

ATTACK ON THE USS STARK

Ombudsmen relay news, offer help to anxious families

By William E. Marden

Staff writer

Imelda Barrow took her children and spent Monday night in a friend's house, hoping that sleeping in a different bed, in a different home, would be enough to ease the fears about the fate of her husband, a crewman aboard the USS Stark.

"It didn't help," she said yesterday.

Mrs. Barrow, like many of the wives of the crewmen aboard the guided-missile frigate, which was attacked Sunday, could only wait and wonder if Chief Petty Officer Larence H. Barrow Jr., 34, was one of the lucky ones.

Her husband has been in the Navy for 14 years and they had been preparing to celebrate their 15th wedding anniversary on May 26 before the horrible wait began.

Her fears were eased only when she was

notified at 3 a.m. yesterday that "he was on the live list."

"I have not slept," she said. "It has been a long ordeal."

But even before the joyous news, Mrs. Barrow, 34, could not simply sink into a world of her memories while desperately holding her fears at bay.

She had to confront reality; she had responsibilities to other Navy families.

She is one of two Navy wives who function as ombudsmen for the Stark. She is a link between the crew members and their loved ones, relaying whatever information she has been given and referring callers to Navy resources for help.

Since one or two missiles were fired at the Stark, igniting fires and killing at least 37 crew members, Mrs. Barrow said, "The

phone has been ringing off the hook — families, mothers, brothers, from all over the country."

When those calls come in, she said, "I identify myself. Many times they have no idea who I am or what I do. I ask them their name and who their loved one is."

But she and the other ombudsman, Claudia Lovern, can give little comfort to such callers, she said.

"We cannot tell them whether their son or husband is alive or dead," she said. "That is done strictly by the Navy."

She was asked how she could calmly deal with others' fears before she learned if her husband was alive.

"I had one mother say that to me, 'How do you do the job? You just seem so calm and collected.'"

"I said, 'Of course [I'm] not, but it is something you have to do,'" she said.

She said that although she strongly supports how the Navy notifies the crew members' families, the lack of information results in "rumors flying. We have all been just waiting, waiting, waiting."

But she said the Navy's way is the correct way.

"Of course, we want to know right away. You want to know right now. I want to be sure. But the Navy wanted to be sure, too. They have done everything possible to make sure the information came through accurately," she said.

After the next of kin are notified, the Navy sends counselors and other support to the family's home, Mrs. Barrow said.

"We [families] have not wanted for one

thing — food, child care, whatever," she said.

She said women such as herself, who are veterans of Navy life and its long separations between spouses, react the same as younger women with younger marriages.

"All the girls [with loved ones] on the ship have taken it like every wife does," Mrs. Burrow said. "Whether you're in there for one year or 14, you have the same feelings."

Yesterday, she said she had not received further word on casualties and could only continue to wait.

While the suspense soon will be dispelled by facts, some feelings will never go away.

"I will never get over this," she said. "This is something that will be in our minds for a long time to come. I think it will be in our country's mind for a long time to come."