The Morning of the Attack on the USS STARK (FFG-31)

Description

I was in the Staff Office early that morning, as I was Duty Officer. I hadnâ€™t been in the door but a few minutes when the phone rang. The voice was all too familiar, barking orders as soon as I said my name into the phone. Capt Wes Jordan, Chief of Staff at COMNAVSURFLANT began ordering me to pull all the MEFEX (Middle East Force Exercise) training records from the previous summer.
He told me the news of the STARK being attacked, in his to the point manner, and told me to get the files down to his office right away. This order, while not from my current Commodore, was easily interpreted as one of priority.

Capt Jordan, no longer the DESRON 32 Commodore, retained a tremendous amount of info on just about everything, including the record keeping he had required when we had sailed on our work up exercises for a Med deployment. The USS STARK (FFG-31) had tagged along with the battle group to get her training in, as there wasnâ€™t a dedicated fleet exercise for those few ships then deploying to the Middle East force AOR. That being the case, we had her daily exercise completion reports filed along with those of the rest of the ships on the FLTEX.

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I opened one of the classified safes and began retrieving the thick folders of exercise messages. As I Was involved in this process, the Commodore, Capt Joe Lopez, and the Chief Staff Officer, CDR Dewey Collier arrived. I recall turning around from the tall stand up safe and telling them about the phone call. Capt Lopezâ€™s expression was one that indicated he wasnâ€™t too happy with the chain of command being jumped over (about three steps to be exact) and then he told me to get the files and get them down to SURFLANT.

About 45 minutes later, I was at Capt Jordanâ€™s office door. He had a room full of staff officers, but he came over took the folders and shook my hand, greeting me warmly. I headed back to the office.

We went back to work at the office, as we had deployment preps to handle, but, as time went by, reports came in. A few days after the incident, one of the officers from COMCRUDESGRU 8 came down and told us to come up to their spaces to see a message to Admiral Boorda. The message was a â€œPersonal Forâ€• from the CO of the USS CONYNGHAM (DDG-17) to CCDG 8. It described the bravery of the crew of the STARK, and the men of the CONYNGHAM, who provided the bulk of the manpower to relieve the worn out sailors on the STARK. CONYNGHAM was the second ship on scene, and the first ship, USS WADDELL (DDG-24), left when she arrived, to search for the men who had gone overboard from STARK.

The XO of CONYNGHAM spelled the very junior Damage Control Assistant (DCA) of the STARK, bringing the experience of a middle grade LCDR to the table. The XO realized the weight of topside firefighting water was a serious threat to the stability of STARK and got the crew working to get the water off the ship.

One of my former shipmates from USS LEFTWICH (DD-984), Bill Stetson, had been the Engineer Officer of CONYNGHAM just before their deployment to the MEF. He got a letter from his crew a few months after the attack and he told me they thanked him for making the train for â€œout of the boxâ€• situations, one of which had been to use sledge hammers to crack aluminum bulkheads, as we had no effective cutting tolls/torches on the ships at the time. They found this to be the way to attack the problem of the water in the topside spaces of the STARK, which had an aluminum superstruture. They told him of a few other things they thought he was crazy when he instructed them, but they used them that day.

More info in the â€œP4â€• message to the Admiral indicated the extensive fires had shown we had some significant deficiencies in our essentially WWII damage control equipment. It also spoke of the courage of a sailor who volunteered to take on the grusome task of collecting the remains and working to identify them, how he stoically attended to that duty. The combination of several crews, of men, consumables, and knowledge, saved the STARK. That message told a factual story, written by someone able to rapidly collect and analyze the lessons learned, while others fought to save the ship. It was a first glimpse into the type of equipment we would see very quickly. Commercial items, such as exothermic torches, Jaws of Life, NIFTI (infrared thermal imaging), and Fire Fighting Ensembles got to the fleet as a result of the lessons paid for by human lives.

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Several years later, I found myself as XO aboard an FFG-7 Class ship scheduled for a Middle East Deployment. The outgoing Commanding Officer, CDR Wade Johnson, had me get copies of the STARK Investigation, which became mandatory reading for the khaki clad crew members. We had several training sessions discussing the things that led to the ship being hit. One major point was the operator at the FC1 control panel was not at his station when the attack came. Of the available sensors, that station had a good chance of seeing the threat and reacting to it. The operator had control of the Mk-92 Combined Antenna System (CAS), which has a high rate track-while-scan (TWS) capability. He could designate a target, assign it to a fire control channel and fire the assigned weapon, all from his console. He had left to get coffee, but had been gone for some time, and no other tactical watchstander had paid attention. As a result, we put the rule in place that no one was to leave their station in the Combat Information Center (CIC), without the permission of the Tactical Action Officer (TAO). We didnâ€™t say no one could leave, but that departures were to be managed by the senior watchstander in the space.

About two months later, we were a few days from reaching Port Siad to commence our transit south in the Suez Canal. I walked into CIC, as I did routinely, after midnight. I stepped around the comm table and stood next to LTJG John Jenkins, the CIC Officer, and the assigned TAO for the midwatch. I stared at the MK-92 Console on the port side, about 6 feet from John, and then at him. â€œMr. Jenkins, where is FC1?â€• His face flushed and he stammered â€œDonâ€™t worry, XO, weâ€™ll have it down when we get to the Persian Gulf.â€• By the time he finished his comment, he was sounding confident. I responded â€œNo, you wonâ€™t, you donâ€™t have 3 weeks.â€• I once more reminded him he had to know who was there and if someone needed to leave their station, he had to use sound tactical judgment in granting that permission. I also took a moment, since it was a quiet watch, to let him know it took 21 days to establish, or break habits, and I had seen that play out many times in practical application. I left to continue my tour of the ship. John was one of the best junior officers on the ship, and the only non-Department Head aboard to be qualified as Tactical Action Officer, which was no small achievement on his part, and a great vote of confidence in John from the Commanding Officer, by then, CDR Edward â€œNedâ€• Bagley, Jr.

A few weeks after the attack on the STARK, I had my oral board for Command-at-Sea. Usually, this was a feared event for us SWOs, not because we didnâ€™t know â€œour stuff,â€• but because you never knew what daily practical thing one of the squadron COs, who would assist the Commodore in grilling you, would ask. The â€œgotchasâ€• seemed to be things that had recently bit, or had nipped at the heels of the CO asking the question, and almost always was related to supply type things. That being the case, we felt out of our league, and had mentally expected our assigned Supply Officers would handle things. Questions such as Shipâ€™s Store Stock Turn and security requirements, CASREP part turn in, etc, etc. I got lucky. Due to the attack, I had the majority of the questions being about tactical operations of the ship. I was in my element. Not saying I didnâ€™t get the gouge on the Supply stuff, but I did breathe a sigh of relief as I left the room with passing grade.

Not only did we use the lessons of the STARK for the TAO to manage his watchstanders, we spent extra time with the electronic warfare (EW) crew members, letting them know how crucial a part of the picture they were. We also paid attention to lookout training, for, as with the British in the Falklands War, were the ones to see the Exocets first. A year later, I was assigned to the COMNAVSURFLANT MObile Training Team (CSMTT), conducting Combat Systems Assessments (CSAs) for LANTFLT ships. My teams reinforced the use of lookouts as an intergral part of the Detect-to-Engage (DTE) exercises we required the ships to run.

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The Navy took to heart the hard learned lessons of the STARK attack and quickly responded in getting new equipment and training to the fleet.

Thanks to Mudville Gazette for the Open Post!

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