

Navy man's dreams of bettering world also died on frigate

By R. Michael Anderson
Staff writer

As a youngster growing up in Tallahassee, Vernon Tyrone Foster dreamed of becoming a lawyer so he could help the poor and the oppressed.

He set his sights on that course immediately after graduating from Amos P. Godby High School in 1971, when he enrolled as a political science major at Florida A&M University.

"He said he had seen so many injustices done to people who could not afford a lawyer — whether they were black or white; color didn't mean anything to Vernon — and he was concerned about this," said his mother, Mimi Gaines of Tallahassee.

But in September 1972, at age 18, Foster dropped out of college and joined the Navy to see the world. Later, he "fell in love with the Navy" and decided to make a career of it, Mrs. Gaines said.

Still, he always planned to become a lawyer one day after leaving the Navy.

That day will never come.

Foster, a navigator aboard the Mayport-based USS Stark, was one of 37 crewmen killed in a fiery explosion May 17 when an Iraqi fighter pilot fired two missiles into

the frigate's hull in the Persian Gulf.

"A few weeks ago when he called, he was still talking about when he retired from the Navy he was going to go to law school," Mrs. Gaines recalled in an interview at her son's home about a mile from Mayport Naval Station.

Mrs. Gaines said she was notified by Navy officers about 1 p.m. last Monday that her son had been killed. About the same time, Navy officers were delivering the sad news to Foster's wife, Ernestine.

Waiting to hear if her husband was dead or alive "seemed like forever," Mrs. Foster said. "It's very painful."

Breaking the news to their seven children was hard, she said.

"First of all, I had to calm down myself," she said. "Then I called my kids and gathered them in a crowd and I told them that their father was gone. I told them that he loved them and that he died protecting our country, and that he knows we love him very much."

Mrs. Foster said her husband adored their children: Warren, 15; Mario, 13; Gerkalia, 13; Ennikka, 9; Katrina, 7; Tyrone, 5; and Vernon II, 2.

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Congress should use ship attack as impetus for change, mom says

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"He made sure that we were happy, and when he was here he spent as much time as he could with the family," Mrs. Foster said. "We'd take the kids out to dinner; we'd go to skating rinks; ride bikes together; play basketball together..."

Foster also was such an outstanding sailor that the Navy assigned him as a recruiter in South Florida for five years from 1977-82, during which he received dozens of awards and letters of commendation.

Much of his time was spent visiting high schools, encouraging students to consider a Navy career after graduation, or taking children on field trips as a member of the PTA, or counseling children who came from troubled homes, or serving as a volunteer firefighter.

"Vernon liked helping people," Mrs. Foster said. "He would volunteer to help the city, the schools, anything he could do for anybody."

Mrs. Gaines said her son, the oldest of four boys, had always been like that.

"He was always outgoing, and even as a child he was always look-

ing for a way to help somebody," she said. "I remember when he had a paper route and he made about \$8 or \$10 a week, and when he got paid he wanted to pay for his brother's lunch."

Chief Mark Weldon, a casualty assistance officer who was assigned to help the Fosters through this crisis, said Foster was an exceptional person and sailor.

"To be a recruiter you have to be an exemplary role model, and that's what Vernon was," Weldon said. "There's something about Vernon's personality that drew these kids into the Navy. And he recruited top-caliber people."

In March, a month after the Stark arrived in the Persian Gulf, Foster was promoted to senior chief petty officer — one pay grade below the highest enlisted rank in the Navy — at the relatively young age of 33.

The attack on her husband's ship has left Mrs. Foster with some burning questions in her mind.

"I'm not fully angry, but someone was responsible for this and we all want to know what happened and how this could happen," she said. "It wasn't supposed to happen."

"We all wonder now is it safe over there," she said. "We don't want our loved ones to go over there knowing that they're not protected."

Mrs. Gaines said she wants the United States government to take steps to ensure that such an incident never happens again.

"If Congress would realize that there is a need to come together and talk about these things and get them in proper perspective so this will never happen to any other parents — that their children are blown up — then their [Stark crewmen] dying will not have been in vain," she said.

"But if there's not a change, then I feel that [missile attack] was a total loss. I know my child was willing to die for his country, because he knew what being in the armed forces was all about."

"And I could accept that," she said. "But this seems so useless, such a waste of young lives. And all I can hear is the government over there will apologize, or has apologized. I can't buy that. My heart tells me it was no accident."

One of Mrs. Gaines' most cherished mementos is a faded, gold-colored brooch in the shape of a rose, which Vernon gave her on Mother's Day when he was 9 years old.

"It probably only cost about 69 cents, but that was a lot of money for him at that time," she said.

"About 10 years ago he bought me a gold pin and said, 'Mama, I want you to have a real one.' But I wear this one [the 69-cent pin] all the time."