



USS Firebolt Heroes Remembered, 20 Years On

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From Courtesy Story

The ceremony honors the lives of U.S. Navy Sailors Boatswain's Mate 1st Class Michael J. Pernaselli and Signalman 2nd Class Christopher E. Watts, and U.S. Coast Guard Damage Controlman 3rd Class Nathan B. Bruckenthal, who died while conducting maritime security operations in the Arabian Gulf on April 24, 2004. The three were stationed aboard the Cyclone-class patrol coastal boat USS Firebolt (PC 10).

The three were killed while intercepting a suspicious dhow headed for the Khawr Al Amaya Oil Terminal in the Northern Arabian Gulf. As their rigid-hull inflatable boat neared the dhow, the vessel exploded in an apparent suicide attack. This action prevented the dhow from hitting its intended target, but caused the RHIB to capsize, leading to the three service members losing their lives in the process.

"Their heroism in the waters of the North Arabian Gulf 20 years ago today inspires us still," said Vice Adm. George Wikoff, commander of U.S. 5th Fleet, who spoke at the ceremony. "Even as we speak, Sailors not unlike these three young men are facing down anti-ship ballistic missiles and one-way attack drones in the Red Sea. Like these heroes from Firebolt, they sail unflinchingly into harm's way, understanding theirs is no 'routine mission.'"

Wikoff also noted that today, Sailors and Coastguardsmen in the Arabian Gulf and the Northern Arabian Sea provide assistance to mariners when needed, and board suspect vessels to ensure regional maritime security, interdicting illicit drug trafficking, and seizing weapons intended for malign actors.

"They, too, know it's no 'routine mission,'" he said.

The ceremony also included recapping the lives and accomplishments of the three service members as

well as the playing of Taps and tolling a bell 11 times, symbolic of church bells which rang on the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918 to signal the end of the First World War.

Firebolt, which was decommissioned in February 2022, was commissioned in June 1995. It began conducting coastal patrol operations in the U.S. 5th Fleet in 2003. Prior to operating from Bahrain, the ship helped secure New York City's harbor immediately following the September 11th terrorist attacks. Months later, Firebolt conducted coastal patrols in the Arabian Gulf during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations encompasses about 2.5 million square miles of water area and includes the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea and parts of the Indian Ocean. The expanse comprises of 20 countries and includes three critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab al Mandeb at the southern tip of Yemen.