

Officials question basis for Iraqi pilot's attack of U.S. ship

From Associated Press reports

On Tuesday the Pentagon raised the death toll to 37 in the missile attack on the USS Stark as White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker asked why a "trigger happy" Iraqi pilot launched a deadly missile into the Stark's crew quarters.

"I think we should understand that free transit on the high seas and the Persian Gulf . . . is absolutely essential to the vital interest of the United States and the rest of the free world," Baker said on the NBC-TV "Today" show.

"I would certainly like to know why a trigger-happy pilot decided

to fire on the basis of radar signals. Why wasn't there more identification?" Baker asked.

Pentagon sources said the American-guided missile frigate Stark had at least one minute's warning that a missile had been fired by an Iraqi warplane, but it does not appear that the ship tried to shoot down the missile or the

plane.

Sources also disclosed that the Iraqi fighter believed to be responsible for the attack was under surveillance by a U.S.-manned AWACS early warning plane at the time of the attack. There was some confusion as to whether one or two Iraqi planes had been involved.

In a speech to graduating high school seniors from the Chattanooga, Tenn. area, President Reagan declared Tuesday that the U.S. military forces had been told to defend themselves. He added, "This tragedy must never happen again and we are going to do what must be done to keep the Persian Gulf open."



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