

Mayport Honors Fallen Shipmates

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More than 200 shipmates, friends and families filled the Mayport Memorial Park May 15 to pay their respects to the fallen crew of USS Stark (FFG 31) 28 years after the frigate was struck by an Iraqi missile while deployed in the Arabian Gulf.

In the early morning hours of May 17, 1987, two Iraqi missiles struck the Naval Station Mayport-based frigate. Despite the severe damage inflicted, the heroic efforts of Stark's crew saved the ship. Thirty-seven Sailors lost their lives during the attack.

Stark was decommissioned at Mayport in 1999. To preserve the tradition once the ship was retired, the Naval Order of the United States, and Naval Station Mayport partnered to preserve the observance of this tragic incident. Mayport Memorial Park was established Aug. 1, 1987, with the dedication of the Stark monument.

The guest speaker for the event was



-Photo by Paige Gnann

Naval Station Mayport 2nd Class Petty Officers Association (SCPOA) stand in front of the plaque that lists the names of the 37 Sailors killed after USS Stark was struck by Iraqi missiles on May 17, 1987 while deployed to the Arabian Gulf. The SCPOA is continuing the legacy of USS Stark by coordinating Mayport's efforts to hold the ceremony with the Naval Order of the United States.

retired Navy Capt. John Mitchell, former Naval Station Commanding Officer from 1987-1989. According to Mitchell, these ceremonies are essential to respect and remember those 37 Sailors who made the

ultimate sacrifice.

"In order to continue to uphold the commitment and obligation spelled out on the plaque, I think we need to broaden our reach to ensure "You will never be forgotten" far into the

future."

Several of the ship's crew and family members of those who died were also present to tell their stories. One recount was a story of remembrance. Barbara Kiser, who lost her

husband Senior Chief Stephen Kiser, attends the ceremony every year.

"After the bodies of the deceased we removed from the ship I was permitted to go in the actual compartment where the missile exploded before

it was cleaned up," said Kiser. "I went in there with a flash light and I reached in the ashes and I pulled out my husband's bible, this bible survived a 12 million BTU (British thermal unit) fire. That was the hottest fire ever recorded on a U.S. Navy ship, and yet you can still read every single page," Kiser said.

The ceremony needed with a 21 Gun Salute and an American patriotic song God Bless the USA, (written by Lee Greenwood) sung by the Finegan Elementary School choir. According to current Mayport Commanding Officer Capt. Wesley McCall, all personnel in uniform today should know and understand what their profession as a Sailor is all about.

"All of us wearing the uniform of the United States Navy today have a duty and responsibility to recognize and remember the sacrifice 37 of our shipmates made on behalf of our country," he said. "These individuals were husbands, fathers, brothers and shipmates and their memory shall never be forgotten."