

12 years after missile blast, Stark retired

Associated Press

Despite the pomp of the Navy's ceremony decommissioning the USS Stark at Mayport Naval Station yesterday, Diana Pierce Ellis could not hold back the tears for her husband and 36 of his shipmates.

They died aboard the frigate in 1987 when it was struck by two missiles fired accidentally by an Iraqi jet fighter.

"It's like burying them all over again," said Ellis. She attended the ceremony yesterday putting the warship out of service with her daughter, Randi Lynn, 14, and son Logan, 12, who wears the ship's number, 31, on his T-ball uniform.

Her husband, Randy Pierce, was aboard the warship in the Persian Gulf when the two Exocet missiles struck the ship's left side, exploding into the combat information center and berthing areas where dozens of the crew were sleeping.

"For as long as the ship has been floating, he's been alive. He's been out there. He died at sea. Now she's gone and it's like letting him go again," she said.

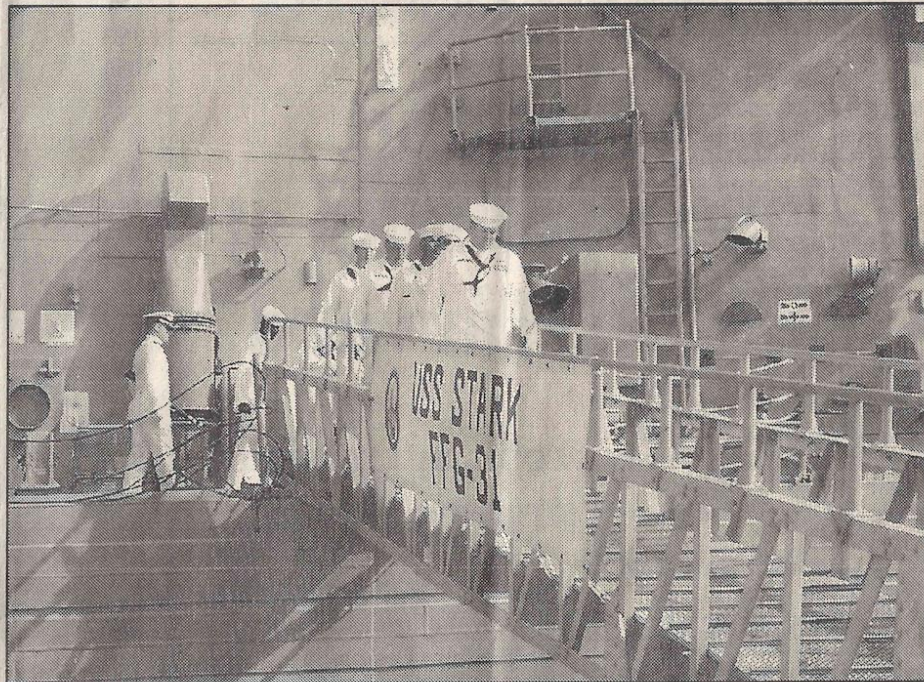
Heroic firefighting efforts saved the ship and it was returned to service.

"Her scars are invisible. Her wounds will never heal," said Rear Adm. Henry G. Ulrich III, an earlier commanding officer for the Stark and guest speaker for the ceremony ending the ship's 17-year career.

"Stark has written her history," he said, recounting the ship's accomplishments, but said it would always be remembered "for the 37 men



— Special



— Special

Left: Crew members of the USS Stark lower the flag during the decommissioning ceremony at Mayport Naval Station yesterday.

Above: The last sailors to serve on the Stark walk down the gangway from the 445-foot fast frigate.

she committed to the sea. This is right. This is just. This is how it should be."

Cmdr. O. Wayne Young, the last commanding officer, ordered the commissioning pennant and flags to be lowered for the final time as the last eight sailors walked down the gangway from the 445-foot-long fast frigate.

The ship has already been stripped of its weapons, missiles and radar.

"It has been a pleasure and an honor to lead this fine warship," said Young, who took command of the vessel in July 1997.

The Stark traveled more

than 240,000 miles but never fired a shot in anger. Its most memorable voyage was the limping trip back to Mayport from the Middle East after the missile attack.

There is no sign on the exterior or interior of the ship that it had been severely damaged. A memorial plaque affixed to the side of an interior passageway has been removed to the Navy archives.

The missile strike happened in the Iran-Iraq war, when the United States was supporting Iraq.

A Navy report said Capt. Glenn R. Brindel "failed fundamentally" to prepare the

crew for its mission. He was relieved of his command and allowed to retire at the lower rank of commander.

Brindel contended the flight path of the Iraqi jet was similar to that of countless other Iraqi planes and there was no reason to think missiles would be fired from a friendly force. Iraq said it was a case of mistaken identity.

The Stark was commissioned in 1982 in Seattle, Wash., and called Mayport home during its entire history.

It was named for Adm. Harold R. Stark, commander of the U.S. Naval Forces in Europe during World War II.

AT A GLANCE

Achievements during the USS Stark's 17-year Navy career include:

- Rescuing 16 sailors from a burning merchant vessel hit by an Iranian missile in 1984.

- Rescuing two downed helicopter pilots in the Persian Gulf in 1991.

- Participated in drug interdiction missions, including seizure of a boat loaded with 14,000 pounds of marijuana in 1991.

- Helping rescue more than 500 Cubans in 1994.

Source: U.S. Navy.