

Associated Press

FIRE DAMAGE — The fatal blaze aboard the Conyngham started two decks below this one, where an officer surveys the damage on the guided missile destroyer.

Commander blames fuel leak for fatal fire aboard destroyer

NORFOLK (AP) — The skipper of the destroyer Conyngham yesterday said a major fuel leak in one of the ship's boiler rooms touched off the fire that killed an officer and injured 18 sailors.

Cmdr. William R. Williams also said that he feared he might lose his ship and had small boats in the water in case the ship had to be abandoned.

"But when I saw the determination of the faces of my men, all those thoughts left my mind," he said at a pierside news conference at the Norfolk Naval Station.

The fire Tuesday killed the operation's officer, Lt. Cmdr. Algernon Pope Gordon Jr., 34 of Montgomery, Ala. Nine of the injured sailors remain hospitalized, seven in good and two in satisfactory condition, the Navy said.

Williams said Gordon died after he entered his cabin to awaken a roommate.

Gordon's promotion from lieutenant to lieutenant commander was to have taken effect in a few weeks. The Navy said it gave him the honor posthumously.

The blaze broke out about 5 a.m. when about 90 percent of the crew was asleep, Williams said. The ignited fuel quickly spread the fire upward, filling berthing spaces with smoke and sending flames up two decks through the middle of the ship.

The heat melted aluminum decks and bulkheads, leaving portions of the ship's interior as slag. Wiring and insulation hung from overhead. A 12-foot-by-20-foot hole was burned through two decks into the command information center.

Williams said he was stirred from his cabin when general quarters was sounded. He said the passageways to the bridge were filled with smoke, and when he reached the bridge, conditions were no better.

"There was black smoke everywhere. The decks were red hot. Fireballs periodically shot from the hatches."

Williams ordered the spaces evacuated and set up command on the ship's forward torpedo deck. Meanwhile, the ship's executive officer, Lt. Cmdr. Martin Moody, though injured, took command of the ship's company on the fantail. The fire effectively split the crew in half.

The ship was without power, making communication between the fore and aft areas difficult, but firefighting crews were organized and equipment dispersed, Williams said.

He also said some of the ship's firefighting equipment was lost in the fire.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Otis Tate said he was asleep in his berth when he heard the alarm. Tate, 24, of Hartwell, Ga., ran to his station on

the mess deck, where he assembled a seven-man firefighting team.

When the team powered its fire hose, there was no water. Tate said he quickly reassigned his men and handed out fire extinguishers. The team was able to move forward until a cable passage above them melted and blocked their route.

Tate and his men returned to the mess deck where a second hose had been laid with a new pump and they began to spray water on the fire.

The guided missile cruiser Normandy and destroyer Briscoe responded to the scene and ferried over firefighting equipment and personnel.

The Conyngham had been operating 80 miles off the Virginia-North Carolina coast. The crew was getting ready for an annual inspection that would have tested firefighting capabilities in case of a major engine room fire.

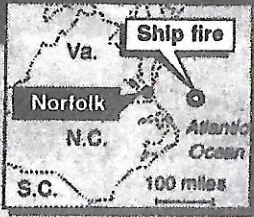
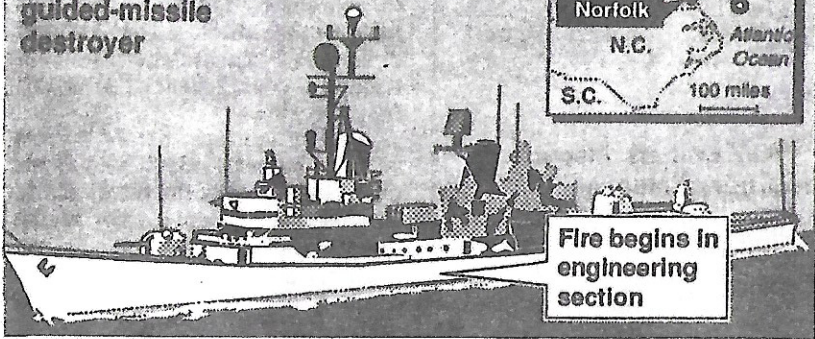
"Tuesday was to be our last full day of drills, and the crew was getting pretty cocky about the inspection," Williams said. "For us, the exam came early."

Tate, who has been in the Navy since June 1984, said his training paid off. He attended firefighting schools in Philadelphia and Norfolk, plus the regular shipboard training.

"This is my first shipboard fire and I hope it's my last."

USS Conyngham

Adams class
guided-missile
destroyer



Fire begins in engineering section

- Commissioned: July 13, 1963
- Built by: New York Shipbuilding Corp.
- Displacement: 4,825 tons fully loaded
- Dimensions: 437 feet long, 47 feet wide
- Armament: 2 five-inch guns, torpedoes and surface-to-surface missiles
- Main propulsion: 2 steam turbines, 4 boilers
- Speed: 30 knots
- Range: 6,000 miles at 15 knots
- Crew: 380 (includes 20 officers)

Source: Jane's Fighting Ships

Associated Press graphic

Guided-missile destroyer blaze kills 1, injures 12

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — The guided-missile destroyer USS Conyngham limped back to port under tow Tuesday after a boiler fire spread to its nerve center, killing the ship's operation officer and injuring 12 others, officials said.

In a second fatal Navy accident Tuesday, a crew member aboard an air-cushion vehicle off the East Coast was killed when a propeller malfunctioned. It was the latest accident since a series of problems forced a worldwide Navy stand-down last fall.

The fire on the 27-year-old Conyngham started around 5:30 a.m.

about 80 miles off North Carolina, said Lt. Cmdr. Carrie Hartshorne, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Atlantic Fleet.

The blaze broke out in the No. 1 boiler room when the boiler was fired up, according to White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater.

"The fire spread to the combat information center spaces, which caused the captain to evacuate the combat information center and the bridge, temporarily leaving the ship without communications and dead in the water," Fitzwater said.

The Combat Information Center contains all of the ship's communi-

cations equipment plus sonar and radar and is considered the ship nerve center.

The Norfolk-based ship, whose skipper is Cmdr. W.R. Williams, has a crew of 383.

The main fire was put out after about 2½ hours and the crew battled smaller secondary fires through the morning.

Atlantic fleet officials said the Conyngham was able to move under its own power en route to Norfolk about 3 mph until midday, when it lost power about 60 miles east

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Norfolk. It was then taken under tow by the salvage ship USS Opportune.

Navy officials were unable to say when the Conyngham would reach its home port.

The guided-missile cruiser USS Normandy, the destroyer Briscoe and Coast Guard cutters Point Arena, Gentian and Forward also assisted the Conyngham, said Capt. Paul Hanley, a spokesman for the fleet.

The Navy identified the dead man as Lt. Algernon Pope Gordon Jr., 34, of Montgomery, Ala.

The 12 injured sailors were flown by helicopter to hospitals. None of the injured sailors was from Florida. The Navy opened a toll-free telephone line for Conyngham family members to call. The number is 800-523-2975 for calls outside Virginia.

The 437-foot ship was commissioned in 1963. It is armed with Harpoon anti-ship missiles and Standard anti-aircraft missiles, as well as torpedoes, depth charges and two 5-inch guns.

The Navy, as is its practice, refused to say whether the Conyngham was carrying nuclear weapons. According to Jane's Fighting Ships, the Conyngham has the capability of firing nuclear depth charges and torpedoes.

The second Navy accident occurred Tuesday afternoon aboard an air-cushion vehicle near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge from Virginia Beach to the Eastern Shore, said Chief Petty Officer Bob Gimblet of the Atlantic Fleet.



May 1997 Conyngham Destroyer