

French-built missile is proven killer

Associated Press

PARIS — The French-made Exocet missile that might have been used in the attack on the USS Stark is in demand by military forces worldwide because it is accurate, reliable, difficult to detect and hard to intercept, military experts said yesterday.

The air-to-ship AM39 Exocet is the invention of the French arms contractor Aerospatiale in collaboration with the French military. Since it was put into production in 1980, the Exocet has become one of France's best-selling weapons.

By the end of 1981 the missile had been ordered by 25 nations, including Iraq, Peru, Pakistan and Syria, according to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies.

French defense officials would not provide the cost of the missile.

A spokesman for the French Defense Ministry, who spoke on condition of anonymity in keeping with government policy, declined to provide the names of countries currently buying Exocets but said 2,000 had been sold since they were first marketed in 1980.

"It is a very, very important missile to us," the spokesman said.

"It is very accurate and when you launch the missile you know it will hit the target 99 percent of the time. Everyone knows that," he said.

Don Kerr, at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said French sales of the missile were boosted after the 1982 Falklands war in which the Exocet was used with devastating effect by Argentina against the British navy. The British frigate Sheffield was set afire and sunk by an Exocet.

The AM39 model is released by a fighter jet, like the Iraqi F-1, and flies by radar about 6 to 8 feet above the surface of the sea. The missile is extremely accurate and designed to hit the side of a ship in its operations room, the nerve center of a military vessel.

The missile that hit the Stark, traveling just below the speed of sound at 10 miles a minute, slammed into the left side of the ship about 20 feet above the waterline. It hit just below the ship's brain, its Combat Information Center.

The AM39, one of four types of Exocet missiles made by Aerospatiale, has a substantial blast and fragment warhead.

"Try to imagine what would happen in a computer room — which is what an operations center on a ship is — if you hit it with a bomb, then threw a couple of hundred pounds of hot, sharp fragments in moving at a high velocity, cutting through anything in their path," Kerr said.

The French Defense Ministry would provide no details on how many Exocets have been sold and declined to comment on the use of the AM39 against the U.S. vessel.



— Ron Bell/staff

Jacksonville sympathizes with families

An unidentified man views a banner (above) hung by two Navy wives near base housing at the Mayport Naval Station. The sign faces the road near the base's main entrance. And Karl Stokes hoists letters onto a sign at Scoots hamburger drive-thru stand on Mayport Road (right) as a tribute to the sailors who were killed and injured when two Iraq missiles hit the Mayport-based USS Stark on Sunday.

Elementary schools near the base observed a moment of silence yesterday, and guidance counselors briefed teachers on helping children deal with grief. At Joseph Finegan Elementary, a second-grader came to the office with a note from his teacher and tears streaming down his cheeks. A few minutes later, a friend joined him. In two days, their fathers would leave on the USS Forrestal, an aircraft carrier, for a six-month assignment.

