Delivering bad news to families never gets easier, officer says

By Liz Twardon
News Staff Writer

In his last four years as the commanding officer of the U.S. Naval Reserve Center in Southfield, Walter V. Pasinski has arranged more funerals than he cares to count.

"Each case is unique, yet deja vu," says Lt. Cmdr. Pasinski, 44, whose responsibilities include bringing the news of deaths, injury or disappearance of Navy personnel to their spouses and families. "You relive the grief, the tragedy, every time."

His most trying case came Monday.

PASINSKI WAS at home, fresh from taking his 11-year-old daughter to the doctor, when the phone rang at 6:30 p.m. It was the Philadelphia Naval District instructing him to officially notify the family of sailor Steve Erwin, 22, that he was among the missing and presumed dead in Sunday's missile attack on the USS Stark in the Persian Gulf.

Pasinski had been waiting, hoping he'd finish his term in June without having to serve again as casualty assistance calls officer.

"The hell of it is, you know it's going to happen — especially after an incident like this," he says, referring to the attack that killed 37 sailors.

By 8:30 p.m. Monday, he and a petty officer sat in the Erwin living room in Troy delivering the speech he's delivered about 18 times before: "On behalf of the U.S. secretary of the Navy, I regret to inform you that your son ..."

EXCEPT THIS time, the sailor was missing, his condition unknown. Erwin was confirmed dead on Tuesday.

"This is my first case of someone missing in action," Pasinski says. "And it's almost worse than having to tell a family their son or daughter died.

"It's always an unpleasant situation for everyone, but missing status stretches everyone's tolerance to its elastic limit. The lack of information, just not knowing, makes it more trying and frustrating for the family and for me.

"I'm as anxious as they are to have the situation resolved — hopefully happily."

THE LACK of specific information also makes his job trickier than usual.

"We always have to be careful not to cross that line between providing support and sympathy and intruding on the family's grief," Pasinski said.

"But in a case like Erwin's, we also have to be very circumspect about discussing only the information that we have. We cannot afford to raise or dash the family's hopes unnecessarily. That would be immoral.

"The Navy's priority is to be as accurate and as complete as possible, even in the midst of havoc and uncertainty."

NO MATTER how many times he's delivered bad news, Pasinski's job never gets easier, he said.

"I feel just terrible every time I drive up to a family's home in full uniform in the Navy van. Even though most of the time I don't even know the people involved, I identify with the sense of the family's loss. Like every man in uniform, we're all part of the Navy, the military family."

Pasinski looks forward to his new post in Washington as a computer systems manager for the Navy Military Personnel Command.

"To tell you the truth, it'll be a great relief not to have to face the fact that for 24 hours every day you're on call to turn a happy family into a grieving family."