



Tragedy forces cancellation of wives' homecoming plans

By Laura Griffin

Staff writer

For the past three months, 25-year-old Karen Supple and other Navy wives planned "the biggest homecoming Mayport has ever seen."

They held car washes and bake sales to raise money for bands and balloons and flowers and banners to welcome home the USS Stark on Aug. 5.

"Mayport is so big on carriers, but frigates have to go out for just as long," said Mrs. Supple, co-chairwoman of the homecoming committee. "We wanted something really special for them to welcome them home."

But there will be no celebration. When Mrs. Supple's husband comes home, he and 36 other Stark sailors will be in flag-draped caskets.

On Sunday, an Iraqi jet attacked the Stark because, the Iraqis said, the pilot mistook it for an Iranian vessel.

On May 5, the wives crossed the halfway mark of their husbands' six-

month sea duty — and until Sunday, they were gearing up for the party.

This was the first time Mrs. Supple and her 28-year-old husband, Martin, had been separated since their wedding in December 1984, so she marked off each day as it passed.

"What got me through it was just knowing that he was coming home," she said yesterday. "When it got hard, I knew it was one day less until he came home."

On Sunday evening, after an all-day car wash to raise money for the homecoming, most of the wives learned the Stark had been hit and some of the men were dead and injured.

For the next two days, wives waited nervously. Receiving little or no more information than what they heard on the news, they were anxious.

"Monday, they told me he was missing. [Tuesday] I found out he

Karen Supple (left) and her mother, Mary Mozzi, were interviewed yesterday at the Supple's apart-

ment in Jacksonville. Mrs. Supple's husband, Martin, was killed in the attack on the USS Stark.

— Ron Bell/staff

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Sailor was not concerned about tension in Middle East

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was dead," she said.

"But I knew that if he was all right, they wouldn't tell me he was missing. I was trying to set myself up for the worst and trying to hold on to hope at the same time. And I really couldn't do both. At least I know now."

Her husband, a petty officer third class who joined the Navy in 1984, was waiting out his next three years of enlistment and planned to return to civilian life.

"He was using the Navy to get his education," she said. "He definitely was not going to make a career of it."

Mrs. Supple talked to her husband — whom she described as patient, loving, kind and a "class clown" — the day before the attack.

"It was good to talk to him. He was lonely though. He said how much he loved me and how he couldn't wait to get home," she said. "He said he knew what it meant now for someone's arms to ache [for

someone else]."

Mrs. Supple said she, too, knew the feeling.

She recently saw him on a videotape the Stark crew sent home to their wives with messages.

"He was joking around with me and answering all the questions I had asked in my letters. It was so good just to see his face," she said.

Supple never expressed fear about his tour in the Middle East, she said, nor was he afraid to die.

"I talked to him about it before he left — about the tension over there," she said. "But he said, 'We've been over there for years,' so he wasn't worried. He also wasn't scared at all to die because he knew he was going to a better place."

For a woman so young, Mrs. Supple has suffered more than her share, said her mother, Mary Catherine Mozzi. Last year she gave birth to a stillborn baby. Now, at 25, she is a widow.

"You don't ask why," Mrs. Mozzi said. "But how come a young couple like this?"