

Recalling a Collision

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At the time of the June 1969 collision between the USS *Frank E. Evans* (DD-754) and HMAS *Melbourne*, I was asleep in "after officer's country," on the main deck two-thirds of the way aft in the *Frank E. Evans*. I was the officer of the deck (OOD) on the previous watch and had been relieved three and a half hours earlier.

The sound of the collision was ear-splitting: 40,000 tons of *Melbourne* crashing into 2,200 tons of *Frank E. Evans* sounded like 50 automobile accidents happening at once. The *Frank E. Evans* was rolled onto her starboard side. Water rushed in through open portholes and hatches. Within 45 seconds, though it seemed longer, the force of the *Melbourne* driving down the forward part of the *Frank E. Evans* caused the ship to break in two at the amidships expansion joint. The after section of the ship then righted itself. If not for that ship design feature, the entire ship would have been lost.

My roommate and I were thrown from our racks. Once the ship righted itself I hurriedly dressed in the dark, then headed for my general quarters station in the combat information center. The ship had lost power, but the few battle lanterns that had not been ripped loose provided some illumination. I exited after-officer's country on the port side and headed forward—only to nearly run full speed into the side of the *Melbourne*. I quickly realized what had happened. I crossed to the starboard side just in time to see the forward part of the ship being driven under. Bright flashes illuminated the water. Smoke was everywhere. The steel-on-steel

sound continued, and then—dead silence. The after half of the *Frank E. Evans* lay still alongside the after starboard side of the *Melbourne*.

The initial reaction of many of us was to quickly abandon ship for fear the after boilers had not been secured and would blow. But the thought of swimming with sharks in the South China Sea dampened that idea. Once we ascertained the engineering watch had secured the after boilers, the crew was ordered to remain on board to allow the *Melbourne*'s boats and helicopters to search for our shipmates in the water. We then began the seemingly endless process of mustering, trying to get an accurate count of survivors.

At first light, about 0500, the *Melbourne* dropped Jacob's ladders down from her hangar deck and some 150 weary and shaken *Frank E. Evans* officers and sailors climbed up to board the *Melbourne*. The Australians were absolutely terrific. They cleared one hangar bay for our exclusive use and provided blankets and pillows. An especially thoughtful gesture was to issue each of us two cans of Foster's beer. I have never tasted a better beer before or since. Mustering continued the next day; the missing were presumed lost at sea.

We headed to Subic Bay Naval Base, in the Philippines, and the after half of the *Frank E. Evans* started her tow there. By the time we arrived, the Navy family had fully mobilized. Disbursing officers were lined up on the pier to settle lost property claims. No paperwork was needed; you told the disbursing officer your estimate of lost property and he immediately paid it—in cash. The Navy exchange opened after hours so

we could get new uniforms. Within six hours of arriving in Subic Bay, the surviving sailors were on board charter flights heading for our Long Beach, California, home port. I have never seen anything like the outpouring of Navy support and help the *Frank E. Evans* crew received.

The surviving officers and the boatswain's mate of the watch stayed in Subic Bay for the U.S. Navy and Royal Australian Navy Joint Board of Investigation. The after section of the *Frank E. Evans* soon arrived and was drydocked at the Subic Bay Naval Repair Facility. We then ran into a quirk of Navy regulations. Even though the *Frank E. Evans* was damaged well beyond repair, she remained a commissioned Navy vessel for four more weeks, during which time the remaining officers had to stand eight-hour watches on her fantail.

Seven years after the collision, I became an engineering duty officer and spent the remainder of my career in naval shipbuilding billets. The built toughness of the *Frank E. Evans* is carried on in every Navy ship we build. The battle damage sustained and repaired on ships such as the USS *Stark* (FFG-31), *Samuel B. Roberts* (FFG-58), *Princeton* (CG-59), and *Cole* (DDG-67) testify to that. ♦

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