

Pastor eulogizes crewman

By Tonyaa Weathersbee

Staff writer

Monsignor Leo Danaher tried to help those who gathered yesterday at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church in Ponte Vedra Beach in memory of USS Stark crewman Robert L. Shippee to understand that death played no favorites.

But, he said, they also could take comfort in knowing that no matter how unfair Shippee's death seemed to be, it was not in vain.

"Death is blind, and does not look to see whether its victim is young or old, productive or unproductive," Danaher, pastor of the church, told about 300 people, some who came for the memorial, and others who came for regular Saturday Mass.

"But there is one thing we can be sure of. The Lord of the harvest never plucks a flower from the garden of life unless he knows it has completed its allotted time on earth.

"Robert Shippee was only 35 ... he was a husband and a father of three children. He served with loyalty and distinction. Robert Shippee was a good man."

Shippee, a New York native, was a fire technician aboard the USS Stark. He was one of 16 crewman from the Jacksonville area who were killed last Sunday when Iraqi Exocet missiles struck the ship, which was patrolling the Persian Gulf near Bahrain.

Shippee's widow, Carol, kept her composure throughout the memorial Mass and a reception that followed at Ponte Vedra Elementary School. She accepted hugs and words of comfort from friends and relatives who greeted her.

She declined to be interviewed.

Lucinda Phillips, a neighbor, said somberness had settled on the neighborhood, which is home to many service personnel.

"One of my co-worker's brother was killed aboard the Stark," Ms. Phillips said.

"People here have been pretty devastated by it. They're shocked.

"I watched the memorial ceremony on TV yesterday, and I cried. Here we are, suffering for a stupid mistake they made. And we are all suffering."