

# THE DAYBOOK

A PUBLICATION OF THE HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL MUSEUM

USS COLE SPECIAL EDITION





# THE DAYBOOK

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Cover: USS Cole (DDG 67) September 2000. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

Right: During the first two months of USS Cole's deployment, the crew conducted chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear attack response drills. They also participated in the Damage Control Olympics, a competitive but fun way to test the crew's skills in necessary activities like firefighting, pipe patching, shoring, and caring for wounded Sailors. This training helped prepare Cole's crew for the attack on October 12. (Courtesy of James Parlier)



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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Rear Admiral Samuel J. Cox USN (Ret.)



Since the dawn of recorded history, city-states and nations that expected to survive would station troops or send patrols to their farthest frontiers to provide early warning of enemy invasion and buy time to mobilize and meet the threat. On October 12, 2000, the guided missile destroyer USS *Cole* (DDG 67), in a port on the far side of the globe, did exactly that. Seventeen Sailors died and 37 were wounded, and the ship was grievously damaged as a result of a determined enemy surprise suicide boat attack in Aden, Yemen.

But in their sacrifice, the crew of the *Cole* gave our nation eleven months of unambiguous warning that we were at war with Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, or certainly that they were at war with us. Others may debate whether that warning was properly heeded, but that in no way reflects on the valor and sacrifice of the crew who saved their ship from damage that would have sunk any other warship of that size in any other navy in the world, and who brought *Cole* out of Aden harbor with the massive battle flag of the United States flying high. The crew of the *Cole* who made the ultimate sacrifice must never be forgotten.

USS *Cole* was not a random target. Al Qaeda chose to attack a warship flying the flag of the United States precisely because of the symbolism of such an attack. Previously, bin Laden had issued two declarations of war (Fatwas) against the United States (in 1996 and 1998) that, from his perspective, had been ignored. His attacks against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 resulted in intense criticism of bin Laden, even in extremist circles, due to the extremely high death and injury toll amongst innocent civilians, many of them Muslims. The American response to the embassy bombings came in the form of Tomahawk cruise missile strikes from U.S. Navy ships against al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan (and a suspected chemical weapons precursor plant in Sudan). The physical damage

against the primitive camp infrastructure in Afghanistan was easily repaired. The psychological impact was more profound, as al Qaeda's leadership understood just how close they came to being hit and killed. Nevertheless, the strike fell well short of bin Laden's intent for the embassy bombings, which was to provoke such a grossly disproportionate overreaction by the United States that would galvanize the Muslim world to the final jihad against the United States and the infidel world.

Bin Laden chose to attack a warship to demonstrate to the world that he was not afraid of the United States and to provoke the United States by flagrantly attacking a symbol of America's might and pride. He chose a military target to preclude Muslim casualties. He chose a warship because warships had attacked him, and because he found the presence of American warships in a port in his ancestral homeland of Yemen to be particularly offensive. He chose the method of attack, suicide bombing, to ensure the effectiveness of the attack and to demonstrate to the world the resolve of those committed to his cause, who would go willingly to their deaths to accomplish their mission. By attacking a U.S. Navy warship, bin Laden intended for there to be absolutely no ambiguity that when he "declared war" he meant it.

There are many pejorative words that would accurately describe those who attacked the *Cole*, but "coward" would not be one I would choose to use. The men on the boat that came alongside *Cole* knowingly and willingly went to their deaths for a cause they believed in. Nor would I describe the Sailors on *Cole* as "victims." They were U.S. Navy Sailors doing their duty in one battle in a long war against an enemy of the United States. Those who have read about the kamikazes at Okinawa will know that even against an overwhelming technologically and numerically superior adversary, an enemy that is determined to die for their cause will get in blows. *Cole* took such a blow. But I do not ascribe to the view that the attack was "successful." When the smoke cleared, the *Cole* was still there, afloat, with the American flag still flying. The U.S. Navy continued to operate in the region. The *Cole* would be repaired and returned to the fight, and ultimately Osama bin Laden would be dead under the guns of U.S. Navy SEALs. But let us never forget the sacrifice of the crew of USS *Cole*.

*Admiral Samuel J. Cox is the Director of the Naval History and Heritage Command in Washington, DC.*

## "The War on Terror Started with Us:" Attack on USS *Cole* (DDG 67)

By Laura Orr, Director of Education

On October 12, 2000, two al Qaeda terrorists carried out a successful attack on USS *Cole* (DDG 67), propelling the United States into a decades-long sequence of military actions that came to be known as the War on Terror. The bombing killed seventeen Sailors and wounded thirty-seven others. At the time, few American citizens understood this act as a declaration of war. Not until September 11, 2001, when nineteen al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four American passenger planes, did Americans fully understand the scope of this global war.

The attack on USS *Cole* was America's first "battle" in the War on Terror. It came suddenly and without warning. America's hidden enemy—al Qaeda—expected to claim victory with USS *Cole*'s sinking in a Yemeni harbor. But that didn't happen. Despite the damage and the tragic loss of life, *Cole*'s indefatigable crewmembers saved their vessel from sinking. Their training, skill, and perseverance prevented their ship from becoming a rusty monument to al Qaeda's success. In the end, this battle was no victory for the terrorists.

Though *Cole* survived, the seventeen young Sailors who died represent some of the first military casualties in the War on Terror. Today, more than two decades later, many Americans are still awaiting an answer about the legacy of that war. Have all the sacrifices—those killed on the *Cole* and those killed in subsequent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq—been worth it?

From 1994 to 1996, shipyard workers at Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, Mississippi, completed hull number 67, the future USS *Cole*, a member of the *Arleigh Burke*-class of guided missile destroyers. Commissioned in 1996, *Cole* was named in honor of Sergeant Darrell S. Cole, a Marine killed in action at the Battle of Iwo Jima. In August 2000, the destroyer went to sea on its first deployment with approximately 300 crewmembers. Assigned to the USS *George Washington*

USS *Cole* after the October 12, 2000 attack. (Department of Defense)





USS *Cole's* damaged hull is shown clearly in this closeup. (Courtesy of James Parlier)

(CVN 73) battle group, *Cole* operated in the Mediterranean, and then in the Middle East, conducting “presence operations,” that is, routine patrols in dangerous areas of the world where naval presence served as a tool of diplomacy. Primarily, USS *Cole* served as the battle group’s air defense commander, which meant the ship’s crew coordinated all available assets to defend the task force from air attack. In early October, instead of following the battle group into the European theater of operations, the Navy transferred *Cole* to Naval Forces Central Command. Once in Bahrain, Central Command planned to brief *Cole's* crew on a new set of orders.

But before USS *Cole* could reach Bahrain, it had to refuel. Naval Forces Central Command’s area of responsibility covered 2.5 million square miles of ocean, but it possessed only one oiler for at-sea refueling. Unable to make contact with the oiler, *Cole* had to stop at a local port. *Cole* had several choices, but security concerns at one of them, Djibouti, caused the Navy’s intelligence analysts to suggest that *Cole* refuel at Aden, Yemen. At the time, Aden seemed like the safest choice. Twenty-six U.S. ships had refueled there since 1997. Over email, *Cole's* commanding officer, Commander Kirk Lippold, discussed the situation with several officers in Central Command. His correspondents had been among those twenty-six ships that

had previously refueled there. They told him not to worry.

Lippold and his crew did not know that al Qaeda was lying in wait. Formed in the 1980s in the midst of the Afghan Civil War, al Qaeda consisted of extremist Muslims who advocated jihad, the murder of Westerners whom they blamed for their nation’s intractable political and economic troubles. One of al Qaeda’s leaders, Osama bin Laden, believed that an attack against a U.S. Navy warship would serve as an excellent opening salvo for his group’s religious crusade.

Earlier in 2000, al Qaeda targeted USS *The Sullivans* (DDG 68),

*Cole's* sister ship. On January 3, a small boat crewed by al Qaeda terrorists charged at *The Sullivans* with the intent of sinking it in a suicide attack. Thankfully, the skiff—which was filled to the brim with explosives—sank after casting off. The crew of *The Sullivans* never knew how close they came to being bin Laden’s first victim. The failure of the attack on *The Sullivans* disappointed al Qaeda’s leaders. Bin Laden intended it to be a major propaganda event. His operatives planned to film the explosion and use the footage for recruiting purposes. Sadly, none of these details or any other whispered threats received by the CIA or by naval intelligence were passed along to *Cole*. The ship’s crew entered Yemen mostly unaware of the danger that lurked there.

On October 12, USS *Cole* pulled into the Gulf of Aden. The crew waited for over an hour for a harbor pilot to guide the ship to the refueling pier, but once guided, they hooked up and began refueling. Lippold expected the process to take most of the day. *Cole* required a full tank and the Yemeni pumps moved slowly. As the ship received its fuel, a local logistics agent offered *Cole's* officers a cheap price for garbage removal. They agreed to the agent’s terms and he told them to expect the arrival of several skiffs to remove the garbage.

Unfortunately, one of those skiffs was not a garbage scow at all, but a small fiberglass suicide craft filled

with C-4, piloted by Hassan Said Al-Khamri and Ibrahim Al-Thawar. One Sailor, Fireman Raymond Mooney, saw it approaching. His officers had told him to expect garbage skiffs, so, despite the suicide boat’s high speed, Mooney raised no alarm. He was surprised, however, when Al-Khamri and Al-Thawar looked up at him and waved as a last gesture meant to keep *Cole's* crew at ease. Suddenly, the small boat exploded. Mooney was thrown to the ground by the blast, receiving facial wounds.

The thunderous explosion occurred at 11:18 A.M., local time. Fire Controlman Third Class Christopher Hagad, who was located in the ship’s Combat System Maintenance Center, remembered, “It sounded like a big hammer to metal. It was a bang, and I felt the entire floor go up. It went up and then came back down just as suddenly. The moment I felt us stop going down, that’s when the lights went out and then I watched the alarm panel go out too. Then it was just nothing but battle lanterns [emergency lighting] and silence.” Crewmen were tossed around like lifeless ragdolls. Engineman Third Class John Thompson, who was attending a meeting in the ship’s training room, added, “I got thrown up against the wall. . . . When that happened, it felt like time stopped for a moment.”

The mess deck became the explosion’s epicenter. A huge, 40-foot-wide hole was ripped in the port side of the ship, the deck was torn to pieces, and kitchen appliances smashed into one another, crushing Sailors under their

weight. Sailors lining up for lunch or those working in the galley were instantly killed or injured. When he reached the scene later that day, Commander Lippold remembered: “Just beyond the door was total devastation: the heavy metal deck, the floor of the mess line, where sailors had been sliding trays and getting servings of chicken fajita, had curled upward at about a sixty-degree angle, jamming into the overhead.” Through the giant hole, Lippold could see the harbor and floating debris. He recalled, “What had been the galley, the kitchen, was no longer recognizable, and the deck—the floor right above main engine room 1 and the general workshop—had violently fractured into four sections.”

Quickly, *Cole's* Sailors moved to contain the damage. First, they tended to the wounded. Command Master Chief James Parlier went to the aft battle dressing station, finding twenty wounded Sailors under the care of their fellow shipmates. In different areas of the ship, hospital corpsmen stabilized the wounded, directing ambulatory Sailors to carry them to the ship’s deck for transportation to Aden’s hospital.

While some Sailors focused on assisting the wounded, others began the long and difficult process of saving the ship. Electrician’s Mate Second Class Kristofer

After the attack, most Sailors slept whenever and wherever they could. Here, you see Sailors talking, relaxing, and sleeping on the ship’s flight deck. (Courtesy of James Parlier)



Dettloff remembered his first look at the damaged section:

*It was unrecognizable, in all honesty. It looked like somebody had taken a really dirty piece of tinfoil and just kind of crinkled it all up. That's the only way I can really describe it. We kept going [down the starboard passageway], went past the Doc's office, and then the exit to the mess hall was near there. That's the only moment in those first days I kind of lost it a little bit. One of our shipmates was there under a blanket, and the gravity of the situation just kind of took over. I ducked into the engineering office, which was right past that, to just kind of gather my thoughts. . . . I gathered my thoughts and then went into CCS [Central Control Station]. It was organized chaos. People were everywhere all at once, but everything was getting taken care of, everything was getting done.*

Over the next several days, Sailors got generators running and they removed oil-filled water from the ship's interior. Three ships arrived to assist: HMS *Marlborough* (F233), USS *Hawes* (FFG 53), and USS *Donald Cook* (DDG 75). Together, the combined crews provided technical assistance, regular watches, and food. But even with the additional manpower, *Cole* nearly went under. On the night

of October 14, the pumps broke and the ship began sinking. Undaunted, two hundred Sailors formed a bucket brigade, establishing a line running from the flight deck to the engine room. Command Master Chief Parlier remembered, "You can only imagine, in your mind, seeing all these Sailors lined up down into the skin of the ship, passing this water back to try to bail her out." Amazingly, the bucket brigade saved the day.

To get the pumps working—so that the bucket brigade would no longer be necessary—Hull Technician Second Class Chris Regal took the lead in deploying an unusual damage control method. He cut a hole in the ship's hull to pump out water from the engine room. These actions kept the water level from rising. Commander Lippold credited his crew for their quick-thinking and perseverance. He remembered, "They had kept the ship from sinking. They were not going to give up the ship—their ship."

While damage control continued, other Sailors braved the mangled maze of metal to recover their fallen shipmates. Five of the bodies, within easy reach, were found almost immediately. However, the bodies of twelve others were crushed under the collapsed mess deck. It took hours of back-breaking labor to remove the debris. When the FBI's evidence collection team arrived onsite to investigate the cause of the attack, they assisted in the difficult process of extricating the human remains. It wasn't until Thursday, October 19, seven days after the attack, when the last victim was removed and transported to shore with an honor guard.

*Cole's* crew spent the next week continuing to stabilize the ship for transport on the back of M/V *Blue Marlin*, a semi-submersible heavy lift ship hired to carry the destroyer back to the United States. On Sunday, October 29, Yemeni tugboats came alongside the battered warship and towed the ship into open water, where M/V *Blue Marlin* took over. *Cole* returned to its birthplace, Ingalls Shipbuilding. It took more than a year to repair all of the ship's damage.

After several days of searching, the final four Sailors were found on the mess decks. Here, they await their final trip home. (Courtesy of James Parlier)

USS *Cole's* mess line now has seventeen gold stars on the deck, representing those Sailors who lost their lives in the attack. (U.S. Navy)

In April 2002, it returned to its homeport, Norfolk, Virginia. On August 20, 2003, USS *Cole* embarked on its second deployment under the command of Commander Christopher Grady.

During the subsequent investigation into the *Cole* incident, the U.S. Navy took no punitive action against any member of the crew, although the investigation noted that *Cole's* security had been insufficient during the refueling. Naturally, this verdict caused bitterness among *Cole's* officers, who maintained they were not sufficiently informed of the danger in Yemen. Initially, intelligence analysts were certain that al Qaeda had conducted this attack, but they refused to place official blame on any organization. Eleven months later, the culprits' identity became certain. On September 11, al Qaeda conducted its most successful attack when nineteen hijackers flew three passenger planes into the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon. Hijackers crashed the fourth plane, possibly targeting the U.S. Capitol, in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after the passengers attempted to regain control. Ultimately, 2,977 civilians were killed in the 9/11 attack. Everywhere, Americans watched their televisions intently, coming to grips with the fact that their nation was attacked by an unexpected and largely unknown foe. But for the crew of *Cole*, 9/11 had been America's second battle in the War on Terror. A year earlier, they had fought the first engagement. As Commander Lippold remembered, "The war on terror started with us." Supporting Lippold's point, the 9/11 Commission Report noted, "While most counterterrorism officials quickly pointed the finger [for the *Cole* attack] at al Qaeda, they never received any sort of definitive judgment from the CIA or the FBI that al Qaeda was responsible that they would need before launching military operations." Lacking "definitive judgment," the United States launched no retaliatory strikes. Those finally came on October 7, 2001, when the United States invaded Afghanistan, commencing Operation Enduring Freedom.

Each October, veterans and family members return to Naval Station Norfolk to commemorate the attack. They visit the *Cole* memorial, erected in 2001. Whenever USS *Cole* is in port, they visit the mess line, which has seventeen



gold stars inlaid on the deck, representing the Sailors who lost their lives. This attack will never be forgotten by those who experienced it, and hopefully, it will never be forgotten by those who come after.

The attack on USS *Cole* is regarded by some as a tragedy because al Qaeda terrorists killed seventeen U.S. Sailors for the price of only two suicide bombers. However, the story of *Cole* might also rightly be considered an American victory since al Qaeda failed in its mission to sink the ship. In 2021, more than two decades after the attack, the legacy of the USS *Cole* attack is still impossible



to determine. It may be recognized as the first engagement in the War on Terror. But the war's outcome remains murky. Only the passage of additional time will reveal the answer. As the full history of the war has yet to be written, the attack on USS *Cole* will be remembered because it compelled

Americans to place more immediate value on national security. The attack tested the training and resilience of the United States Navy. The loss of seventeen Sailors reminded all Americans of the price we sometimes pay for the security we value. The nation remembers:

**Kenneth Eugene Clodfelter, Hull Maintenance Technician Second Class**

**Richard Dean Costelow, Electronics Technician Chief Petty Officer**

**Lakeina Monique Francis, Mess Management Specialist Seaman**

**Timothy Lee Gauna, Information Systems Technician Seaman**

**Cherone Louis Gunn, Signalman Seaman**

**James Rodrick McDaniels, Seaman**

**Marc Ian Nieto, Engineman Second Class**

**Ronald Scott Owens, Electronic Warfare Technician Second Class**

**Lakiba Nicole Palmer, Seaman**

**Joshua Langdon Parlett, Engineman Fireman**

**Patrick Howard Roy, Fireman**

**Kevin Shawn Rux, Electronic Warfare Technician First Class**

**Ronchester Manangan Santiago, Mess Management Specialist Third Class**

**Timothy Lamont Saunders, Operations Specialist Second Class**

**Gary Graham Swenchonis, Jr., Fireman**

**Andrew Triplett, Lieutenant (junior grade)**

**Craig Bryan Wibberley, Seaman**

## “The Worst Nightmare Any Sailor Could Have:” The Command Master Chief Experiences the USS *Cole* Attack



I saw, was him coming out of there. XO [executive officer, LCDR John Chris Peterschmidt] got on the phone; it was dead. Told everybody to go to general quarters by word of mouth. All this technology, billion-dollar warship, nothing. Five-inch gun doesn't work, missiles, tubes are all shifted, instantly took on water into the main machine room spaces, supply was flooded. . . . Two of the three generators were

CMC Parlier's office aboard ship after the attack took place. Note the plate dispenser from the mess line, which has been rammed into his office by the blast. (Courtesy of William Merchen)

In January 2021, Hampton Roads Naval Museum staff members conducted an oral history with Command Master Chief James Parlier, USN (ret.). Parlier joined the Navy in April 1978. He served over 20 years as a hospital corpsman before becoming a command master chief. CMC Parlier retired from the Navy in 2006. In this excerpt, Parlier describes the scene after the explosion. A former hospital corpsman, Parlier helped to care for wounded crewmembers.

*Caution: As with many first-person accounts that address a major historical event, please note that this account contains graphic content.*

**Question:** Tell me about October 12, 2000. What did you experience when the attack initially occurred?

**Answer:** Well, the blast happened. You feel an 8,500-ton ship lift up out of its port side, I could see bulkheads moving, you could feel the energy of the blast. I remember Petty Officer [Fred] Ings coming out of the boatswain office, screaming. He had apparently been leaning his chair against the bulkhead, and it injured him. They always trained us that if you take a hit, be careful when you're leaning on bulkheads, because the energy can travel right through your body. That's what happened to him. That was the first injury



On October 29, 2000, semi-submersible heavy lift ship M/V *Blue Marlin* picked up USS *Cole* and transported the ship back to drydock in Pascagoula, Mississippi. (U.S. Navy)





A gunner's mate is on duty, manning the gun and watching for further threats, while some of the crew relaxes in the background. (Courtesy of James Parlier)

just totally messed up. All four main engines were damaged. Believe it or not, the shaft was bent, the port shaft. It even bent the masts—that's the energy that went through this ship. It ripped the tiles off the SPYs radar, just to kind of give you a visual mentally. Reports were from shoreside that there was a fireball, but by the grace of God, when she settled back in the water, the water displaced over the ship was enough to put the fire out. You know, you had ruptured fuel tanks, lost potable water tanks. It was the worst nightmare any Sailor could have. The ship was now pretty much non-functional in a lot of ways. She was still floating, and of course we had dead Sailors and injured Sailors from that as well, because of the energy of that blast traveling pretty much amidships internally almost halfway through the ship. If you ever see the photos, you can actually see the damage from main deck topside all the way down to the bilge, and there's even fissures or cracks going forward and aft towards the hull, or the bottom of the hull. So she could've split in half.

But we didn't know what we were fighting, and we didn't know if there was going to be another attack. Well, DC1 [Ernesto] Garcia mans his repair

party, and I go over to the aft BDS [battle dressing station], and there's 20 or so casualties there already, and we're using the laundry room as a staging area. We didn't realize that we were the only part of the ship that had power still, had lighting. You could imagine what it was like fighting the ship in the dark. The main repair locker was taken out. They had to shift it, move it out

on the flight deck. Doc's main BDS was non-operable, so only the forward and aft battle dress stations could be used, and still to triage and treat patients, you had to do it outside

Hospital Corpsman Third Class Tayinikia Campbell (top right), the junior corpsman aboard USS Cole, takes a break with her shipmates. (Courtesy of James Parlier)



Electronics Warfare Technician Third Class Johann Gokool, wounded during the attack, is shown here with Commander Kirk Lippold, Command Master Chief James Parlier, and Lieutenant Commander John Chris Peterschmidt. (Courtesy of James Parlier)

of those battle dress stations or topside. It was amazing, preparing the ship for this, the amount of training we did, and the way we did it, prepared this crew. I also really attribute that to our captain, and his drive and getting her as ready as possible for this deployment. . . . Those things made the difference really, in our crew helping save their ship and their shipmates.

So, Baby Doc [junior corpsman, Hospital Corpsman Third Class Tayinikia Campbell] shows up—I don't know if our IDC [independent duty corpsman], which is Moser, Cliff Moser, we didn't know if he was alive yet. She hadn't seen him. We got word that there was more severely injured, obviously, toward the galley and mess decks. Some of those were already being extricated and treated, and Baby Doc was going to take over. We had fractured jaws. The way the crew put the battle dressings on for those, it was amazing. I remember Petty Officer Hancock, FC2 [Douglas] Hancock, his jaw was hanging out. He was still trying to talk. I was telling him to shut up: "We have to watch you here, watch your airway, breathing,

circulation." There were people temporarily blinded by the blast. I did two tours with the Marine Corps as a corpsman, so I could smell the explosives. It was similar to Semtex, something like that. It was definitely a distinct smell that I had smelled out in the field with the Marines when they set off explosives. . . .

I started seeing, as they're bringing people out aft from that blast area, that there were chiefs. And I'm going, "Oh my god," so not only was it the galley and the mess decks, but the chief's mess took a hit. . . . I make my way up toward the galley, and before I get there, there's a log room, which has got a regular door on it, and there's Craig Wibberly, and he's mortally wounded. His right side didn't even look human. Some of the stretcher bearers there, they didn't know what to do because it was well beyond anything they were trained for. He was in horrific shape, man. I got down there and this young man was fighting for his life. They took the door off the hinges, there were no stretchers. They were either inaccessible or had been all used. Put Craig on it, took him out the fantail. He was my focus right then; he just—and I guess because he was popular on the ship as a seaman, but we had just did a career development board on Craig. . . . I started CPR on him, got a mouthful of blood. You look past all the injuries. I put my ear to his

chest, and I hear his lungs filling up with fluid, and I knew it wasn't good.

In something like that, time is not measurable just because of the way it is. But I knew after John [Fire Control Chief John Walker] looked at me, he said, "James, you gotta look around, we need ya." And I've said this before, here I am, the command master chief. Now I have to be a corpsman again, and use my skills that I'm qualified there on the ship, because I don't have the quals like Doc does, but I can do some things. I was a triage officer, I realized it. I'm playing the role—I'm in the role of a triage officer, so I knew Craig was expectant. I looked around, heard some of the crew screaming, the .50-cal went off, we were low-crawling. It was an accidental discharge, but you're worried about a second attack, too. I said a prayer over him [Wibberly]. We were taught that as corpsman when I was with the Marines, when you don't have a religious officer or chaplain, so I did that. Then I had a couple of shipmates take him to the helo tower where he wouldn't die alone, but where he would pass away. I treated—triaged Petty Officer [Johann] Gokool. The flesh was coming out of the seams of his shoes. He was in the direct line of the blast, and his feet absorbed all that energy. He would later lose his leg, and we would later—almost two years later—lose him to PTSD and TBI [traumatic brain injury] in Miami. He was my second to be taken up.

I'd found out then that Doc [Cliff Moser] was alive and triaging patients up by the missile deck. I triaged Fireman [Jeremy] Stewart. That young man's still alive today. He had the classic symptoms of internal injuries because of the rigid abdomen, all fractures—he was in really bad shape. He was my first to send up to Doc because I knew he needed morphine. Then Gokool, and then there was Saunders [OS2 Timothy Saunders]. I'd just talked to Saunders that morning on the bridge wing. He was actually a lookout. He told me about the Navy and how he loved it, and him and his family are from Danville, Virginia. Now here I am, treating him, and he's mortally wounded. [Seaman Eben] Sanchez was with him, the striker [training to become a corpsman]. I didn't see if Saunders' legs were deformed, but I was told they were later, but Sanchez wanted to take his dressings off to redress them. I said, "No, one thing you do, you just reinforce what's on already." He was my third guy to medevac up to Doc to get off the ship. He'd pass away in flight, en route.

A side story to that is, the trial has been going on down in Gitmo with that terrorist, Al-Nashiri, who planned and paid for this thing, the boat's operation, and the prosecution team came to my house and they told me about his death [Saunders] because I asked. After I heard about his injuries, I broke down and just cried, because for ten years I carried guilt about his death and what I could've done. But it was so extensive internally, things we couldn't see, that he just—they couldn't get him to a facility in time to save his life. But it was amazing that we got 39 Sailors off in an hour and a half. And it was pretty damn hot there, I mean, it was hostile. People were rioting outside the hospital where they were being taken. The XO had sent over security to not only be armed security guards for the crew, but also a walking blood bank for the crewmembers. XO thought of that. But that's the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that saved lives and made a difference in saving shipmates and the ship.

When *Cole's* Sailors returned to Naval Station Norfolk, they were greeted by their families and friends. Here, CMC Parlier hugs his mother. (Courtesy of James Parlier)



USS *Cole's* damage is shown clearly in this image. (Courtesy of James Parlier)

## “We Could Hear the People Screaming:” A Damage Controlman Remembers



In August 2020, Hampton Roads Naval Museum staff conducted an oral history with William Merchen. At the time of the USS *Cole* attack, Merchen was a Damage Controlman

Third Class. Still on active duty, he now holds the rank of senior chief. In this excerpt, Merchen recalls breaking into the chief's mess. He and his shipmates extricated several chiefs, and then began to search for other survivors. Later, DC3 Merchen conducted damage control for the ship.

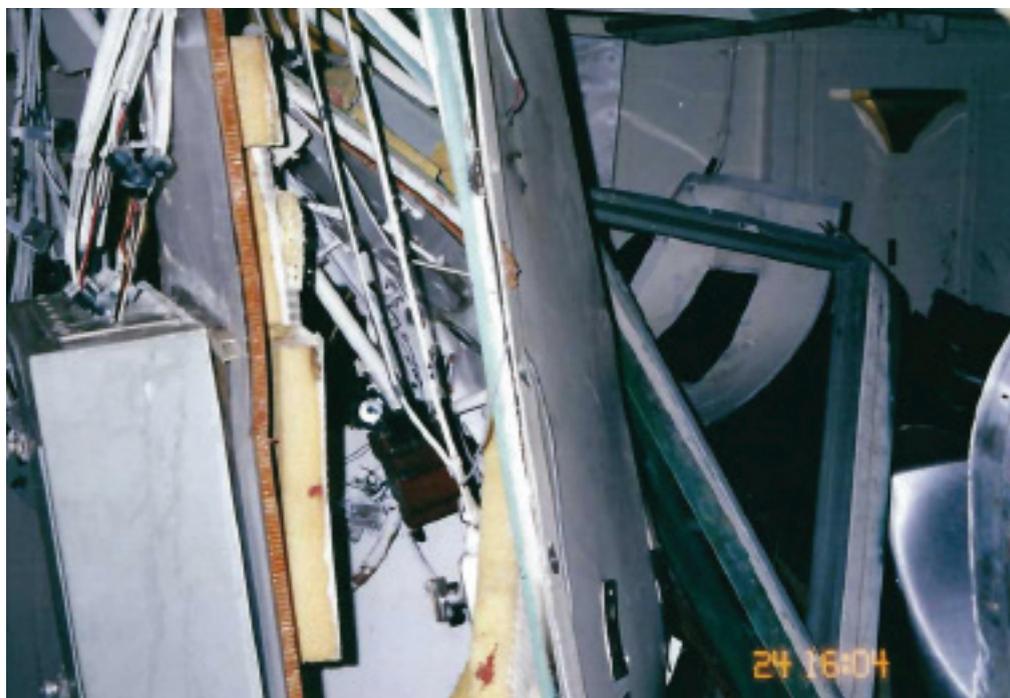
**Question:** Tell me about your experiences as the explosion occurred on October 12th. What did you hear and feel, and how did you react?

**Answer:** I haven't talked to too many people that recall exactly what it felt like. I sure don't. I know that my two buddies don't. What I do remember is standing in one place and then being on the deck in another place. That was the case. All three of us ended up on the deck, and all those fluorescent lightbulbs [in the room with us] had exploded because of the concussion of the explosion. All of the paint cans had just emptied paint everywhere, so there were—it

was a few gallons of paint, just enough to stick glass to everything. That was my concern, which seems a bit like a silly concern now. I knew we were all on the deck and I knew there was glass everywhere, and I was telling the guys, “Get up, there’s glass on the deck.” The least of our concerns, but at the time that’s what I knew, and that’s all I knew. Lights were out, ventilation had stopped, the ship was quiet, which—it was just running, we were taking on fuel, running main engines and generators and things—so something was very wrong, obviously. I didn’t feel that the ship was listing at this point. I think the list increased over several days as it took on water and as we dewatered things. But I knew something was wrong. . . .

Things settled down for half a minute or so, and now we could hear the people screaming in the chief’s mess. The chief’s mess is just aft of our location. So we’re on the port side, down on the DC [damage control] deck, just forward of the chief’s mess at this point, which is just forward of the mess line. We couldn’t hear anybody before. We couldn’t breathe and we couldn’t see, and those were the only things I think any of us were focused on. I guess I should just speak for myself, but that’s all I could focus on. Once we took care of those things, now we could hear the people that were having trouble.

We made our way back to the chief’s mess, which wasn’t far, just into the next passageway, basically. The outboard bulkhead of the chief’s mess is a false bulkhead—it’s a metal, honeycombed-sort of bulkhead—and it had all collapsed. The door had been blown off and the door was in the passageway, and it was clear there was extensive damage to the ship at this point. Still didn’t know why, didn’t know what happened. I had sort of thought that there must have been some sort of refueling accident—something had happened with the fueling. Didn’t occur to me at the time that this was the wrong side of the ship for there to be so much damage, but also I might not have known any better, either—maybe the



damage went across the whole ship.

The chief’s mess, we couldn’t get into. We could hear the folks inside, some of them were injured very severely, and they were telling us that. “I’m bleeding, I can’t breathe, help, help, we’re in here,” things like that. Stuff that lets you know that there’s some bad things on the other side of that false bulkhead that you can’t access. So, the idea was just to find a way to open it up so they could get out. It was just kind of muscle memory, sort of instinct, primal—there were people in trouble, and we need to get the people in trouble out of trouble. But it wasn’t as easy as opening the door, it wasn’t as easy as, okay, we’ll just let them out. I didn’t know how to get into it. There was a natural ventilation grating between the two spaces—the chief’s mess and the passageway. I looked at it, it was kind of on its side like the rest of the bulkhead was, but I thought maybe we could find a way through that. While I was thinking of that, one of my buddies—he’s a bigger guy—he just grabbed on to the false bulkhead parts and started kind of throwing his weight behind it, and started rocking and pulling, and we did the same, and pulled a spot open. It was kind of a triangle-shaped hole that was, at first, only two or three feet tall. . . .

The second person that we saw after accessing

**This image shows the false bulkhead that DC3 Merchen and his fellow shipmates ripped open to get to the Sailors trapped in the chief’s mess. (Courtesy of William Merchen)**



**This view inside the chief’s mess depicts the destruction that happened inside. (Courtesy of William Merchen)**

the chief’s mess was injured pretty severely to his face, just under his eye. We assisted him, just with our hands, essentially helping him step out of the hole. He was able to make it to the topside deck on his own. We let him walk, he just left. Then we went into the chief’s mess. There was a close family friend, but also my departmental chief—the departmental LCPO [Leading Chief Petty Officer] that was in charge of engineering—and he was on the deck. We could hear him speaking. I think his biggest concern was that he was going to be missed—that we weren’t going to see him. He had acquired flashlights for all the engineers prior to this deployment. I thought, “What a good guy, he got us all these flashlights.” I didn’t know at the time how critical or how important those would be later, and they were even to him. He had his flashlight, and he was flashing it back and forth, basically just telling us, “Hey, I’m right here, don’t forget about me. Don’t leave me behind,” things like that. I think in his own shock, he thought we were going to walk right by and not see him. He was injured pretty badly. He had a table across him, and when we moved the table, his leg had broken a number of times, to the point that it had wrapped

around and was laying across his, kind of his abdomen, chest area. Didn’t seem to have any other injuries, but we knew we weren’t gonna be able to let him walk out on his own, obviously, so we—I stayed with him and talked to him. I spent some time just talking to him, made sure he knew he was going to be okay while some other guys got the stretcher.

We put him in the basket stretcher, and he was the first person we went into the chief’s mess and left with. So we carried the stretcher out into the passageway, toward the same ladder that we had gone down, back up toward the filter shop, because there is access to the weather deck right there outside the filter shop. We got to the ladder that goes up to the filter cleaning shop and everything happened very quickly. He wasn’t strapped into this stretcher—it was a basket-style stretcher. So we’re hauling this guy up the ladder in the basket stretcher, and he’s sliding out of the basket stretcher, which at the time, how many more—how much more difficult can we make this? Then I realized he still had his flashlight in his hand, the one that he was flashing for us to come and get him, which kept him from being able to hold onto the stretcher. So, we took his flashlight from him, he held on, got him up the ladder. We didn’t follow him any farther.



When the ship was hit, this watertight hatch was blown open and could not be closed again. (Courtesy of William Merchen)

We went back into the chief's mess. There were other injured personnel in the chief's mess and we did the same—find the person, get them out of the chief's mess. We got to the beverage line in the chief's mess, which is parallel to the center line. It's the centermost part of the compartment. There was a chief there that was very, very injured. Still alive when we got there, but he did pass away. Looking at his injuries, we didn't feel like there was

anything that could be done to help him besides to let other people know where he was. From there, we tried to access the galley through the door that adjoins the galley and the chief's mess.

After clearing out the chief's mess, we went topside, we saw the people we had helped out of the chief's mess. Sort of amidships, medical had been established at that point. Our command master chief and our chief medical—our command master chief was a hospital corpsman before he became a CMC—and our chief corpsman also was up there. They're treating people and taking care of some very serious injuries. So as we were helping people in the chief's mess, other people were helping people in the galley, and other parts of the ship. It wasn't—all the serious injuries didn't all come out of the chief's mess, they were all over. There were probably three times as many people on the amidships part of the ship, being assessed and given medical care. We got some fresh air, briefly, went right back down into the ship and started working through the galley. And this is where it gets a little—from a timeline standpoint, a little bit difficult. At this point, after the initial rescue efforts, the rest of the fourteen days sort of all went the same way. It was, find a casualty, address the casualty, move on to the next casualty. Everybody that could be evacuated from the ship was evacuated from the ship by the end of that afternoon. That left a lot of people who had been killed in the ship. They weren't all removed until later—took some time. We didn't concern ourselves with that at the time. We moved on—once it seemed like there

were no more injured people that needed to get out—we moved on to pretty much strictly damage control at that point.

**Editor's note:** In the complete oral history interview, Senior Chief Merchen describes, in detail, the actions he and his fellow Sailors took to keep the ship afloat after the attack, including shoring up bulkheads, pumping water, and fixing generators.

## “We Don't Want People to Forget:” Mona Gunn Remembers the Loss of Her Son



At a memorial service for the September 11th attacks, Louge, Mona, and Jamal Gunn recite the names of the Sailors who died aboard USS Cole. As Mona Gunn remembers, “Before 9/11, there was 10/12.” (U.S. Navy)

On October 6, 2020, Hampton Roads Naval Museum staff members conducted an oral history interview with Mona Gunn. Her son, Cherone Gunn, was one of seventeen sailors killed aboard USS *Cole* on October 12, 2000. She is the past National President of the American Gold Star Mothers. In this excerpt, Mrs. Gunn describes how she and her family learned the tragic news.

**Question:** When and how did you hear about the attack on USS *Cole*?

**Answer:** As the school principal [in Norfolk], I would get to school about 30 minutes before—my reporting time was 8 o'clock, but I would get there before 8. The secretaries, office manager didn't come in until right before 8, when it's time to start answering phones. I got there before they did, and I was in my office. I had a private line that will ring just to my phone for before and after hours, so if the district office needed to reach me before 8 or after 4, they'll call that private line. My family members, my husband, had that private line, because sometimes as a principal, you can't get it all done while people are in the building, so I would be there

sometimes 7, 6:30, 7 o'clock at night when the custodians are cleaning the building. That private line rang that morning, before the secretaries got in. It was my sister, and she said, “What ship is Cherone on?” I said, “The *Cole*.” She said, “It's in the news. There was an attack on it.” I said, “Okay. Bye.” I hung up the phone, and I went right across the hall to the media center, the school library. Turned on the television in there, and right there on CNN, there was a picture of the ship, and the headline said four dead. . . . I said, “Four. I've got four sons. But he's not one of those four.” So I went back to my office, and by then, the secretaries were in. One of them came and said, “You have a call on line” whatever, and it was my son in South Carolina, saying Cherone's ship was in the news. I said, “I know,” so I hung up from him, and then I called my supervisor. I said, “My son is on that ship that is in the news, so I'm going home.” She said, “Fine, just keep us posted.”

I left school, went back home, and sat in front of the TV, just listening and trying to get as much information from television as possible. I was in touch with my husband, in touch with my son, and Jason said, “When I get out of this class, I'm coming home.” All they were saying on the news was, to get updates, go to Ely Hall on the base [Naval Station Norfolk], call this number or whatever. It was a phone number I think I had to call. I called the number and they said, “You need to go to Ely Hall on the base. That's where the Navy is giving updates to family members.” I tried to wait for Jason to make it home. I'm praying the whole time Cherone is not one of those. Jason was slow to get there, so I called him. I don't know whether we had cell phones then or not, I don't know. I said, “I'm headed to the base.” . . . I ended up at Ely Hall, had to be 12:30 or 1 o'clock. All the other family members, we're all in one big room, the Navy's trying their best to give us as much information as they could, but all the communications on the ship, everything was knocked out. They were trying to get information. The families kept saying, “We're here; how do we know who are the ones that are killed? What's the status of our loved ones?” They said, “If you have signed in, and you wear your nametag we gave you,

we will find you.”

They were saying, “Well, suppose they come to my house?” Everybody knows about the knock at the door. They come to your house, you see that van, that car, come up, and we’re here. If they come to my house, I’m not at my house. They said, “If you’re here, we’ll look for you here. We’ll check the list. Don’t worry about that.” I’m just thinking, “I just want information to make sure that my child is okay.” It was like, all day, 1 o’clock to maybe 4, 4:30. . . maybe 4 o’clock. They didn’t tell us anything. I got up to go and get something to drink or something to eat, and I remember someone saying, “Mrs. Gunn, we’re looking for you. Come with me.” We went down to one of the rooms at Ely Hall. I found out, and I don’t know how many other families of the seventeen got the news at Ely Hall. . . . I was really blessed, in fact, that Cherone was one of those four that they were able to get to right away. Unlike some of the other families, I was able to see remains. It was not in the condition I wanted to see because he hit a bulkhead, and he went immediately—his head was, you know, the attack I guess blew him—his head was wrapped in gauze. But we were able to see remains.

There were other families that didn’t see anything. He was one of those four [the first four found dead], even though I prayed the whole time—don’t let him be one—and I had four sons, that number four just, right away, connected. I hoped and prayed that wasn’t him, but he was one of those four.

**Question:** What was the Navy able to tell you right away? Were they able to give you a lot of details, or was it just the basics?

**Answer:** Just the basics—“On behalf of the President,” or whatever it was they say, “We regret to inform you that your son was killed.” And of course, they did assign a casualty officer. She was right there in the room with me; Betty Hill I believe was her name. They didn’t have a lot of information about what happened, and it really just puzzled my husband, because his 21 years in the Navy, he was on a ship that was an oiler, and they refuel ships at sea. He said, “Why would they go in the port to get fuel when there are ships out there with fuel where they can refuel?” That was his big whole thing. We just heard all kinds of stories how the guys on the ship felt uncomfortable when they went through the Suez Canal, and we were hearing talk of stuff. Right away, the Navy didn’t tell us a lot of information because they didn’t know.

After losing a child, you go through all these phases, and anger set in with me. I remember, I’m thinking to myself, I’m in charge of a school. I’m the leader of that building. If something happens in that building, I’m ultimately responsible. I said, “Someone has got to be responsible for what happened to my child and his sixteen shipmates.” I wrote a letter to the CNO, Chief of Naval Operations, expressing my concern about what the investigation was going to show, that there’s got to be some accountability for somebody. Then, when that JAG investigation came out, it was like, nobody was to blame. It just angered me

**Signalman Seaman Cherone Gunn in his official Navy portrait. Gunn was one of the 17 Sailors who lost his life aboard USS Cole. (Courtesy of Mona Gunn)**



**Cherone Gunn’s family visits his grave in 2020. From left to right are his brothers Jason and Anton, mother Mona, and brother Jamal. (Courtesy of Mona Gunn)**

even more. I do remember, after the investigation came out, and it pretty much said that they didn’t blame the captain or anybody over him. I don’t remember the details, but no one was found at fault. I’m thinking, “That can’t be the case.” I do remember Commander Lippold making phone calls to my house. I refused to talk to him. I was angry, I was upset, I hung up the phone. Somebody’s got to be responsible. Eventually, 9/11 happened, and I remember my husband was very outspoken, always on the news, saying something needed to be done about the *Cole*. Nobody did anything. Then when 9/11 happened, it was like we relived October 12th on 9/11. Now we had thousands of people feeling the way we felt eleven months ago when nothing was done. So, after 9/11 happened, it was like, “Oh my. We told you, do something, do something. You swept it under the rug, 17 Sailors were killed and nothing was done, and now look. They’ve come over to our country with airplanes going into the World Trade Center.”

**Question:** Do you feel that the *Cole* attack has been remembered correctly in the twenty years since it happened?

**Answer:** Yes, I do. . . . In terms of the incident being properly recognized, I know in 2001 they unveiled the memorial, and I think the anger was still in me. I don’t think I went that year. But I did go down to see the memorial when all the festivity was over. Each year after that, the former crew got together and did a ceremony down at the memorial. Yes, it’s been properly recognized. Out of the 20 years so far, the ship does a ceremony, and family members come back, the former crew comes back, and the ship is open for tours. They have 17 bronze stars right on the galley, on the floor right there in the area where the attack happened. There’s always news about it. I think it has been properly recognized each year. It’s one thing that, as a Gold Star Family, we fear, is that people will forget. . . . We don’t want people to forget that we’ve made the ultimate sacrifice. We don’t want to forget that we have our freedoms in this country today because of our servicemen and women who put their lives out there to protect our freedom.

# Finding Meaning in Tragedy: What the Attack on USS *Cole* Means to Our Navy, Our Nation, and Our Adversaries

By Admiral Christopher W. Grady



The *Cole* was alone in Aden, and the entire crew knew there was no immediate help nearby. They also knew there was no giving up. The crew's actions lived up to the courageous and determined examples set by their predecessors throughout naval history. They answered the call that day. Exactly as they had sworn their oath to do, they answered the call to general quarters, they answered the call to duty, and they answered the call as they were trained to. After two backbreaking, sweltering weeks, the crew got *Cole* underway again, battle ensign flying proudly, showing the world that *Cole* was still in the fight.

The famed American author and psychiatrist Irvan Yalom postulated that each of us creates expanding circles of influence around ourselves that may affect others for years, even generations. Those circles, like ripples on water, spread out farther and farther from their source and are felt by others, influencing their lives and actions, even without their knowing. Rarely are we able to realize how meaningful the circles of influence created by our actions have been, but I can think of no better illustration of this ripple effect than the example of USS *Cole*.

We don't have to look far to discover where *Cole*'s crew drew their inspiration. The *Cole* heroes were unquestionably influenced by the ripples formed by their ship's namesake, Marine Sergeant Darrell Samuel Cole. Sgt. Cole was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his dauntless initiative, unwavering courage, and indomitable determination during the battle of Iwo Jima in World War II; a true 'Determined Warrior.'

While I was incredibly proud and honored to join team *Cole* as Commanding Officer in January 2003 and lead the crew returning her to sea, I immediately recognized that the true meaning from this tragedy resided within the crew itself. It lives on through the legacy those *Cole* heroes created. Their actions epitomized America's fighting spirit: bravery, toughness, and tenacious resolve to never give up, whatever the odds.

October 12th, 2020 marked 20 years since the insidious attack on USS *Cole* in the port city of Aden, Yemen. The story of USS *Cole* is one of remarkable heroism, exceptional toughness, and fierce determination. It is also a story of solemn sacrifice. As such, the story of USS *Cole* represents a significant chapter in our Navy's proud history.

As is true in every chapter of our Navy's story, the *Cole* Sailors rose to the occasion. They upheld our finest traditions by rescuing their shipmates and by fighting to save their ship under extreme conditions. In doing so, they personified our Navy and our American fighting spirit. The USS *Cole* was not a target chosen at random. Two men, under suspected orders from al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, perpetrated a cowardly attack against the *Cole* during a routine refueling stop. The blast, which tore a 40-by-60 foot hole in the ship's hull, killed 17 Sailors and injured 37 more. The *Cole* crew fought through fire, hazardous debris, flooded compartments, and shrapnel-laden passageways valiantly for more than 96 hours to rescue their shipmates and save their ship.

The attack on *Cole* reminded us then, and continues today, to be the shining example of the strength, resilience, and toughness that flows from a combat-ready ship and a battle-minded crew. It also revealed the 'Determined Warrior' spirit exhibited by our mighty industrial base. These proud, passionate, and productive craftsmen lived up to their great legacy by repairing *Cole* in only 15 months thanks to their tenacity, determination, and teamwork.

Years later, I am still inspired by the positive attitude and grit of *Cole*'s Sailors on her return deployment. When tested, they responded with, "We have to do this right, because the 17 would have it no other way." They were willing to do whatever it took to get their ship back into the fight better than ever. They were inspired to honor their fallen shipmates, and felt a deep sense of responsibility to live up to the examples set by their predecessors.

For the citizens of this great nation, know that I see the reflections of the *Cole* heroes in today's Sailors. The American fighting spirit is alive and well, and the legacy of

*Cole* lives throughout the fleet today. More importantly, as we enter a new era of great power competition, any potential adversary to the United States should recognize an obvious message that al Qaeda clearly missed: never underestimate our resolve. The U.S. Navy was undeterred by the attack on *Cole*. Our actions over the last 20 years prove that.

The ripples formed by the *Cole* heroes continue to spread across the world's oceans to this day, and they will continue to do so well into the future. Because the *Cole* heroes would have it no other way.

*Admiral Christopher W. Grady assumed command of U.S. Fleet Forces Command/U.S. Naval Forces Northern Command on May 4, 2018, and assumed duties as Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Strategic Command (NAVSTRAT) and U.S. Strategic Command Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC) on Feb. 1, 2019.*



USS *Cole*'s crew with their ship in August 2000.  
(Courtesy of James Parlier)





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