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U.S. MILITARY NEWS

20 years after the attack on the USS Cole, memories of heroism and loss

By DAVE RESS

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | OCT 08, 2020





USS Cole

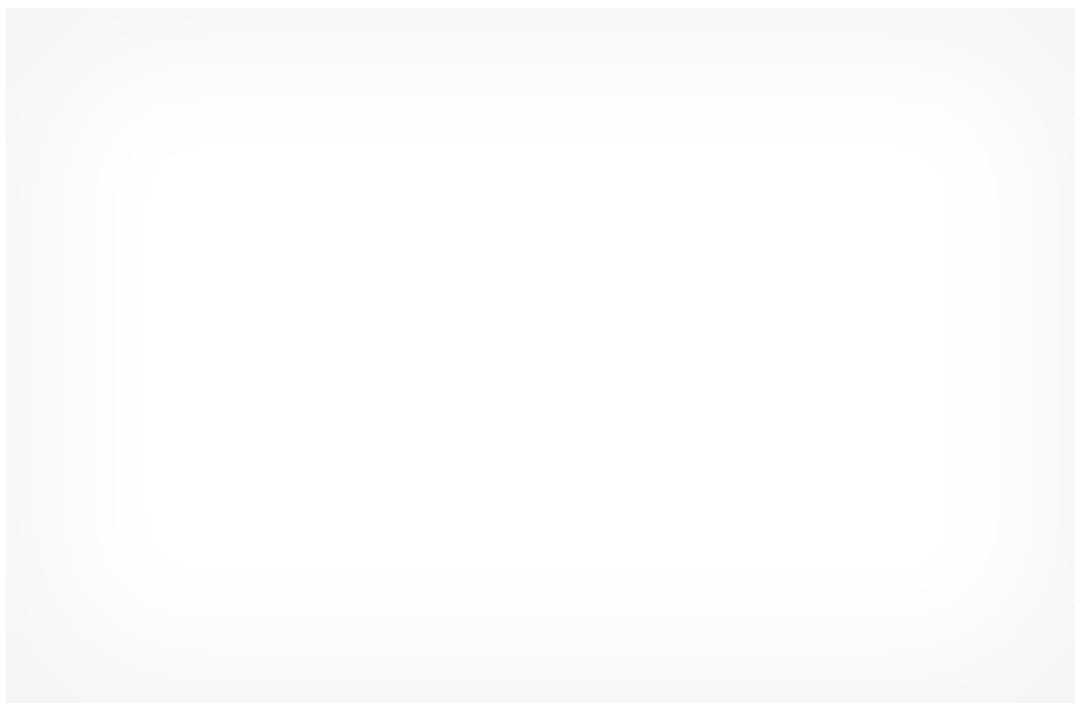
Photo taken October 12, 2000 shows the port side of the guided missile destroyer USS Cole damaged after a terrorist bomb exploded during a refueling operation in the port of Aden in Yemen. (Photo by HO / US NAVY / AFP) (HO/AFP/Getty Images)

1 / 20

It was typical steamy morning in Yemen, 20 years ago when the USS Cole eased past At-Tawahi point and the container port.

As the warship entered the harbor, machinery repairman Rick Harrison spotted a ship on its side and he didn't like how it made him feel.

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“I was with my friend Marc Nieto on the fantail and I asked Marc: ‘You have this feeling something is going to happen?’”

The Norfolk-based destroyer was headed for what was supposed to be a brief stop for refueling on the way to the Persian Gulf.

About two hours after its captain, Cmdr. Kirk Lippold, won his argument with the Yemeni pilot and made sure Cole's bow was pointed out to sea — Lippold wanted to be sure the ship could get out of port fast if necessary — a dinghy that had been hugging close to a barge coming to collect trash, suddenly broke away, heading fast and hard toward the destroyer.

It was 11:10 a.m. on Oct. 12, 2000.

The dinghy slowed, the two men on board smiled and gestured in what seemed to be a friendly way as they steered close to the destroyer's port side, headed toward the stern.

Seconds later, it exploded.

The blast

In this Oct. 15, 2000, file photo, experts in a speed boat examine the damaged hull of the USS Cole at the Yemeni port of Aden after an al-Qaida attack that killed 17 sailors. (DIMITRI MESSINIS/AP)

The blast tore a 32-by-36-foot hole in the ship's side. It lifted the 505-foot-long destroyer out of the water, pushed the deck of the crew and chief's galley up to the ceiling. Water roared into the main engine room, auxiliary machine room and a store room.

Seventeen sailors died. Thirty-nine were seriously injured. The more than 200 who survived spent days trying to find the missing, care for those who needed it, and battle desperately to keep the gravely wounded ship, listing at 20 degrees, afloat. They worked in 100-plus degree heat, with the sickening smell of blood, rotting food and fear filling the air.

"I got lucky, my back was to the blast," said Robert McTureous, then a gas turbine systems technician 2nd class, who was busy testing the fuel the destroyer was taking on. "Three of us were in the oil lab, in the blast zone. Two of us got out."

Gas Turbine System Technician-Mechanical 1st Class Margaret Lopez was facing the other way, and suffered burns over 20% of her body. She waded through waist-deep water to escape — and then swam back into the ship, searching for Ensign Andrew Triplett, who had also been in the lab.

He didn't make it.

Triplett, a Mississippian who had started his career as an enlisted man and was commissioned an officer three years earlier, was the last person Greg McDearmon, a lieutenant in the deck department, saw.

“He was a mentor to all us younger officers,” McDearmon said. “He was helping me qualify as an engineering officer of the watch ...

“The last thing he said was ‘I’ll see you in the wardroom, later.’ ”

Everything went dark

This Handout file photo taken October 12, 2000 shows the port side of the guided missile destroyer USS Cole damaged after a suspected terrorist bomb exploded during a refueling operation in the port of Aden in Yemen. (Photo by HO / US NAVY / AFP) (HO/AFP/Getty Images)

“I was walking in the midships passage, it lifted me off my feet and pushed me up against the overhead,” Harrison recalled.

Everything went dark. Thick black smoke billowed through the ship. Then the first, bloodied sailors emerged.

“I thought it’s the fuel tank, I thought maybe a missile. I wondered if another missile was coming,” Harrison said.

Harrison’s training as a fire marshal kicked in — unaware that he himself had fractures in his spine or that his knees had suffered what would turn out to be permanent, disabling injury, he led his crew-mates to the damage control center for first aid.

Then, he went in search of his firefighting gear.

Trapped

The blast threw Master Chief Sonar Technician Paul Abney out of his seat in the chief's galley. It sent a shipmate flying over his head, Smoke filled the air. Feeling his way along a wall, he found the galley exit but it was blocked. Trapped, knowing it wouldn't be long before he and his shipmates in the galley suffocated, he hammered on the bulkhead, hoping to attract attention.

He did. Fellow sailors cut a hole, allowing him and some shipmates to escape.

“The deck came up and was pushed all the way into the bulkhead. ... There were people that were crushed up against this bulkhead,” he later told the Navy's All Hands magazine.

“There were people that were still trapped in the machinery, caught in various different things,” he continued. He saw two shipmates lying in the passage way. “One, I think was already deceased and the second was struggling for breath and later did not make it.”

Senior Chief Storekeeper Joe Pelly made his way through dark, thick smoke, sparking cables and leaking fuel oil to a shipmate pinned under a mangled grill. Wedging himself between live wires and twisted metal to reach her, he organized a team to use a “jaws of life” device to get the grill off the injured sailor.

Boatswains' Mate Eric Kafka, suffering torn leg ligaments and lung damage, headed into one of the flooding compartments to lead six shipmates to safety.

“It was still arcing and sparking, but he went in anyway,” said James Parlier, the master chief hospital corpsman who also served as the Cole's command master chief.

Then he organized 50 sailors to manhandle the gangway, which normally required a crane to be moved, to get the most seriously injured off the ship

"We got the injured off in an hour and 39 minutes," Parlier said.

"I was helping the corpsman triage

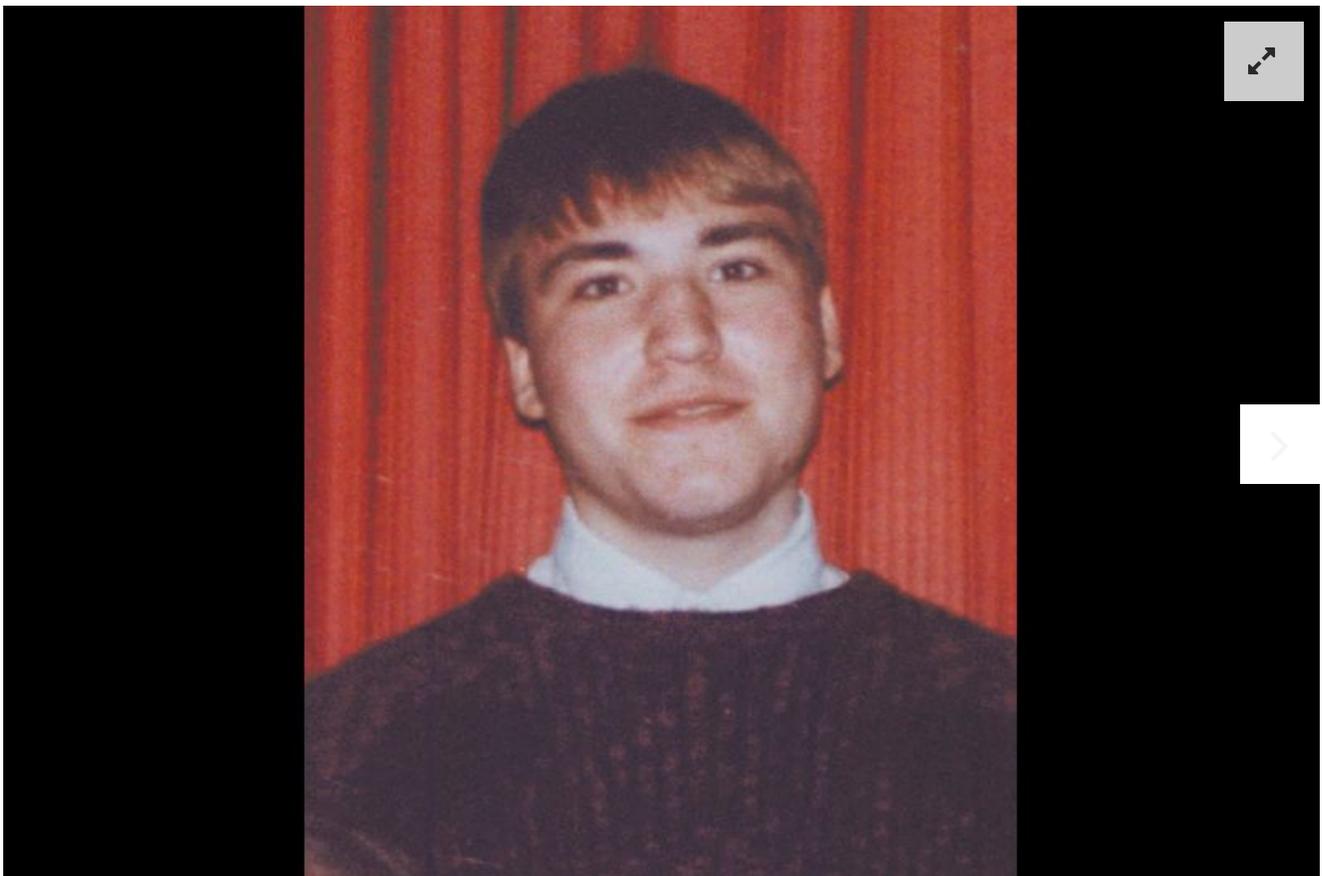
"But I put five of shipmates in body bags."

It would take nine days to recover all the of dead.

"I kept thinking about my friends, Ken Clodfelter, Marc Nieto, Pat Roy, wondering if they were ok," Harrison recalls.

None of them made it.

"I carried some of my best friends' bodies out of the ship. That was the hardest thing I ever had to do."



...ment in emergency... ...wanted to serve his country in the Navy. He'd called home a few days before the attack. "He was happy. He said, 'Dad, it's exciting. The ports are exciting. But I want to come home,'" his father remembered. The young sailor loved hunting deer and paintball and -- with a reputation at his high school, Harford Christian, as a bit of a computer geek -- had volunteered to set up a computer lab there. (AP)

Saving the ship

The damage was unimaginable. It would take more than a year at the Mississippi shipyard that built the Cole in 1996 before the ship could return to service.

Cracks in the hull went all the way down to the keel — the ship was at risk of breaking in two. The blast sliced through much of the electrical, communications and mechanical systems.

"We had to use a cell phone a colonel from the embassy gave us," Parlier said. "The battle group was 1,000 miles away."

Two days after the attack, the seal on the ship's main shaft broke and water started pouring in.

Sailors waded into the oily water, pushing mattresses and other soft material around the broken shaft, to keep the water out. But the Cole's pumps weren't able to get the water all the way from the very bottom of the hull up to the deck and out — and the water was deep enough to put the ship at risk of foundering.

"For a while, we weren't sure if we'd have to leave, if the Cole wasn't going to sink to the bottom," McDearmon recalled.

There's wasn't an obvious answer — until someone thought to try cutting a hole in the hull, to make it easier to get the water out.

And Hull Maintenance Technician First Class Chris Regal volunteered to splash over and fire up a welding torch, despite the risk of doing so in that oil-saturated water, to cut the hole.

“My teammate Martin Songer and me, we’d go compartment by compartment. Before we’d put on our (self-contained breathing apparatus), we’d take some deep breaths. We’d throw up, put it on and go in. ... There was a job to do and we did it,” Harrison said.

Tense days

The Cole came into Aden under “threat condition Bravo,” which was the second lowest on a scale of four rankings of risk.

It meant guards were posted, but under the rules of engagement, they were not to fire upon civilian vessels unless fired on first. Crew members later said they didn’t know what they could have done to prevent the attack.

And those rules held, even after the explosion, sailors reported. One told The Washington Post that when he pointed the M-60 machine gun on the Cole’s fantail at an approaching boat to warn it off, a chief petty officer ordered him to turn the gun away.

“I remember listening to the chanting on loudspeakers coming from the city, the people lining up on the pier,” Harrison said. The embassy arranged for food from a nearby hotel, but many of the sailors didn’t trust it. Instead, they managed on snacks from the ship’s stores, until other Navy vessels arrived.

It was very tense. Nobody knew if another attack was coming.

A review led by the Army’s former vice chief of staff and the retired admiral who had been commander-in-chief of U.S. Joint Forces Command found security gaps across military operations in the region. A Navy investigation noted that although some procedures in the Cole’s security plan weren’t followed, they would not have been enough to prevent the attack.

The extensive FBI investigation ultimately determined that members of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network planned and carried out the bombing. By 2008, all the defendants convicted in the attack had escaped from prison or been freed by Yemeni officials.

A Saudi Arabian citizen named Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, captured by the CIA in 2002, was charged in 2008 with responsibility for the bombing. He is awaiting trial.

Jamal al-Badawi, an al-Qaeda operative accused by the United States of helping plot the attack, was killed in January by a U.S. airstrike in Yemen.

The legacy

Robert McTureous, who lives in Alpharetta, Ga., was injured and lost several shipmates in the bombing of the destroyer Cole in Aden, Yemen. He stills finds it difficult to talk about the attack. (Stephen M. Katz)

Robert McTureous still bears scars; loud noises still make him jump — “fireworks scare the heck out of me,” he says. Harrison’s injuries prompted chronic arthritis; damage to his lungs has sent him to the hospital several times.

“The nightmares will never go away. They’re with you forever,” Harrison said.

But that’s not the big thing he hopes people will remember.

“Some people had a hard time going back into the skin of the ship,” he said. “but everybody pulled together...there’s flooding, people are missing, no power but you wouldn’t believe how people pulled together like that.”

McDearmon said he wants to be sure Americans don’t think of the Cole and its crew as victims.

“We were in combat; it wasn’t a crime, it was an act of war,” he said.

“All the training, that’s what did it ... it was tough, yeah. Going in to places where there was no power, where it was flooded, with emergency lighting or flashlights. In some parts of the ship, the smell,” McDearmon said.

“But they did it.”

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And, at the end of those three weeks, “When we left that port, the ship was upright. We cleaned it, all the soot. We changed out the colors, after the last of our deceased shipmates left, New colors, not any that had been stained and torn in the attack,” he said.

They’d kept the old, tattered flag up, and signed a floodlight on it overnight, to send one message —

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working to say their ship.

And they hoisted the new one to send a different message.

"We wanted everyone to see that this is a warship and we're going to depart here in as strong a posture as we can."

Dave Ress, 757-247-4535, dress@dailypress.com

Dave Ress



Dave Ress covers the military. He's been a reporter in Virginia since 1990 and before that for Reuters in Canada, Britain and Africa. Dave has a PhD in history from the University of New England (Australia) and is the author of 4 books on U.S. and Australian history.

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'A part of me died when he died': Families recall loved ones killed on USS Cole

By **DAVE RESS**
DAILY PRESS | OCT 09, 2020





Cole Families

ADEN, YEMEN (October 18, 2000) - U.S. Navy and Marine Corps security personnel patrol past the damaged U.S. Navy destroyer USS Cole (DDG 67) following the October 12, 2000, terrorist bombing attack on the ship in Aden, Yemen. Security personnel established checkpoints and searched incoming vehicles for contraband and explosives while the ship was prepared for its journey back to the United States. (LYLE BAKER/US NAVY)

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Sarah Gauna Esquivel remembers the day her 19-year-old first-born, Tim, headed off to Naval Station Great Lakes for boot camp.

“I’d just married, and he told my husband to take care of me. Then he looked at me and said: ‘He’s a keeper, mom,’” she says.

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It’s harder to remember when he came home.

“We buried him three times,” she says. The first time was two weeks after the terrorist attack on USS Cole, which killed her son and 16 shipmates 20 years ago.

A few weeks later, the Navy gave her Timothy Lee Gauna's ashes. She gave them to Pastor Russ Mills, who had known her and Tim all of Tim's life, and who just a few weeks ago, promised to travel with her to Norfolk for a memorial service on the 20th anniversary of the attack. He died of COVID-19 before he could.

Still later, she got word that additional remains had been found, and were buried at sea, in the ancient naval tradition.

She's crying as she says she hasn't shared that story much.

"A part of me died when he died," she says.

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A heart-shaped wreath

Every Valentine's Day from 2001 on, Mona Gunn and her late husband Lou, a Navy veteran, would make the long drive up to Arlington Cemetery from Virginia Beach to lay a heart-shaped wreath on the grave of their second-oldest son, Cherone. He was just 21 when he died in the attack on USS Cole.

Valentine's Day was his birthday. His family and friends often felt that birthday had blessed him with a particularly happy, loving personality.

Shortly after he finished at Great Lakes in March, 2000, and before joining the crew of the Cole, he had spent most of that July visiting aunts and uncles and school friends from his days at Kempsville High School.

There were lots of visits.

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"He said: 'This is my first deployment, Mom, you're going to miss me and I'll miss you, but I'll be back,'" Mona Gunn remembers.

"He'd head out saying: 'I'll be back, I'm going out to say my goodbyes.'"

First ship

The Cole was also Tim Gauna's first ship. Just before posting there that summer, he had a few days leave and spent it back home, in Ennis, Texas.

"We spent the time together, watching movies, eating pizza," Sarah says.

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But sea duty loomed, and Tim wasn't really looking forward to deploying.

"I think he had a feeling something was going to happen," she says. "He told me, maybe if I break a leg, I won't have to go. I said: 'Think of it like a vacation you couldn't afford, the memories you'll come back with.'"

Like many young Americans, Tim joined the Navy in hopes of finding a path to college. His goal was to go to the University of Texas and study computer science,

high school.

“I was a single mom, he knew we couldn’t afford that,” Sarah says. “He knew I had to work, he always understood — I had to miss some of his games ...”

She’s crying again.

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“He was so responsible ... he’d help look after his younger brothers and sisters,” she says. “He was a real ‘Yes, ma’am. No, ma’am. Yes, sir. No, sir.’ kind of kid. That’s the way I brought him up.”

When he called his mom the weekend before the attack, he commiserated about the Longhorns' stunning loss to rival Oklahoma — the score was 63-14 — and joked that he would need to throw away the tape because the Cole was full of OU fans who were sure to give him a hard time.

He said he couldn’t tell her where the Cole was headed, but said she’d know if she watched the news, and griped a bit about a schedule change that had him eating lunch at 2 p.m.

The newness of a first deployment

Cherone Gunn’s calls home were filled with questions about the strange new world of a Navy ship on a deployment and lots of answers and good advice from his dad, remembering his first cruise.

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Cherone didn’t seem worried about the dangerous waters into which the Cole was headed.

On his last call home, he told his mom he'd just finished with mess cranking — the chore all newly assigned sailors take on, helping the ship's cooks serve and clean up.

He would die in the Cole's galley. That's where the bomb-laden boat that attacked the Cole struck the destroyer.

But from what his shipmates later told his mother, Cherone didn't need to be there.

He was done with cranking. But when on that never-popular duty, his shipmates remembered his cheerful spirit and efficient help — perhaps a legacy of his days as a junior at Kempsville High in the hospitality-catering cooperative education program and happy afternoons working at a nearby Holiday Inn. He had loved the part of his job at the hotel driving the airport shuttle, ferrying flight crews and pilots to and from the airport, and it had won him much good will and many smiles.

On the Cole, too, the cooks liked him a lot.

“They'd tell him, ‘C'mon back here, have some food with us,’” Mona Gunn said. “I think that's where he was that day.”

That fateful lunchtime

On that dreadful Tuesday morning, with reports that the boat-bomb that hit Cole struck it next to the galley, remembering that mild complaint about a late lunch schedule would give Sarah Gauna Esquivel a reed of hope through six agonizing days.

It wasn't until Oct. 18 that that hope vanished. That's when Tim was found by his shipmates.

Still later, a shipmate — the Cole's crew were a close-knit group and stay in touch — told her Tim had just gotten up from the galley table to fetch some pineapple for himself and a friend when the bomb went off.

“I keep thinking, if only he hadn't got up, he might be alive,” she says.

“And then I think he wasn’t only my child. He was God’s.”

A new goal, a continuing commitment

It was in those last few months before enlisting, during Cherone Gunn’s adventure of trying a new city — Atlanta — far from the familiar neighborhoods of home, that a new life goal took shape.

He was staying with his mom’s youngest brother, enjoying being hero-worshiped by a 5-year-old cousin, still not certain if one of the many colleges in Atlanta was for him, when he picked up work as a security guard.

It really seemed to click, his mom says. Cherone decided he wanted to be a police officer — maybe a state trooper.

And he knew that military service could be a leg up. The Navy was a natural for the son of a 21-year Navy veteran. His dad urged him to try.

He went off to boot camp in January, 2000. His parents were there in a chilly Illinois March to see him graduate; he spent the next few months at Great Lakes, studying to be a signalman.

“He was excited when he got the Cole. He was coming back home,” his mom recalls.

Mona Gunn says she’s luckier than some of the moms and dads and spouses of the victims. Cherone was among the first four fatalities identified, and she was spared days of waiting that others faced.

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But his death left a hole in her heart. It took years before she came to understand that other Gold Star mothers might share that pain — and that she, too, could help others who lost their children by joining the 92-year-old American Gold Star Mothers association. She organized the nonprofit's Hampton Roads chapter and this summer finished a term as the national group's president — the first African American to serve.

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“I think the most important thing we want is that people don't forget,” she says.

One who hasn't is the little 5-year-old boy who 20 years ago, looked up to his cousin, Cherone.

“Christian enlisted in the Navy in 2016; he said he wanted to honor Cherone and he wanted to finish the service Cherone had started and wasn't able to finish,” Mona Gunn says.

“He’s just re-enlisted, too,” she adds. “And in his first hitch, he already made (Petty Officer) 2nd class.”

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Dave Ress



Dave Ress covers the military. He's been a reporter in Virginia since 1990 and before that for Reuters in Canada, Britain and Africa. Dave has a PhD in history from the University of New England (Australia) and is the author of 4 books on U.S. and Australian history.

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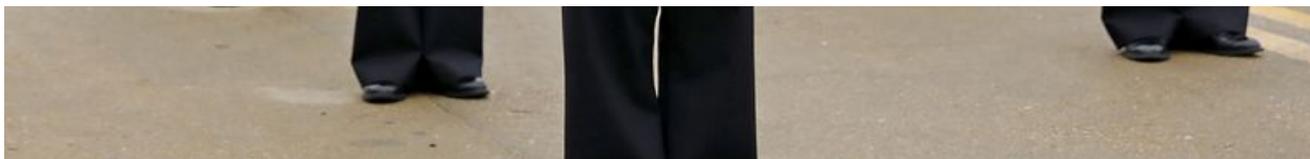
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"Never underestimate our resolve." 20 years later, the USS Cole's legacy continues to inspire

By DAVE RESS
DAILY PRESS | OCT 12, 2020





USS Cole 20th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony

Sailors of the USS Cole bow their heads during a benediction following a remembrance ceremony commemorating the 20th anniversary of the attack on USS Cole Monday morning October 12, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

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NORFOLK — Two decades after the attack that cost the lives of 17 sailors, the legacy of USS Cole lives on — and Senior Chief Will Merchen has proof.

He was a damage controlman on the Cole on that Oct. 12 in Aden, Yemen, his first deployment. He and his shipmates kept the destroyer afloat after a suicide bomb nearly tore the ship in two.

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In February, he was back. Merchen is now an inspector with Afloat Training Group Atlantic, responsible for seeing if sailors are hitting their marks on damage control tasks. In February, his job was to see how the 2020 crew of the Cole was doing.

“I inspect a lot of ships. And I can always tell when I’m looking at the Cole — they’re really on it,” he said. “I know they’re aware of what happened and they are that much more focused,”

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the close-knit Gold Star families who gather every year to remember — and to see that the legacy of Oct. 12, 2000, remains alive.

As the ship's bell tolled for each of the Cole's lost 17, a sailor from the destroyer's current ship's company solemnly read out his or her name and hometown. Behind them, the Cole itself, its crew lined up in dress blues on every deck, snapped a salute. The ship's rifle squad fired a three-volley salute.

Cmdr. Edward Pledger, current captain of the Cole, told the families and members of the old crew that the 17 golden stars on the bulkhead by the ship's mess line are kept polished and shining — and continue to inspire his own shipmates today.

"The story of USS Cole is one of remarkable heroism, exceptional toughness and fierce determination," said Adm. Christopher Grady, currently commander of the U.S. Fleet Forces Command, but in 2003, the captain who brought a rebuilt Cole back into active duty.

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Some of his shipmates that year were sailors who lived through the attack — sailors who insisted on deploying again with the Cole.

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He said the way the Cole's sailors swung into action to rescue shipmates and save their ship should be a reminder: "a lesson that al-Qaeda missed: never underestimate our resolve."

Remembering sacrifice and resolution was really the point, said retired Adm. Rob Natter, recalling walking the decks of the terribly damaged Cole, and — his voice breaking — how isolated the Cole's sailors were in that distant port, unsure when or if another attack was coming, as well as how the Navy and the Hampton Roads community rallied round to support sailors and their families.

"Cole answered the call that day. They answered the call to general quarters. They answered the call to duty," Natter said.

"And after two backbreaking, sweltering weeks, they got Cole underway, sending a clear unmistakable message ... she left with her battle ensign flying high and our national anthem blaring ... everyone in and around Aden Harbor knew that Cole was coming back," he said.

Dave Ress



Dave Ress covers the military. He's been a reporter in Virginia since 1990 and before that for Reuters in Canada, Britain and Africa. Dave has a PhD in history from the University of New England (Australia) and is the author of 4 books on U.S. and Australian history.

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By **DARLEEN RAMBERHAN**

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