

Survivor unaware he's a dad

Wife bears daughter while awaiting word

By Sandy Strickland
Staff writer

Only hours before going into labor at a Jacksonville hospital, Tracy Nelson learned her husband's ship, the USS Stark, had been attacked in the Persian Gulf.

But she did not know the devastating extent of the damage or the number of casualties.

At 3:51 a.m. Monday — still unaware — she gave birth to her first child — 7-pound, 2-ounce Jessica Lynn.

Meanwhile, Michael Nelson's family was keeping a tense vigil in Columbus, Ohio, as the death toll escalated.

"Every time the phone rang, chills would go down our spines," Nelson's sister Stella Williamson said in a telephone interview.

At 2 a.m. yesterday, their ordeal ended. The family finally got through to the Pentagon and learned that Nelson, 22, was not on the casualty list.

Mrs. Nelson said she got the good news yesterday morning. At the same time, she got the bad news that the Iraqi attack Sunday had

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left at least 37 men dead and 21 injured.

"I'm just thankful he was all right. My prayers were answered," she said yesterday.

Mrs. Nelson has been suffering from high blood pressure but does not know whether it is related to the birth or her concern about the attack.

She and daughter Jessica are doing fine, she said.

Her husband, who was transferred to another ship en route to Bahrain after the attack, does not know he is a father. Nelson last saw his wife in February, before the Stark left Mayport.

In Columbus, Nelson's family had set candles glowing in the front yard of their home. Two hours after the candles had extinguished themselves, they had reason to rejoice.

"When we found out, we went crazy. We woke up all the neighbors," Mrs. Williamson said.

But the Nelsons' joy was tempered with concern for families mourning their lost loved ones.

Susan Ryals of Jacksonville was left to pick up the pieces of a life that she said is in "shambles."

Her husband, Earl, 25, is missing and presumed dead.

For Mrs. Ryals, the certainty that he could not have survived the fiery blast ends her dreams for their future. That future was to have included children.

Mrs. Ryals, also 25, had a miscarriage in December during the fourth month of her pregnancy. The couple planned to try again in August, when Ryals was to return from his Persian Gulf duty.

Ryals had joined the Navy only one month after their marriage in November 1985, so they had been unable to spend much time together.

"He was a signalman and was always on maneuvers," she said.

She was a 19-year-old college student when they met in Fort Lauderdale. Mrs. Ryals, who is one year shy of her degree in chemistry, has now put her education on hold. She has dropped her classes at the University of North Florida.

Although she had not received official notification of her husband's death yesterday afternoon, she held no hope for his survival.

"People told me to be optimistic, but I knew. A missile like that hitting the ship and only one minute's warning to get out of their bunks, the likelihood [of survival] was very slim at that time of night," she said.

Navy officials now say two missiles struck the ship's port side below the superstructure, touching off fires that spread through a forward berthing compartment where many of the victims died.

"He wasn't on duty at that time,



Susan Ryals of Jacksonville holds a picture of herself and her husband, Michael. He is missing and presumed dead after Sunday's attack.

— Associated Press

and if he wasn't on duty, he was in his berthing," she said.

Mrs. Ryals said she hopes her husband's body is found. And she expects the death toll to rise.

"This isn't the end. Once you get that ship in, and you go below deck, you're going to find a lot more casualties."

Although Mrs. Ryals said she did not know Mrs. Nelson, she was glad to hear that her husband was among the survivors.

Mrs. Ryals said she does not think the attack was a case of mistaken identity.

"I believe because we sent that aid to Iran, I think Iraq was retaliating against us and pretending it was

an accident. It was too coincidental," she said.

But most U.S. officials who have issued statements on the attack agreed that the Iraqis did not realize it was a U.S. warship.

Mrs. Ryals also questioned why the Stark did not take retaliatory action.

"If someone is shooting at your ship, you have the right to defend yourself," she said.

"All of a sudden, this person is taken out of my life — for what? I could see if we were in a war ... but now I think to myself it was such an unnecessary death and could have been prevented."

Her own plans remain in limbo.

Mrs. Ryals, whose mother and in-laws were to join her yesterday from South Florida, said she is trying not to think about the future.

"I have to keep my head clear to follow up on the obligations to my husband right now. I have no idea what I will be doing. I have no idea. I'm kind of at a loss. I don't know what to think or what to do."

She said Ryals enjoyed the Navy and had planned to re-enlist to further his education. She said she hoped the tragedy would help give U.S. military personnel the recognition they deserve.

"These men are out there defending our country and putting their lives on the line," she said.



Earl Ryals
Signalman among the missing