

missiles from an Iraqi Mirage F-1 jet.

Over the next 24 hours, the men of the *U.S.S. Stark* battled to save their ship. Many fought while mortally wounded. In some spectacular cases, ordinary men became extraordinary heroes, carrying out uncommon acts of valor. But, in all cases, the efforts of the crew testified to the strength of their loyalty, which simply would not let shipmates fail each other or their ship.

The missiles tore a 15-foot hole in the side of the *Stark*. Within minutes after the hit, smoke and flames scoured the corridors and compartments. Seven men were thrown into the sea by the impact; they floated there, surrounded by sharks, until they were picked up the next morning—almost 10 hours later.

Only one of the warheads actually had exploded; the other was a dud. Both had hit the berthing area, where the crew slept. Most of the 37 men killed in the attack died in their bunks, either burned to death or suffocated by the sudden loss of oxygen. Some were charred beyond recognition. Lieutenant Conklin was the *Stark's* Damage-Control Assistant. Only 27 years old, he was now in charge of coordinating the efforts to save the ship.

"The first missile, which made that crashing roar sound, never blew up," says Conklin. "It went more than 100 feet into our interior, spreading several hundred pounds of rocket fuel as it passed through passageways, berthing compartments, the barbershop, post office and the chief petty officers' quarters. The second missile entered 30 seconds later and detonated. This ignited the spilled fuel, which burned through the middle third of our ship.

"The potent mix of the missile's fuel and oxidizer resulted in the initial fires being hotter than 3500 degrees Fahrenheit, which instantly ignited all the *Stark's* combustibles and melted her structural materials. That's nearly double the 1800 degrees normally considered the upper limit in shipboard fires. After the initial combustion, I'd say the average temperature in the internal sections of the ship was probably in the 1000-degree to 1500-degree range."

Back at Damage Control Central, in the engineering spaces of the *Stark*, Conklin and his team evaluated the situation: The fires had to be contained first and then extinguished. The ship's fire-fighting system had been all but blasted away. Key water pipes and valves had been blown open, so firefighters couldn't pump water; it simply ran out the open ends of the shattered pipes.

Conklin and Petty Officer 1st Class Michael J. O'Keefe determined that, to save the ship, they had to close the critical firemain valves, which would isolate the shattered sections of piping. To reach the valves, they would have to crawl through the burning, mangled wreckage.

Despite wounds to both feet, his hands and arms, Conklin stripped off his T-shirt

## Those Who Died

At the time of the attack on the *U.S.S. Stark* by an Iraqi Mirage F-1 jet, slightly more than 200 men were serving aboard the ship, according to the U.S. Navy. The 37 casualties, shown here, ranged in age from 19 to 36 and came from all across the United States.



BOLDUC, Doran H.  
Lacey, Wash.



CALKINS, Jeffrey L.  
Mitchfield Springs, N.Y.



CAOQUETTE, Mark R.  
Fitchburg, Mass.



CILETTA, John A., Jr.  
Brigantine, N.J.



CLINEFELTER, Brian M.  
Barstow, Calif.



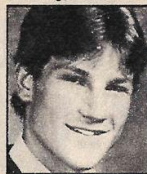
BROWN, Braddy O.  
Bessemer, Ala.



DANIELS, Antonio A.  
Greeleyville, S.C.



DeANGELIS, Christopher  
Dumont, N.J.



DUNLAP, James S.  
Osceola Mills, Pa.



ERWIN, Steven T.  
Troy, Mich.



FARR, Jerry B.  
Charleston, S.C.



FOSTER, Vernon T.  
Tallahassee, Fla.



GRISSETT, Dexter D.  
Macon, Ga.



HANSEN, William R.  
Reading, Mass.



HOMICKI, Daniel  
Elizabeth, N.J.



JANUSIK, Kenneth, Jr.  
Clearwater, Fla.



KENDALL, Steven E.  
Honolulu, Hawaii



KISER, Stephen G.  
Elkhart, Ind.



LOCKETT, Ronnie G.  
Bessemer, Ala.



MacMULLEN, Thomas J.  
Darby, Pa.



MOLLER, Charles T.  
Columbus, Ga.



PHELPS, Jeffrey L.  
Locust Grove, Va.



PIERCE, Randy E.  
Choctaw, Okla.



PLONSKY, James  
Van Nuys, Calif.



QUICK, Kelly R.  
Swartz Creek, Mich.



RYALS, Earl P.  
Boca Raton, Fla.



SHIPPÉE, Robert L.  
Adams Center, N.Y.



SIBLEY, Jeffrey C.  
Metairie, La.



STEPHENS, Lee  
Pemberton, Ohio



STEVENS, James R.  
Visalia, Calif.



SUPPLE, Martin J.  
North Olmsted, Ohio



TWEADY, Gregory L.  
Champaign, Ill.



ULMER, Vincent L.  
Bay Minette, Ala.



WATSON, Joseph P.  
Ferndale, Mich.



WEAVER, Wayne R.  
New Bethlehem, Pa.



WELDON, Terance D.  
Coram, N.Y.



WILSON, Lloyd A.  
Summerville, S.C.

from under his coveralls, wet it with seawater, wrapped it around his face and entered the crew's quarters, where the missiles had hit. It was totally dark inside, an inferno of about 400 degrees.

"I kept my eyes closed the whole time," says Conklin, "because I figured I'd rather have my eyelids burn away than anything else, so I had to rely on my memory of the piping system." Conklin tapped along the searing pipes with the backs of his hands, stripping off the skin. "Every time I touched a pipe," he adds, "it was like striking a hot griddle." Even the brass keys in his pocket melted together. Today, he compares the agonizing heat to a blazing pizza oven: "Stand in front of one sometime, then imagine walking inside it."

With the firemain valves closed off, the able-bodied could begin to douse the fires, which had engulfed the ship. But other dangers also threatened: The fire surrounding the missile magazine still could not be extinguished because access was blocked; the magazine could explode at any time, blowing the whole ship apart. (Eventually, the men cut a hole through the main deck to reach the blaze.) In addition, the ship was listing heavily from the water she had taken on.

"Five minutes after the missiles hit, I thought we'd lose the *Stark* by fire," says Conklin. "After fighting the fires for an hour, I realized the ship was also in danger of sinking."

The men regrouped, organizing themselves into two damage-control teams. And O'Keefe set up four fire-attack groups. Then the fight began.

"Common sense drove so much of everything we did," recalls Conklin. "Nobody got orders. You can't go running to an officer every time you need to blow your nose."

One cook, Mess Specialist Francis Burke, suddenly found himself in charge of a first-aid station. He rigged a system for distributing fresh water.

Seaman Mark Robert Caouette had lost a leg, yet he refused his shipmates' efforts to drag him to safety. Instead, he crawled about, frantically shutting off the firemain valves. "Caouette knew he was going to die," says Conklin. "That's what he said to the people who passed him by." The seaman's charred body later was found slumped over one of the valves.

Electronics Technician Wayne Richard Weaver kept pulling men from the wreckage, despite mortal wounds. Conklin recalls that Weaver pulled six to 12 men to safety before he died from shrapnel and burns. Weaver's body was found clutching the body of another man he was trying to rescue.

Conklin also recalls the bravery of Petty Officer 1st Class Randy Engram: "I was tired and burned, I couldn't see. I figured we had lost—and yet, when I looked at Randy, I said, 'I'm not going to sit down before he does.' And I know he

*continued*

Photos from AP/Wide World