

Sailors aboard the USS Cole tell their stories

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Master Chief Petty Officer Pamela Jacobsen:

"The first thing I remember about that morning going aloft was it was really hot. I don't know how people live there and stand the heat. I knew I didn't want to stay up there too long. I remember seeing the port like a place that was carved out of a piece of sand to me."

Lieutenant JG Robert Overturf:

"We got there before sunrise. There was this field littered with sunken ships. Destruction all over. To think that we were going to pull into that [port] to refuel was a little bit odd."

Kirk Lippold, Commanding Officer of USS Cole:

"I think everybody realized that there was an elevated threat level. But when we pulled in, there was no evidence of a specific threat for that port or for our ship. Shortly after 10:30am, we started refueling the ship and it was routine."

Lt. Elroy Newton:

"I went down to the oil lab to take station, and my boss told me, 'Hey, Chief, you were down here the last two times. Go top side and I will go ahead and take the oil lab.' So that's what he did. I headed topside. I took the headset and then we were kind of joking back and forth a little bit. About two minutes after that is when we felt and heard a huge explosion. The ship listed over. It basically leaned over suddenly. The next noise I heard was a lot of debris jumping out of the sky."

Kirk Lippold, Commanding Officer of USS Cole:

"You could feel all 505 feet and 8400 tons of guided missile destroyer violently thrust up and to the right. Lights went out. Within a matter of seconds, I knew we had been attacked. In my mind, first and foremost is, 'What's the status of the ship?' Because if you can't save the ship, you certainly aren't going to be able to save the crew. I don't know if there were going to be follow-on attacks. I had pulled out a 9-mm pistol, loaded it, de-cocked it, went down and outside, and prepared to defend the ship."

Master Chief Petty Officer Pamela Jacobsen:

"I remember the captain coming up on the bridge. He had his 9-mm drawn. I remember thinking, 'Well, something really bad must have happened because he has got his weapon. He is running around here with a gun.' There was lot of things running through my head as you can well imagine. I was really worried about another attack. Maybe there was some kind of chemical or biological poison in the air? I mean a lot of things went through your head."

Kris Detloff, Electrician's Mate, Second Class:

"When the explosion went off, it threw me towards the opening of my rack. I opened the curtain and one of the guys comes running down the aisle was saying, 'We have been bombed.' I just remember thinking what's going to stop these people from coming back and finishing us off?"

Lieutenant JG Robert Overturf:

"After the explosion, it was total deafening silence. That went to people coming back saying, 'Oh my God! There is a hole! It's 30x40 feet! It's a big hole! We are flooding! The engine room is gone! The oil lab is gone! The galley is gone!'"

Petty Officer Keisha Stidham:

"I was working for the galley at the time. It's really hard to explain... it's rushing air that was hot and cold at the same time. I closed my eyes and the next thing I know I am on my hands and knees on the deck. It was people's expressions on their face when they looked at me that let me know I was injured. I knew it wasn't severe damage to my face. I could still breathe through my nose and my mouth. I could feel my teeth and my tongue. But [you feel] pretty nervous when someone looks at your face and their eyes get wide."

Chief Foreign Officer Susan Czoscjke:

"It was just black. This black soot covered the entire ship. People were out there and they were bloody and soot-covered. As I walked down towards one of the repair lockers, there was someone down there. They said, 'There's dead people everywhere.'"

Lieutenant JG Robert Overturf:

"Shortly thereafter, the wounded started coming back to the repair locker. I opened up the laundry – that was the largest space, so we started bringing the wounded back. We had people with broken legs, broken jaws, and bloodied. It was a little bit difficult to process what was going on when you see people that you had just seen moments earlier laughing, joking, having a good time and the next moment, they are wounded."

Retired Master Chief James Parlier:

"I made my way down the starboard passage way towards what we call the log room. That's where I saw one of the sailors that was in the worst condition. As a matter of fact, his right side didn't even look human. I decided to do CPR – probably shouldn't have because I knew there were sailors that needed help in triage but I wanted to give it a go. I wanted to save this young man. When I first started doing mouth to mouth, I got a mouth full of blood. I knew he was bleeding internally into his lungs. There was so much going through my head. A chief came over and said, 'James, you are going to have to stop.' So I had to make the call. First time in my life I ever had to do that. I had to let him die..."

When we finally did get the last sailor off, it was time to put a new flag up. When the flag was finally at the top of the pole, we beamed a halogen light as bright as we had to show them sons of bitches that we were not defeated. That was our proudest moment."

Deborah Amos talks with Lawrence Wright, author of the book, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*.

Deborah Amos (DA): Al-Qaeda often telegraphed its strategies. Was there a warning that there would be an attack, maybe not on the Cole but on some U.S. destroyer?

Lawrence Wright (LW): In the universe of chatters, as it's called, the lines were buzzing all the time. There was definitely going to be something to happen. It's just so striking when you investigate what was going on. People in the NSC – in the White House – didn't even know that America had signed a treaty with Yemen allowing warships to refuel there. On reflection, it was crazy. It was a very dangerous spot to do such a thing. The lines of communication within the counterterrorist world were simply not operating at the time.

DA: Why was a U.S. destroyer such a prime target?

LW: This happened to be a missile cruiser and it had launched missiles into Afghanistan in response to the attacks on the embassies in East Africa. It was a delicious target for Bin Laden in many ways. The symbolism, as he said, of a small boat that represents Mohammad and the giant American warship which represents the empire. He loved this symbolism of that. This is a little craft that goes out and nestles against this warship and blows a hole in it. This warship had been built to compete against the Soviet Navy. It was stealth designed so it was not easily seen by radar but easily seen in the Yemen harbor by the terrorists who were going to ruin it. From Bin Laden's point of view, it was a military victory and he celebrated as such.

DA: They intended to videotape it?

LW: They always tried to videotape their accomplishments and use them as advertisements and recruiting tools. Fahd al-Quso was the cameraman. He was supposed to be in this promontory with a view of the craft striking the USS Cole. He was hoping to film the sinking of this particular billion-dollar warship. But because he overslept, the sound of the explosion reached him in a cab as he was on his way to the site. But Fahd al-Quso turned out to be an important turning point in the investigation.

- See more at:

http://www.americaabroad.org/radio/programs/documentaries/?prog=remembering_the_cole&seg=sailors_ aboard_the_uss_cole_tell_their_stories#sthash.2WphRFGGo.dpuf