USA TODAY

NO. 1 IN THE USA . . . 4,792,000 READERS EVERY DAY

COVER STORY

'Everybody's hurting' for Navy families

'They're not just the Navy, they're our neighbors,' Mayor Godbold

By Julia Lawlor
and Marilyn Balamaci
USA TODAY

MAYPORT, Fla. — "Everybody's walking with the same hole in the pit of their stomach," said Cmdr. Bill Perry, a chaplain assigned to Mayport Naval Station — the USS Stark's home port.

He spent Sunday night with families of the crew. "Everybody's hurting," Perry said.

"They're not just the Navy. They're our neighbors," said nearby Jacksonville, Fla., Mayor Jake Godbold. Flags will be flown at half-staff starting today, he said.

A sign at the entrance to the base Monday read: "God bless the families of the Stark." Twelve families stopped to attend a prayer vigil at the base chapel. One woman, afraid her husband was dead, gave Perry a hug and "hung on for dear life." By afternoon, she'd learned he was alive.

The number of dead and injured in Sunday's attack on the Stark is a horror no one expects during peacetime.

"He's gone to meet the Lord," Norma Kiser said of her son, Steven, a Navy electrician's mate for 18 years. Kiser, of Elkhart, Ind., heard about of the attack Sunday after church. By Monday morning, the family knew he was dead. So far, 28 have been reported dead and 22 injured after the Iraqi missile attack. Iraq has said it was an accident.

Regardless, the victims' families have been devastated.

In Tallahassee, Fla., Mims Gaines — mother of Senior Chief Petty Officer Vernon Foster, 33, a navigator — had to be sedated after she was told her son was dead. "My brother's life was sacrificed for a mistake," said Arthur Robinson, Foster's brother. Foster and his wife had seven children.

Please see COVER STORY next page ▶

COVER STORY

'My heart just stood still'

Continued from 1A

Ron Longest of Hoopeston, Ill. learned of the bombing Sunday. "My heart just stood still," said Longest, father of Petty Officer 3rd Class Eric Longest. He was waiting by the phone for news of his 22-year-old son — a Navy firefighter.

Longest traveled to Florida in February to visit his son before the Stark's uneasy crew shipped out: "I know a lot of the kids. I was dad to them all that night before they left. They were scared to death. They knew what they were getting into."

Eric's last letter said: "Dad, I love you and I miss you. We're needed over here and I'm doing my job."

In Lyndonville, Vt., Lucille Nelson, the mother of 22-year-old seaman Paul Robert Brown, learned of the bombing on a Monday morning television news broadcast.

"I heard the word 'Stark' and my ears kind of perked up. I thought, 'My God, that's Paul's ship,' " she said. "I looked and I could see the ship on fire. I thought it can't possibly be."

When she called a toll-free information number, she was told that if she didn't hear from military officials in an hour, her son probably was uninjured. "I'm trying to maintain a very positive attitude that no news is good news," she said.

"I felt that there was danger, but I also have told myself whatever happens, happens," she said. "They are properly trained to handle situations like this."

As Lela Bell drove to work at the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority on Monday, she heard a radio announcer explain that some Stark crew members were rescued from the waters of the Persian Gulf. The news somehow made the Midwest City, Okla., mother of a Stark crewman feel more confident.

Bell said her son, Randy Pierce, is a good swimmer. "I was even calm thinking he was in the water. I knew if he was, he'd be all right," she said.

Pierce, a computer maintenance worker, has been in the Navy almost 10 years. She last saw him at Christmas.

"He's not on the list of injured, so he could be on the list of those who are OK or on the other one that we'd rather not think about," Bell said.

She was dreading a phone call from the Navy. "If it's a sad story, it won't be easy to tell us," she said.

But a Spotsylvania, Va., woman had some relief Monday when the U.S. ambassador to Bahrain called to say her son, Petty Officer 3rd Class Lawrence M. Bareford, was injured.

Bareford said he was in satisfactory condition with burns, although she did not know where he was hospitalized. A week earlier, she had spoken to him on the phone.

"I never asked him if he was in any danger because there's no war," she said. "The United States is not at war. That's why I couldn't believe this.,"

The Stark crew included 17 members of anti-submarine helicopter detatchment HSL-32 based at the Norfolk Naval Air Station. The mood there was just as somber. For the families in both Norfolk and Jacksonville, Sunday's horror was made all the worse because it was so unexpected.

"It's very scary for me," said Candace Mingo, 37, whose husband, Edwin, 46, is a sonar technician first class at Mayport Naval Station. Her husband has been to the Mediterranean on routine missions several times. He was not on this one.

"The way everyone understood this," said Mingo, "it was just a routine mission. This ship was just doing its number, minding its own business when it happened."

At Finegan Elementary School in Mayport, teachers worried about 35 children whose fathers were aboard the Stark. Extra phone lines were installed at the base to handle the deluge of calls from families.

But most family members simply clung together. "They're coping by leaning on each other," said Perry.

Military families have dealt with such tragedies before, and doubtless will face them again.

Myrtle Plymel, 63, of Merritt Island, Fla., lost her 24-year-old son Clyde after the bombing of Marine headquarters in Beirut in October 1983. Hearing about the Stark brought the memories rushing back.

"I just wonder why it keeps on happening," she said. "I don't think it's necessary at all for those boys to be there, when the fighting keeps going on and it doesn't help anything."

But military families "always live with that fear that something could happen," said Sydney Hickey, of Springfield, Va., daughter of an Air Force major general and wife of a Navy captain. "It can't be foremost in your mind or you couldn't function, but it's always there."

After something happens, "the hardest part, of course, is the waiting. It's human nature whether you're a Navy wife, an Army wife, or the wife of a plumber, when you hear of an accident you want your husband to be the one who's not hurt. But in the service, you're not dealing with a bunch of strangers. If you want your Bob to be safe, does that mean you want her Dave to be dead? Obviously not, but you have to deal with those thoughts."

And you have to be prepared for the worst — to find some meaning in a young life cut short.

"He really loved the Navy," Norma Kiser said of her son, who left behind a wife, an 11-year-old daughter and a 5-year-old son. "That was his life, defending his country."

Contributing: Judy Keen, Bob Minzesheimer, Jeanne DeQuine.