Navy widow tries to deal with pain

By Kathleen Bohland
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JACKSONVILLE BEACH, Fla. — Kristin Watson doesn't fully understand why her husband had to die in the Persian Gulf on the USS Stark.

But the former Michigan woman says she doesn't blame anyone, even though the attack on the ship leaves only memories of a happy 2-year marriage.

Joseph Watson, 25, was one of 37 seaman, including three from Michigan, killed when an Iraqi missile hit the Stark last week.

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Kristin and Joseph Watson were all smiles after their wedding two years ago.

Loss

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"I'M NOT angry, because I don't think anything could have changed," said Kristin, 23. "Joe was there for a reason and whether he came out of it or not is irrelevant. I try to think the needs of the whole outweigh the needs of the individual.

"A lot of people are very eager to put the blame on somebody. If we want to blame anybody, it should be the Iraqi pilot. I just feel very resentful that one person could have an impact on so many lives. What about all those children growing up without fathers?"

Watson lives in a small, sunlit apartment, about 10 miles from the Mayport Naval Base where the Stark was stationed in northern Florida. The couple had lived here about a year. They had no children.

"When I first came to Jacksonville, I couldn't believe I would live here," Watson said, admitting she missed the lakes and trees of St. Johns (near Lansing) where her parents live. Her husband was from Ferndale.

"BUT I knew at this point, it was Joe's career we had to worry about and I had to be more flexible," she said. Watson, working toward her master's degree in business at the University of North Florida, said she probably will stay in the Jacksonville area. It has become her home.

She works at the university scheduling events and plans to make her career in arts administration.

"Joe and I were different from the majority of a lot of other military couples," she said. "We weren't just out of high school. Both of us graduated from college. We were both our own people and came into this knowing full well something could happen."

Watson majored in music at Michigan State University and met her husband there. They lived in the same dormitory.

FAMILY MEMBERS from Michigan and elsewhere were in Florida last week to console Watson and attend a memorial at Mayport.

Joe Watson had planned to return to school when his hitch was over next year — and she said she resented how the Navy controlled their lives.

"I hate it," she said when asked her view of the military. "It's very frustrating. When they called he went and it's not like he can quit or protest."

But she knew her husband loved the Navy and she loved him. So she compromised.

"HE WAS very proud of the ship — and he loved the uniform," said Watson's aunt, Patricia Metz, who came from Atlanta to be with her niece.

"He loved the cleanliness," joked Watson's mother, Joan Valentine, who flew to Jacksonville with her husband, Don.

Watson remembered when her husband called her about a month after he left port in February, complaining of seasickness.

"He was in Spain and felt awful and said he hated it," she recalled. "So I told him you can cry and mope and make the situation worse or forget about it and talk to me. Then he said, 'Oh, you're right.' And he felt better."

JOE WATSON loved athletics and used to run around the Stark for exercise. A mile run was eight times around the entire ship or 32 times around the flight deck, she said. When in port, he played basketball.

"He was the kind of guy who wouldn't be negative about anything or anybody — except shopping," said Kristin's father, Don Valentine.

"He thought it was a disease and someday they'll find a cure and we'd all be better for it," Watson said with a smile.

Don Valentine said Joe Watson always went to great lengths to make everyone feel comfortable.

"HE WAS the star of the show," he said. "Everyone was always looking to him. If he were here right now, everybody would be waiting for him to speak. He was just that kind of person."

"IF HE had to die, this was a much more glorious way," he said. "The fact he didn't get hit by a drunk driver or get killed in a crime helps a little."

Kristin Watson said if her husband had lived he would have felt he should have helped prevent the Stark tragedy.

"I'm sure he would have felt responsible," she said. "The crew was very much a family. He would have been questioning what he should have done. He always put others thoughts before his own."

Kristin Watson said she will be asking why this happened for a long time.

"Why take the good men in the good ship?" she said. "Why take him who was so good and had so much going for him? He was going to go full speed ahead. I guess it comes down to who is going to say someone is less worthy or more worthy."

Funeral arrangements for Joe Watson are pending, but the family plans to bury him in Michigan.