

Delaware base mortuary to receive crewmen's remains

Associated Press

DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del. — The bodies of sailors killed in a rocket attack on the USS Stark in the Persian Gulf will be returned to the United States at Dover Air Force Base, the site of many such emotional scenes.

The base is often called on to handle mass deaths because it houses the largest mortuary east of the Mississippi River.

"It's the mortuary that serves all the needs for the eastern half of the world. It's the largest port mortuary in the Department of Defense," said Sgt. Terry L. Shay, a base spokesman.

Thirty-seven sailors were killed and 21 were wounded Sunday when the frigate was hit by an Iraqi missile about 85 miles northeast of Bahrain.

The ceremony of return is solemn. An honor guard stands at attention before the flag-draped coffins while drums roll and a band plays.

The facilities were most recently used in January 1986, when the remains of seven crew members of the space shuttle Challenger were brought to the base.

In December 1985, the base received the remains of 248 soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division and

the crew of an Arrow Air DC-8 who were killed in a plane crash in Gander, Newfoundland.

In October 1983, the remains of 241 servicemen killed in the bombing of a Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, and of 14 servicemen killed in Grenada were sent to the base and given full military honors before being shipped to their hometowns.

In 1978, the bodies of 913 followers of the Rev. Jim Jones' People's Temple who committed mass suicide or were murdered in Guyana were sent to the base.

The bodies of more than 300 U.S.

residents killed in the 1977 crash of two jumbo jets at Tenerife in the Canary Islands were sent home via Dover.

The base mortuary was built in 1968 during the Vietnam War, and at the war's height handled 40 bodies a day. The base handled 100 bodies a day during the Peoples Temple deaths, base officials said.

The base also has occasionally played a role in happier missions.

Six U.S. diplomats who escaped from Iran with the aid of Canadian Embassy officials spent their first few days back in the United States at the base.