He's stern, but calls it a mistake

By Johanna Neuman
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President Reagan, facing the first attack on a U.S. ship in the Persian Gulf, moved cautiously after Iraqi missiles struck the USS Stark.

National security adviser Frank Carlucci told Reagan at 3:30 p.m. Sunday — 80 minutes after the attack.

Reagan got written updates from the Situation Room. He was not awakened just before midnight when Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger told Carlucci of 28 U.S. casualties.

At 11:40 a.m. Monday, Reagan, his tone low-key but his message stern, uttered his first comments, saying he'd protested "in the strongest terms."

At 2:30 p.m., Reagan convened an interagency task force meeting to assess fallout.

At 4 p.m. the White House issued a statement. The United States had upped the alert status of its gulf ships, and warned next time they'll fire back.

All day, the White House carefully called the incident "an inadvertent attack."

It was left to the Pentagon to answer questions about why the ship didn't fire back. One reason for few details: The ship's captain was battling to control the Stark.

Reagan said he waited to act until getting the facts.

Others saw a familiar Reagan who also moved cautiously in 1983 after the Soviets shot down a Korean airliner.

"There have always been two Reagans," explained William Schneider, American Enterprise Institute fellow. "What he says often alarms people, but what he does is usually cautious and moderate."