Brindel credits sailor who saved fellow crewmen

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MANAMA, Bahrain — Michael O'Keefe, a petty officer aboard the USS Stark, had just dozed off in his bunk when a lookout spotted an incoming missile and the alarm sounded.

"I heard them saying 'General quarters, all hands man your battle stations' and there was an explosion," the 27-year-old engineer from Palmdale, Calif., told a news conference yesterday.

Capt. Glenn Brindel, captain of the guided-missile frigate, introduced O'Keefe as a hero of the disastrous Iraqi missile attack Sunday night that killed 37 men and wounded 21.

O'Keefe said: "All you could hear was the alarm. . . . There was a lot of confusion. I made it to the exit. There were flames already there. I told everybody to go to the emergency escape hatch. We got there; we already had water pouring in."

At first, O'Keefe said he thought the blast came from one of the Stark's engines, which had been running at full power earlier in the day.

"I didn't know what was going on, and then, when I smelled the smoke and we got to the main hatch and I saw a fireball there, that's when I knew we were in trouble," he said. "There was just a big flash and all you could see were the flames at the top of the hatch."

Brindel said O'Keefe helped many shipmates to safety, then spent 36 hours fighting the fires, which "will give you some kind of idea of the type of guy he is and what his contribution was."

O'Keefe, who broke a finger fighting the blaze, said his concern after the attack was survival, not heroism.

"The lights were out. You couldn't really see who you were rescuing," he said. "I was just going by and grabbing them by their head and by their pants and pulling them out.

"The biggest thing I was telling them was to turn left and run aft. Go aft and get hoses."