

was thinking the same thing about me."

"It was a fight for survival," says Michael O'Keefe. "I was fighting to stay alive. I bet you three-quarters of the crew would say the same thing. During my time in the Navy, I have fought other shipboard fires, but nothing was like this."

For 20 hours more, the damage-control parties continued the fight. The fire-attack teams smashed a porthole of the captain's cabin with a 25-pound sledgehammer to get at the fire within. Then, to vent the flames, they bashed holes in the Combat Information Center—the ship's defense center, from which her guns and missiles are directed. They gouged holes in bulkheads and walls to drain the water that had collected and made the ship list even more. Finally, by early Monday evening, certain facts were clear:

- The *Stark* had survived.
- She was towable.
- There were no more hidden holes in her hull.
- Everything that was going to burn had done so.
- The *Stark*'s list, 23 degrees at maximum, had been reduced to 3 degrees.
- Thirty-seven men were dead, more than 20 injured.

Their efforts proved that these men simply would not fail each other— or their ship

"By 7 o'clock that night, we pretty much knew the *Stark* was going to go home," Conklin recalls.

Gradually, the men began to think of other things, such as eating. They assaulted the box lunches sent over by ships that had joined the *Stark*. "We sort of ate like wild pigs," says Conklin.

The lieutenant also recalls his first shower, on May 19, two days after the attack: "When I finally removed my coveralls, I discovered that my nylon gym shorts had melted onto my body, like candle wax, from the intense heat."

There were odd moments of great passion. After the fight was over, the crew was transferred to other ships to rest and recuperate, and fresh men were brought aboard to complete mop-up operations. Conklin, O'Keefe and Engram wanted to remain on board with their captain, Glenn R. Brindel, and conveniently missed the last boat that was taking the crew off.

"I was with the *Stark* before she was

commissioned," O'Keefe says. "I'd been with her from day one. I had a lot of me in that ship—my work, my sweat."

As the *Stark*'s commanding officer, Captain Brindel was criticized by the Navy for failing to defend the ship against the apparently accidental attack. (In his earliest comments, Brindel stressed that the attack had caught the *Stark* by surprise because Iraqi warplanes had always been viewed as "friendly" by U.S. ships patrolling the Persian Gulf.) Brindel retired at reduced rank. The executive officer, Lt. Cmdr. Raymond Gajan Jr., was relieved of his duties on the *Stark* and received a letter of admonition. And the ship's Tactical Action Officer, Lt. Basil E. Moncrief, resigned from the Navy. The Navy later reported that a "cascade" of failures had led to the "collapse of the ship's defensive readiness posture," permitting the attack to occur.

Today, the *Stark* has been repaired and refitted and has rejoined the Navy's Atlantic Fleet. Almost two years after the attack, both Conklin and O'Keefe say they still support Brindel.

"Decisions concerning right and wrong are next to impossible to make without appropriate experience and objectivity," says Conklin. "For example, the American people support the commanding officer of the *Vincennes* without any basis for that." (On July 3, 1988, the *Vincennes*, an American guided-missile cruiser, mistakenly shot down an Iran Air jetliner, killing all 290 people aboard.)

"Captain Brindel had been there a long time and was highly respected by the crew," Conklin continues. "We would have done anything for him. Was he the best commanding officer I ever had? I don't know. It has been a perplexing question for a lot of us."

And O'Keefe says today of Lieutenant Moncrief's resignation: "That is the sorriest thing that can happen to an officer. You talk about a man who was dedicated to his job. I feel bad for what happened to him."

Both Conklin and O'Keefe say today that the 37 victims of the *Stark* attack did not die in vain. O'Keefe points out that when the frigate *Samuel B. Roberts* struck a mine in the Persian Gulf on April 14, 1988, loss of life was avoided in part because of lessons learned on the *Stark*. He points out, too, that the *Vincennes* may have been prompted to fire at the Iranian jetliner by the failure of the *Stark* to defend itself.

Ultimately, the men of the *Stark* were able to take pride in the fact that she was not sunk and that she remains an active unit of the U.S. Navy. Ten crewmen were decorated for heroism in the attack. All remember moments of pride, but O'Keefe cites one in particular: When the *Stark* returned to its home base, Mayport Naval Station in Mayport, Fla., an elderly man climbed out onto the last rock of a long jetty to greet them. The man had a flagholder strapped around his waist, and he broke out the biggest American flag he could find.