USS Stark victims mourned

By IKE FLORES
Associated Press

MAYPORT NAVAL STATION, Fla. — Relatives of 37 seamen killed aboard the USS Stark in the Persian Gulf cried and hugged each other as they dropped yellow roses into the sea Tuesday to commemorate the first anniversary of the attack.

"I'm still asking myself, 'Why did it have to happen?'" said Diana Pierce, widow of Petty Officer Randy Pierce.

Almost 150 wives, parents, children and other relatives of the victims took part in a dockside memorial service at the guided-missile frigate's North Florida home port. Many of them then rode the USS Antrim about five miles into the Atlantic Ocean for a wreath-laying ceremony from the vessel's stern.

Nancy Ciletta, with daughters, Laura, 4, and Dawn, 14, wiped away tears as they moved from the ship's railing after tossing their tissue-wrapped roses into the ocean.

"I'd rather not go through it over and over," the widow of John Ciletta said. "I would rather just remember John as he was."

Chaplain Bill Perry and Capt. John Mitchell Jr., Mayport's commanding officer, memorialized the 37 as heroes, as President Reagan had in services last year.

Standing before a stone and bronze monument to the Stark at the Mayport dock, Mitchell told the crowd sitting under white awnings that the reason for the observance was engraved on the memorial: "You will never be forgotten . . .."

"Last May, we were God's people caring for God's hurting people. One year later, we are now God's people caring for God's healing people," Mitchell said.



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Elizabeth Ann Erwin, whose brother was killed on the USS Stark a year ago, is comforted Tuesday at Mayport, Fla. Family and friends gathered at the ship's home port for a special service of remembrance recalling the incident in the Persian Gulf that cost the lives of 37 Americans.

Said the chaplain, as the name of each dead seaman was intoned to the ringing of a ship's bell: "Even if you wanted to, you could not forget the pain, that personal pain that goes beyond description,"

Similar observances were held in Pascagoula, Miss., where the Stark is undergoing a $100 million overhaul, in Washington and aboard many Navy ships and installations around the world.

A wreath-laying ceremony was also held by Navy ships still patrolling the central Persian Gulf, where the Stark was hit by two missiles fired by an Iraqi jet.

At Mayport, flags on the base and aboard ship flew at half-mast.

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