

Long-distance calls from Bahrain give loved ones relief

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Staff writers

For a few moments Wednesday and yesterday, dozens of Navy wives and families across the nation could feel that their husbands, fathers and sons were not so far away.

Through telephone connections, it did not seem as though they were a third of the way around the world.

The wives and other family members had waited days to hear those voices letting them know, "I'm OK."

Finally, relief came for those whose husbands and sons survived Sunday's Iraqi missile attack on the USS Stark in the Persian Gulf.

The men on the lines were the lucky ones. They were not among the 37 killed in the attack.

When the phone rang at 6:45 a.m. in Kathleen McGunigale's home in Jacksonville, she was more than ready to talk to her husband, Rick.

Richard Alan "Rick" McGunigale is an officer in the Navy. According to Kathleen, she was the first officer's wife to hear from a husband.

When she did, his voice sounded hoarse and tired.

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ATTACK ON THE USS STARK

Calls from survivors bring relief, happiness

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"It didn't sound like him, he had breathed in so much smoke," she said. "Some of the other officers were around the phone when I talked to him."

In Mattoon, Ill., when Steve Hunter called his parents late Wednesday, he told them he had been trapped in flames and overcome by smoke after the frigate was hit.

"I thought I was gone," Kathy Hunter quoted her son as saying. "Somebody must have pulled me from the ship."

Hunter suffered first-degree burns on his arms and told his mother he was an "emotional wreck" after the attack.

"Mom, I have two arms, two legs and am still breathing," his mother said he told her.

"He said the entire room was engulfed in flames and he was trapped inside," Mrs. Hunter said. "Crouching under a table ... he grabbed an oxygen mask in an effort to keep from being overwhelmed by the smoke."

When the family of James Wayne McKelvey, 19, heard from him on Wednesday, they too felt relief. It was calming to hear his voice, they said.

McKelvey was on his first sea duty, his brother Tracy McKelvey of Jacksonville said.

"He's fine, but tired," McKelvey said of his brother, who was apparently worn out from fighting fires on the ship after the attack.

McKelvey, a postal clerk, has been with the Navy for one year, his brother said. He certainly did not expect danger on this trip, he said.

He called his family in Iowa last week and told them he was enjoying the cruise, and mentioned nothing about problems with the ship as other crew members have, his brother said.

"All Navy ships have things that break, just like you have things [break] on a car," Tracy McKelvey said. "If you can't fix it, you wait for a part to come in so you can fix it. You can't have spare parts for everything aboard ship."

The Stark's current tour was McGunigale's first sea duty, too, though he had been in the Navy for more than 14 years.

It was a trip of firsts for the McGunigales.

In addition to being his first sea duty, it was the first time he would be separated from his wife, his first assignment serving as an officer and his first job as weapons officer.

It also was his first time under fire.

McGunigale, 32, loves the Navy.

"It is the only thing he knows. He joined as an enlisted man when he was 17," his wife said.

As she listened to his hoarse voice coming through the telephone, a good connection from Bahrain, thousands of miles away, she felt a sense of ease.

McGunigale was reassuring.

"He is never emotional. He takes his job very seriously," she said.

"He just let me know he was OK, and wanted me to know all the other husbands [officers] were OK, doing fine," Mrs. McGunigale said.

She and her husband did not discuss where he was when the two missiles blasted into the Stark, turning a section of it into an inferno.

But she said she did learn it was so hot in the cabin where McGunigale slept aboard ship that many objects were melted.

Low-ranking officers sleep on the 0-1 deck to the aft and below the bridge of the Stark.

As weapons officer, McGunigale's duty station is in the combat systems center, a section closer to the stern of the ship than the bow.

Two Exocet missiles struck the ship's port side, below the superstructure.

"He didn't say much about what happened, and I didn't ask him," Mrs. McGunigale said. "I felt it was best not to ask what happened."

The McGunigales have two sons, 4 and 5 years old.

"They saw the pictures of the ship with the hole in it, but they don't really understand what is happening," Mrs. McGunigale said.

"I prayed to God daddy wouldn't be killed," she said one of her sons told her.

Though hearing his voice on the telephone was a relief, she said she thought all along he would survive.

The report contains material from staff writer Laura Griffin and The Associated Press.