Tull said that when he heard about the attack on the Stark, his immediate reaction toward Iraq was anger and aggression. But, unlike others, he said a quick U.S. military response would be the "wrong thing to do."

"The policy of the U.S. is quite lenient, but that policy should be lenient" to avoid unnecessary military confrontations, Tull said.

He said he was inclined to believe the Iraqi government's claim that the attack was accidental.

"I think that's a reasonable answer, but that goes back to the training of their armed forces," he said. "So many ships look alike."

He said the attack may have been sparked by "overaggressive pilots" who may have thought the Stark was an Iranian ship on radar.

No matter what it was sparked by, to Mrs. Hanes and the other relatives waiting to find out whether their husbands, sons and fathers will be coming home, it does not seem right.

"They're telling me that if he's dead, someone will come knocking on my door," Mrs. Hanes said. "So I guess I'll know he's dead if a chaplain pulls up the driveway."

Staff writer R. Michael Anderson contributed to this report.