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Families gather for memorial service

By Don Yaeger

Staff writer

Hundreds of relatives and friends of sailors aboard the USS Stark were expected at Mayport Naval Station today to join President Reagan at a memorial service for the 37 crew members killed in an Iraqi missile attack.

Mourners are scheduled to be ushered into the base's largest helicopter hangar for a brief address from the president, who also was expected to offer his personal con-

dolences to the victims' families, a White House spokesman said.

The job of preparing Hangar 1552 for the memorial service, although seemingly mundane to many, was a task charged with grief for at least one sailor.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Cheryl Wells was among 50 sailors assigned to ready the hangar for the service, scheduled to begin at 11:15 this morning.

The sailors on the Stark were more than her colleagues, she said.

Several also were close friends.

As she unloaded folding chairs for the service, the reality of Ms. Wells' assignment began to sink in.

She has avoided reading the list of those killed. She has not wanted to know yet if her friends will not be returning.

"I'm waiting until [today] to look at the names," she said. "We've been busy with these preparations all week. I didn't want to think about that while I was working."

"I feel like I'm helping them and

their families," Ms. Wells said of the fallen sailors. "It really isn't much, what I'm doing. But I'm happy to be doing it. In my heart I've felt a sadness since it happened. I wish there was more we could do."

Ms. Wells and her unit lined the 300-foot-long hangar with 1,200 chairs.

Today, those seats will be occupied by the families of sailors killed on the Stark, families of survivors and Naval dignitaries. They will be joined by the president, first lady

Nancy Reagan, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and Navy Secretary James Webb.

The families of the 220 or more men on the Stark were invited to an 8:30 a.m. breakfast sponsored by Southern Bell. The breakfast, at the Chief Petty Officers Club at the Mayport base, is closed to the public and Navy brass, said Mayport Chaplain Bill Perry.

The group, which Perry said could include more than 300 relatives, is scheduled to then attend a private

church service at the base chapel before moving to the hangar for the memorial service.

The memorial service, which also is closed to the public, is scheduled to begin shortly after Reagan's 11:15 a.m. arrival. The president is to leave Mayport on Air Force One an hour later.

"One of the concerns in opening this to the public is that it is a private moment for these grieving

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— John Pemberton/staff

Petty Officer 3rd Class Rodney Fields unloads chairs to be used during the memorial service today inside Hangar

1552 at Mayport Naval Station. President Reagan will address the relatives of USS Stark crew members.

Community extends open arms to relatives of crew members

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families," Pentagon spokesman Robert Anderson said. "I think the president wants to keep it that way and show the families the nation's appreciation. We know we can't really ever comfort them for the loss they've suffered. But we want to show them we're concerned."

The base will be sealed off by Secret Service agents at 7:30 a.m. and will remain closed until the president departs. Families of the Stark crew will be shuttled onto the base by bus from area hotels.

Navy officials declined comment on other security precautions.

Perry said the memorial service represents more than eulogizing the 37 sailors.

"The whole nation is grieving," he said. "This service is to deal with the grief of a nation. I've been in touch with most, if not all, of the families. They've told me how important it is to them that the country is with them."

Anderson and Perry both praised the residents of Jacksonville for their generosity in the past week.

"We've had hotel rooms offered to the families by various hotels at no cost," Anderson said. "From what we've seen here, Jacksonville has opened its heart."

Perry said a Western Union telegram he received yesterday alerted him to a donation to the scholarship fund established for children of the deceased sailors.

On the envelope, which arrived at the base chapel, were scribbled notes of encouragement — "May

Local stations to cover service

From staff

The three major networks and Cable News Network plan live coverage of today's memorial service at Mayport Naval Station honoring the 37 sailors killed Sunday in the Iraqi missile attack on the USS Stark.

In addition, Jacksonville's three network-affiliated television sta-

tions will provide special reports from the site. Each is scheduled to begin about 11 a.m. from Hangar 1552 at Mayport's Naval Air Facility.

The three stations plan expanded coverage of the service during their newscasts tonight.

WJXT TV-4's *Eyewitness News* will air an hourlong special at 7 p.m. about the Stark tragedy.

God bless you all" and "We're praying for you."

"That shows you how intense this nation is feeling about this," Perry said. "Everyone is reaching out, trying to turn the hurt they feel inside into some help."

Perry said calls volunteering baby-sitting, food, rides from the airport and accommodations have flooded the base.

Eric Casas, deputy director of Mayport's Family Services Center, said the base has set up a counseling and support center for families of crewmen on the Stark and other ships who may need help handling the tragedy.

He said the center will conduct follow-up counseling for "as long as a year, if needed."

Also yesterday, Mayor Jake Godbold proclaimed today "USS Stark Memorial Day" and scheduled a brief downtown memorial service for the public to attend.

"Many citizens would like to pay their respects to these gallant Navy

men and their families," Godbold said. "But they won't be able to attend the memorial service scheduled at Mayport Naval Station, so we have scheduled a special tribute downtown."

The service for those killed will feature a color guard and rifle squad from Jacksonville Naval Air Station. City and other Navy officials are expected to attend.

The noon gathering will be at the city's war memorial at Bay and Market streets, where an eternal flame burns.

Godbold, who will attend the memorial service at Mayport, has asked Jacksonville residents to observe a moment of silence at noon.

In Tallahassee, the Florida House adopted a resolution yesterday memorializing the victims of the attack. Sponsored by Reps. Jim King and Bill Bankhead, both Jacksonville Republicans, the resolution said the state "joined in the grief" of the victims' families.