The Florida Times-Union
JACKSONVILLE JOURNAL
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA SUNDAY MAY 24, 1987 CITY EDITION B

Iraqi missile missed U.S. ship in '85

N.Y. Times News Service

WASHINGTON — The May 17 Iraqi attack on the guided-missile frigate Stark was not the first such incident, Navy officers have asserted, describing a similar but less disastrous episode in 1985 when the destroyer John Hancock appeared to have been an Iraqi target in the Persian Gulf.

Officers who said they were there reported that an Iraqi fighter fired a missile during a night flight like that of May 17. The missile, however, hit a seagoing tug between the fighter and the U.S. destroyer, which was near the point where the Stark was hit.

The next day, the officers said, a boarding party from the Hancock inspected the tug and found remnants of a French-made Exocet missile.

Later, they said, U.S. officers charted the missile launching point and the positions of the two ships and concluded that the Iraqi missile had been intended for the Hancock but had struck the tug instead. They said they could not determine whether aiming the missile at the Hancock had been deliberate or accidental.

The officers, who asked not to be identified, said details of the episode had been reported to the Navy Department in Washington. In response, the nuclear-powered cruiser Texas, which is equipped with advanced radar and anti-aircraft missiles, was ordered into the Persian Gulf to help protect the U.S. fleet.

A spokesman for the Navy confirmed the details of the Iraqi missile attack but disputed the contention that the missile had been aimed at the Hancock. He said the Hancock crew had witnessed the attack on the tug, which was six nautical miles away.

Last Sunday night, the Iraqi missile that struck the Stark killed 37 seamen and wounded 21. The attack, described as accidental by the U.S. and Iraqi governments, is being jointly investigated.

The disclosure of the missile the officers thought was fired at the Hancock, which has not been publicly reported until now, raises at least two questions.

First, have there been other instances in which Iraq or Iran, the other warring nation in that region, has fired at U.S. warships, or scored near-misses when firing at other ships? The Navy officers said they had heard rumors of several such instances but had no details.

Second, have captains of U.S. warships subsequently deployed in the gulf been informed of the earlier attack and warned of the possibility that Iraqi pilots might fire at them, deliberately or mistakenly?

John F. Lehman Jr., who was then secretary of the Navy, said that the Hancock episode had not been reported to him and that he was sure he would have remembered it if it had. But, he added, "that doesn't mean it didn't happen."

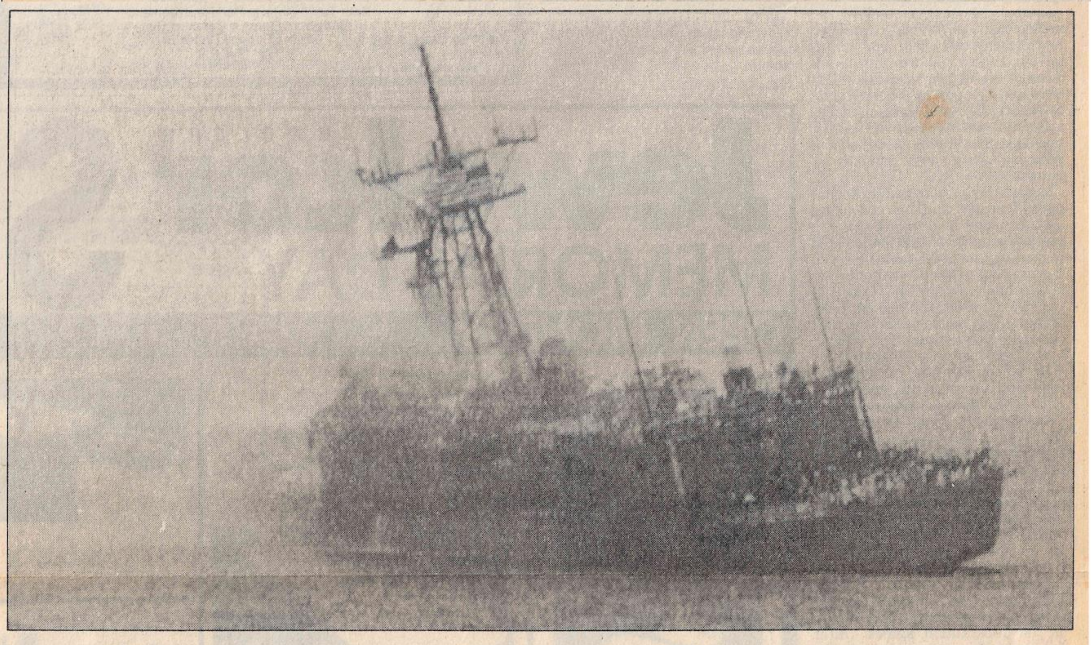
In a telephone interview, Lehman said that at the time he feared Iranian pilots flying small planes loaded with explosives might try suicide missions against U.S. ships. The Navy had thus put Marines armed with shoulder-fired Stinger anti-aircraft missiles aboard those ships.

The missile attack occurred just after the United States and Iraq agreed, in November 1984, to re-establish diplomatic relations. Iraq and several other Arab nations had broken relations in 1967 to protest U.S. support for Israel in its war with Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

Whether the United States protested to Iraq about the Hancock attack could not be determined.

About midnight on Jan. 21, 1985, the Navy officers said, the 7,800-ton Hancock was on routine patrol in the central gulf,

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An official U.S. Navy photo, taken Wednesday, shows the USS Stark listing heavily to port with smoke still rising from on-board fires.



— Associated Press

Twisted metal protrudes from the side of the guided-missile frigate Stark in the area below the bridge where an Exocet missile exploded.

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70 to 90 miles northeast of Bahrain. The Hancock has a crew of 325 officers and sailors, compared with the crew of 220 on the 3,600-ton Stark.

The officers said radar operators aboard the Hancock tracked an Iraqi F-1 Mirage fighter, like the one that attacked the Stark, from a long distance. No hostile intent was evident, they said. Whether the ship warned the fighter pilot, as the Stark had, was not clear.

As the Iraqi fighter approached the Hancock, lookouts saw a streak of light from the missile's rocket, then heard an explosion about six miles away, the officers said.

The next day, they assembled evidence from radar records and from the boarding party sent to the tug and concluded that the Exocet, which travels 6 to 10 feet above the water, hit the tug.

Meanwhile, in Manama, Bahrain, a U.S. Navy team investigated to see whether a fault in the Phalanx anti-missile system aboard the Stark was responsible for failing to warn of the missile attack.

U.S. Navy officials in Bahrain first denied a report that the computer system that runs the Phalanx was faulty, then refused to comment further on the matter.

Cleanup crews were clearing twisted metal from the frigate's wrecked electronic control center and placing the debris in large dumpsters on board, a source said.

In the first detailed description of the ship's damage, the source said the first missile, a water-skimming Exocet, punched a hole but failed to detonate. The second missile, still unidentified, exploded and touched off an inferno.

The source said the French-built Exocet missile entered the vessel near the overhead, or ceiling, of one deck. It tore a gaping tunnel through the portside, then hit the inside of the starboard hull, punching a small hole there.

The second missile also entered the frigate, although no entry hole has been found and it is unclear where it first struck the vessel, the source said.

The missile barreled down into a small, confined area where it exploded, causing tremendous damage because the space was limited, he said.

It exploded "upward and outward" next to some of the crew's quarters, and sparked a fierce blaze made worse by nearby of chemical-filled piping, the source said.

This report contains material from The Associated Press.