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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Joe Bob Mann
Conducted by Robert Tidwell
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Transcribed by Shannon Geach

NOTE: Text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

(Extraneous conversation and background noise)

1 Robert Tidwell: How long were you in the service before you received notice that
2 you were going to go to Vietnam?

3 Joe Bob Mann: I had gotten out of boot camp and went, didn't have orders at that
4 time to go anywhere, so I reported back to San Diego and picked up orders to go on the
5 *U.S.S. Frank E. Evans*. I flew to Los Angeles and then caught a plane to Hawaii and was
6 there for two days. Picked up the ship there when it came in to port and then I found out
7 I was going to Vietnam.

8 RT: So after you were already onboard ship?

9 JM: Onboard, yes.

10 RT: So what did you think when you found out that you were going to Vietnam?

11 JM: Well, I wasn't too anxious to go as you always say. I thought of the recruiter
12 from the Army [Navy] saying, "You know you'll go to Vietnam if you go in the Army.
13 If you go in the Navy, you won't have to worry about it".

14 RT: What did your family think when they found out that you were going to go
15 to Vietnam, at least in the Navy?

16 JM: In the Navy, I know my mother worried a lot, but I don't whether my dad
17 was, I'm sure he worried some too but I don't think he was that concerned.

18 RT: Now, did you get married before you went into the service or after?

1 JM: After.

2 RT: After, ok. So what were your daily duties aboard *Evans*?

3 JM: Onboard ship. When we would be out at sea, we would work four on and
4 eight off. You'd never have two different watches that way, like if you had the 4:00 to
5 8:00 in the morning, you'd get up at 3:30 and you'd go down and you'd put in your four
6 hours on watch. Then you'd get off and then onboard ship we would work mornings in
7 the engine room. So you'd stay back in the engine room for another four hours. Then
8 we'd usually take the afternoon off and go up compartment and sit and things. Then at
9 4:00 that afternoon you'd go back on watch until 8:00 and get off.

10 RT: Your duties aboard ship, what did you normally do?

11 JM: Machinist mate and I worked in the aft engine room and I did messenger
12 watch at first. That was going around taking readings off the gauges and checking
13 pressures and stuff. Then you'd wake the next watch up and that type of stuff. Later on I
14 got qualified to stand evaporator watch. That's where you change the seawater into fresh
15 water; use it both for boiler feed water for your boilers and then for drinking water for the
16 crew.

17 RT: How did you change the seawater into fresh water?

18 JM: You have a set of evaporators, which you heat with steam. You actually boil
19 the water inside the evaporator, which has got a vacuum on it. It caused it to turn into
20 condensate. You collect the condensate and turn it back into water and then it's fresh
21 water.

22 RT: What was your ship's mission, what was the *Evans* mission at the time that
23 you were on there? Were you part of combat, or combat support?

24 JM: We were combat support. We operated off the gun line. We had Marine
25 spotters that were; we had some that would fly the small planes in the air, findings targets
26 for us. Then we had some that were on the ground that would call targets in.

27 RT: What was your impression of the *Evans* once you were onboard?

28 JM: It was a good ship. The crew was tight together. Everyone got along
29 reasonably well. When you take that many people and put hem in a very small area and
30 confine them for 24 hours a day it still got along pretty well.

1 RT: Would you say it was like an extended family reunion where you're bunking
2 with cousins and then siblings?

3 JM: And siblings and some you got along with and some you didn't.

4 RT: What kind of rapport or relationship would you say that the officers had with
5 the ratings?

6 JM: I think they were quite well. They got along with the enlisted men quite well
7 I think. We had a lot of fairly good exchanges.

8 RT: Did you go to port very often?

9 JM: Yes we would go to port usually within two to three weeks; we'd be back
10 into a port.

11 RT: Did you take that opportunity to go off ship and see the sights and find
12 entertainment?

13 JM: Find entertainment is probably about right. We would do various things but
14 as far as taking tours in the country and stuff we didn't do that. We hung around close to
15 the ship. We were always on Cinderella Liberty, which meant you had to be back at
16 midnight, so you didn't venture far.

17 RT: What did you usually do for recreation?

18 JM: Made the bars, checked the girls out.

19 RT: Did you have, were there any experiences in your time, either on the *Evans*
20 or in the Navy up to joining the *Evans* that you would say were humorous experiences?

21 JM: Humorous experiences, probably several of them, I'm trying to think of one
22 now that we did. I can remember when we were in Hawaii, there were four of us went
23 together and rented rental car and we were going to see some stuff outside of Honolulu
24 and we drove. About the time that we thought we were getting out of Honolulu we were
25 right back where we started from. We discovered that the island is all Honolulu.

26 RT: So did you ever make use of any R&R facilities?

27 JM: The only one I ever went to they had a Grandy Island in the Philippines that
28 was an R&R facility. We went over for one afternoon and stayed.

29 RT: What was it like? Was it just a Quonset hut or was it more elaborate than
30 that?

1 JM: It was a big EM club type thing over where they had the bar and they had
2 slot machines I remember there.

3 RT: Oh, so there was gambling there?

4 JM: Oh, yes.

5 RT: So aside from the slot machines were their other opportunities to gamble?

6 Did you have poker games or anything like that?

7 JM: Not on the *Evans* we didn't. *Evans* was a standing order if you were caught
8 gambling you would be busted one rate. I'm sure there was some that went on, I just
9 didn't know of any.

10 RT: But at least when you went ashore, did anyone actually take the opportunity
11 to enter into any gambling or were they just more interested in finding a sailor's gin
12 joint?

13 JM: Gin joints I would say probably more likely.

14 RT: So did you write to your friends or your family while you were on ship?

15 JM: I would write to my family occasionally.

16 RT: About how often, once a week or more?

17 JM: Maybe once every two weeks or so.

18 RT: Did they ever return letters to you? Did they ever write back?

19 JM: Yes, my mother would write back. She would write more often than I would
20 write, certainly.

21 RT: What kind of things did you discuss in your letters?

22 JM: Mine that I'd send home, I would describe daily life on the ship and where
23 we were at and where we were going next. She would explain to me about things
24 happening around town when she sent me a letter, about my, I have two sisters, younger
25 sisters and she would talk about them.

26 RT: So you go tot receive all the local news or at least the news about the family?

27 JM: The family news, yes.

28 RT: Did you get to hear any other kind of news for example some neighbor
29 maybe had a better cotton crop this year or anything like that?

30 JM: I'm sure I did but I don't remember any exactly. I'm sure she put the local
31 gossip in.

1 RT: So, during your time in did you receive any kind of awards, citations,
2 commendations?

3 JM: Such as medals and that type of stuff. See, I have five awards. I have the
4 National Defense Service Ribbon, Vietnam Service Ribbon. I have one from the country
5 of South Vietnam. Then we have a meritorious unit citation and another unit citation.

6 RT: How did you feel about your relatively short time on *Frank Evans*?

7 JM: *Frank E. Evans* it was pretty good. Like you say it was so short that I never
8 really got, I didn't know any different. I went there and we did our job. After the
9 accident we were coming back home and we were all glad to be coming back home, but
10 wished that we could change it and have the guys back again.

11 RT: Since you were on *Evans* for such a short time, did you build an immediate
12 rapport with the guys or would you say that you were still treated fairly as a new guy?

13 JM: I was still the new guy definitely. The new guy gets everything pulled on
14 him and has to do the dirty jobs and stuff.

15 RT: You said the new guy gets everything pulled on him, what did they do short
16 sheet your bunk?

17 JM: I remember one time they had a bucket made up with a wooden lid on it.
18 They sent me from the aft engine room to the forward engine room and said they needed
19 a condensate sample. So both engine rooms are connected with sound powered phone, so
20 as soon as I left they called and said I was coming for a condensate sample. I get there
21 and I tell them I need a condensate sample. So they take you over and they take the
22 wooden lid off the bucket and they open the exhaust steam valve, squirt it full of steam
23 and set it back on there. Said okay, take it back. So I took it back to the aft engine room
24 and of course when they opened it up there was nothing in there. Turned a little moisture
25 on the side and they said, "Well we sent you after a condensate sample and you didn't
26 bring any back". I said, "Well I saw him put it in there". That type of thing.

27 RT: Did you have any souvenirs from your time aboard the *Evans*?

28 JM: I had a few photos that I'd taken on there but that was about all I had.

29 RT: Do you still have those or were they lost in the collision?

30 JM: I've still got a few of them.

1 RT: So speaking of the collision where were you aboard *Frank E. Evans* at the
2 time that the *Melbourne* struck?

3 JM: I was in my rack in the aft part of the ship. I was asleep.

4 RT: So you did not serve in an area that would allow you to have seen the fleet
5 exercise or anything that night?

6 JM: I had been up on deck about midnight that night after I had gotten off of
7 watch. Looked out and it was a nice calm night. Could see the *Melbourne* in front of us
8 at that time and things looked very peaceful then.

9 RT: How could you see the *Melbourne*, was it lit?

10 JM: Just from the glow of the moon type deal.

11 RT: So, you could see its silhouette at least?

12 JM: You could see the silhouette real easily.

13 RT: Other than the silhouette was there any evidence that the *Melbourne* was
14 there? Did you see any kind of lights or any kind of illumination?

15 JM: There was some illumination on the Melbourne at the time that you could
16 see.

17 RT: Was it your standard running lights or was it something different?

18 JM: I would say it's probably standard running lights. I don't remember
19 anything being lit up unusually bright or anything.

20 RT: Since you were sleeping at the time that the Melbourne struck what was your
21 first reaction or your first thought?

22 JM: My first thought was, I didn't know what had happened. I knew we had hit
23 something or run aground or something. I got up and found my pants to put on. I looked
24 around and I could see all the fuel oil and stuff running down the bulkhead and my first
25 thought was I know who'll have to clean this mess up.

26 RT: The new guy.

27 JM: The new guy.

28 RT: When you were up on deck earlier that night and you did see the *Melbourne*
29 about how far away would you estimate that it was?

30 JM: I would say a good at least $\frac{3}{4}$ to a mile away. It was quite a ways in front of
31 us.

1 RT: Were you able to judge in anyway, which direction it was headed?
2 JM: No I can't think of any. I could just tell that we were behind at the time.
3 RT: When the collision occurred were you thrown out of your bunk? Was it that
4 violent or was it a shaking that just awoke you?

5 JM: It was quite violent when the ship rolled. I didn't fall out of my bunk. I was
6 able to grab hold in time. I would have fallen out if I hadn't.

7 RT: What was your first reaction, that is what did you do? Did you immediately
8 start running for the nearest door or did you sit there for a couple of seconds and think
9 about what to do?

10 JM: I probably sat there for couple of seconds. Like I said I found my pants to
11 put on. The battle lanterns were on then where you could see a glow and shine.
12 Somebody was saying we had to report to our general quarters stations. Mine was in the
13 aft engine room. So I went there and just started down the ladder and they had already
14 secured the plant. They were coming back up and said we should go to the fantail. Then
15 I went back to my compartment and finished getting dressed. Got my camera that I had
16 just bought out of the locker and piddled around a while and then went to the fantail.

17 RT: You said, they had secured the plant, what exactly did that involve?

18 JM: Closing the steam valves and shutting the valves off to the outside.

19 RT: So securing the plant essentially meant shutting down?

20 JM: Shutting down.

21 RT: How long would that have taken?

22 JM: It couldn't have took over five minutes.

23 RT: So fairly quickly?

24 JM: Quite quickly.

25 RT: What did you do after the collision? After you had made your way to the
26 fantail, did a bunch of you wait or did you immediately join in to help with the rescue
27 operation or did you await someone to give orders to you as to what to do?

28 JM: More, we stood back and more or less waited because they still didn't know
29 at the time what was going on. The *Melbourne* was pulling along side at this time and
30 putting lines on us to hold us steady. We stood back there and watched that for a while.

31 RT: So what was your opinion of the rescue effort itself?

1 JM: I think they did an outstanding job taking care of it.

2 RT: Especially under the circumstances.

3 JM: Under the circumstances, yes.

4 RT: Was there a lot of cooperation in the rescue effort between the Australians
5 and the Americans or was it mostly the Australians doing, performing?

6 JM: It was mostly the Australians that were getting things taken care of and
7 everything. They came down and said we were to move up. We went up to the highest
8 part of our ship. They had stretched down some cargo nets to use as ladders to climb on
9 up to the door up on the carrier a ways. Whenever I was climbing up that was when I
10 discovered that the front half of the ship wasn't there. Then I knew what, something had
11 happened. Until then I had no idea what the problem was.

12 RT: Until someone had told you that *Evans* had been struck by *Melbourne*?

13 JM: Yes.

14 RT: So at that point you weren't at a vantage point where you could even see the
15 bow of the *Melbourne*?

16 JM: No.

17 RT: So in the years after the collision what have you learned about the events
18 leading to it and how did you get that information?

19 JM: By talking to friends and stuff that have told me what they were doing at the
20 times. I've read the two books that Joe Stevens has written on the accident and visited
21 with the Australians. They told me what they were doing at the time of the accident, got
22 information that way.

23 RT: Do you have any further comments or information about the collision or the
24 events before or after that?

25 JM: I can't think of any right now other than I'm glad the Australians did all they
26 did to take care of us.

27 RT: So shortly after the collision how long was it before you and your crewmates
28 were removed from the fantail?

29 JM: I would say it was probably 20-30 minutes, something like that before they
30 got everything secured.

31 RT: That's very fast.

1 JM: It is quite fast.

2 RT: How was that done? Did they lower rope ladders or did they send small
3 boats?

4 JM: They had, well by the time they got up there they had the helicopters up and
5 they were searching the waters for survivors. They had put down boats and were going
6 around searching the ocean. Whenever we got up there we just used the cargo nets as
7 ladders to climb up in to the ship.

8 RT: Then you found accommodations on *Melbourne*?

9 JM: Yes.

10 RT: Where did they have you?

11 JM: They split us up into small groups where they could put us. They took our
12 group to kind of like a chief's quarters in our Navy and we stayed there.

13 RT: So a bunch of you bunked in the chief's quarters?

14 JM: Well, we didn't bunk, we sat and visited for a while. They prepared
15 breakfast for us. So we went down and had breakfast at the mess deck.

16 RT: How long did it take for you to reach the Philippines?

17 JM: We stayed on the *Melbourne* that day and during that afternoon the
18 *Kearsarge* and we took boats and got on *Kearsarge*. Then we escorted the *Melbourne* to
19 Singapore where we pulled into harbor and then we went back to the Philippines. I think
20 we were at sea, three, four days something like that before we got back to the Philippines.

21 RT: When you returned to the Philippines were you able to see the aft section of
22 *Frank Evans*?

23 JM: Yes, after we'd been there I think the second day we got to go out and get
24 what stuff we had left on the ship, off. That's when we saw it.

25 RT: What was your first impression when you saw it? Was it daylight?

26 JM: Yes, it was daylight when we went out.

27 RT: So what was your first impression when you could see it in broad daylight?

28 JM: It was lot worse than even I thought it was at the time.

29 RT: So had the salvage operation even started by that time?

30 JM: No, they had just brought it in and put it in dry dock.

31 RT: Sometime afterward the aft section was shelled for a gunnery target.

1 JM: They went in and they pulled out the aft engines I was told. Then they
2 towed it to sea and shelled it for gunnery practice.

3 RT: Were any of the men from *Evans* even invited to see the dispatching of the
4 remaining portion?

5 JM: Not to my knowledge.

6 RT: Okay, so you only heard about it afterward?

7 JM: Only heard, yes and this was, it would have been two or three years before I
8 even heard what happened to it.

9 RT: You didn't know that it had been shelled then?

10 JM: No.

11 RT: Would that have, was that, that's pretty much the same situation for the other
12 survivors that most of you did not know what had happened until long after?

13 JM: I don't think most of us knew for sure.

14 RT: What was your first reaction when you found out that was the end of the
15 *Evans*; it had been towed and used as a gunnery target?

16 JM: Kind of a sad way to do away with a memorial I thought.

17 RT: Thank you very much for your time, for this interview. If you have any
18 further comments or anything to add, you can either do it now or you can let us know at a
19 future date.

20 JM: Ok.

21 RT: Thank you very much.

22 JM: Thank you.