

LEE ALLEN ZATARAIN

# AMERICA'S FIRST CLASH WITH IRAN



## The Tanker War, 1987-88

"Given the fact that a reprise of the conflict is just beyond the horizon, this book should be essential reading for all U.S. policymakers as well as – and even more so – the current leaders of Iran."

– Samuel A. Southworth, author of *U.S. Armed Forces Arsenal* and *U.S. Special Warfare*

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# **AMERICA'S FIRST CLASH WITH IRAN**

**The Tanker War,  
1987–88**

By  
**LEE ALLEN ZATARAIN**



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# INTRODUCTION

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In 1987 and 1988, the United States fought an undeclared naval war with the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Persian Gulf. That war is little remembered, even though it involved the largest surface battle fought by the U.S. Navy since the Second World War, a mark which still stands. Perhaps it is mostly recalled today in connection with the Navy warship USS Vincennes' accidental shoot-down of an Iranian commercial airliner, killing nearly 300 innocent civilians.

For a variety of policy reasons, the U.S. decided to intervene in the Gulf in 1987 to protect Kuwaiti-owned tankers from Iranian attack. Shipping in the Gulf had come under increasing attack from both Iran and Iraq in what became known as the "tanker war." That war was an offshoot of the brutal Iran-Iraq war begun in September 1980. The Iran-Iraq war was predominately a grinding land struggle. It was nominally fought over the ownership of the disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway, which ran from the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers for some nine miles down to the Gulf. The waterway formed the southern border between Iran and Iraq, and was the latter's only outlet to the Gulf. Iraq claimed full ownership of the waterway, Iran claimed ownership to its centerline. Iraq had been forced to accept the Iranian claim via an agreement known as the 1975 Algiers Accords.

Iran's monarch, the Shah, had been overthrown by an Islamic-dominated revolt in 1979, resulting in the radical Islamic prelate, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, seizing the reins of power. Iraq's secular dictator, Saddam Hussein, was directly threatened by the bubbling cauldron of the Iranian revolution on his doorstep. Khomeini described Saddam as a "puppet of Satan." In 1980, he called on Iraqis to overthrow Saddam and cleanse the country of his atheistic rule. An increase in armed clashes along the border mirrored the escalating rhetoric. On September 17, 1980, Saddam appeared on Iraqi television, tore up the 1975 Algiers agreement, and claimed sovereignty over the entire Shatt al-Arab. Faced by the threat of a militant Islamic revival in his own country and presented with the opportunity of the Iranian military built up by the Shah having been greatly weakened by the Iranian revolution, Saddam decided on war.

On September 22, 1980, nine Iraqi Army divisions attacked across the Iranian border. Iraqi forces seized a sizeable foothold in the valuable oil-producing southern Iranian province of Khuzestan. Iraq's war aims were relatively limited. Saddam thought he could take advantage of a tilt in the regional balance of power from Iran to Iraq to resolve the territorial disputes in Iraq's favor. He could also put an end to the threat to his rule by putting Khomeini in his place, perhaps even precipitating a collapse of the clerical regime. Unfortunately, he had made a near-fatal error. He was indeed attacking a weakened regional rival, but he was also attacking a revolution.

Following the overthrow of the Shah, a tide of fundamentalist Islamic terror had swept over Iran. Those suspected of anti-revolutionary activities were arrested by groups of students and workers organized around a mosque or a mullah. Zealots threw acid in the faces of women who failed to wear veils, or slashed them with razors. Revolutionary tribunals did a brisk business in trials and executions. Khomeini's grim vision of a true Islamic society was imposed on Iran. He declared music to be corrupting. Swimming pools and sports clubs were closed. Revolutionary Guards raided homes, looking for "objects of corruption" such as playing cards and chess sets.

In November 1979, some 80 students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran. While not ordered by

Khomeini, he found that the students' act played so well that he "got behind his followers" and gave the seizure his blessing. The resulting prolonged hostage crisis led to the humiliating failure of a U.S. rescue attempt. Public frustration in the face of U.S. inability to resolve the crisis took a heavy political toll on the Carter administration. That frustration helped propel Ronald Reagan to the White House.

Absorbed in internal power struggles and in the midst of defying the U.S. with the embassy hostage seizure, Khomeini's regime did not feel much threatened by the limited Iraqi attack. Believing himself in a position of strength with the initial success of Iraq's invasion, Saddam Hussein announced his willingness to negotiate a settlement. Iran refused. The Iraqi army continued its plodding advance against stiffening Iranian resistance. The Iranian defense really took hold at the city of Khorramshahr. The Iraqis were finally able to take the city, but losses were horrendous on both sides. By early 1981, the Iraqi advance had stalled. Given breathing space, Iran regrouped and counterattacked.

Starting in the fall of 1981, the Iranians completely wrestled the initiative away from Iraq with a series of advances. By May 1982, Khorramshahr was retaken. Saddam tried to declare a unilateral cease fire and withdrew his remaining forces from Iranian territory back to Iraq, where they assumed a defensive position. Iran was not so anxious to call it quits. Khomeini had a personal hatred for Saddam. He also saw the utility to his regime of an ongoing war with an external enemy. Calling it an "imposed war," the regime sought to rally the populace against the invader, and behind it. The clerical regime could use the war to further consolidate its power and to provide a convenient rationale to suppress remaining domestic opponents by labeling them as traitors. Iran demanded impossible terms from Iraq as the price for peace, including the removal of Saddam Hussein and his trial as a war criminal. With its back to the wall, the Iraqi regime hunkered down.

If Iraq made a mistake "attacking a revolution," Iran was now making one of its own: attacking a ruthless dictator who could and would deploy the resources of his state to the maximum extent possible to protect his position. Inflated by oil revenue, Iraq's financial resources were enormous. Its human resources were less impressive. Iraq had only one-third of Iran's population, and its people also lacked enthusiasm for the war that Saddam's gambit had plunged them into.

In 1982, Iran launched its first major assault into Iraqi territory, near the southern city of Basra. Others would follow. The attacks made headway and inflicted significant casualties on the Iraqis. However, the Iraqis were able to hold on by the skin of their teeth and prevent any major breakthroughs. What captured the attention of the world, and badly unnerved the Iraqis, was the nature of the Iranian attacks. Tsunami-like human waves, driven by the winds of surging Shiite religious fervor, repeatedly crashed against Iraqi lines. The attacks were made with what appeared to be a complete disregard for human life.

One Iranian attack was described by an Iraqi officer as looking like a crowd pouring out of a mosque. Advancing lines of Iranians were blown up by mines, blasted by mortars, and swept away by machine gun fire. Still, they kept coming. Even when they successfully beat off the Iranians, such sights were profoundly disturbing to many young Iraqi soldiers. Particularly bothersome was the fact that many of the Iranians were young boys down to the age of twelve. On one occasion, Iraqi soldiers broke out laughing when they saw Iranian kids on bicycles pedaling towards their position. The laughter stopped when the young boys started throwing hand grenades. The Iraqis shot them down.<sup>1</sup>



Playing to traditional Shiite themes, the Khomeini regime fostered a cult of martyrdom. Young volunteers were promised instant access to heaven upon death. They wore “keys to paradise” around their necks. The plastic imitation-brass keys, made in Taiwan, were sometimes handed out by Khomeini himself. Iran seemed to flaunt the human cost of the war. Pictures of mutilated wounded were posted in hotels. There was a Martyrdom Sports Foundation in which teams were named after soldiers killed in action and a Martyrdom Video Library where videotapes of funerals were made available to families.

Many of Iran’s fallen fighters were buried in the huge Behest-eZahara cemetery, which featured a fountain whose waters were dyed red to symbolize the blood of martyrs. A flower arrangement on the grave of one young soldier carried the inscription: “We congratulate you on your martyrdom.”— [signed] Students and Staff of the Tehran University of Science.<sup>2</sup>

The Iraqis responded to the Iranian tactics by adopting a defense in depth, consisting of multiple defensive lines. The Iraqis made extensive use of barbed wire and engineering obstacles to slow Iranian attacks, and used massive artillery support. Many observers likened the Iraqi defenses to World War I entrenchments. Iraq went on a binge of weapons buying in a desperate effort to acquire the wherewithal to hold Iran at bay.

Massive Iranian attacks in 1983 and 1984 did not result in much movement of the front. The Iranians suffered truly enormous losses for their limited gains. In 1984, Iraq began employing chemical weapons against the Iranians on a large scale and extended the war into the Gulf with attacks on Iranian tankers. In 1985, Iran pulled back from major offensive operations. However, the war took an ugly turn with bombing and missile attacks directed against civilian populations on both sides.

In February 1986, in a well-planned amphibious assault, Iranian forces overran Iraq’s Al-Faw peninsula in less than 24 hours. The site of Iraq’s only port on the Gulf (closed by the war), Al-Faw was itself of little military value. However, the successful Iranian offensive was a serious psychological setback for Iraq. It also set the stage for an attack on Basra, Iraq’s second largest city. Basra fell, the traumatic blow might set in motion political upheavals which could topple the Saddam regime. The Iraqis dug in around Basra in anticipation of the coming storm. The Iranians unleashed their massive human wave assaults on Basra in late 1986 and early 1987. They failed, with huge losses. However, at times, it was a near-run thing. Before the January 1987 assault, Iraqi general Al-Duri promised Saddam Hussein “a harvest of rotten heads.” He got his harvest all right but the situation still looked grim, with more Iranian assaults anticipated.

Back in 1982, Iran could have made peace based on the pre-war status quo. Starting in mid-1987, a series of events would eventually force Iran to accept those same terms, some six years, hundreds of billions of dollars, and over one million casualties later.

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## THE STARK DISASTER

Under a clear evening sky, on Sunday, May 17, 1987, the guided missile frigate USS Stark cruised slowly through the Persian Gulf. The Stark was on a routine patrol in international waters, some 80 miles northeast of Bahrain. Commanded by Captain Glen Brindel, 43, a 21-year Navy career officer, the 445-foot long ship carried a crew of 200 officers and men. Brindel's tour as the Stark's CO was rapidly winding down, with his replacement due on board in six days.

Iraq was hitting tankers carrying Iran's oil exports, while Iran was attacking ships carrying oil from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, who were extending financial aid to Iraq. There had been misdirected attacks by both sides. However, so far, no U.S. ships had been involved. Iranian attacks had usually been mounted in the southernmost part of the Gulf. Iraqi attacks were usually mounted in northern areas.

The Stark was sailing in the central Gulf, in an area in which no attacks had occurred to date. Still, there was reason to worry. Iraqi antishipping strikes had been creeping further south. Three days earlier, on May 14, an Iraqi fighter had hit a tanker with a French-made Exocet missile barely sixty miles away from the area the Stark was now sailing in. Capt. Brindel had been warned about the Iraqi attack. However, on the evening of the 17th, he seemed to be preoccupied with readying his ship for an upcoming inspection.

Shortly before 8:00 P.M., a U.S. Air Force E-3A "Sentry" Airborne Warning and Control aircraft (AWACS) flying in Saudi Arabian airspace picked up an Iraqi aircraft on its powerful surveillance radar. The AWACS was part of what was dubbed the "ELF-1" force, based in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The Iraqi aircraft was flying on a relatively rare, for the Iraqis, nighttime mission toward the central Gulf. The Iraqi aircraft's course took it over water in a southeasterly direction, threading through the relatively narrow strip in international waters between an Iranian declared "exclusion zone" and Saudi Arabian territory. Iraqi fighters often took this route for their ship attacks. American officers sometimes called this strip "Mirage Alley."

As a precaution, the AWACS called in air cover in the form of two Saudi Arabian Air Force F-15 fighters. It didn't call on them to intercept the Iraqi aircraft, since it appeared to be flying the kind of mission the Iraqis usually flew against Iranian shipping targets. The Iraqi aircraft picked up by the AWACS was outside the detection range of the Stark's own air search radar. However, the Stark was quickly alerted to the Iraqi's presence by the AWACS, which began feeding data on the contact to the USS Coontz, sitting dockside in the port of Manama, Bahrain.

The Coontz whose own radars were not operating, relayed the AWACS information to the Stark over Navy data link. The Stark could, in effect, see through the eyes of the AWACS and follow the path of the oncoming aircraft. The AWACS confirmed that it was tracking an Iraqi military aircraft, a French-made Mirage F-1 fighter. Iranian-U.S. antagonism was still strong following the fall of the U.S.-supported Shah and the embassy hostage crisis. To counter expansion by Iran's revolutionary government, the U.S. was even extending "soft" support to Iraq's war effort. Given the circumstances, the AWACS classified the Iraqi track as a "friendly strike/support aircraft."

Captain Brindel briefly stopped by the Stark's Combat Information Center (CIC) and was told that an Iraqi aircraft was headed south. Brindel told his Tactical Action Officer, Lieutenant Basil Moncrief, to keep a close eye on the contact, noting that the Iraqis had been coming further south recently. The Stark was scheduled to participate in an Atlantic Fleet Mobile Training Team exercise and inspection in a few days. In preparation for the inspection, the Stark then began a "full power run" engineering test, running up to a speed of 30 knots. Capt. Brindel continued on to the bridge. He had the CIC contacted to find out why the Stark's own radar had not yet picked up the Iraqi fighter.

His inquiry prompted the CIC to shift the Stark's air search radar to a shorter-range (80-mile) mode, focusing on contacts lower and closer to the ship. The mode switch did the trick and the Stark's own radar now detected the Iraqi fighter about 70 miles out. When the full power run ended, Capt. Brindel left the bridge and went to his cabin to make a head call.

The AWACS now saw the Iraqi fighter ending its run down the Gulf and swinging around to the east. The Iraqi pilot had either spotted a likely target or was searching for one. If the fighter kept to its new course, it would pass within approximately 11 nautical miles of the Stark. Shortly thereafter, the Iraqi jet turned even more toward the Stark. The frigate's radar operator told Lieutenant Moncrief that the Iraqi's course would now take it to a closest approach point of only 4 nautical miles from the ship. At the same time, an Electronic Warfare Technician in the Stark's CIC began to pick up radar signals which correlated with emissions from the Cyrano IV radar carried on Iraqi Mirage fighters. A minute later, the Stark's radar operator requested permission to transmit a standard warning on the Military Air Distress Frequency to the Iraqi fighter, which had now closed to a distance of 43 nautical miles from the ship. Lieutenant Moncrief responded, "No, wait."

Not aware that anything special was going on, the Stark's Executive Officer, Lieutenant Commander Ray Gajan walked into the CIC to discuss some administrative matters with Lieutenant Moncrief. Seeing the activity, he waited, watching events from a position near the chart table. About the same time that Lt. Commander Gajan entered the CIC, the Duty Officer on board the Middle East Force flagship, USS LaSalle, docked in Bahrain, radioed an inquiry to the Stark. He wanted to know if it was copying the details on the AWACS track of the Iraqi aircraft. Lieutenant Moncrief replied that it was, noting that the track had been evaluated as an Iraqi Mirage F-1EQ.

Unknown to the U.S. forces tracking it, the Mirage had been specially modified to carry two French-made Exocet anti-ship missiles rather than its normal load of one Exocet. The fighter also carried a centerline fuel tank for extended range. The overloaded Iraqi aircraft was aerodynamically unstable and was proving to be a handful for its pilot to fly. The AWACS could see that the plane's track was erratic, indicating that the pilot was having difficulty in fully controlling it. Reportedly, the overloaded Mirage was going so slow at one point that it almost stalled out and crashed.

At a range of 32-1/2 nautical miles, the Iraqi fighter began flying directly toward the Stark, rapidly closing the distance between them. No one in the Stark's CIC seemed to notice that the Iraqi jet was now headed straight at them. At 9:07 P.M., the pilot of the Mirage fired one of his Exocet missiles at a blip on his radar screen. The missile was launched at a range of 22 nautical miles and would take some two minutes to reach its target. The Stark was running with its navigation lights blazing, completely unaware that an Exocet was now streaking toward it at 550 miles per hour.

The frigate was operating at what the Navy called Readiness Condition III: its air and surface sensors were operating, and its weapons could be put into action on short notice. One third of the crew were a

their stations. Still, the ship wasn't quite as ready as it should have been. All of the consoles in the CIC were supposed to be manned but they were not. A crewman assigned to a .50 caliber machine gun was lying down at his post.

The Stark's forward lookout saw a bright light flare on the horizon when the Iraqi missile was launched, but he assumed that the light was from something on the surface. Around the time that the first missile was launched, Lieutenant Moncrief noticed on the radar display the course change which had been made earlier by the Iraqi jet. The situation was apparently getting more serious and Lieutenant Moncrief had Captain Brindel summoned to the CIC. He also ordered the radio operator to issue warnings to the Iraqi pilot. About a minute after firing its first missile, the Mirage fired another Exocet at the Stark. The second missile was launched at a range of 15 nautical miles. At about the same time, the Stark finally broadcast a warning on the Military Air Distress Frequency:

"Unknown aircraft, this is a U.S. Navy warship at your 078... (pause), for 12 miles, request you identify yourself, over."<sup>1</sup>

Also, around this time, the Electronic Warfare Technician in the CIC detected what he thought was the F-1EQ's radar "locking-on" the Stark. The technician turned up the volume on his console and a steady, high-pitched signal of the radar "lock-on" sounded throughout the darkened CIC. Virtually all of the men in the CIC paused and turned their heads toward the console that was the source of the signal. About 10 seconds later, the signal abruptly ceased. It may actually have been the first Exocet missile's seeker locking on the Stark. A concerned crewman got permission from Lieutenant Moncrief to go topside and arm the Super Rapid Bloom Off Board Chaff (SRBOC) launchers. That system consisted of clusters of mortar-like tubes which fired packages of metallic strips, or chaff. The strips dispersed in the air and reflected back a signal to a missile's guidance radar, mimicking a ship. Hopefully, a missile would be distracted into the cloud of chaff and away from its intended target. The Stark then issued its second warning on the Military Air Distress Frequency:

"Unknown aircraft this is US Navy warship on your 076 at 12 miles... (pause), request you identify yourself and state your intentions, over."<sup>2</sup>

There was no reply.

Two of the deadly 15-foot long Exocet missiles, each tipped with a 300-pound warhead, were now streaking toward the Stark. Their blue rocket exhausts reflected off the waters of the Gulf as they bobbed up and down slightly, maintaining a sea-skimming altitude about 10 feet above the surface. The frigate's low alert status had not changed and off-duty crewmen, some in the last moments of their lives, remained settled in their bunks.

Lieutenant Moncrief moved to the console controlling the Phalanx Close In Weapon System (CIWS). The Phalanx is a short-range "last ditch" anti-missile defense in the form of a self-contained, radar-directed, 20-mm multi-barrel "Gatling" gun. The weapon was capable of firing up to 3,000 rounds per minute, using very dense, depleted uranium ammunition. The rounds could penetrate a missile's warhead, detonating it, or damage the missile's fuselage and control surfaces, knocking it into the sea. Lieutenant Moncrief inserted his key in the console and brought the Phalanx into "stand-by" mode, which meant that it was warmed up, but its internal radar was not operating. If the Phalanx had been set on "automatic" it would have tracked and fired on any target it detected.

Lieutenant Moncrief then told the fire control technician to “lockon” the Iraqi jet with the long-range search radar of the ship’s MK92 Fire Control System. When a radar “locks-on” a target, it continuously tracks it rather than just periodically picking it up as it searches in all directions. If the aircraft detects that it has been “locked-on,” it would assume that the source of the “lock-on” has targeted him and might be preparing to fire. Accordingly, “locking-on” a plane serves as a definite attention-getter and warning, even if the ship does not intend to actually fire at that point. The radar “lock-on” would also indicate to an Iraqi pilot on an attack mission that the source of the radar signal was a warship and not a tanker, which would most likely have been his intended target.

However, the Stark’s radar was unable to lock-on to the Iraqi since its signal was blocked by the ship’s superstructure, which fell between the radar antenna and the location of the Iraqi fighter at the time. Lieutenant Moncrief then ordered another radar at a different location be used to “lock-up” the Iraqi. This had finally been accomplished at a range of about 10 nautical miles. Observing the proceedings, Lt. Commander Gajan said, “Let him know who we are.” It was way too late.

The Stark’s forward lookout had seen the flash of the first Exocet launch without realizing what it was. He then observed a small blue dot on the horizon, moving erratically up and down. The dot resolved itself into a blue fireball, which became steady as it neared the ship, coming in at an angle of 10 to 15 degrees off the port bow. Seconds before impact, the lookout realized just what the approaching fireball of missile exhaust meant and screamed, “Inbound missile! Inbound missile!” on the sound powered phone circuit. He then dived to the deck. Bernard Seely was standing watch at the helm when he saw a nearby fog bank suddenly turn an eerie blue color. A ball of light streaked out of the mist and seemed to head straight for the bridge. At the last second, the missile dove into the hull of the ship.

The Exocet slammed into the Stark with a loud thud rather than an explosion, indicating that its warhead had failed to detonate. Seely was jolted into a compass in the console behind him. Alarmed by the impact, the men around him began shouting, “What the hell is going on?”<sup>3</sup> Most crewmen, including those in the CIC, did not even realize that a missile had just hit their ship. Men at the aft end of the ship thought that a fire pump or some other piece of operating machinery had torn itself apart. Others thought that maybe the ship’s 76mm cannon had fired or that chaff had been launched from the SRBOC tubes.

The Exocet’s warhead may not have exploded, but the missile easily sliced through the thin, unarmored hull of the Stark. Propelled by its still burning rocket motor, it tore its way deep into the body of the ship, ripping its way through the portside fire main, the ship control berthing area, the barbershop, the mail room and the Chief Petty Officer’s quarters. The missile started to break up as it careened through the ship, with one piece passing entirely through the hull and finally punching a small exit hole in the starboard side. The unexploded warhead itself came to rest in a passageway near that hole. Tragically, the still burning rocket motor came to a stop in a heavily occupied crew berthing area. Because the Exocet had been launched well short of its maximum range, it was still carrying a large quantity of solid rocket fuel when it hit.

A few seconds before, the rocket motor had been powering the 1,500-pound Exocet over the Gulf at 550 mph. Now, fueled by 300 pounds of remaining propellant, it was spewing an intense jet of flame like a gigantic blowtorch inside the relatively small confines of the berthing compartment. What it was like for the men trapped in there is unimaginable. Sailors screamed as they were incinerated in

their bunks.

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The bridge finally sounded General Quarters. Lieutenant (jg) William A. Hanson, Junior Officer of the Deck, saw the second missile streaking in and shouted into the mike, "Inbound missile, Portside!" Captain Brindel ran to the CIC from his stateroom. With no explosion following the first missile hit, the forward lookout picked himself up only to see another blue dot incoming. He started running but was tossed across the deck when the second Exocet hit about 20 to 30 seconds after the first. The warhead on this one did explode. From the time the Iraqi aircraft had been detected by the Stark's radar to the time the second missile hit, the Stark had been plowing through the Gulf on a steady course and speed, seemingly oblivious to what was happening.

The second Exocet hit about eight feet forward of the first, penetrating only about three feet into the ship before its warhead detonated. Having traveled a shorter distance, the second missile had even more fuel onboard than the first. The exploding warhead ravaged an area with a radius of about 30 feet into the ship. Fortunately for the Stark, the quick warhead detonation also blew a large hole in the ship's hull, venting some of its blast energy to the outside. Still, the explosive combustion of the exploding warhead, and propellant shed by the first missile, released a near instantaneous wave of heat energy.

A searing fireball raced along the path punched through the ship by the first missile. Bernard Seely had been headed to a lower deck to man his general quarters station when the second Exocet exploded. "All I remember is seeing little red balls of fire flying all over the place and people screaming," he said. "It was completely dark and there was fire everywhere."<sup>4</sup> One off-duty sailor had been hurled from his bunk when the first missile hit. He picked himself up and headed for an upper deck. He had scrambled up one ladder and was halfway up the next when the second missile hit. He saw the sailor behind him cut in two when a bulkhead collapsed.

In the living quarters near the area struck by the missiles, there was pandemonium. Hull Technician Michael O'Keefe was in Engineering Support Berthing, directly below the missile impact area. "There was an explosion and I was thrown out of my rack," recalled O'Keefe, who thought the ship's engine might have blown up. "I heard them saying 'General Quarters, General Quarters, all hands man your battle stations.' I started yelling and pulling people out of their racks. I made it to the exit but there were flames already there. I told everybody to go to the emergency escape hatch. We got there and we had water already pouring in."

The second missile then hit and exploded. O'Keefe saw the fireball but kept trying to get men out through the escape hatch. "There were no lights... It was hard to get around and check [bunks] so we could get everybody out of the compartment." O'Keefe later said, "I grabbed them by their head and their pants, just shoving them out."<sup>5</sup>

James Wheeler, a 28-year old Petty Officer from Texas, was asleep in his bunk at the time of the attack. "I heard the alarm and I didn't know where it was coming from at first," he later reported. "Then I heard whistling and there was nothing but fire."<sup>6</sup> Lieutenant Carl S. Barbour, who dragged him away from the area of raging fires, saved Wheeler. Some of the Stark's crew died in the searing flames of the first missile's burning rocket motor as it rampaged on its angular, 100-foot long swath through the ship. Most of the men lost in the attack perished in the berthing area, where the burning rocket motor came to rest. They were either burned to death or were suffocated.

Michael O'Keefe tried to save three Senior Chief Petty Officers, getting to within six feet of their location before being driven back by the intense heat. Twenty-three-year-old Mark Bareford recalled the horror when the missile hit. "I was screaming, everybody was screaming. The guys behind me, they died. They screamed until they died.... If I had stopped to get somebody out of their bunk, If I had waited the five seconds to say, 'Hey, Pete, get up,' that missile would have gone through me and blown me into 50,000 little pieces."<sup>7</sup> Both Wheeler and Bareford were badly burned. Many of the surviving crewmen were driven out of enclosed spaces by the dense smoke and found refuge on the open helicopter deck located aft.

As the inferno raged below decks, individual crewmen fought to save their buddies and their ship. Electronics Technician Wayne Richard Weaver, from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, kept pulling men from the wreckage and supervising their evacuation from Combat Systems Berthing. He could have easily escaped, but remained to aid as many men as possible. Weaver may have pulled as many as a dozen men to safety before succumbing to his injuries. He was later found clutching the body of another man he had been trying to rescue.

The explosion severed the leg of Seaman Mark Robert Caouette, from Fitchburg, Massachusetts. He also had shrapnel wounds and was severely burned. Nevertheless, he refused to let his crewmates pull him away from the burning area. Instead, he somehow dragged himself around, desperately shutting off valves to the fire main, which had been ruptured by the initial missile impact. Unless that line could be shut down, there would be inadequate water pressure to fight the raging fires. Stark officer Lieutenant William A. Conklin later recalled, "Caouette knew he was going to die, that's what he said to people who passed by him."<sup>8</sup> Mark Caouette's charred body was later found slumped over one of the valves.

Petty Officer William Morandi had been sleeping in the Combat Systems Berthing compartment when the missiles hit. "There were a lot of us in the berthing compartment at the time, but we couldn't go out the main hatch because of the fire and smoke, and the escape hatch was blocked," he recalled. "Then the compartment started filling with water."<sup>9</sup> Trapped with 28 others in the darkened compartment, Morandi, along with crewmen Timothy Porter, William McLeod, and Timothy Gable donned hooded Emergency Escape Breathing Devices (EEB's). These provided a limited oxygen supply and were available for every sailor on Navy ships.

The men climbed through the main hatch into the compartment above, the one that had been hit by the missile. They staggered out through the thick smoke, jolted by electric shocks from torn, arcing cables. The dangling, live cables would electrocute some other crewmen. Virtually blinded, Porter, McLeod, and Morandi stumbled through the huge hole blasted in the portside hull by the second Exocet and fell out of the ship into the Gulf. "I got disoriented," Morandi said. "The smoke was getting in my head. I ended up actually falling out the hole on the side of the ship. When I surfaced, I saw the ship cruising away over the horizon."<sup>10</sup> He found himself in the water less than 15 minutes after the missiles hit. Gable jumped out deliberately. Another sailor in the same berthing area, Gary Mahone, discovered two bodies face down in the water on the deck. He too fell into the Gulf trying to escape. The week before the attack, the crew had participated in an egress exercise to test their ability to move from berthing areas to topside while blindfolded. A crewmember later said that he wouldn't have made it out that day if it hadn't been for the practice provided by that blindfold drill.

In spite of the two Exocet hits, the Stark's engines were still running. However, the bridge lost control



of the ship's steering, which had to be shifted to a control station in the aft engineering room. The stricken ship headed back to Bahrain at 15 knots. Course changes had to be relayed from the bridge to the aft control station. The Stark had also lost outside radio communication. However, crewmen improvised and used small battery powered helicopter aircrew survival radios to contact the USS Waddell and the AWACS. They called on the same Military Air Distress Frequency on which the Stark had futilely attempted to warn off the Iraqi attacker.

In Bahrain, U.S. Ambassador Sam H. Zakhem and Rear Admiral Harold Bernsen, commander of the Middle East Force, were having dinner together on board the flagship USS LaSalle. A few minutes after their meal had begun, a duty officer reported to Admiral Bernsen that the AWACS had picked up an Iraqi Mirage heading south. Bernsen had told him to make sure that the Stark was talking to the AWACS and receiving good information on the Iraqi track. The two were just having after-dinner tea when one of the bridge officers came in. "We sensed something was wrong," said Zakhem. Admiral Bernsen left and was informed that the Stark had been attacked. "Oh my God," was his reaction. Admiral Bernsen quickly returned and tersely told the ambassador, "The Stark got hit."<sup>11</sup>

The two Exocets had severely damaged the Stark and inflicted a heavy loss of life, though the immediate destruction caused by the missile hits did not threaten to sink the ship. But now, super hot fires, ignited by the missiles and sustained by their propellants, were growing and consuming more of the ship. The water pressure available to firefighters was drastically reduced because the portside fire main had been ruptured by the missile impacts. Hoses would have to be brought all the way forward from the aft fire mains. Extremely dense smoke blocked all visibility in workspaces adjacent to the fires. Unless those fires could be contained, the Stark might well share the fate of HMS Sheffield during the Falklands War. A single Exocet, whose warhead had also failed to explode, had hit that Royal Navy destroyer. Fires ignited by the missile had gotten out of control, causing the loss of the ship.

Nearly one fifth of the Stark's crew was dead within a short time after the attack. Others had been badly burned, were suffering from serious smoke inhalation, or had received shrapnel wounds. Several had fallen overboard. Many senior crewmen with damage control experience had been lost. The battle to save the ship was just beginning. It would last some 18 hours.

Captain Brindel stationed himself on the bridge to monitor firefighting efforts fore and aft of the missile hits. Communication with the aft part of the ship was difficult because of the damage and fires. Accordingly, Lieutenant Moncrief went to the flight deck at the stern to direct efforts on that side of the missile hits. Lieutenant Moncrief had to scramble over the bridge wing to avoid the twisted port side blast hole and a white-hot deck on the starboard side. The Stark carried munitions which could well be ignited by direct contact with the flames, or even by the intense heat radiated by the fires at a distance. Exploding munitions would cause more ship damage and casualties.

Lieutenant Commander Gajan had been wounded in the shoulder and the hand by shrapnel when the second Exocet exploded. Nevertheless, he went to the bridge and ordered crewmen to jettison the hand-held Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and .50 caliber machine gun ammunition located topside.<sup>12</sup> Those items were dangerous enough, but the real threat to the Stark was in the forward missile magazine, located under a deck-mounted launcher. That magazine housed nearly 40 Standard anti-aircraft and Harpoon anti-ship missiles, each of which had warheads and propellant loads roughly comparable to the ones on the Exocets that had hit the Stark. If they detonated, like a string of giant

firecrackers, the Stark would simply be blown apart and most of her surviving crew lost.

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The Stark's Damage Control Assistant was 27-year-old Lieutenant William A. Conklin. The evening of the attack, he had settled into his bunk in a T-shirt and a pair of gym shorts. When the first missile hit, he heard the sound of grinding metal and at first thought the Stark had collided with another ship. He grabbed his shoes and clothes and ran out of his room. The adjacent passageway was already filled with blinding smoke. Conklin was trying to make his way aft when the second missile hit. He saw the passageway buckle under him from the warhead blast.

Conklin managed to reach Damage Control Central around 9:30 P.M. He and his team began to evaluate the ship's situation and plan their actions. Increasingly intense fires, fed by the missile propellants, were raging in the forward parts of the ship struck by the Exocets. The compartments in which the fires were raging were turning into a kind of giant, super hot burner within the ship, roasting compartments above it. The intense heat was already reaching up to parts of the ship's boxlike aluminum superstructure, which rose above the hull on the main deck.

The first order of business was to close off the damaged fire main sections. Water was gushing out of shattered fire main sections, seriously reducing line pressure and greatly hampering efforts to fight the fires. The valves, which had to be shutdown, were located in the burning, smoke-filled crew berthing area. Determined to reach them, Conklin took off the T-shirt from under the coveralls he was now wearing, soaked it in seawater, wrapped it around his otherwise exposed face, and made his way back into the berthing area. Conklin kept his eyes closed to protect them from the intense heat. He figured better to lose the eyelids than the eyes themselves. He felt his way along the scalding pipes, relying on his memory for their layout. "Every time I touched a pipe," Conklin recalled, "it was like striking a hot griddle." He used the backs of his hands, tapping on the burning hot pipes to locate and turn off valves. Sometimes his hands stuck to a pipe. When he pulled them away, he left behind strips of skin sizzling on the metal.

Bulkheads and the deck were glowing from the heat. Conklin thought that being in the berthing compartment was like being inside a pizza oven. "Stand in front of one sometime, then imagine walking inside it," he said. Brass keys in his pocket melted together from the heat. Two days after the attack, when Conklin was finally able to remove his coveralls and to take a shower, he discovered that his nylon gym shorts had melted into his body like candle wax.<sup>13</sup>

The crew was now fighting a fire later described by a Navy panel as a "shipboard inferno the like of which had never been experienced."<sup>14</sup> At least by the modern U.S. Navy, which trained for fires generating temperatures up to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. The Stark's fires reached 3,000 degrees, stoked by the missile propellant and modern materials used in the ship's construction. Water being used for firefighting sometimes flashed instantly into steam or formed scalding pools, lapping around the shoes of the men.

Sailors found that their Navy uniforms were better suited to inspection than safety. Shiny corfam shoes and wrinkle-resistant polyester clothing melted in the intense heat. Standard issue fire helmets had to be tossed aside because they absorbed too much heat. The smoke was so thick that the firefighters were forced to use Oxygen Breathing Apparatuses (OBA's). The sheer volume of smoke would keep them from isolating the actual sources of the fire for several hours.

The blaze began to grow and started to climb vertically. Combustible materials in compartments above the fire were heated to their “flashpoints” and burst into flames, starting fires in new locations. Hose teams tried to attack the fire from adjacent compartments, but were driven back by the heat and smoke. Heat from the furnace below was beginning to melt portions of the ship’s superstructure above deck. The vinyl covering on exposed wires and cables burned with billowing clouds of acrid smoke, which were then spread throughout the ship by its air re-circulation system. Within an hour, the spreading fire consumed the Combat Information Center. Finally, in the face of the fires, even the bridge had to be abandoned. Areas of the main deck and the starboard side of the ship were glowing cherry red. The deck was so hot that crewmen’s feet were being burned through the soles of their boots.

Extreme exertion in near unbearable heat forced the men on the firefighting teams to be spelled every 10 to 15 minutes. Freshwater pumps were down, and desperately thirsty firefighters used axes to break into mess deck vending machines. They even resorted to drinking the bagged IV fluids from medical supplies to try to slake their thirst. The Oxygen Breathing Apparatus (OBA) worn by the men uses replaceable canisters, which generate oxygen through a chemical reaction. Because of an upcoming inspection, the Stark had over 300 OBA canisters, three times its normal supply. It still was not enough. Within a few hours the Stark’s supply was exhausted and fresh canisters had to be brought in by helicopter from the Middle East Force flagship and from other ships. Ultimately, over 1,200 canisters would be used up. Without the new supplies, it is doubtful if the Stark’s damage control teams could have continued fighting the fires.

As the fires spread upward, the teams counterattacked by cutting holes into the overheads of compartments and jamming in hose nozzles from above to try to extinguish the flames. They discovered that an additional advantage to this technique was that superheated air and smoke vented upward and out of compartments, eventually making it easier to gain lateral access to them. The thick smoke roiling through the ship continued to be a vexing problem.

The Stark tried several course changes in an attempt to use the wind to clear the smoke out, but it didn’t really help much. Even worse, the ship’s speed made it difficult to keep the intake hoses feeding the auxiliary fire pumps in the water. The Stark finally came to a dead stop about 11:00 P.M. Capt. Brindel ordered the endangered missile magazine flooded. However, crewmen couldn’t carry out the order because the loss of the forward fire main prevented them from getting the water supply they needed.

The first ship to come to the Stark’s aid was a Dutch-owned commercial salvage tug, which pulled alongside the stricken frigate around 11:30 P.M. Salvage tugs loitered near areas in the Gulf where tankers were frequently attacked by either side and then rushed to the scene, offering their services to the victim. The salvage vessels were sometimes called “vulture tugs,” and were said to arrive with a fire hose in one hand and a salvage contract in the other. Nonetheless, to the Stark, this circling “vulture” had to be a very welcome sight. Without its help, the missile magazine might well have blown up, sinking the ship. Lieutenant Gajan directed the tug forward, on the starboard side, to play its water cannon in the vicinity of the missile magazine. A 2-1/2 inch hose was also run over from the tug and down into the magazine to spray the missiles with cooling water. Gunner’s Mate Mark Samples would courageously sit inside the magazine for over 12 hours, using the hose to cool the missiles.

Water was itself turning out to be a big problem for the Stark. So much of it had accumulated in the

upper decks and the superstructure, from firefighting efforts and ruptured mains, that the Stark began taking on a severe list to port. Eventually, the ship would reach a maximum angle of 36 degrees. Pictures of the Stark, heeled way over under the weight of all that water, probably communicated its distress to the public more than any other visual aspect of the disaster. If the water kept accumulating the ship threatened to capsize.

Lieutenant Gajan organized a “dewatering” party to cut and punch holes in bulkheads to allow water drain out, preventing any increase in the angle of list. In the early morning hours of Monday the 18th the USS Waddell arrived on the scene with damage control supplies and medical aid. The survivors of the Stark’s crew, with the aid of supplies from other ships, were slowly able to prevail in their battles against the fires and flooding. By Monday afternoon, the fires were mostly extinguished, although small fires, “reflashes,” continued to ignite up to 48 hours after the attack. The Stark’s crew worked continuously until around 5:00 P.M. on Monday, when men from other ships finally relieved them.

Swimming in the Gulf, unknowingly left behind by the Stark after they fell overboard, Timothy Porter and Timothy Gable found life rings which had been tossed out earlier. The others in the water, William McLeod and William Morandi, used their EEB’s as improvised floats. Porter worried about rescue after being in the water for several hours. “I was praying for the sun to come up,” he said. “When the sun came up and I saw the sharks, I wanted the sun to go down.”<sup>15</sup> The four men were picked up a few hours later by a Bahrain Defense Forces Search and Rescue helicopter, which had been dispatched to the scene. Gary Mahone was still in the water. He managed to stay afloat by swimming on his back until picked up by the USS Waddell later in the morning. On one of his backstrokes, he brought up a poisonous sea snake in his hand. Mahone hurled it away from him.<sup>16</sup>

The first Exocet’s unexploded warhead had remained intact on the Stark and was discovered by firefighters from USS LaSalle on the 18th. The men ignored the live warhead as they went about their work. An Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team flown in to render the Stark’s own missiles and torpedoes safe also removed and disarmed the warhead. The EOD personnel got assistance from the French Naval Attaché Staff in Washington in order to devise a procedure to disarm it. The information on the French-made missile was radioed to the Gulf. It was still a dicey business because the right wires had to be cut. Unfortunately, they had all been blackened by the fire and smoke and couldn’t be identified by their color-coding. The EOD team somehow did manage to cut the right ones and save the warhead. It was taken away and is still being used as a training aid in Fort Story, Virginia. It was fortunate that the warhead did not “cook-off” from all of the heat it had been exposed to.

The Stark was taken under tow by USS Conyngham and brought to anchorage Tuesday night near the flagship LaSalle in Sitra Bay, Bahrain. Teams went onboard the ravaged ship the next day to recover the bodies of the crewmen killed in the attack—a total of 37. Most of the men lost in the attack had been in the forward berthing compartments. The scene there was appalling. Eight-inch solid steel pipes had been twisted like pretzels by the heat. The body of one crewman was found melted into his bunk. Three bodies were found with EEBD’s on near a hatch. One sailor reported finding a severed arm with a letter still clutched in the hand.

“It’s hard, very hard,” crewman Dwayne Massey recalled. “When we looked down in the hole and saw all the bodies lying down there, it was an empty feeling, like an empty shell outside. You don’t have any emotions.”<sup>17</sup>

Bodies were identified visually. In some cases, the preliminary identification could only be made from clues such as clothing stencils, jewelry initials and bunk positions in the compartment. The body of one seaman, who had last been seen wandering around injured after the attack, was not recovered. He was presumed to have been lost overboard. Several of the men who had gone overboard and were later recovered thought they had heard someone screaming or yelling in the water that night. In Bahrain, telephones were set up on the Waddell for surviving crewmen to call relatives.

At the Stark's home base, Mayport Naval Station near Jacksonville, Florida, Navy officers had the solemn task of notifying the families of sailors killed in the attack. Eighty-six Stark sailors made their homes in the area. Sixteen of them died in the attack. While awaiting news of their loved one's fate, Navy families leaned heavily on each other. A dozen families conducted an all-night prayer vigil in the base chapel. Relatives in the Base Community Center held an emotional three-hour meeting.

"The tension increased with every second that passed," said Chaplain Bill Perry. "It was like taking a guitar string and winding it ever more taut."<sup>18</sup> One wife gave birth to a baby girl not knowing her husband's fate. The Red Cross sent the news to the Stark. The presence of reporters trying for stories caused some resentment in Mayport. One reporter attempting to interview an off-duty sailor in a pool hall was threatened with a cue stick and told, "You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the Stark."<sup>19</sup> A few reporters angered families and officials by visiting or phoning homes where word was still being awaited on the fate of their relatives.

Resentment against some in the media was justified. One reporter went to the home of the father of a Stark sailor who was unaccounted for. Asked to phone in her notes, she told her editor that she didn't want to tie up the family's phone. "Why not?" asked the editor. The son was dead. The newspaper knew, but the family had not yet been informed. The editor told the reporter to make sure she stayed there so she could get the big story on how the family reacted when told of their son's death. Instead, the reporter left and called in her notes from a pay phone. Unable to stomach her callous assignment, she did not return and quit her job the next day.<sup>20</sup>

For most, the waiting came to an end Monday and Tuesday when the news, terrible or joyful, came to one family after another. Betty Belton sent her three children to school at Mayport Elementary on Monday, not knowing if their father had survived the attack. She told them not to pay attention to rumors. At 1:00 A.M. Tuesday, she learned that her husband Mack was alive. Ernestine Foster, who had three of her seven children attending the same school as the Belton children, was told by a naval officer knocking on her door that her husband, Vernon, had been killed on the Stark. At the school, the principal asked the pupils to pray for the Foster family. Many of the children, 90 percent from military families, began to worry aloud about their own fathers' safety.<sup>21</sup>

Some families were understandably bitter. "They were like sitting ducks," said Robert DeAngelis, fighting to hold back tears over the death of his son Christopher, an electronics technician who had celebrated his 23rd birthday aboard the Stark on May 8.<sup>22</sup> "If someone is shooting at you," Susan Ryals told reporters gathered at her home, "you have the right to defend yourself."<sup>23</sup> Her husband Earl was missing and presumed dead. Most relatives were too lost in their grief to immediately go into reasons why.

The shadow of the Stark fell across the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis in the middle of the celebration marking the graduation of the Class of 1987. Flags were lowered to half-staff on the

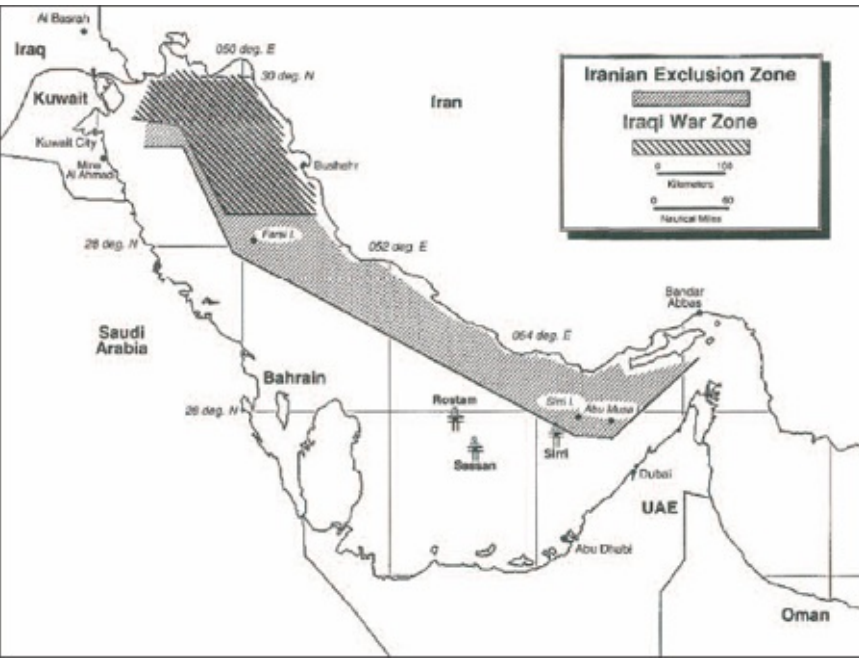
grounds. Navy Secretary James H. Webb urged the 1,022 graduates to remember the men killed and injured in the Stark attack. The survivors of that attack stood at attention on the hot tarmac at Bahrain International Airport on May 20 as a Navy helicopter appeared out of the haze over Manama harbor. The helicopter was ferrying aluminum caskets containing the remains of their crewmates for transfer to an Air Force C-141 Starlifter transport. The caskets, borne by Stark crewmen, were moved one by one to the Air Force transport in a simple, 15-minute ceremony.

An emotional focus for many present that day was Barbara Kiser and her five-year-old son John. Barbara had traveled 9,000 miles from Florida to rent an apartment in Bahrain to be close to her husband, Chief Petty Officer Steve Kiser. The couple had been able to enjoy several short leaves together, the last of which ended when Barbara took her husband to the wharf for the Stark's departure at 8:00 A.M. Sunday morning, May 17th. Steve Kiser died that evening in the attack. Three days later Barbara Kiser stood with her son between Captain Glen Brindel and Middle East Force Commander, Rear Admiral Harold J. Bernsen, as the caskets were loaded onto the Air Force transport. Wives of dignitaries present came up and hugged Mrs. Kiser. Bahraini officials lined up to shake hands and express their condolences.

While the adults talked, five-year-old John Kiser sat alone on a chair by his mother. When Ambassador Zakhem bent down to speak to him, the boy shyly hid his face in his mother's dress. As the last of the flagdraped caskets were loaded on the waiting jet, a Navy bugler played "Taps," Bahraini jets flew overhead, officers saluted and the honor guard presented arms. Mrs. Kiser whispered to her son, who put his hand over his heart. Photographs of the tow-headed youngster made papers around the world the next day. Later, Ambassador Zakhem stated that Mrs. Kiser had given him a letter and an Arabic language New Testament. The package was addressed to "The men who attacked the Stark, Dad's ship." Zakhem said he could not bring himself to read the letter out loud but described it as "a message of eternal peace."<sup>24</sup>

On Friday, May 22, in a sweltering hangar at the Naval base in Mayport, Florida, a crowd of 2,000, including 350 grief-stricken relatives of the men killed on the Stark gathered for a memorial service attended by President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy. The President personally embraced every sobbing mother in the crowd. His own eyes became red and swollen. His shirt was wet from tears and his suit stained with tears and makeup. Nancy Erwin, whose son Steve had died on the Stark, said, "The President greeted all of us personally, and it meant a lot to me that he said, 'I'm sorry about your son.'" She said that Reagan's look and the caring he showed "were genuine. I'll remember that for the rest of my life."<sup>25</sup>

The President eulogized the Stark's dead as heroes who "stood guard in the night." President Reagan mentioned Senior Chief Petty Officer Gary Clinefelter, who volunteered to work at a base coordinating center for families when he was told his own son, 19-year-old Seaman Brian Clinefelter previously listed among the missing, had been confirmed dead. "I need to keep working," Reagan quoted him as saying. "He stayed at his post," the President said. "He carried on. Well, so, too, we must carry on. We must stay at our post."<sup>26</sup>



## TARGET: KUWAIT

At the time of the Stark attack, the United States was on the verge of a large and unprecedented commitment of naval forces to the Persian Gulf. The upcoming operation was in response to the most recent developments in the so-called “tanker war,” which was itself an offshoot of the Iran-Iraq war. Both sides in that war depended on oil revenues to sustain their efforts. Iran’s oil production was concentrated in fields north and east of the northernmost tip of the Gulf. Most of the oil was pumped from the mainland via underwater pipelines to the Kharg Island terminal, where it was loaded into huge deep-draft tankers. These ships carried some 90 percent of Iran’s oil down through the Gulf and then on to its ultimate destinations. In contrast, Iraq was able to flow its oil exports through overland pipelines that ran into Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This was an option which geography and politics denied to Iran.

The tanker war was generally considered to have begun in March 1984, when an Iraqi jet hit the Greek tanker *Filikon L* with an Exocet missile. The missile failed to explode, which was just as well, since the tanker was carrying oil for Iraq’s supporter, Kuwait. Hitting the wrong target with a dud missile did not exactly mark an auspicious start for Iraq’s anti-shipping campaign. Things, however, would change. In rapid succession, other Iraqi strikes followed for a total of 53 attacks in 1984. Iran responded in May that year by launching air attacks on ships traveling to and from Saudi Arabian, Kuwaiti and other non-belligerent ports. Attacks by both sides continued through 1985.

In 1986, Iran began using its navy frigates to fire relatively small Seakiller missiles at targeted ships. Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) naval elements joined in the attacks in 1987. The IRGC used a fleet of small speedboats, often based on islands and oil platforms. They fired machine guns and shoulder-launched anti-tank rockets in their attacks on tankers. The Iranians also began a stop and search operation near the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz, looking for war material destined for Iraq.

When the “tanker war” began in 1984, it had marked the first sustained military operation directed against merchant shipping since the Second World War. The results had been a bit surprising. The supertanker-size crude carriers turned out to be difficult targets to sink or even seriously damage. In fact, in many cases, the price Iraq paid for its Exocet missiles actually exceeded the cost of repairing the damage inflicted on the tankers.

While a missile or rocket might punch a hole in the hull of a tanker, the cargo of thick crude tended to muffle the explosion of the warhead. One military analyst compared it to “shooting a bullet into mud.”<sup>1</sup> The unrefined crude was also unlikely to ignite from the blast. If the ship was traveling empty, it used exhaust gas from its diesel engines to flush fire-sustaining oxygen from empty crude compartments. Some ships, coming into the Gulf to pick up cargoes of crude, were hit in compartments that had been filled with water ballast. Needless to say, little damage was done.

Many of the rockets and missiles fired at ships by the Iranians did not carry large warheads, and were incapable of doing any serious structural damage. Even the large-warhead Exocets used by the Iraqis might damage one or at most a couple of up to 17 compartments on an ultra-large crude carrier. This sort of damage might cause some flooding, but was unlikely to sink a ship. The steel plating used for



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