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The Evans was among a class of heavily armed destroyers very popular with the U.S. Navy for gunfire support operations in the Vietnam 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 convey 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.

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? These 74 sailors’ names are not inscribed on The Wall, because, according to the Department of Defense, they were not in Vietnam.

U.S.S. FRANK E. EVANS (DD-754)

Sumner Class Destroyer

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

Displacement: 2,810 tons
Length: 376 feet 10 inches
Beam: 40 feet 10 inches
Draught: 14 feet 2 inches
Armanent: 6-5 inch, 12-40mm, 1-20mm guns, 10-21 inch torpedoes

continued on next page
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. Captain Stevenson 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 OOD, Lt. H. 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. 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.
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.

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, ran through the bridge to the watch, among the 13 sailors on the Bridge and adjacent stations, also survived. Two of the three radio men escaped. Seaman Apprentice Marcus Rodriguez, one of two seamen to order the Radio Room’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.

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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. Canntong, who grabbed a flashlight and took the last place in line, directing the light for his companions to see where they were going. Disorientation was a big problem when the ship turned on its side. Canntong 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 Evans.

Australian sailors played a crucial role in rescuing the Americans and limiting further loss of life. Capt. Stevenson instantly ordered Emergency Stations 1 and 2, and the forward section of the Evans in four to five minutes. That boat picked up 29 survivors and the body of Seaman Glisson. On a second trip, the cutter brought back five more survivors on life rafts. The carrier's long rescue increased the total to 34. Lt. R.J. Burns jumped into the water to help the seamen who had escaped the sinking forward section of the Evans.

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, the rear section of the Evans, to provide assistance. Lt. Commander George L. 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 water to help the seamen who had escaped the Evans. Lt. (junior grade) Robert M. Hiltz heard a shout and dashed General Quarters 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. Ruptured boiler steam lines scalped all but one of the six sailors in the forward engine room. One man drowned elsewhere.

Lt. (junior grade) R.T.E. Bowler, who had had the previous Bridge watch as OOD, was thrown from his bunk. 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.

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. Hearn rigged helicopter cargo nets to connect the ships. Then executive officer Colin J. Penton 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 chanced throughout the week 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 hull 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. Lt. Ramsey and Hopson and Lieutenant Commander McLeod 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, bewailed 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 routine of participating in the war and then remaining.

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 Laos 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.