

‘YES, THEY WERE HEROES’

Working condition of anti-missile gun becomes early focus of investigation

From news services

WASHINGTON — Military investigators probing the attack on the USS Stark informed the Pentagon yesterday that they have focused their inquiry on a suspicion the ship's Phalanx anti-missile gun system was not in complete working order, knowledgeable sources say.

The sources, who spoke only on condition of anonymity, stressed there is no evidence the Phalanx gun could not have fired on the missiles approaching the Stark if the crew had had time to switch it on automatic.

The ship's skipper, Capt. Glenn R. Brindel, has said he was maintaining the Phalanx in a manual mode at the time of the attack and did not have time to switch it on automatic.

The sources said, however, even in the manual mode the Phalanx system should have alerted the crew that its radar was tracking something.

"It would not have fired, but it should have provided alarms," said one official who asked not to be named. "The report that it didn't is troubling and that's where [the investigators] are starting."

The sources dismissed reports the Stark departed on its fateful patrol the day before the attack with a totally inoperable Phalanx system.

"If they had flipped the switch to automatic, it would have worked," one said. "There is no indication that it wouldn't have worked."

"But that doesn't mean the system was fully functional in all modes," this source continued. "And that's what we're investigating."

According to military and industry sources, when the system is in a manual mode, it will not open fire.

"But the radar is still tracking and it's supposed to sound alarms," said one source, noting the captain has said he received no such warning.

An industry source, meantime, questioned Brindel's statement that he kept the Stark's Phalanx in manual to ensure it did not fire on friendly aircraft or ships in the crowded gulf.

"Regardless of mode, you can program the system to look only for certain things — like something moving at the speed of a rocket," this source said.

In related developments yesterday:

- In an overnight attack, an Iranian gunboat fired 12 rocket-propelled grenades into a small freighter from the Persian Gulf state of Qatar and raked it with machine-gun fire, seriously wounding three crewmen, the owner reported. The engine room and crew's quarters were destroyed by flames.

- Autopsies were being performed on the remains of the 35 sailors killed in the attack, a U.S. military spokesman said.

The sailors' remains were being prepared to be flown to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, said the spokesman, U.S. Army Lt. Col. Larry Furrow. The autopsies were being performed at a military mortuary in Frankfurt, West Germany, he said.

The bodies of the sailors will be flown from West Germany to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware next week, probably Tuesday, the Pentagon said yesterday.

- Iran said that it was prepared to provide new information on last Sunday's attack if the United States agreed to an investigation "by neutral persons in a neutral country."

Iran Parliament Speaker Hashemi Rafsanjani said it was possible that the Stark's mission was to direct Iraqi air attacks toward Iranian tankers, "but our navy, by a secret maneuver, misled the Iraqi missile to the U.S. warship itself."

"The Pentagon knows what took place but President Reagan — as demonstrated by the McFarlane scandal — does not know what is going on," he said.

He also suggested that Soviet military experts in Iraq might have engineered the incident, "whether by a direct attack order issued to one of the Moscow-trained Iraqi pilots or even by pressure on the Iraqi government itself, which depends on Soviet weaponry."

"The Americans had to pay the price, and it is possible the issue has already turned into a confrontation between the two superpowers," Rafsanjani added.

- The Pentagon sources insisted there were other detection systems on the Stark besides the Phalanx's radar that should have alerted the crew a missile had been fired. The status of those systems will be investigated, they said.

- The sources said the Pentagon was no longer discounting the possibility that Iraq had found a way to modify its French-built Mirage F-1 fighters to carry two Exocet missiles at a time. The unexploded warhead of one Exocet was found aboard the Stark after the attack and Iraqi officials have said the attack was carried out by one Mirage that fired two Exocets. French and U.S. military officials had said the F-1's were not built to fire two Exocets at once.

- A three-member Senate delegation — Sens. Jim Sasser, D-Tenn., John Glenn, D-Ohio, and John Warner, R-Va. — prepared to fly to the Persian Gulf this weekend on a fact-finding mission.

- En route to Florida, presiden-

tial spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said the administration thinks that consultations already under way with Congress "will probably meet the spirit certainly, if not the letter" of the reporting requirement demanded by the Senate.

The Senate voted 91-5 on Thursday to require the administration to inform Congress about the security situation in the gulf before U.S. ships begin escorting 11 Kuwaiti vessels.

- Reflecting a split within the administration, Fitzwater also disagreed with testimony Thursday by Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy, the State Department's senior Middle East specialist.

- U.S. officials in Washington said air power might be used to prevent further assaults on U.S. warships.