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Remembering the attack on the destroyer Cole 20 years ago

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Twenty years ago, 17 U.S. sailors, including Lakiba Palmer of San Diego, were killed, and more than 40 were injured in the Oct. 12, 2000 attack, in which al-Qaida suicide bombers pulled up to the refueling destroyer in an explosives-laden boat and blasted a hole in its hull.

BLAST SLAMS NAVY SHIP — TERRORISM SUSPECTED — 17 LOST

Explosion came when crew was preoccupied and vessel vulnerable

The explosion that killed at least six sailors and severely damaged the destroyer Cole yesterday in Yemen proved that even the most advanced warships — bristling with high-tech radars, missiles and guns — can't always defend themselves against a possible terrorist attack.

Terrorism and military experts say the attackers found a vulnerable moment to strike. The warship was preparing to refuel in a windy harbor, its crew occupied with a difficult docking maneuver and its radars and weapons turned off.

Without any known threats requiring increased security, the crew of the Cole had little reason to be on high alert during a planned five-hour fuel stop in Aden, Yemen.

But after the explosion yesterday, in the Mideast and at naval bases throughout the United States, sailors quickly jumped to heightened security.

Locally, awareness and security have been boosted, although Navy officials won't reveal what additional measures have been taken. In the Persian Gulf, where seven San Diego-based ships are deployed, all Navy ships steamed to safety at sea in response to the attack.

"We are taking the appropriate steps to ensure the security of our forces throughout the region," said Lt. Sean Banks, a San Diego Navy spokesman.

But even the most vigilant military force can't defend against all terrorist acts, said Ivan Eland, a terrorism expert at the Washington-based Cato Institute.

"No matter what you do, they'll find a weakness," he said. "Terrorists have the upper hand. They are more agile and they are on the offensive, so they can choose the weak spot."

The Cole's Achilles heel was a refueling stop at a port in a country wracked by unrest and instability.

Aden, near the tip of the Saudi peninsula, is at the trade crossroads between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

The Navy has used the port to refuel at least six warships during the past year, a move tied equally between the ships' need for fuel and U.S. efforts to build better diplomatic ties with the country, sources said.

Apparently, the bombers used the routine handling of mooring lines to get close enough to the Cole to move alongside either unnoticed or too quickly for crew members to react.

However, the terrorists might not have targeted the Cole specifically.

Instead, they may have just planned to strike the next U.S. warship that stopped at the port.

"Because of our global reach, we're a big target overseas," Cato's Eland said.

Defending against terrorism has been an increasingly important task for the Pentagon since a truck bomb killed 273 Marines in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983, and the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 U.S. airmen.

Nowadays, security perimeters -- marked by heavy concrete and steel barriers -- are placed hundreds of feet away from military buildings. Ports in the troubled Mideast are patrolled by heavily armed soldiers behind barbed wire and concrete.

But, Eland said, ship officers may have mistakenly thought that water also provided a barrier against terrorists.

Navy personnel are keenly aware of the danger of traveling to the Middle East, local sailors said yesterday.

"What we do is inherently dangerous," said Cmdr. Al Collins, skipper of the San Diego-based destroyer Fitzgerald. "We try and mitigate that danger by being prepared." The destroyer will head to the Persian Gulf next month for a six-month deployment.

So yesterday's attack "is at the forefront of our minds. . . . And our prayers certainly go out to the captain and the crew," Collins said.