

Blip turned to disaster for Stark

37 die, ship crippled, gulf policy questioned

By Francis X. Donnelly

Staff writer

It started as a green blip on a radar screen.

It ended with the crippling of a 445-foot frigate, a reassessment of U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf, and the deaths of 37 U.S. sailors.

The May 17 Iraqi attack on the USS Stark has raised questions about the pilot's intent, the ship's defense and whether the United States should be bolstering, or withdrawing, its Middle East forces.

But the crew of the Mayport-based guided-missile frigate was not concerned with such weighty issues that night. They simply wanted to shoo away the approaching jet as carefully as one would fend off a wasp.

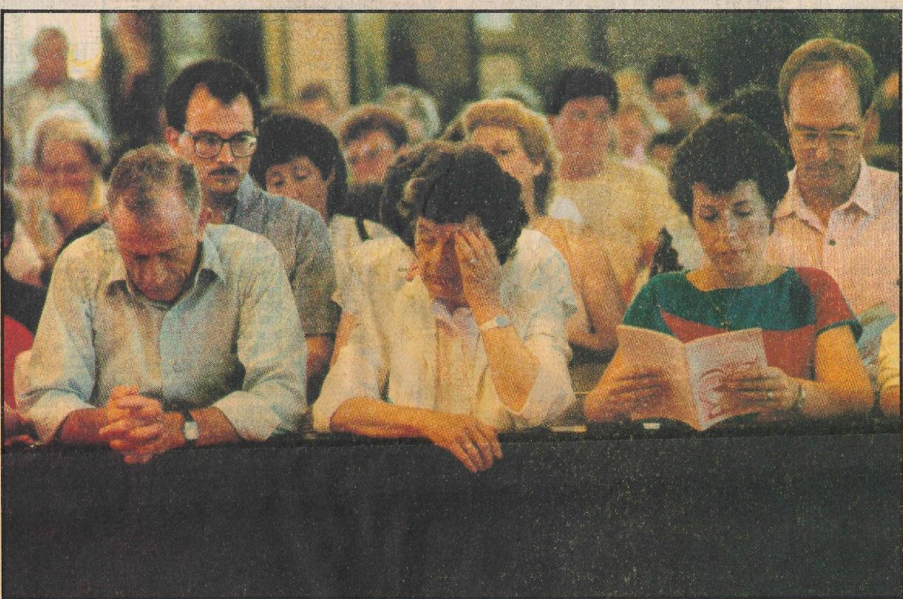
As the F-1 Mirage closed in the inky darkness, the lone ship twice radioed the pilot and identified itself. The pilot did not respond.

Crew members continued watching the radar screen as the blinking streak showed that the low-flying fighter jet traveled south along the coast of Saudi Arabia.

Before reaching the island emirate of Bahrain, the Iraqi jet banked eastward toward the frigate and climbed to 5,000 feet.

Fighter jets had flown along the coast before, but never that far south. Still, the ship's muscular skipper, Capt. Glenn R. Brindel, did not expect trouble. Iraq and the United States were on friendly terms.

While those aboard the Stark



— Frank Smith/staff

Richard and Alfreda Shippee, parents of Robert Shippee, killed in the Iraqi missile attack on the USS Stark a week ago, join the sail-

ors' widow, Carol, and others in mourning Shippee at a memorial Mass at a Ponte Vedra Beach church. Story, Page A-15.

waited to hear from the aircraft, a lookout noticed a fiery tail racing toward the ship. It was a missile. He telephoned Brindel to say they were about to be hit.

The 43-year-old captain sounded an alarm and attempted to turn on the anti-missile weapons.

"General quarters," he barked over the ship's loudspeakers. "All hands, man your battle stations."

Seconds later, the bulkhead of one of the port side sleeping quar-

ters exploded in flames.

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Most of the 220 men aboard the Stark during its six-month deployment in the Middle East shared humble backgrounds.

They joined the Navy because it could teach them a trade, provide them with a career, put some organization into their lives, or simply give them something to do.

Seaman Ronnie Lockett, 30, a signalman, played several sports and

graduated 19th in his 1976 high school class in Bessemer, Ala.

He attended dental school in Atlanta but lost interest after nine months. Lockett returned home and told his mother he wanted to become a sailor.

"He came in and said he wanted to go places and see things," Eldora Lockett said. "He said, 'I'd like to see the world.' I said I was glad as long as the Navy kept him off the streets."

While Lockett had decided on the Navy as a career, Seaman Steven Erwin, a sonar technician, could not wait to get out.

Erwin, 22, became a sailor only because his friend had suggested it and he could not think of a better idea. With his four-year enlistment ending this summer, Erwin was eager to leave the Navy and start school, his mother said.

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Blip's effect grows to affect many lives across the nation

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"He was all boy, no angel, during his teen years," Nancy Erwin said. "He was eager to get out. He was ready to start his life."

Interviews with Navy officials and relatives of all but a few of the 37 sailors who died in the attack revealed an account of the attack and some of the crew members' backgrounds.

The night of May 17 had been routine for those aboard the Stark, which was operating 85 miles northeast of Bahrain.

The guided-missile frigate usually escorted oil tankers threatened amid the Iran-Iraq fighting. But that night, the ship was searching for underwater mines with its sonar.

Off-duty crew members were reading, sleeping, writing letters or preparing to go on duty. Some were bored and homesick — on their fourth month on tour.

They had last spoken with their parents or wives a week earlier on Mother's Day. One petty officer had told his parents about the long hours he spent watching Iranian and Iraqi jets pass. Some formed a band while their friends, with no women on board, danced with each other.

"He didn't like the separation," Karen Supple said about her husband, Petty Officer 3rd Class Martin Supple, 27, an electronics technician who was a big fan of the Cleveland Browns. "His letters home talked about the pain of it."

Some were afraid of being attacked by the countries feuding around them, but others scoffed at the thought.

Petty Officer Joseph Watson, 25, a sonar technician, the youngest of six children, had told his parents in a letter last month that news reports of fighting in the gulf were exaggerated.

"Don't worry, the newspapers are playing up the fighting a lot worse than it is," the petty officer wrote. "The Iranians and [Iraqis] aren't mad at us and we aren't fighting them. So I'm perfectly safe."

When the Stark crew began to track the approaching Mirage F-1 fighter jet, they were not the only ones.

A Saudi Arabian AWACS plane circling the Persian Gulf had been watching the jet from the time it took off from Iraq. Unlike the frigate, however, the AWACS plane realized immediately that a missile had been fired.

But the AWACS plane, operated by U.S. personnel, could not warn the ship. It did not have direct radio access.

The AWACS crew later asked two Saudi Arabian fighter jets to intercept the Iraqi plane but Saudi ground controllers denied them permission to do so.

The Iraqi pilot said later that he thought the Stark was an Iranian tanker and that he did not receive any radio transmissions from the ship.

A 15-foot-long Exocet missile dropped by the jet glided downward nearly 5,000 feet before its trajectory flattened out and, skimming the waves, it raced toward the Stark about 500 mph.

Somewhat, the men on the Stark failed to spot the approaching missile on the ship's sophisticated electronic system. The missile took more than a minute to travel its 12-mile path.

If crew members had seen the missile on radar, they could have activated the multibarrelled, rapid-fire Phalanx gun to shoot it down. The gun had been turned off because it tended to arbitrarily shoot at any fast-moving object.

The missile struck the ship's port side, near the water line and forward of the superstructure. Piercing the steel hull, the Exocet hit the petty officers' sleeping quarters and exploded.

A fiery blast instantly killed most of the 37 victims. Others suffocated from searing heat and poisonous smoke.

In a separate compartment, Petty

Officer Michael O'Keefe, 27, had been awakened by the call to general quarters when the explosion knocked him out of his bed.

He ran to the hatch and saw the flash of a fireball. Flames licked the top of the door.

Thirty seconds later, the ship was rocked again. A second Exocet struck the aluminum superstructure but never exploded.

As the general quarters alarm continued and seawater poured from the overhead, sailors groped through the darkness to an emergency escape hatch.

O'Keefe, a seven-year Navy veteran, pulled sailors out of their beds by their pants and arms. They grabbed fire hoses and tried to contain the growing blaze.

The fire, among a sailor's greatest fears because it is difficult to escape, quickly spread along the ship's electrical systems.

From the sleeping quarters where the missile struck, the blaze moved toward the stern, gutting the war room and part of the superstructure.

Choked by smoke, the sailors fought flames and intense heat through the night and all of the next day.

Petty Officer Steve Hunter was doing some paperwork in a small room in the rear of the ship when flames whipped through a hatch into his work space.

Trapped by the fire, Hunter of Mattoon, Ill., grabbed an oxygen mask and crouched under his desk. As the fire crept closer, he ran out of air and lost consciousness.

When he awoke, Hunter was inside the sick bay of the USS Wadell, a destroyer.

He apparently had been rescued by another sailor and flown by helicopter from the Stark.

He suffered first-degree burns on his arms, but counted himself among the blessed, his mother said. He was alive.

"He said, 'I have two arms and two legs, Mom,' Kathy Hunter said. 'And I'm still breathing.'"

Supple, Watson, Erwin and Lockett were not as fortunate. Along with 33 others, they were killed or are presumed dead in the attack.

A search was started after the fire was extinguished 36 hours later. Twenty-five bodies were found inside the sleeping quarters where the bomb had struck.

Of those, 11 had been burned so badly their bodies had not been identified by yesterday. Two sailors were missing and presumed dead.

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First reports of the missile attack began to trickle into the United States at 2:10 p.m. EDT last Sunday. But the information was sketchy and contradictory. The crew had been too busy fighting the blaze to account for itself.

The Navy announced Sunday night that there had been "minimal casualties" and then said there was one death.

The next morning, relatives of the sailors awoke to find that the number of deaths jumped to 28. By Tuesday morning, the number had reached 37.

Coping with the mounting death toll was only part of the relatives' painful wait.

They then wanted to know whether their sons, brothers or fathers were among the 37.

The Navy set up a toll-free telephone number where relatives could find out news about the sailors. The person who answered the phone kept two lists — one for survivors and one for those who died.

Relatives referred to them as the good list and the bad list.

Some wives called the phone number more than 100 times a day. It gave them something to do. They could not concentrate on anything else.

Others stayed off their phones, hoping the Navy, or the sailor himself, would call with good news. Calls on unrelated matters or from friends asking for news would leave them breathless, exhilarated.

An Illinois couple could not decide whether they wanted their

phone to ring. It could be a call from the Navy with bad news. Or it could be a call from their son.

When several wives learned where the missile had struck the ship, they knew their husbands' chances of survival depended on the duty roster.

Because the missile had struck the sleeping quarters, they said, if their husbands were off duty at the time, they probably were dead.

Vigils were held across the nation. One began immediately, Sunday night, at the Mayport Naval Station chapel. Others were held in the homes of relatives.

The waiting had begun.

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Waiting is not unusual for a Navy wife.

The sailors' long tours of duty keep couples apart for months at a time. By themselves, the women run households, raise children, hold jobs and provide love for a husband halfway around the world.

Videotapes of each other play important roles in their lives. One wife had recently sent her husband a tape of their child, who was born while the husband was overseas.

Susan Ryals had barely seen her husband, Seaman Earl Ryals, a signalman, since their wedding in November 1985.

As she waited to learn whether he was alive, she recalled the last time she had seen him — on an overcast, drizzly Feb. 5, the day the Stark left for the Middle East.

"We said goodbye in the car," she said. "He said, 'Don't worry, nobody's going to be shooting at us.' When I looked at him walking away, I got this feeling like I hope nothing happens to him. What would I do if he never came back?"

Other wives echoed her remarks. They may have resented the long separations from their husbands in the past, but they would have preferred them now.

At least he would be alive.

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Most of the relatives of the crew members learned the good or bad news by late Monday night. The rest found out the next day.

Kenneth "Butch" Janusik, a Clearwater commercial fisherman, had docked his boat Sunday night at Lake Okeechobee when he heard television news reports of the attack.

He called the Navy's toll-free phone number to find out whether his 19-year-old son, Seaman Kenneth Janusik Jr., an operations specialist, was all right. Instead of telling him, a Navy official asked Janusik where he was staying. The father then realized his son probably was dead.

Kenneth Janusik and his wife returned home, where they were visited several hours later by a Navy officer and chaplain in their dress whites.

"Sir, we regret to inform you that your son gave his life in the line of duty," the officer said.

"Joining the Navy was his choice," Janusik said later. "I'm proud that he was in the Navy. You know, a lot of moms and dads brag about their kids; but, damn, I had a nice kid."

When Linda Hensley called the toll-free number Monday, the woman who answered said her husband,

Seaman Jimmy Hensley, a communications specialist, was listed as dead or missing.

Hensley's sleeping quarters were in the section of the ship struck by the missile.

The woman excused herself for a minute and, when she got back on the line, asked Mrs. Hensley whether she was Hensley's widow.

"No, I am his wife," she cried.

The next day, Mrs. Hensley received a call from a friend who told her Hensley was alive. She called the Defense Department, which confirmed the good news.

Her anger over the mix-up was overcome by joy. The only reason Hensley had not been in his quarters was because he was in the lounge writing her a letter. She had made him promise to write her a letter every day.

To help the unfortunate ones, the Navy sent a team of 10 doctors, psychologists and chaplains to the Mayport base. Several groups started fund-raising drives.

But the biggest boost for those who lost their loved ones may have come from President Reagan's decision to attend a Friday memorial service for the 37 sailors.

Reagan's speech during the emotional service, in a freshly painted helicopter hangar, seemed to help family members cope with their grief.

"For all the lovely spring and summer days we will never share with them again, for every Thanksgiving and Christmas that will seem empty without them, there will be other moments, too," Reagan said.

"Moments when we see the light of discovery in young eyes, eyes that wonder: Why is there such a place as America? And we can answer them by telling of this day and those we come to honor."

An elderly couple cried softly as they bowed their heads toward each other in the muggy helicopter hangar, which was used to accommodate the large crowd. An estimated 1,100 relatives, friends of the victims and Navy personnel attended the service.

A young woman dabbed her eyes with a moist tissue and then kept it pressed against her mouth. A family of four threw their arms around each other and sobbed heavily together.

Reagan and his wife, Nancy, then walked through the crowd, hugging and shaking hands with relatives of the sailors.

After shaking the president's hand, one woman studied Reagan's face as he walked away. She looked as though she expected him to say or do something more to ease her pain.

Several hours later, Mrs. Ryals held a memorial service for her husband, who remains missing and presumed dead.

Unlike the earlier memorial service, the Ryals' service at the diminutive St. Paul's Catholic Church in Jacksonville Beach was attended by fewer than 50.

Also unlike the earlier service, no television cameras filmed Mrs. Ryals as she cried at St. Paul's.

She then went home to weep in private.

Staff writers David C. Rudd, Thomas Davis, Aubrey Lee and Andy Trinica contributed to this report.