



America's First Clash with Iran: The Tanker War, 1987-88

By Lee Allen Zatarain

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In May 1987 the US frigate Stark, calmly sailing the waters of the Persian Gulf, was suddenly blown apart by an Exocet missile fired from an Iraqi jet fighter. A fifth of the ship's crew was killed and many others horribly burned or wounded. This event jumpstarted one of the most mysterious conflicts in American history: "The Tanker War," waged against Iran for control of the Persian Gulf.

This quasi-war took place at the climax of the mammoth Iran-Iraq War during the Reagan administration. Losing on the battlefield, Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran had decided to close the Persian Gulf against shipping from Iraq's oil-rich backers, the emirate of Kuwait. The Kuwaitis appealed for help and America sent a fleet to the Gulf, raising the Stars and Stripes over Kuwait's commercial tankers.

The result was a free-for-all, as the Iranians laid mines throughout the narrow passage and launched attack boats against both tankers and US warships. The sixth largest ship in the world, the tanker Bridgeton, hit an Iranian mine and flooded. The US Navy fought its largest surface battle since World War II against the Ayatollah's assault boats. Meanwhile, US Navy Seals arrived in the Gulf, setting up shop aboard two mobile platforms. As Saddam Hussein, who had instigated the conflict, looked on, Iranian gunners fired shore-based Silkworm missiles against US forces, actions which, if made known at the time, would have required the US Congress to declare war against Iran.

In July 1988, nervous sailors aboard the cruiser USS Vincennes shot an Iranian airliner out of the sky, killing 300 civilians. This event came one month before the end of the war, and may have been the final straw that influenced the Ayatollah to finally drink from his "poisoned chalice."

Author Lee Allen Zatarain, employing recently released Pentagon documents, firsthand interviews, and a determination to get to the truth, has revealed a conflict that few recognized at the time, but which may have presaged further battles to come.

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Editorial Review

Review

"...an excellent book on a very little known conflict in US Naval History". (*Internet Modeler*)

"...well researched... a compelling read for the armchair enthusiast and military veteran alike." (*IPMS*)

"...a very well documented book on a subject we saw flash on the nightly news back in the 1980's...an excellent book on a very little known conflict in US Naval History. (*KITMAKER*)

...does an excellent job of describing the tension aboard US ships and helicopter/ air crews... a good read and a fast one, especially for those of us unfamiliar with the war" in the first place." (*Magweb.com / Russ Lockwood*)

"...a very well documented book on a subject we saw flash on the nightly news...an excellent book on a very little known conflict in US Naval history." (*Model Shipwrights,*)

"...one of the best reads of the year...the best and most accurate account of the events of that fateful time period...answers a lot of questions and brings up a few as all, It is one that you simply must read." (*ModelMadness.com / S. Van Aken*)

"...a compelling and immensely readable account of one of the least-known chapters of the U.S. Navy's maritime combat operations... a must read for those who have a desire or a duty to understand how recent history may shape perceptions of these protagonists in the future." (*Naval War College Review*)

"...a fine job of recounting a 20 year old fight that was no doubt just another round in a continuing struggle." (*US Naval Institute Proceedings*)

"Anyone thirsting for the maximum detail of the period under the spotlight will not be disappointed...packed with information...a very readable account, which sheds considerable light and insight on what the public were fed at the time." (*Royal Navy and Maritime Book Reviews*)

"an excitingly written and very clear description of two oft forgotten but vitally important years in the relationship between Iran and the West." (*Ships and Shipping (Australia)*)

Well paced and factual... clearly understands the details of war at sea. As the United States discusses a possible conflict with Iran in the global press, the important lessons outlined...become particularly valuable." (*The Northern Mariner*)

"...full of such head shaking revelations and is a good source of information on America's naval readiness, its Middle East policies and its heroes and scapegoats in the not too distant past." (*The Journal of America's Military Past*)

.presents a case study of the complex relations based on oil, politics, and power. During the Reagan administration, and undeclared war was launched between America and Iran after the latter threatened shipping through the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz. The ensuing conflict is known as the Tanker War, and

Zatarain's account is both thorough and balanced...The author's thoroughness creates an almost first person narration of the conflict beginning with Iran's ambush of the American frigate Stark to the errant shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655. His chronicle adopts an American perspective yet bias remains absent from his work....For readers interested in Persian Gulf affairs, America's First Clash With Iran offers an exhaustive and impartial history of largely forgotten and overlooked situation...a well rounded discussion of the metaphorical chess match between America and Iran. Though the Tanker War ceased in 1988, these events continue to be relevant today, as America's relationship with Middle Eastern nations remains tenuous... 1 (*Nautical Research Journal*)

Lee Zatarain leaves no stone unturned in his analysis of this little remembered naval conflict between the United States and Iran. From his riveting prose and suspense building hooks to his powerful blow by blow take downs of the conflicts biggest questions. Zatarain delivers a sure winner. Military and civilian readers with any interest in naval or recent military history should most definitely add Tanker War to their reading queues. (*Army Lawyer*)

About the Author

Lee Zatarain was born in New Orleans, and earned his BA and JD degrees from Louisiana State University. He is currently an attorney who works in the energy industry, making frequent visits to Washington DC. He resides in Spring Hill Texas with his wife and two daughters.

Users Review

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Sharon Hollars:

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