1988-12

The Stark Was Ready!

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https://hdl.handle.net/10945/61855

The *Stark* Was Ready!

By Commander John Jackson, Supply Corps, U. S. Navy

One of the oft-proved laws of the sea is that the difference between a ship sunk and saved is the crew's ability to perform damage control (DC).

In describing the damage control effort on board the USS *Stark* (FFG-31) after she was hit by two Iraqi Exocet missiles, the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of the Navy for Safety and Survivability, Joseph K. Taussig, Jr., a veteran of the Pearl Harbor attack, stated, "In a surprise attack . . . their reaction to sudden trauma was outstanding. They responded with the same ingenuity, bravery, and dedication that American sailors always seem to."

And while it may be hard for the families of those sailors who died or were injured in the attack to accept, a number of observers have suggested that it was fortunate that the *Stark* was the target, since she was arguably better prepared to control the damage than many other fleet units.

Realistic Training for All Hands: It is vitally important that everyone on board ship be fully prepared to react in an emergency situation quickly, correctly, and effectively. This requires dedication to damage control, and a realistic and aggressive training program—one that goes far beyond simply checking off the DC portions of the personnel qualification standards system or conducting the occasional drill for the duty section fire party. While the U. S. Navy has long been recognized for the overall excellence of its damage control programs, we all have seen instances where other shipboard functions have encroached on the time and resources that should have been spent on DC.

Ninety percent of the work necessary to save a damaged ship must be accomplished before the damage occurs. Once the compartment fills with smoke and the fires begin to rage out of control, it is too late to get serious about damage control. The crew of the *Stark* did take DC seriously from the day the ship was commissioned; that is why she is afloat today. Strong leadership directing a strong DC program was the foundation of the *Stark*'s DC posture.

Years of experience show that simply proclaiming a policy ("DC is important!") will not change anyone's behavior. The words must be backed by action. In the *Stark*, no one was promoted unless he demonstrated a high level of competence in damage control. To be recommended for E-4, for example, a seaman had to be fully qualified as a fire team member. To move up to E-5, the petty officer had to be qualified in all stations up to and including investigator. To be eligible for first class, crew members were required to qualify as on-scene leaders. And anyone seeking a recommendation for chief petty officer had to be a fully qualified locker leader. In the wardroom, all ensigns had to qualify as on-scene leaders within six months of reporting on board, and had to become a repair locker leader before pinning on lieutenant (junior grade) bars.

These rules applied regardless of rating or designator. They pulled the ship together for a common goal: keeping the *Stark* ready to fight and survive. One measure of the *Stark*'s readiness was that even after taking severe casualties, she still carried 35 crew members who were

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No drill could fully prepare the *Stark*'s crew members for 3,500° fires, choking smoke, a 16° list, dehydration, fatigue, and heavy casualties. But their intense, all-hands damage control training saved the ship.

fully qualified on-scene leaders.

Another way the *Stark*'s crew prepared to deal with a major disaster was by conducting realistic first aid training for all hands. This included the use of graphically accurate artificial wounds to simulate the carnage of a real accident. To avoid relying repeatedly on the same well-trained individuals, the more experienced crew members frequently were selected to pose as casualties during the drills to force less seasoned personnel to assume greater responsibilities. Each drill was scripted, prebriefed, and conducted as if it were in preparation for a major inspection. Written scenarios were developed for each drill, with the emphasis on realism and dealing with the unexpected. By varying the simulated damage, substituting new members into fire-fighting teams, and forcing innovation and creativity into each scenario, the crew's actions began to be second nature.

Most home ports provide many assets to help hone the crew's damage control skills. On board the *Stark*, crew members made every effort to use such help whenever possible. Quotas for fire-fighting school were never missed, and the services of the portable DC trainer at the Little Creek Fleet training unit were used as late as one week before beginning the deployment that was cut short by the Exocet missiles. The entire crew went through the trainer, from the commanding officer on down. The sight of the skipper, dripping wet from fighting simulated fire and flooding, did a great deal to underline the importance he placed on DC.

In looking back after the accident, it becomes obvious that even though the crew trained and drilled with demanding scenarios, these scenarios were never big enough or challenging enough to simulate the degree of damage faced after the missile attacks. Even the "mass conflagration" drill on which the crew exercised during refresher training (RefTra) off Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, failed to simulate the horrifying situation faced on board ship the day of the attack. One lesson learned: when planning major drills, throw in every contingency and complex-

We Gave 110% and Saved the *Stark*

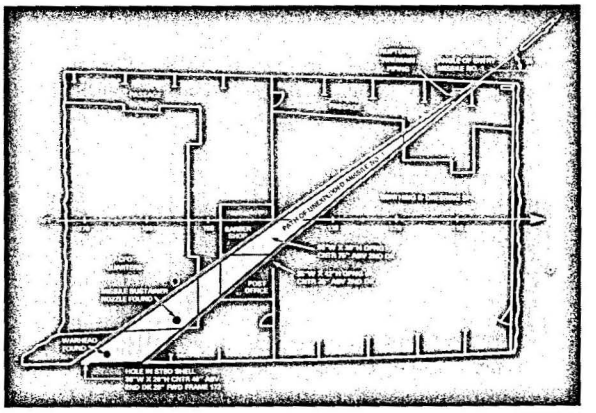
By Lieutenant Art Conklin, U. S. Navy

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Lieutenant Art Conklin, the* Stark'*s damage control assistant (DCA), was cited by the Secretary of the Navy for "providing heroic and inspirational leadership by example throughout all forward fire-fighting efforts . . . and for courageous and prompt actions which saved lives and were instrumental in saving the ship." Here he tells of the events on the day of the* Stark'*s attack, 17 May 1987.*

We had been operating in the Gulf for two months, and although commercial tankers were being attacked with some regularity, there were few diversions in our boring, day-to-day routine.

At approximately 2112, I heard the horrible sound of grinding metal, and my first thought was that we had collided with another ship. I immediately opened my stateroom door and headed for Damage Control (DC) Central. Within a fraction of a second I knew we were in trouble. I smelled missile exhaust and heard over the 1MC, "Inbound missile, port side . . . all hands brace for shock!" Then general quarters (GQ) sounded and I saw the crew move faster than they ever had before. The first missile had slammed into the ship under the port bridge wing, about eight feet above the waterline. Its speed at impact was more than 600 miles per hour. The warhead did not explode, but the missile did deposit several hundred pounds of burning rocket propellant as it passed through passageways, berthing compartments, the barbershop, post office, and chief petty officer quarters. And although we did not know it at the time, the missile still had most of its fuel on board, since it had traveled only 22 miles from the launching aircraft to our ship. The potent mix of the missile's fuel and oxidizer resulted in fires hotter than 3,500° Fahrenheit that instantly ignited all combustibles and melted structural materials. This temperature was nearly double the 1,800° normally considered the upper limit in shipboard fires.

Exocet #1: Second Deck Impact



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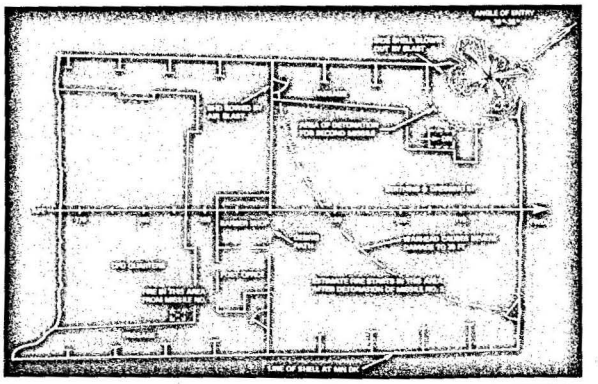
Exocet #2: Second Deck Impact



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