

Crew was unaware missiles had been launched

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Associated Press

MANAMA, Bahrain — The surprise must have been "incredible" when two missiles struck the Stark, Rear Adm. Harold J. Bernsen, the commander of the Navy's seven-ship Persian Gulf task force said yesterday. The attack Sunday night off the emirate of Qatar killed 37 U.S. sailors and wounded 21.

Bernsen, who was on his flagship destroyer La Salle at the time of the attack, told reporters that preliminary information indicated the Stark had no advance warning an attack was under way.

The crippled guided-missile frigate stood off Manama under tow last night, flying the Stars and Stripes at half-mast.

The admiral said it did not appear the crew tried to fire at the Iraqi plane or missiles and he did not think the captain, Cmdr. Glenn R. Brindel, was on the bridge at the time.

He said it was not clear whether the missiles were Exocets and thus the type that could have been picked up by the Stark's radar and weaponry systems.

Asked whether he was saying the crew had no idea the rockets had been launched, he replied: "That's precisely what I'm saying."

When asked if he knew why no weapons were fired in self-defense, Bernsen replied: "No, I really don't. I think that the

surprise was incredible, quite frankly."

One crewman on lookout saw a missile coming and gave a warning, he said, but "toward the end it became evident nothing could be done. . . . A great amount of detail needs to be worked as to why it [the Stark] did not respond." He said the attack caused a "tremendous amount of damage and immediate deaths."

Associated Press Radio correspondent Steve Katz, who viewed the Stark from a boat about 200 yards away, said the bridge was "all twisted metal."

He saw a gaping hole under the bridge. A few U.S. Navy men were busy around the damaged area and two dozen stood on the undamaged rear decks.

Reporters taken on the boat trip organized by the Bahrain government were not allowed to get closer because the Stark and its towing vessel, the USS Conyngham, needed room to maneuver.

Bernsen said the Stark was five nautical miles from the Manama port.

He said a damage assessment team would inspect it today and decide whether it should be brought in.

"There are still hot spots but no fire," he said, adding that the engine room and helicopters were in good shape but the missile room had to be flooded after the attack.

The frigate is "on an even keel and float-

ing well," Bernsen said.

A marine salvage executive said that just after the attack "the inside of the Stark got so hot that the aluminum was melted."

During the fire it was like the inside of a boiler," with a temperature of 1,832 degrees.

The attack was the deadliest on shipping since Iran and Iraq went to war in September 1980.

Nearly 230 ships have been hit by Iran or Iraq since attacks on commercial shipping began in February 1984.

Bernsen said the Stark's crew had not determined "hostile intent" by the Iraqi warplanes and they were considered "friendly aircraft."

"We are not here to shoot friends indiscriminately," he said. Bernsen called the attack "a very unfortunate error. . . . As Americans we deal with the world, we presume people are not out there to shoot at us."

The task force commander said Iraqi pilots had flown 340 missions of "similar profile" in the past nine months, firing 90 Exocet missiles and striking 40 ships or other targets.

The Pentagon is sending an aircraft carrier, the Constellation, into the Arabian Sea so its F-14 fighters can fly protective cover for the fleet.