

Ship deaths great tragedy Bush says

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — A huge gun turret packed with gunpowder exploded in flames on the battleship USS Iowa near Puerto Rico yesterday, killing 47 sailors — and the toll could be higher, naval spokesmen said.

It was one of the worst naval disasters since the Viet Nam War.

The death toll from the accident during a gunnery exercise, "could go higher, but we don't know at this point," said Lt.-Cmdr. Steve Burnett, a spokesman for the Atlantic Fleet, based in Norfolk.

The explosion occurred in one of the Iowa's three heavily armored turrets, each of which supports three of the ship's nine 41-centimetre (16-inch) guns. The turret was "full of gunpowder," said Lt.-Cmdr. Chris Baumann, another fleet spokesman.

President George Bush called it "a great tragedy and a matter of terrible sadness."

"I will take this opportunity to express my regrets, especially to the families of the kids that were killed," Bush said in Washington.

Iowa crewmen put out the fire in 80 minutes, flooded several magazine compartments holding explosives as a precaution and declared the ship out of danger, Baumann said.

At the time of the blast, there were 1,600 people aboard, including Vice Adm. Jeremiah Johnson, commander of U.S. 2nd Fleet.

The Iowa was met at midafternoon by the nearby aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea, which carries three doctors and has full medical facilities, Baumann said. Helicopters from the Coral Sea brought medical equipment to the Iowa and transferred some injured crewmen to the carrier.

"The ship has not sent a list of the wounded. They have other things more pressing to worry about," said Lt. Russ Grier, an Atlantic Fleet spokesman.

Meanwhile, all over the United States distraught relatives were being told of the deaths of their loved ones by navy representatives.

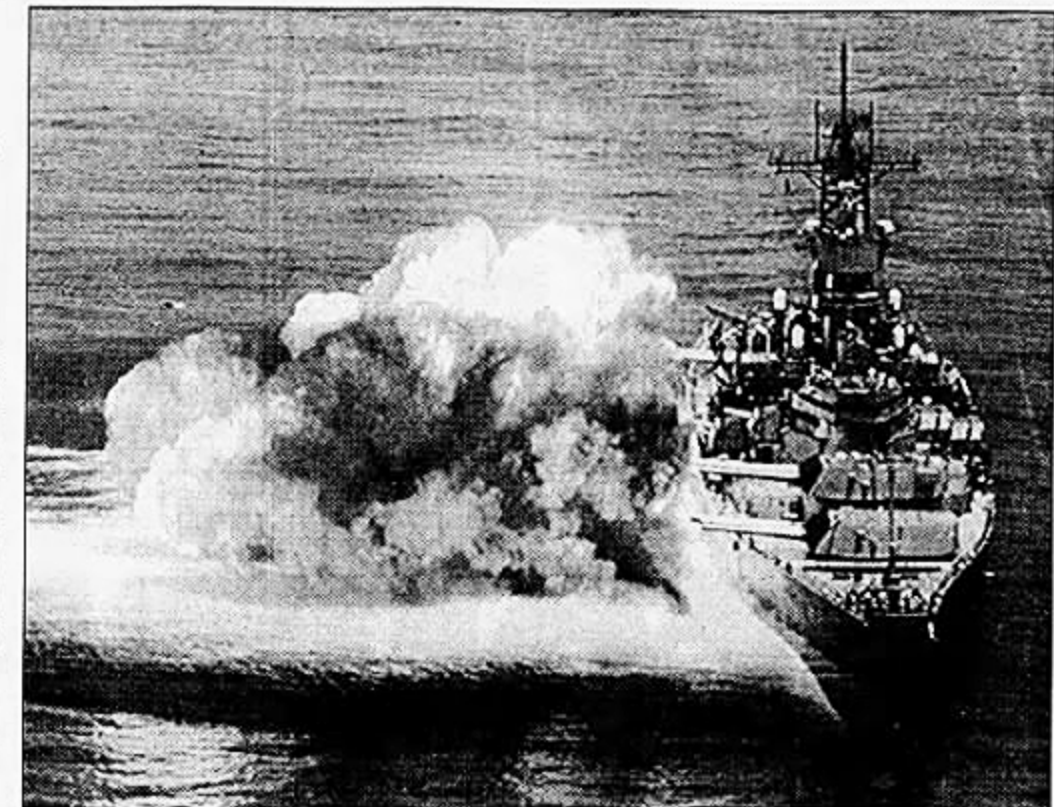
Today, the 48-year-old ship — one of the four largest in the U.S. fleet — will sail to Roosevelt Roads, a Navy base in Puerto Rico, Cmdr. Robert Franzmann said.

The training exercise began April 13 and involves 19,000 people aboard 29 U.S. ships, three allied ships and shore-based aircraft, officials said.

Iowa was about 530 kilometres (330 miles) northeast of Puerto Rico when the explosion happened.

Its 41-centimetre (16-inch) guns were being test-fired. They can fire 1,043-kilogram (2,300-pound) shells a distance of 37 km (23 miles).

Immediately after the explo-



BATTLESHIP TRAGEDY: The 48-year-old Iowa, one of four U.S. World War II vintage battleships, is enveloped

in smoke from her huge 41-centimetre (16 inch) guns. After yesterday's disaster, she sailed to Puerto Rico.

sion, Iowa crewmen went into action:

- They put out a fire inside the forward turret, which supports three of the ship's nine big guns.

- They flooded several compartments holding explosives as a precaution.

Eighty minutes later, the ship

was out of danger.

By midafternoon, Iowa had drawn up beside the nearby aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea, which carries three doctors and has full medical facilities.

From a chartered jet, little damage could be seen on Iowa.

Pilot Svend Ovesen said the Navy had told aircraft to stay 40

kilometres (25 miles) from the ship, but "we moved in close to for a better view."

Iowa was built during World War II, mothballed until the Korean War, and mothballed again.

It was modernized and reactivated in 1984, at a cost of \$409 million, and returned home last year after service escorting

Kuwaiti tankers in the Persian Gulf.

Iowa carried President Franklin D. Roosevelt to Morocco on the first leg of his journey to Tehran in 1943 to meet with Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin to discuss the war against Germany.

A bathtub installed on Iowa for that voyage remains aboard.

AP FILE PHOTO