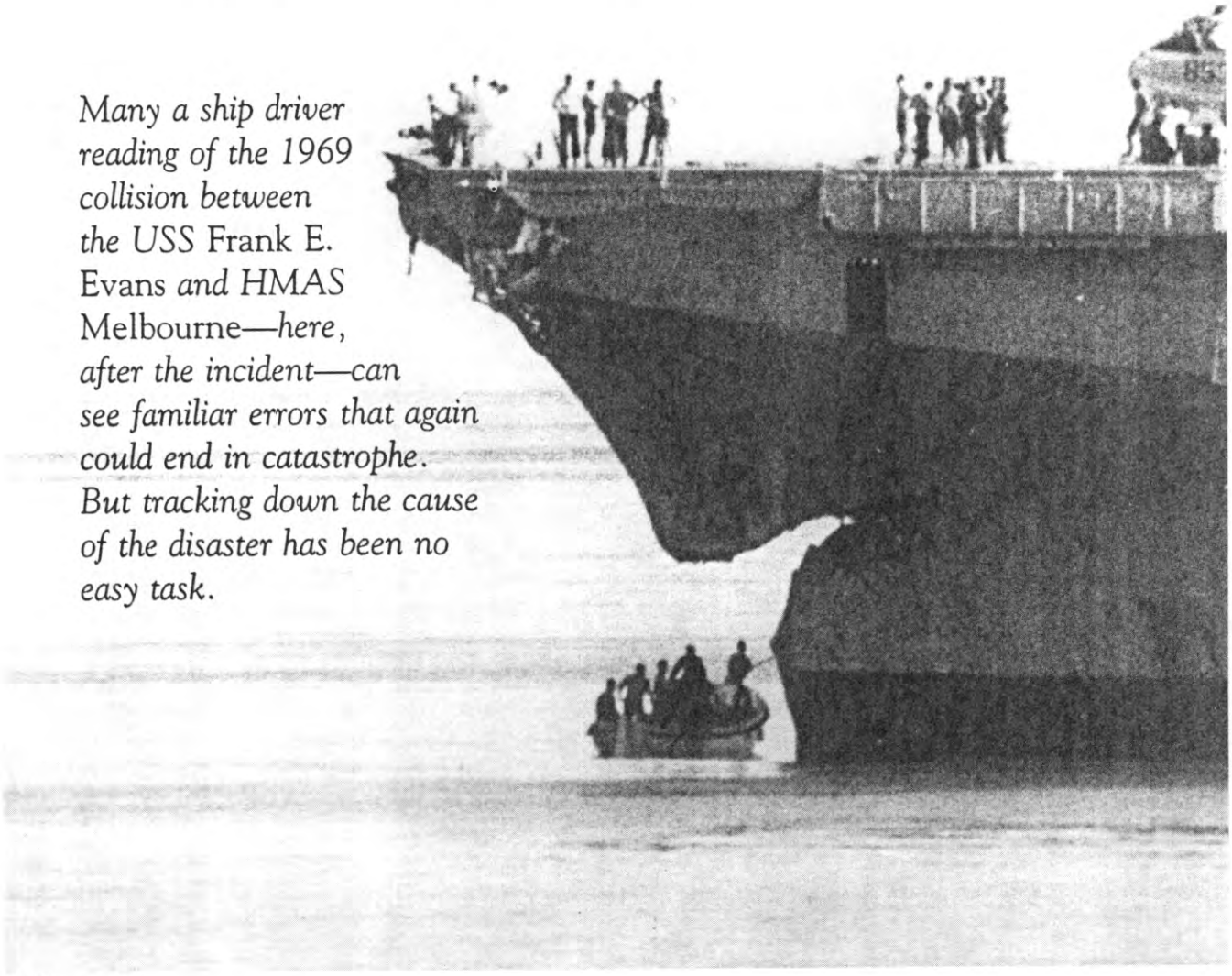
Death of a DESTROYER

By Captain Paul Sherbo, U.S. Naval Reserve

Many a ship driver reading of the 1969 collision between the USS Frank E. Evans *and HMAS* Melbourne*—here, after the incident—can see familiar errors that again could end in catastrophe. But tracking down the cause of the disaster has been no easy task.*



U.S. NAVY

At quarter past three in the morning on 3 June 1969, 74 crewmen of a U.S. destroyer in the South China Sea began to die.[1] It was not enemy fire that took them. The tragedy occurred when the bow of the Australian aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* struck the port side of the USS *Frank E. Evans* (DD-754) with pile-driver force near frame 92 (a section to the rear of the forward funnel).[2] The destroyer was cut in two. The bow section sank in less than two minutes. With it went dozens of young U.S. lives. It also took its toll on the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). How did this tragedy—with a "glassy calm" sea, no wind, unrestricted visibility, and "bright moonlight"—come to pass?[3]

Sequence of Events

The *Melbourne* and the *Frank E. Evans* were participating in Exercise Sea Spirit in the South China Sea.[4] The two ships were part of a task group that included the USS *James E. Kyes* (DD-787), the USS *Everett F. Larson* (DD-830), New Zealand's HMNZS *Blackpool*, and the United

Kingdom's HMS *Cleopatra*. Aside from these facts, participants disagreed on many of the details leading up to the collision. Some of the contested details were trivial; but disagreement over such basics as base course—recollections differed by nearly 40°—disclosed the degree of confusion in the events of the predawn accident.

Key participants agree to this much: the smaller ships were in a sector screen to the south and west of the *Melbourne*. The commanding officer (CO) of the *Melbourne*, Captain John P. Stevenson, was acting on behalf of the task force commander, Rear Admiral Gordon J. Crabb, RAN.[5] The *Frank E. Evans* was assigned the nearest and northernmost of these sectors, from 240-280° true, 3,000 to 5,000 yards. The group had been executing a zigzag plan that was occasionally discontinued then resumed between other operations. The *Frank E. Evans* CO, Commander Albert S. McLemore, retired to his sea cabin sometime after midnight 2-3 June. The entire task group except for flight operations was steaming at darken ship.[6] At 0307 local time, the *Melbourne* altered course to 260° (although this was unclear to the *Frank E. Evans*). Four minutes later, the U.S. ship was ordered to form in a column 1,000 yards astern of the *Melbourne* to act as rescue destroyer in preparation for flight operations. With the *Melbourne* on course 260° at 18 knots, the *Frank E. Evans* began to turn.

The events from this point to the collision are obscured by conflicting testimony of the participants, who differed on the relative positions of the *Frank E. Evans* and the *Melbourne*, on the base course and the axis of the formation—on many points except the disastrous result. At 0312, the *Melbourne* signaled the *Frank E. Evans*, in code, "My course is 260." Moments later, the *Melbourne* signaled, "You are on a collision course." This was followed by two signals, the order of which the participants disputed: one from the *Melbourne*, "I am going hard left," and one from the *Frank E. Evans*, "I am going hard right." The combination of the two turns was fatal.

Views from Two Bridges

Testifying before the combined U.S. Navy and Royal Australian Navy Board of Investigation after the collision, Lieutenant (junior grade) James A. Hopson, the junior officer of the deck (JOOD) aboard the *Frank E. Evans* at the time, later said he thought the base course and speed of the formation were 185° at 16 knots. The officer of the deck (OOD) of the previous watch, Lieutenant (junior grade) R. T. E. Bowler III (see sidebar, page 40), at first also testified that the base course was 185°, which it had been earlier on 2 June; he later corrected that to 220°.[7]

At the time Hopson turned the *Frank E. Evans* to try to pass down the *Melbourne*'s starboard side en route to station, he fixed the *Melbourne*'s position on radar at 084°, 3,800 yards, and he believed the *Melbourne* was on course 205°.[8] After the turn, he was confused to find the *Melbourne* at 070°—a left-bearing drift instead of the right drift he expected. He put on left rudder, then heard the *Melbourne* signal, "You are on a collision course." He then noticed the *Melbourne*'s lights, but among the white lights on the flight deck he could not make out any running lights.

Hopson said he did not hear the Australian carrier signal it was on course 260°. He also said there were no reports from the lookouts or from the combat information center, where Ensign Alan H. Armstrong was on watch.[9]

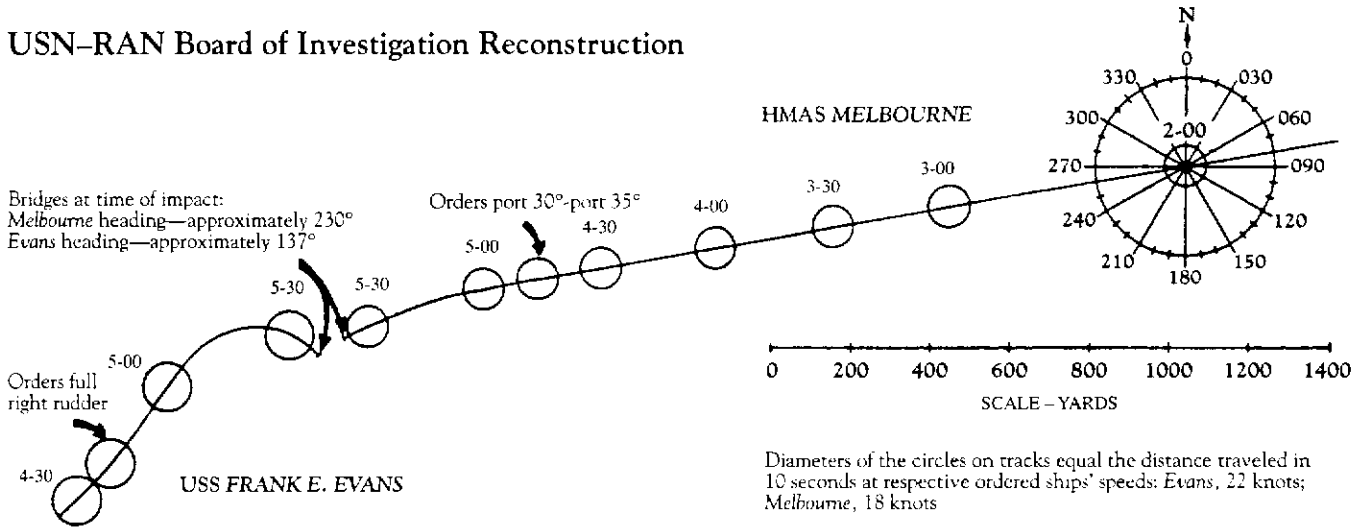
On the *Melbourne*, Stevenson held the *Frank E. Evans* on his port bow at about 3,000 to 3,500 yards when the signal to take station was given. Watching the U.S. destroyer with his binoculars, he saw the ship move from "red 20 to red 10" (340° to 350° relative—a right-bearing drift), "swore" at this action, and sent the signal warning of the collision course. Stevenson ordered the ship's navigation lights turned up full, although there was some disagreement as to whether the navigation lights or the flight deck lights were turned up and at what time. Lieutenant Russell D. Lamb, the *Melbourne*'s officer of the watch (analogous to the U.S. Navy's OOD), testified that the lights inadvertently were shut off completely for a moment after the *Frank E. Evans* was ordered into a column.[10]

On the advice of his counsel, Lieutenant (junior grade) Ronald G. Ramsey, OOD on the *Frank E. Evans* at the time of the collision, chose not to testify before the Board of Investigation. However, the board took as evidence two handwritten, unsworn statements signed by Ramsey plus the transcript of an interview of Ramsey by two captains jointly chosen by the U.S. and Australian navies.[11]

Ramsey stated that he decoded a signal from the *Melbourne* that the carrier was coming to course 160°—not 260°, which the *Melbourne*'s officers claimed (and which was supported by the logs of other ships in the formation.) He then told JOOD Hopson to "watch her, she is coming left." It was at this point that Hopson, confused, put on slight left rudder.[12] Ramsey then heard the *Melbourne* signal, "You are on a collision course," and quoted Hopson as saying, "She is on a collision course, but I don't understand." Ramsey ordered right full rudder and, 10 to 15 seconds later, heard the *Melbourne* signal its hard left turn.

The transcript quotes Ramsey as saying, "I didn't understand why she was coming hard left. . . . Mr. Hopson was just a little bit panicked and he yelled several times, 'She is going to hit us, she is going to hit us!'" Hopson ordered "all back full." The boatswain's mate of the watch, Seaman Robert S. Petty, feared the lee helmsman would not react quickly enough, so grabbed the handle of the engine order telegraph, shoving it to the backing bell in an attempt to reverse engines. Hearing that the *Melbourne* was turning hard left, Ramsey recalled, "I stood frozen in

USN–RAN Board of Investigation Reconstruction



Diameters of the circles on tracks equal the distance traveled in 10 seconds at respective ordered ships' speeds: *Evans*, 22 knots; *Melbourne*, 18 knots

Even the U.S. Navy–Royal Australian Navy Board of Investigation was unable to determine the precise cause of the collision between the USS Frank E. Evans *and HMAS* Melbourne. *In presenting its reconstruction of the collision, the board noted, "In view of the imprecision of the evidence on which it is based and the many conflicts in evidence, [the Board's reconstruction diagram, adapted above] is at best an approximation of the tracks of the ships from the time the signal to form column was executed until collision."*

. . . . . .

the center of the bridge. . . . God knows why she had left full."

Stevenson, on the *Melbourne*, remembered that the destroyer's "stem was crossing my track," and that he did not see how a port-to-port passage was possible. He ordered the "hard left" signal. The signalman reported that the *Frank E. Evans* "rogered" for the signal, then added, "She is coming hard right."[13] (There was some disagreement among witnesses as to which signal, the *Frank E. Evans*'s "hard right" or the *Melbourne*'s "hard left," came first.)

As the ships rapidly closed at a speed of 40 knots, Stevenson saw the *Frank E. Evans* turn: "You could see the kick of water sideways . . . you could see the ship savagely swinging. . . ." On the *Frank E. Evans*, Hopson heard a cryptic "Hey" over the 29MC speaker. He thought the voice sounded like Ensign Armstrong's. It was the last he heard from the combat information center.

The ships collided at 0315.

Collision

The *Melbourne* was making 18 knots when the two ships struck. The force of the collision threw Seaman Apprentice Marcus Rodriguez from the signal bridge of the *Frank E. Evans* to the flight deck of the *Melbourne*.[14] Hopson ran from the port wing of the bridge, where he saw the bow of the *Melbourne* bearing down, to the starboard wing. "I turned and saw a flash of light on the bridge," he told the board. "I was hit very solidly in the back and I was in the water." Chris Dewey, a seaman apprentice on board the *Frank E. Evans*, recalled "being thrown across the room" in his berthing compartment.[15] With the compartment rolling on its side, the racks hanging from their chains, and the exit "up about 12 to 15 feet," Dewey climbed the compartment's fluorescent lights to get to the hatch. Of the 40 people in the compartment, Dewey said, "36 didn't get out."

On the *Melbourne*, Leading Seaman David Robertson was "awakened by the emergency alarm about 20-30 seconds before impact. . . . I should have stayed in my hunk—the impact was quite severe knocking one other man in the compartment to the deck. I went then to my Emergency Station on the flight deck . . . I did not expect to see half a destroyer heeling over just away from our port beam."[16]

Fast damage control actions by survivors in the stern half of the ship kept it afloat. The stern section floated down the *Melbourne*'s starboard side, where sailors lowered lines to secure it. Several survivors remarked on the self-control of everyone involved. Among the heroic acts:

- When approached by the *Melbourne*'s lifeboats, many of the *Frank E. Evans* survivors declined immediate rescue, sending the boats to shipmates in greater danger.
- Hospital Corpsman Chief Charles W. Cannington voluntarily allowed others to leave chiefs' quarters ahead of him and gave his penlight to the first man in line to guide the others. Cannington did not survive.
- Machinery Repairman First Class Donald A. Bakken and Signalman First Class Byron R. Pruden tried unsuccessfully to get to their general quarters stations, then returned to their berthing compartments to order sailors topside.

➤ In addition to help from the *Melbourne*'s lifeboats and helicopters, sailors from the ship voluntarily jumped into the water to rescue crewmen of the *Frank E. Evans*.

The list goes on. Its length is a tribute to the courage and resourcefulness of both crews.

Investigation and Court-Martial

The Board of Investigation listed a litany of errors and questionable actions, which will look familiar to any surface warfare officer who has studied collisions or faced a confusing situation in a formation at night:

➤ While Ramsey had stood OOD watches for about four months, his formal designation was only 10 days old.

➤ The OOD and JOOD of the *Frank E. Evans* had different assessments of the *Melbourne*'s course and of the destroyer's speed, but did not know they differed.

➤ The OOD and JOOD of the *Frank E. Evans* did not ask the combat information center for recommendations or information.

➤ The CO of the *Frank E. Evans* was not notified of the order to take station astern of the *Melbourne*.

➤ The OOD of the *Frank E. Evans* incorrectly decoded the *Melbourne*'s course.

➤ The JOOD of the *Frank E. Evans* did not take a visual bearing on the *Melbourne* before turning.

At a general court-martial on 11 September 1969, Ramsey pleaded guilty to charges of dereliction in the performance of duty and negligently hazarding a vessel. He was sentenced to be reprimanded and lose 1,000 numbers of the unrestricted line. McLemore pleaded not guilty to the same charges. On 16 September 1969 he was found guilty of both charges and was sentenced to reprimand. Stevenson subsequently was charged in an Australian military court with negligence in "failing to positively direct movement of *Evans* . . . and for failure to take more positive action to avoid the collision." He was "acquitted with honor" in August 1969. Despite this blameless judgment, his career was another casualty of the collision, as he was given a shore posting more suitable for a junior.[17]

Asked for a lesson learned from the tragedy, Captain Stevenson concludes, "[T]he major one is that there is no substitute for experience and care. Experience with the effect of relative motion between ships at night is needed as it is very easy to make wrong assumptions. There can be no excuse in putting inexperienced officers in charge. With a shortage of experienced officers those that have it must just work harder."[18]

U.S. NAVY

The after half of the USS Frank E. Evans *remained afloat after the collision and was manned for four weeks at drydock as a commissioned vessel until the Navy struck the ship from the records (see sidebar).*

In most reviews of the tragedy, there is almost complete focus on the quality of the watch standers of the *Frank E. Evans*—justifiably so. However, officers in tactical command cannot always ensure the quality of watch teams in the task force, and taking positive control deserves due consideration as another tool in the toolbox. This observation is much more than a footnote to the tragedy. It is the key lesson, and it remains unlearned.

Aftermath

Many families suffered losses from the collision. Of the 74 crewmen missing or presumed dead, only one body was recovered. The remaining half of the *Frank E. Evans*

was towed to Subic Bay in the Philippines, where it was stripped of parts and later scrapped.

For the Royal Australian Navy, the *Melbourne* temporarily took on the image of a ship with a "jinx."[19] Stevenson had remarked to the COs of the escort ships, including McLemore, at a dinner before the 3 June collision, "I do not think either Australia's Navy or its government can stand another collision at sea."[20] On 10 February five years before, the 3,500-ton HMAS *Voyager* had been cut in half in an accident that killed 82 of its crew, including the captain. The *Voyager* had been hit by the *Melbourne*.

A 1975 U.S. Navy training film, "I Relieve You, Sir," told the story of the collision.[21] In 1999, survivors and families of the dead gathered at the Australian War Memorial in Sydney's Hyde Park for a special commemoration service; Captain Stevenson and Commander McLemore were present.[22] The commemoration and the heroics after the collision are among the few bright spots in this episode. There was disaster enough here for all. ⚓

[1]Report of the Combined USN-RAN Board of Investigation into the Collision between HMAS *Melbourne* and USS *Frank E. Evans*, Convened by Commander, U.S. Seventh Fleet, and the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board (hereinafter "Report of the Board of Investigation"), 18 July 1969, "Findings of Fact," p. 4.
[2]Letter from Commander, Seventh Fleet, 14 October 1969.
[3]Report of the Board of Investigation, "Findings of Fact," p. 6.
[4]Data on the sequence of events is from Report of the Board of Investigation.
[5]Testimony of RAdm. Gordon J. Crabb, RAN, Record of Proceedings of the Combined U.S. Navy Royal Australian Navy Board of Investigation (hereinafter "Record of Proceedings"), pp. 23-24.
[6]Report of the Board of Investigation, "Findings of Fact," #35, p. 6.; #67, p. 8; also Stevenson testimony, Record of Proceedings, p. 83.
[7]Record of Proceedings, pp. 198-213.
[8]The board disputed the accuracy of this bearing. Report of the Board of Investigation, "Findings of Fact," p. 9.
[9]Record of Proceedings, pp. 112-130.
[10]Record of Proceedings, p. 168.
[11]Record of Proceedings, p. 598.
[12]Witnesses disputed the amount of rudder as either 5° or 10°, but in either case it was slight.
[13]Record of Proceedings, pp. 76-101, 170, 226-234.
[14]Record of Proceedings, exhibit 35.
[15]Interview with the author, 31 September 1989.
[16]Letter to the author, 19 January 1990.
[17]Jo Stevenson, *In the Wake*, Hale & Iremonger (1999: Alexandria, Australia).
[18]Note to the author from e-mail account of Captain (Ret.) John P. and Mrs. Stevenson, 24 June 2003.
[19]Australian Navy Minister Clive Kelly, quoted in: *San Diego Evening Tribune*, 3 June 1969.
[20]Stevenson, *In the Wake*, p. 22.
[21]CNET P1550/3, REV 8-01, page x.
[22]Australian "Navy News," 12 July 1999; also ABC (Australian TV) News, 2 June 1999.

Captain Sherbo is on the staff of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and recently completed a one-year presidential recall at Commander, Pacific Fleet. He first became acquainted with the *Melbourne-Frank E. Evans* collision at Surface Warfare Officer School in 1976.