

Alarms Turned Off

On May 17, 1987, an Iraqi F-1 Mirage aircraft fired two Exocet missiles at the Navy frigate USS Stark, which was patrolling in the Persian Gulf. The Stark was equipped with radar systems to detect such missiles in the air. In the nerve center of the ship was the electronic warfare operator, a man who monitored these systems. If a missile was fired at the ship, he would be warned in two ways. An audible alarm would sound and a visual symbol would appear on the radar screen.

Nevertheless, without warning, the Exocet missiles slammed into the side of the USS Stark just above the waterline, tearing a 10-foot hole in the ship and killing 37 American sailors.

To learn what went wrong, the House Armed Services Committee launched an official investigation. After visiting the ship and talking to the crew, they reported that the tragedy had probably not resulted from equipment failure. Rather, the cause was human error or omission on the part of several people. One was the electronic warfare operator in the ship's nerve center.

The report said, "The operator indicated that he had turned off the audible alarm feature because too many signals were being received that were setting off the alarm, requiring actions that distracted him from performing other signal analysis."

Then with the audible alarm off, according to the investigators, he may have been distracted at the time when the visual signals appeared on the radar screen.

Warning signals are usually an irritating interruption, but we turn them off at our peril.

Our bodies have warning signals, too. Blood pressure and cholesterol levels tell us that something is either right or wrong. Symptoms are signals also. The definition of that word is "a sign or indication of disorder or disease."

On the spiritual side, we have warning signals as well. These include the conscience, that still, small voice within that cautions us; a text of Scripture brought to mind; or the counsel of a friend.

It's always a good idea to pay attention – and react appropriately – when the alarm bells are going off.

--Beecher Hunter