

THE FINAL CHAPTER OF THE USS FRANK E. EVANS

In 1969, during the height of the Viet Nam conflict, the Royal Australian Navy aircraft carrier, HMAS Melbourne, collided with the American destroyer USS Frank E. Evans.

The ships were on maneuvers in the South China Sea. The collision occurred in the early morning hours of June 3. No doubt, all those not on watch were in their bunks.

The damage to the Melbourne was slight. The damage to the Evans was horrific. The forward third of the ship sank almost immediately - taking seventy-four young American sailors to a watery

grave.

Because of the heroic efforts of the Evans' crew, what remained of the good ship was saved. Men thrown into the water by the collision were rescued by member ships of the task force. The aft section of the mortally wounded Evans was taken to the Subic Bay naval base on Luzon in the Philippines. The news of the collision and resultant loss of life sent a shudder through the Pacific fleet.

The men who survived the disastrous collision of the Evans with the Melbourne must wonder what ultimately became of the ship? This, then, is a personal account of my recollections of the very last days of the USS Frank E. Evans DD-754. Perhaps one or two of the survivors will read these words. Perhaps they can find some modicum of comfort, some small feeling of closure, in knowing the final chapter of their good ship's story.

My first knowledge of the disaster came via the newspaper - most likely the Stars and Stripes. Hanging on every printed word, I devoured what news I could. The prospect of a ship, a Sumner class destroyer, being cut in two was very hard to believe. The loss of life was tragic.

At that time, I was a seaman who had served a total of six months aboard the Gearing class destroyer USS John R. Craig DD-885. The Evans and the Craig were World War II vintage tin cans. Their utilitarian design made them practical work horses for shore bombardment, picket duty, and plane guarding during the Viet Nam War. While the Evans was being cut in two, my ship was preparing to leave San Diego on its way across the Pacific on what was to be my first of three WestPac deployments. I had no idea at that time that our ship and the Evans were destined to meet soon in Subic Bay, Philippines.

The USS John R. Craig finished a tour plane guarding at "Yankee Station" off the Viet Nam coast. After a period in the ship yards at Subic Bay, we were sent to a new mooring, but not alongside the other destroyers and support ships. We were assigned to a berth at a rather secluded part of the sprawling naval base. We moored within a few yards of the remaining stern section of the Frank E. Evans.

I had come within sight of the ship I had read, heard, and talked about. The sight of the crippled stern section was chilling. There was a ship, similar to our own, damaged beyond repair. The comprehension that our destroyers were hardly invincible became a stark and frightening reality. It was distressing to think of the lives lost aboard that ship. Little did I know that our time in Subic Bay was to be a death watch for the USS Frank E. Evans.

For several days, groups of sailors and shipyard workers boarded the Evans and unceremoniously removed everything that could be salvaged from the stricken ship. The workers reminded me of ants, carving up and carrying away parts of a fallen grasshopper. I watched from the starboard side of our torpedo deck as the macabre work proceeded. The Philippines was a lush and green place. The area where our ships were berthed was bereft of greenery. The soil adjacent to the piers seemed red in color - devoid of life. The sky was an overcast, somber gray. The sad colors of the land and sky were appropriate for the grim salvage work at hand.

We put to sea after several days. Our mission was simple: we were to sink the hulk of the Evans. It seemed obscene that one American destroyer was to sink what remained of another! Why not simply tow the shattered gray lady out to sea and scuttle her with dignity, a funeral of sorts? Such is not the way of the Navy or the gods of war. The hapless Evans would prove herself a valuable practice target for the Craig's inexperienced gun crews. Her end was to be pragmatic, not ceremonial. Our ship was to be the final instrument of the Evans' destruction. The USS Frank E. Evans, in her death throes, would serve her country one last time.

The day was fair and sunny; the seas calm. Our gun crews first used what I was told were "sand shells" to fire on the Evans. They were non-explosive rounds that made a dust plume to register a strike. The Evans was fired upon all day long. Only the gun crews were at their battle stations. For the rest of the crew it was the normal ship's work routine. I, like most of my shipmates, went topside many times throughout the day to witness the morbid work in progress.

The announcement came over the 1MC that the Evans was about to sink. We could watch the death throes of a once vital man o' war from our Asroc deck amidships. Perhaps twenty or thirty of the Craig's curious crew gathered there to watch her final minutes. She was less than a mile off our port side. Our ship began a high speed run and both of our five inch gun mounts, two guns per turret, opened fire. Several salvos found their mark. The explosions aboard the Evans could not be heard, but the large plumes of white smoke indicated that explosive shells had done their work.

The last furious blows dealt by a friendly ship were too much for the now twisted and sinking Evans. Her end was not spectacular. She neither rose at the truncated bow nor the stern. There were no explosions. The Frank E. Evans merely slipped beneath the gentle blue sea. It was as if the ship itself had given up in her struggle to remain afloat and had resigned herself to accept the watery grave that awaited.

Frosty Edkin's bass voice announced over the 1MC the somber and soulful words, "The hulk of the Evans is now sunk." The tone of the boatswain's mate of the watch was respectful, like that of a priest delivering a sermon at a funeral. His words were chosen carefully and delivered just as carefully. My blood ran cold on that hot summer day when hearing the announcement; just as it runs cold now as I write these words.

We stood dumbstruck. No one spoke. Each of us stood silently listening to our own private thoughts. Nothing remained of the Evans' hulk. There was no sign that two thirds of a destroyer had just slipped beneath the waves. There was no debris floating on the surface; no bubbles rising from the depths. We saw only the dark blue water sparkling in the tropical afternoon sunshine. One by one we slipped quietly away to return to our own ship's

work.

Memories of that eventful day are now fading with passage of some thirty years. Sometimes my mind wanders back to that August afternoon. I cannot remember the names of those who stood as witnesses beside me, but I can certainly remember the powerful feelings I had while watching the sinking of a ship so much like our own. My thoughts were of the men - sailors like us - who had tragically died in her. The thoughts were also of the mortality of both men and the machines they create. The lives of both the Frank E. Evans and her lost crewmen were all too ephemeral, so delicate, so short and fragile.

I wonder now about the men who sailed aboard the Frank E. Evans on that disastrous early June morning on a faraway sea. I think of all the other crews who had sailed in her previously. After all these years I can only imagine the grief they still must carry - both the survivors and their families and friends. Time merely dulls the pain that grief inflicts; it does not eliminate it. The men of the Melbourne also must shudder when their minds drift back to that night. The captains of both ships must be haunted by their memories of that awful event. What thoughts are in their minds when reflecting on the pre dawn hours of June 3, 1969? What mental tortures must be evoked by those memories of long ago for all those good men involved in the collision? How many have asked themselves, "Why," or, "What if?"

The John R. Craig ultimately shared the same fate as the Frank E. Evans. In June of 1980 the old tin can, her useful working life behind her, was towed out to sea off the California coast and sunk. Thinking about her fate now, it seems like some form of poetic justice. Like the Evans, the Craig's last trip to sea was to be one last example of service to her country. Her end, though not tragic, was the same.

Two once proud destroyers now lie below seas on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean. They are separated by thousands of miles and a little more than a decade in time. Yet those two sleek greyhounds of the sea are historically linked forever because of one tragic incident that claimed the lives of seventy-four sailors and the resulting fateful coup de

grace that was delivered to the USS Frank E. Evans off the Philippine coast one tropical summer day in August of 1969 by the USS John R. Craig.

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USS John R. Craig DD-885