

ATTACK ON THE USS STARK

Stark nearly defenseless during attack, Navy says

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WASHINGTON — The battery of sophisticated weapons aboard the USS Stark most likely was turned off Sunday night, leaving it practically defenseless when it was attacked by an Iraqi warplane, a Navy spokesman said yesterday.

Like all other U.S. ships in the gulf, the Stark was operating under a "Condition 3" alert when it was hit by Iraqi missiles, Lt. Cmdr. Walter Urban, a Navy spokesman, said.

"All of the weapons systems are manned with one-third of the crew," Urban said, describing the Condition 3 alert status under which the Stark sailed at the time of the attack. "The weapons are not energized as they would be under a Condition 1 watch, which is General Quarters."

An "energized" weapon is primed to work

"at the drop of a pin," Urban said, while an "unenergized" weapon takes much more time before it can be used.

"We don't know for a fact if he had any of his systems energized," Urban said of the Stark's captain. "Typically, he would not have his systems energized" under a Condition 3 alert, Urban said.

The Stark's MK-15 Phalanx close-in weapon system, the final defense against an oncoming missile, could fire within five seconds if it had been energized at the time of the attack, Urban said.

"If the [Phalanx] system were off, it would take 5.6 minutes to be fully energized," he said.

Several military officials, including a retired Navy admiral, said it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for the Stark to defend itself given the scant one minute be-

tween the time the ship realized it was being surveyed by the Iraqi plane's radar and the missiles' detonation deep amidships.

Navy ship alerts range from a low of Condition 5, which means the ship is in port, to Condition 1, in which the crew mans battle stations. Condition 4 is for normal peacetime steaming, Condition 3 is a heightened alert status, and Condition 2 is an alert stage short of full battle readiness, Urban said.

In Bahrain, Rear Adm. Harold J. Bernsen said the Stark's radar spotted the plane but apparently did not detect the missiles' launch. Numerous problems, from Persian Gulf humidity to radar operator boredom, could have caused the missiles to be missed, Navy weapons experts said.

Despite President Reagan's statement Monday that the ships in the gulf have been

placed on a higher level of readiness following the attack, they remain on "Condition 3," military officials said yesterday.

The ships have been instructed to mount a more aggressive defense if they think an attack is imminent.

Eugene J. Carroll Jr., who left the Navy as an admiral in 1980, wondered why the ship had not gone to Condition 1 as soon as it realized the plane was heading toward the ship.

"It's a little hard to understand why the ship wouldn't be at general quarters once the report of the Iraqi airplane bound to his area was received," said Carroll, now deputy director of the Center for Defense Information, a nonprofit group of former military officers generally critical of Pentagon policies. "It's clear that they really took alarm when the plane turned toward them."

Once the plane turned eastward toward the ship, the ship issued its two radio warnings alerting the plane to the ship's identity and location — a process that could have taken two or three minutes, said Carroll, who commanded an aircraft carrier task force in the Mediterranean Sea while in the Navy.

But by the time the missiles were launched from the Iraqi plane, it was too late for most defensive actions, he said.

"With one minute of flight time, the captain could have sounded general quarters and people still would have been going up and down ladders and getting out of their bunks and generally milling about smartly — the missile still would have hit before anything could be done," Carroll said. "The ship was totally unprotected if it were in 'Condition 3.'"