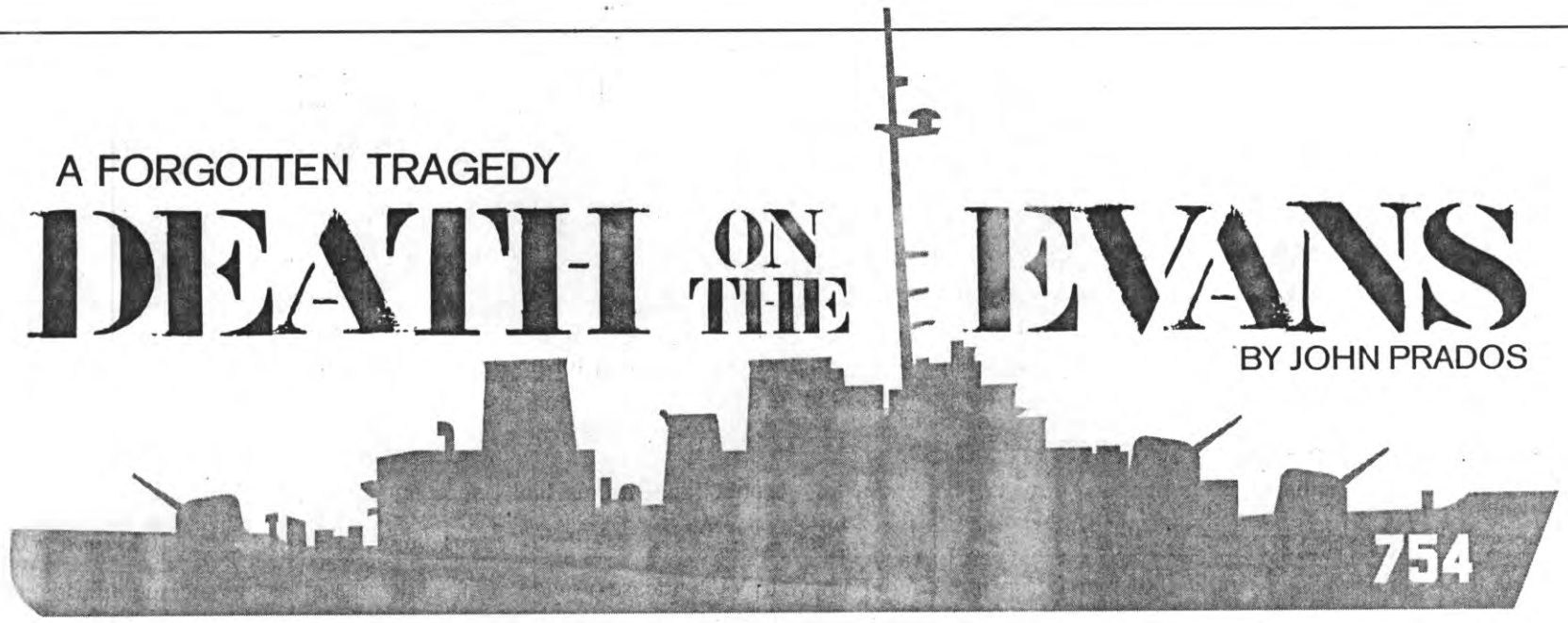
A FORGOTTEN TRAGEDY

DEATH ON THE EVANS

BY JOHN PRADOS



There was so much of the arbitrary about the Vietnam War, such as death and survival. The difference between standing in one place or another, getting one assignment or another, holding onto some possession, doing a certain thing before leaving for a patrol—all were familiar to infantrymen. Too often they presumed these irrationalities applied only to them. But Vietnam did the same kinds of things to airmen and sailors as it did to the troops on the ground.

The biggest single loss of life in the Navy during the war, the hangar deck fire aboard the aircraft carrier *Forrestal* in August 1967, was a sudden event in which survival was quite arbitrary. The second biggest naval loss has had no books written about it; no commentators conjuring what-ifs. Its victims are not inscribed on *The Wall*.

In this case, not only survival but even remembrance was arbitrary. The politics of the Nixon administration required keeping the incident as low key as possible, while the vagaries of Vietnam's "areas of operations" afforded an opportunity to do so, with the result that this tragedy has been all but forgotten.

Let us now remember the 74 sailors of the U.S.S. *Frank E. Evans* (DD-754), who died at sea on June 3, 1969, and their injured and uninjured shipmates, for whom being on duty or off watch guaranteed their survival that night. And let us also ask: What did it mean to be "in" the Vietnam War? Those 74 sailors' names are not inscribed on *The Wall*, because, according to the Department of Defense, they were not in Vietnam.

The *Evans* was among a class of heavily armed destroyers very popular with the U.S. Navy for gunfire support operations off the Vietnamese coast. Nicknamed "The Fighter," she had been commissioned in February 1945 in time to see the end of the Japanese kamikaze attacks in the Pacific. *Evans* had also fought in the Korean War and was with the Seventh Fleet off the China coast for the Quemoy-Matsu crises of the late 1950s. When America almost came to blows with Mao's China over those offshore islands, the *Evans* was among the warships assigned to convoy Nationalist Chinese supply vessels into the harbors of the islands, with a strong presumption to shoot back if fired upon. During the Vietnam War ships such as the *Evans*, once scheduled for retirement, were recalled for service.

The American Navy had two main roles in Vietnam. The *Evans* contributed to both of them. One was the conduct of amphibious operations, landing Marines and other troops on the coast in strikes on North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. The destroyers escorted the amphibious vessels to their landing beaches, then provided heavy artillery support for fighting on the ground. Naval gunfire support was widely used along the Vietnamese coast—so much so that operating on such missions was known as being on the gun line. The Navy's other main mission was air operations from Yankee Station. There, too, destroyers were key in protecting the big, lumbering carriers from adversary threats. The *Evans* spent most of her time in the first of these roles.

In December 1967 the *Frank E. Evans* was cited for her work on the gun line off Danang and Quang Ngai in I Corps. After more work along the coast and with the Pacific Fleet, she returned home for refitting. Due to pressures of the war, she left Long Beach for the war zone in early 1969 with an incomplete crew, picking up extra sailors at Pearl Harbor. The ship's barber, who had been given a medical transfer for surgery, was recalled to the *Evans* before she sailed. Under Commander Albert S. McLemore, the destroyer almost immediately went on the gun line.

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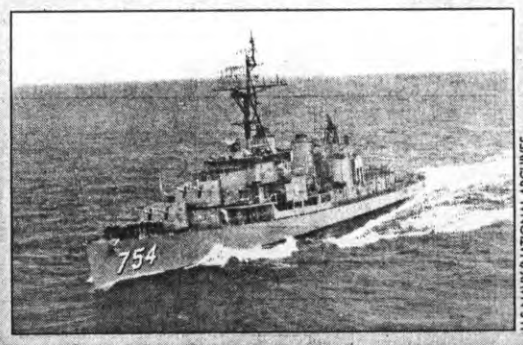
U.S.S. FRANK E. EVANS (DD-754)
Sumner Class Destroyer



U.S.NAVY/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Builder: Bethlehem Steel, Staten Island
Launched: October 3, 1944
Commissioned: February 3, 1945

Displacement: 2,610 tons
Length: 376 feet 10 inches
Beam: 40 feet 10 inches
Draught: 14 feet 2 inches
Armament: 6–5 inch, 12–40mm, 11–20mm guns, 10–21 inch torpedoes

McLemore's vessel and three other destroyers were the primary gunfire support for Operation Daring Rebel, a sweep of the barrier island southeast of Danang in May 1969. That operation was punctuated by an over-the-beach landing of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, under Col. William C. Doty, Jr. The unit was distinguished for its defense of Khe Sanh during 1967-68. In Daring Rebel, the Army's Americal Division screened off the coast with armored cavalry, two South Vietnamese battalions cleared a nearby island, and four companies of South Korean Marines landed and joined up with Doty's 1/26.

The *Evans* took turns with the other destroyers firing at North Vietnamese bunkers and other fortifications spotted by the Marines. The naval gunnery ships amounted to one-fifth of the entire U.S. Navy force on the gun line at that time. Doty outfoxed the enemy twice, loading Marines aboard helicopters for assault landings into areas his main forces had already passed, on the theory that the North Vietnamese would emerge from their hideaways. The U.S. Marines claimed 105 enemy killed among a total of 303 dead, versus American losses of two killed and 59 wounded. Daring Rebel was considered a highlight of Navy-Marine action for May 1969.

At the end of the operation, her munitions expended, the *Frank E. Evans* received orders to sail to Subic Bay in the Philippines to re-arm, after which she

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would participate in a naval maneuver. The exercise was a multilateral one, one of the largest in the history of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), called Sea Spirit. It brought together warships from the United States, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand. Among SEATO members only France and Pakistan did not participate. Forty-six vessels took part in a dozen days of maneuvers. Most of the ships gathered in Manila on May 26. Flotilla commander U.S. Navy Adm. William T. Rapp assembled the captains for a luncheon and pre-mission briefing. Commander McLemore attended and received general instructions.

The *Evans* was assigned to Exercise Task Group 472.1 under Australian Adm. G.J.B. Crabb of the Australian aircraft carrier *Melbourne*. Screening ships included two other U.S. destroyers, *James E. Kyes* and *Everett F. Larson*, the British *Cleopatra*, and the New Zealand ship *Blackpool*. The screen commander was the American destroyer division commander aboard the *Kyes*. Adm. Crabb held a pre-sailing conference for ship commanders. The task group sailed into the South China Sea on May 29. The ships were arrayed in several task groups. The plan was to rehearse surface actions, antisubmarine warfare, and carrier air actions in several different configurations under wartime conditions. Crabb's force was a unit with an antisubmarine specialty.

This brings us to the night of June 2 and a story about routines and standard operating procedures. The task group had a two-layer screen, with two escorts as outer pickets, and the *Evans* was one of three ships on the inner arc, generally 3,000 to 5,000 yards ahead of the *Melbourne*. On that arc the escorts had assigned sectors in relation to each other and to the flagship. There were standard maneuvers for various changes in formation when warships steamed in concert. Adm. Crabb established a schedule that set a daily rotation for the designated plane guard ship. On June 2, the appointed ship was the New Zealand escort craft *Blackpool*. That afternoon the task group took part in an exercise aimed at fending off a surface attack group, perhaps somehow affecting the *Blackpool*. That evening, Crabb asked his escort leader to select a plane guard. The assignment went to the *Evans*. Three times that evening and into the night the *Evans* was the rescue ship as the carrier continued her operations.

The task group followed a zig-zag course along a base line as an antisubmarine precaution. In addition, it was in a buttoned-down combat mode, called "Condition Yoke," with darkened ships and all openings to the interior shut. Several of these routines had a direct impact on what happened that night.

Before midnight the *Melbourne* called on *Evans* for plane guard once again. A few moments later the order was cancelled, and the destroyer returned to the screen. Commander McLemore gave his night orders at about 9:00 p.m. and retired to his cabin shortly after the watch changed at midnight. On the bridge for the mid-watch, midnight to 4:00 a.m., were two junior lieutenants, Ronald C. Ramsey and James A. Hopson IV. Ramsey was the officer-of-the-deck (OOD). He had been certified for this duty just ten days earlier but had been doing this work under the most challenging conditions (with the ship underway) for about four months. Hopson, the junior officer-of-the-deck, had served aboard the *Evans* for 19 months. He had stood watch in the ship's combat information center and as JOOD, though he had yet to attain the OOD rating.

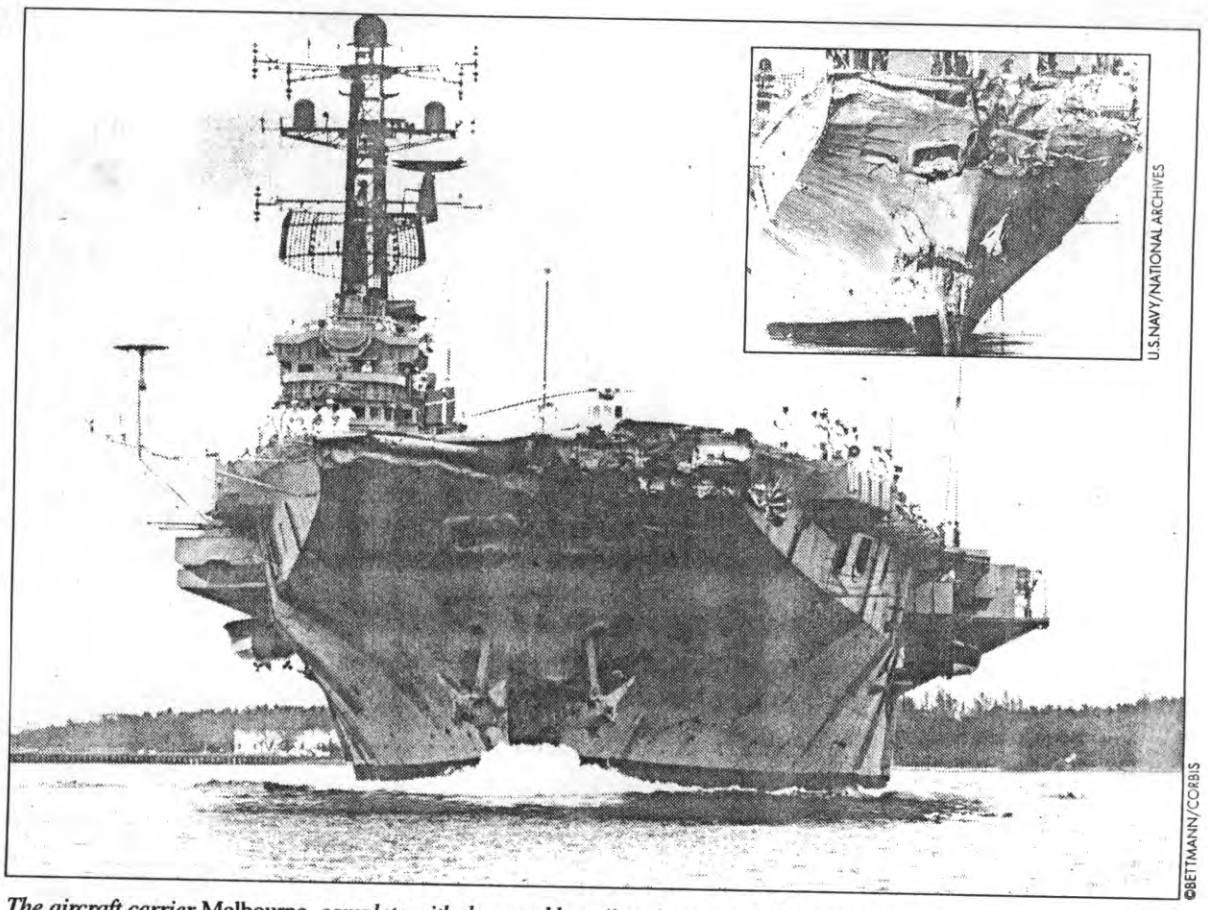
That night the young officers should have been all right. The sea was glassy calm, with practically no wind, bright moonlight, and unrestricted visibility. McLemore's standing orders called for him to be summoned whenever there was doubt as to a safe speed or course, when course or speed were changed for any reason, when higher command ordered any formation change, or when in any doubt about whether to summon the captain. The *Melbourne* anticipated landing an antisub aircraft at about 3:30, which the task group was aware of. She also had two helicopters airborne at the time.

The skipper of the *Melbourne*, Capt. John P. Stevenson, was in tactical command, since the admiral had gone to bed for the night. Stevenson stopped the force's zig-zagging a little after 2:00 and went to his own cabin, leaving Lt. Russell D. Lamb of the Australian Navy with the con of the carrier. The ship launched a helicopter at 3:04, just as Stevenson returned to the bridge. About 3:10 the captain ordered the destroyer *Evans* to assume position as rescue ship once more.

The exercise was one of the largest in the history of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), called Sea Spirit. It brought together warships from the United States, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand. Forty-six vessels took part in a dozen days of maneuvers.

The order to change formation triggered a series of errors that led directly to the tragedy. Apparently the *Evans* had drifted into the patrol sector covered by the *Blackpool*. When she received the order to shift place, her reckoning began with a mistaken notion of relative position. Lt. Ramsey on the destroyer's bridge did not take a visual sighting of the aircraft carrier, nor did he summon Commander McLemore, although both course and speed changes were contemplated in order to execute this maneuver. He did not check with the JOOD, Lt. Hopson, on their respective understandings of the positions of the ships. Hopson had a different notion of both the speed and course of the *Melbourne*, a critical factor since he was controlling the helm of the *Evans* under Ramsey's direction.

The basic choice was whether to turn to port (right) or starboard (left). Observers have suggested that in Manila the exercise commander had indicated to his assembled captains that starboard turns should be used routinely when forming columns for plane guard duty. But this is impossible to verify. In any case, it was unknown to the junior officers on *Evans'* bridge that night. That was a preferred evolution in the U.S.



U.S.NAVY/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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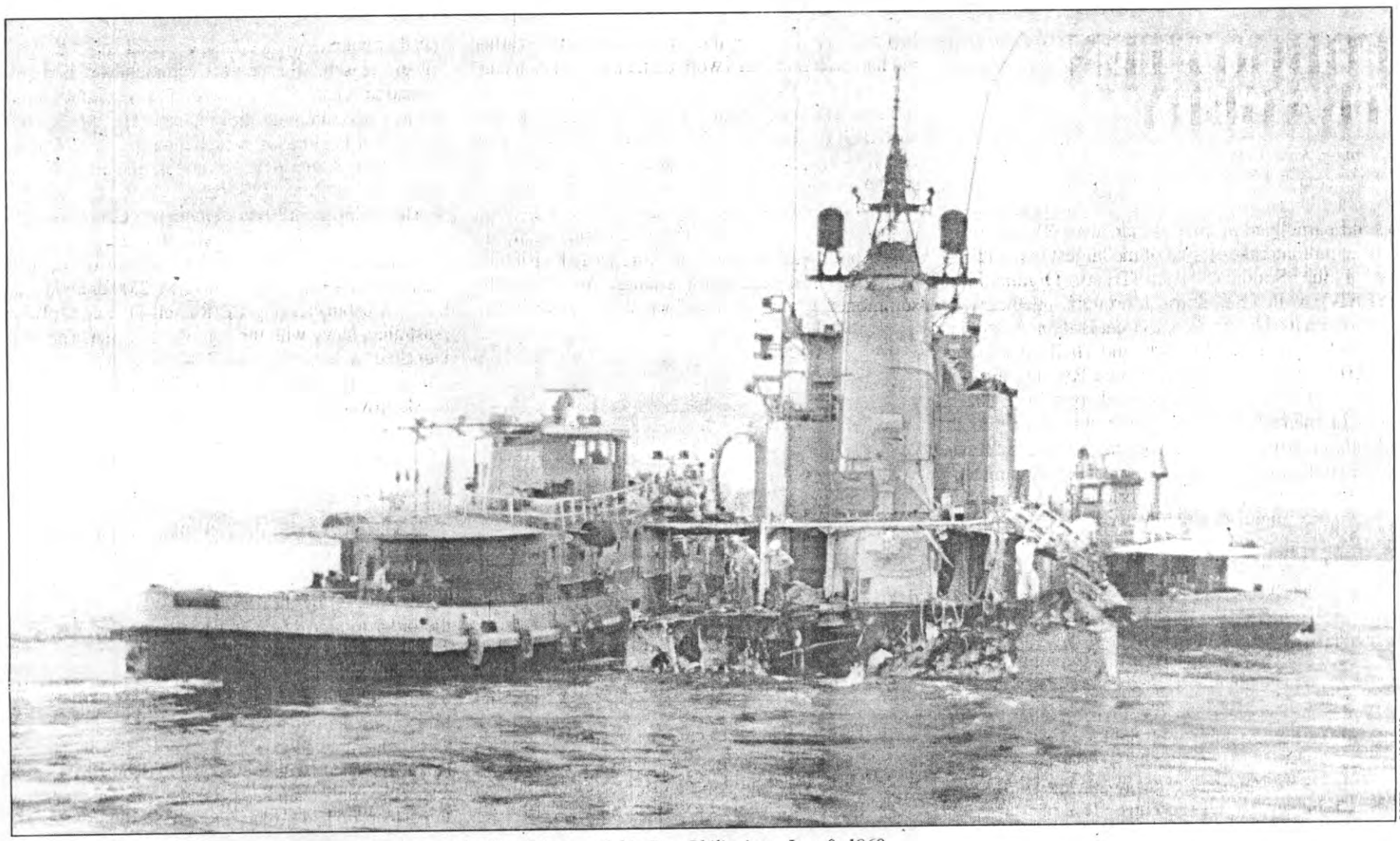
The aircraft carrier Melbourne, *complete with damaged bow (inset), arrives in Singapore June 6.*



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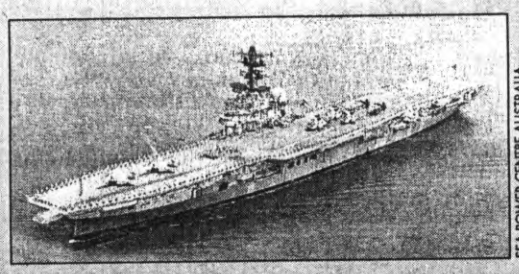
The rear section of the U.S.S. Frank E. Evans *arriving at the Naval Base at Subic Bay, Philippines, June 9, 1969.*

Navy, according to one flag officer familiar with this incident. An investigating board later concluded that a starboard turn would have eliminated any chance of a collision. Instead, the *Evans* turned to port.

The ships were roughly 3,700 yards apart when the destroyer began her maneuver. Almost immediately it became apparent aboard the *Melbourne* that something was wrong.

H.M.A.S. MELBOURNE (R21)
Majestic Class Light Aircraft Carrier



SEA POWER CENTRE AUSTRALIA

Builder: Vickers Armstrong, Barrow-in-Furness, England
Launched: February 28, 1945
Commissioned: October 28, 1955

Displacement: 20,320 tons
Length: 690 feet
Beam: 80 feet 2 inches
Draught: 25 feet 5 inches
Armament: 25–40mm Bofors AA

The Fleet tug *Tawasa* was summoned to move the hulk to Subic Bay. A week later, the Chief of Naval Operations struck the destroyer from the Navy List and the Secretary of the Navy ordered she be decommissioned and used as a target for live fire.

Capt. Stevenson sent a message on the task group's primary tactical radio circuit giving his correct course and ordered the aircraft carrier's running lights turned on. Aboard the *Evans*, the carrier's course was erroneously decoded by Lt. Ramsey; he evidently interpreted it to mean that the *Melbourne* was turning to starboard. By that time, the ships were within 2,600 yards.

Ramsey ordered a turn to starboard. On the bridge of the carrier, Australian sailors realized the destroyer was on a collision course with the *Melbourne*, Stevenson ordered a signal sent: "You are on a collision course." It was 3:12 and the ships were 2,200 yards apart. Lt. Ramsey, when he received that message, ordered right full rudder and sent the Australian ship notice of his action. By then the distance between the ships was 1,200 yards.

Capt. Stevenson ordered a hard starboard turn. Shortly thereafter, his officer of the watch, Lt. Lamb, ordered the *Melbourne*'s engines stopped. Neither measure had any effect. Aboard the *Evans*, Lt. Hopson ordered all engines back full. That, too, had no effect: At 3:15 the bow of the carrier *Melbourne* sliced through the destroyer at a point between her funnels and her bridge. The *Evans* was cut in two in less than a minute. The *Melbourne* sustained a gash in her bow but no other damage. She suffered no casualties.

The forward part of the *Frank E. Evans* was pushed over by the force of the collision and lay on her beam ends, settling fast, filling quickly toward the back end of the section. This part of the ship capsized, then the bow rose above water and the ship slid into the sea. The entire section of the ship sank in just nine minutes.

Suddenly survival became the issue. Most of the 111 sailors in the forward section were asleep. The bridge crew were luckiest. Lt. Hopson had run out onto the bridge wing to see the oncoming mass of the *Melbourne*, then ran through the bridge toward the opposite wing as the impact occurred. He was thrown into the water. Ramsey also survived. Seaman Robert S. Petty, boatswain's mate of the watch inside the pilot house, was thrown clear of the ship and landed in the water. He climbed back aboard the hulk, pulled open and held a hatch just behind the Wardroom, through which 16 sailors escaped.

Seaman Apprentice Marcus Rodriguez, one of two sailors atop the Signal Shelter on the destroyer's signal bridge, was thrown directly onto the flight deck of the *Melbourne*. He was badly injured. Two others on watch, among the 13 sailors on the Bridge and adjoining stations, also survived. Two of the three radiomen escaped. Seaman Apprentice Kenneth W. Glines, a forward lookout, apparently became entangled in the wires of his communications gear, drowning before he could get free. Nobody from the *Evans'* Combat

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Information Center survived. Two officers and 13 sailors had been on watch at the time.

Below decks there was no warning. An off-watch seaman in the Messroom rushed to the main deck and got into the water, and two chief petty officers whose quarters were just forward of the Wardroom had relatively easy escapes. Commander McLemore, shocked out of sleep in his sea cabin, scrambled to the deck, saw his ship sinking fast, and, unable to communicate with the crew, shouted to abandon ship before he went over the side. The same thing happened to the ship's executive officer, Lt. Commander George L. McMichael.

Sailors were tossed from their bunks. Most awoke on the starboard wall, which became the floor as the *Evans* rolled over. The 11 chief petty officers in their quarters were saved in good part due to the actions of Chief Hospital Corpsman Charles W. Cannington, who grabbed a penlight and took the last place in line, directing the light for his comrades to see where they were going. Disorientation was a big problem when the ship turned on her side. Cannington did not make it out.

There were 32 sailors in the main crew bunkroom, the First Division compartment. Only six survived. In the 01 Division compartment, where there were 20 sailors, Radarman First Class George J. Laliberte got the men going by calling out, "Let's get out of here!" Ten men succeeded. Laliberte was not among them. All these sailors escaped up the hatch held open by Bob Petty. In all, 37 officers and men survived from the forward section of the *Frank E. Evans.*

Australian sailors played a crucial role in rescuing the Americans and limiting further loss of life. Capt. Stevenson instantly ordered Emergency Stations when the collision occurred, sending his crew to where they could help. He then ordered away all boats. A motor cutter was afloat and moving toward the forward section of *Evans* in four to five minutes. That boat picked up 29 survivors and the body of Seaman Glines. On a second trip, the cutter brought back five more survivors on life rafts. The carrier's barge rescued eight Americans. Lt. R.J. Burns jumped into the water to help the seamen who had escaped the sinking forward section of *Evans*.

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Captain John Philip Stevenson (right), skipper of the Melbourne, *listens as Rear Admiral Gordon J. Crabb, commander of the Australian Fleet, discuss the accident with the media shortly after their arrival in Singapore.*

Adm. Crabb canceled exercise Sea Spirit at 3:23 a.m. Two minutes later he ordered the launch of rescue helicopters and asked the U.S.S. *Kearsarge* of Antisubmarine Warfare Group 1 to provide assistance. The *Kearsarge* participated in a wider daylight search on June 3. Two Australian helicopters were airborne at the moment of the collision. Helicopter 831 rescued the destroyer's exec, Lt. Commander McMichael. Another helicopter without winch equipment used its floodlight to illuminate the scene. Two more helicopters were quickly launched to participate in the search. One of them, No. 830, put a diver into the ocean to help Larry I. Malilay, who at 3:40 became the last American sailor rescued from the sea.

The two sections of the American destroyer had remarkably different experiences. The rear portion did not sink. Water entered the rear section through several hatch doors that had been open and through the break in the ship, leaving her in critical condition. The hulk settled with a list, but for the eight officers and 154 enlisted sailors on this section of the *Evans* that made all the difference. Water poured into the engineering spaces open to the sea. Ruptured boiler steam lines scalded all but one of the six sailors in the forward engine room. One man drowned elsewhere.

Lt. (junior grade) Robert M. Hiltz heard a shouted General Quarters alarm and tried to reach his post. Hiltz saw the front end of the ship sinking and realized the aft section was open to the sea where the vessel had been cut in two. He ordered sailors to the stern. Lt. (junior grade) R.T.E. Bowler, who had had the previous Bridge watch as OOD, was thrown from his bed. He dressed and rushed forward, only to find his passage blocked by the towering side of the *Melbourne*. Lt. G.W. Dunne, the destroyer's operations officer and senior man aboard the after section, was the one who shouted the General Quarters alarm. He then went to the fantail and began a muster of the survivors. After that he surveyed the condition of the ship.

MICHAEL KEATING

Jim Zumwalt (center), accompanied by Admiral Emmett Tidd (rear, right), Mrs. Tidd, survivors, and family of the Frank E. Evans, *delivered testimony in favor of S.296, the Fairness to All Fallen Vietnam War Service Members Act, in an attempt to add the names of the 74 sailors to* The Wall.

The facts of the incident assumed greater importance with the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982. Sailors from the *Evans* soon discovered their comrades' names were not inscribed on *The Wall* because the tragedy took place outside the combat theater, defined as the territory of Vietnam.

Aboard the *Melbourne*, the Australians reacted quickly, both on the rescue mission and on the problem of the remaining hulk of the *Frank E. Evans*. Capt. Stevenson used the ship's engines to maneuver the aircraft carrier so that her starboard quarter lay alongside the destroyer's stern. Petty Officer Scott passed the first of several lines to the *Evans*, where Lt. Hiltz organized the American sailors to secure the hulk to the carrier. Chief Aircraft Handler Stanley R. Heares rigged helicopter cargo nets to connect the ships. Then executive officer Colin J. Patterson led a party of Australian sailors to the destroyer's deck, where they organized an evacuation of the surviving Americans to the *Melbourne*.

Patterson and Lt. Dunne clambered throughout the wreck to search for additional survivors and determine the destroyer's damage. They decided the *Evans* hulk was in danger of sinking and recommended to Capt. Stevenson that she be cast off to prevent the *Melbourne*'s being damaged. That was done. By dawn, the hulk had settled another foot or so but remained afloat. A party of three American sailors returned to the *Evans* to assess the damage. They were supplemented by additional sailors who made emergency repairs and rigged a towing bridle.

The American carrier *Kearsarge* arrived on the scene after daybreak. All the 199 *Evans* survivors were ferried to the U.S. carrier, except for the badly injured who were transferred by helicopter. The *Kearsarge* and *Melbourne* engaged in a wide area search by helicopter throughout the day without finding additional survivors.

Fleet tug *Tawasa* was summoned to move the hulk. *Tawasa* returned the *Evans* to Subic Bay, arriving an hour after dawn on June 9. A week later, the Chief of Naval Operations struck the destroyer from the Navy List and the Secretary of the Navy ordered she be decommissioned and used as a target for live fire. Lts. Ramsey and Hopson and Lieutenant Commander McLemore were reprimanded. Australian Capt. John Stevenson was acquitted with honor by a Royal Australian Navy court martial.

This ended the *Evans* incident. But the survivors and families of the lost sailors, bereaved in the short term, were short-changed in the long one. Desperate to reduce casualty reports from the Vietnam War Zone, the Nixon administration minimized any connection between the conflict and the *Frank E. Evans* loss. Family members were told nothing of the circumstances of the event. When the Navy announced the collision, it placed the incident at a location some 650 nautical miles southwest of Manila in Indonesian waters, perhaps off the northern coast of Borneo.

The truth was different. Exercise Sea Spirit, aside from its function of enhancing SEATO naval readiness, was designed to send a message to Moscow—and through it, to Hanoi—that naval power could be employed at will against North Vietnam. This came at a moment when the Nixon administration wanted to coerce Hanoi into softening its intransigent position at the Paris peace talks. The disaster actually took place in the South China Sea, less than a hundred miles from the Vietnamese-claimed Spratly Islands and roughly 250 miles from the entrance to the Saigon River. Most importantly, the *Frank E. Evans* and the other ships that took part in Sea Spirit had been pulled off the gun line off the Vietnamese coast, and sent to the maneuvers as part of their regular rotation of participating in the war and then rearming.

These facts assumed greater importance with the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982. Sailors from the *Frank E. Evans* soon discovered their comrades' names were not inscribed on *The Wall* because the tragedy took place outside the combat theater, defined as the territory of Vietnam. Its seaward component was the arbitrary boundary of the Operation Market Time blockade about a hundred miles off the Vietnamese coast.

Evans veterans argue that eligibility for *The Wall* should be defined functionally, not geographically, and that criterion includes the collision victims. The precedent already exists with Americans killed outside of Vietnam, in Laotian operations, air crashes, and other incidents.

Under present circumstances the inclusion of *Evans* sailors' names requires an act of Congress since *The Wall* is under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Such legislation has been introduced in several sessions of Congress but has yet to be passed.

In the 2003 session, family members and their allies tried hard to secure passage of S.296, a Senate bill that would have provided relief for *Evans* veterans and families. It was co-sponsored by three senators. Similar legislation in the House of Representatives had 35 co-sponsors. Preoccupied with other business, however, Congress failed to act for the *Evans'* sailors.■

Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America

A parallel organization of Vietnam Veterans of America, working side by side for the betterment of Vietnam-era veterans, their families, and others.

Our Mission is to advance the work of Vietnam Veterans of America through cooperative projects and programs. We wish to facilitate, enhance, and improve communication with our members and the general public and continue legislative efforts to insure the rights of, and benefits for, all veterans. Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America is dedicated to the aggressive advancement of realistic goals with integrity and in the spirit of unity that reflect our commitment to Vietnam Veterans of America, all veterans, their families, and communities

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