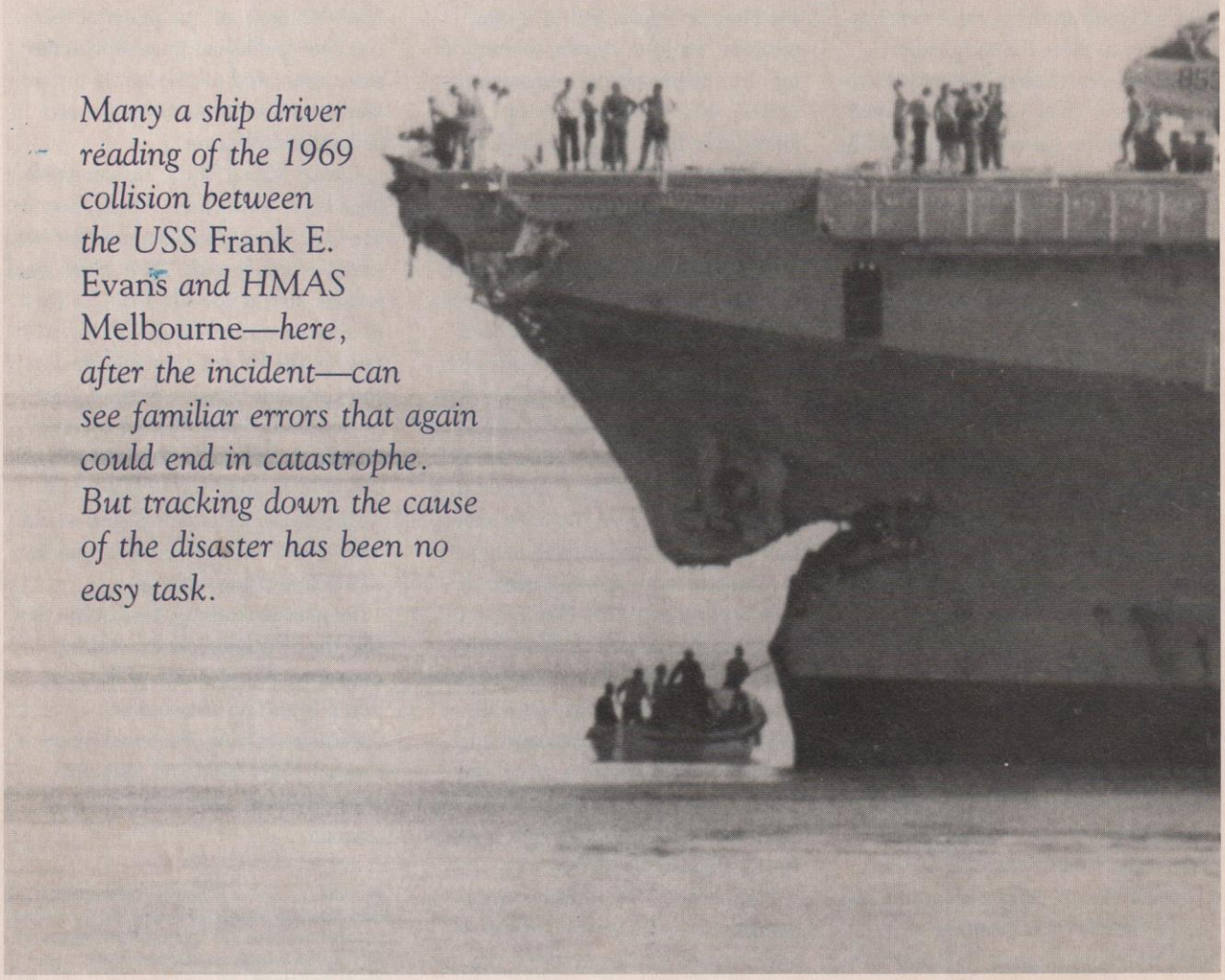
Death of a DESTROYER

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

blown out of the water by news of a remarkable discovery.

Three years ago, the National Maritime and Royal Naval Museums invited me to undertake The Nelson Letters Project. My task was to revisit all the Nelson archives in Britain and overseas, to identify new material and, where appropriate, to publish what I found. My interim findings have just been released and they have come as a surprise to even the most experienced Nelson scholars. I already have located more than 1,000 unpublished letters, and the figure is rising steadily with each archive that is visited. This represents an increase in available Nelson material of more than 15%, so it is by far the most significant addition to the Nelson canon since the publication of the great seven-volume collected edition of his correspondence by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas in 1844-'46.

The most dramatic and headline-grabbing new find was my discovery, in the archive of the National Maritime Museum, of a rough sketch drawn by Nelson in August or September 1805 to illustrate the tactics he intended to use at his next battle—the famous "Nelson Touch." But there have been many other fascinating discoveries. For example, on my recent research trip to the United States I located some 100 unpublished letters in public archives and I still have three more to visit. The new U.S. material includes a charming series of letters at the Huntington Library to fellow admiral Sir Roger Curtis about the prospects of Curtis's naval officer son, Lucius, over whom Nelson was watching tenderly while commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean in 1803-5; important letters at the William Clements Library relating to the Baltic campaign of April-June 1801 showing Nelson performing as skillfully as a diplomat as he had earlier as a fighting admiral; a revealing set of private letters at the U.S. Naval Academy Museum in Annapolis to the King of Naples and his prime minister, Sir John Acton, written during the Mediterranean campaign of 1803-5; and, in the Library of Congress, more than 25 letters and orders to Nelson's protégé George Cockburn—the man who burned the White House in 1814.

What will happen to all this new material? First, it is important to emphasize that nothing that has been discovered so far will drastically alter our perception of Nelson. What does emerge is a more human picture to set against the two-dimensional "heroic" image that tends to be presented in biographies based on the older material. Future biographies will be able to incorporate more subtle touches of light and shade to the familiar story. For example, we will find out more about his complex web of professional relationships, his characteristically 18th-century use of patronage, and, perhaps most interesting of all, the extraordinary intelligence network he built during his last campaign in the Mediterranean in 1803-5.

Nelson was a great letter writer—arguably one of history's greatest—and it would be regrettable if this superb new body of material were to be reduced simply to truncated extracts in biographies. For 2005, the two sponsoring museums have commissioned me to produce a new book of his letters, featuring some 400 of the most important of the newly discovered documents. After 2005, if the necessary funds can be raised, the intention is to publish a new edition of Nelson's letters. This will draw together the contents of Nicolas's great 1844-'46 opus, all the material that has been published in small batches since then, and all the newly discovered letters into one complete and definitive collection.

On 28 March 1805, Nelson wrote a long letter to Sir John Acton, now at the U.S. Naval Academy and hitherto unpublished. It ends, "May every good fortune attend you My Dear Sir John in all your undertakings, which are always of the Most Honorable kind, is the Constant Sincere Wish of Your Most attached and Sincere friend, Nelson & Bronte." I like to think he would have approved of this latest "honourable undertaking" and would have wished it well in terms equally as warm and encouraging.

Regular updates on Year of the Sea and the Trafalgar Festival will be posted on the Web site of the National Maritime Museum at www.nmm.ack.uk/. For more information on The 1805 Club, visit the club's Web site at www.admiralnelson.org/.

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sonal nature. What is curious is the lack of reference to Nelson, whose reputation was established at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent; at Trafalgar, it was enhanced and then burnished by his death. Grimshaw lists him merely as a casualty. Grimshaw appears as an intelligent, lightly schooled man and an experienced seaman. Undertaking a task such as this would be unlikely in a man going to sea for the first time. ⚓

[1]D. King, *A Sea of Words* (New York: Holt, 1995).
[2]J. Grimshaw, "Perticalars of the Procidings of His Majesty's Ship, the Vanguard." The journal is now held privately. The date, 1797, is the same date Grimshaw placed on his title page.
[3]J. Woolford, "Nelson and the Nile," *Military History*, August 1998.
[4]A. T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little Brown, 1897).
[5]Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*.

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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]

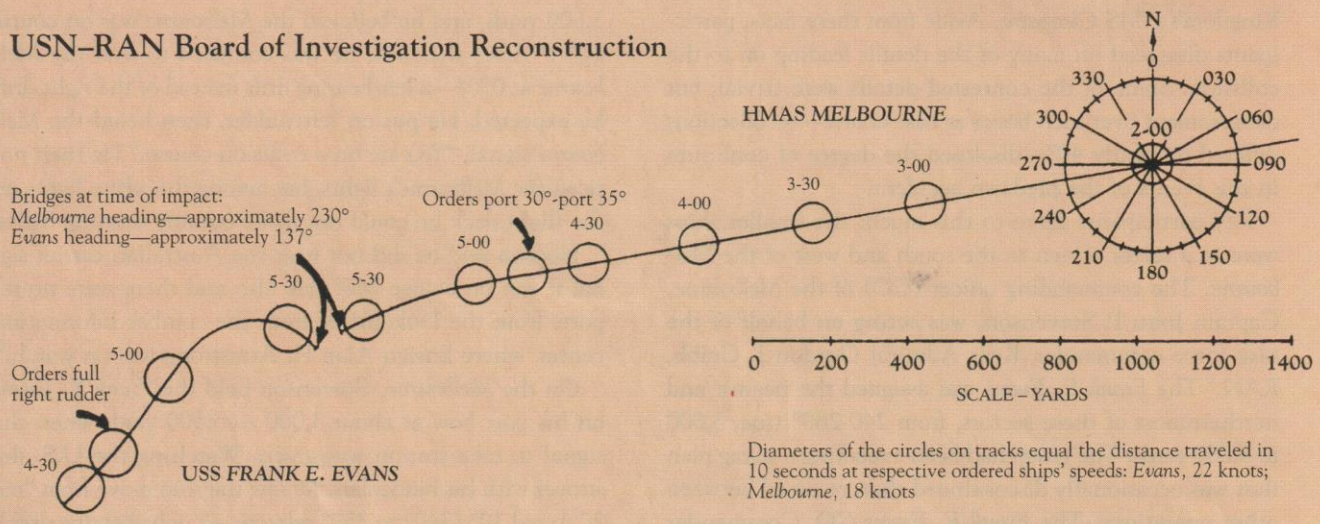
On the *Melbourne*, Stevenson held the *Frank E. Evans* on his port bow at about 3,000 to 3,500 yards when the signal to take station was given. Watching the U.S. destroyer with his binoculars, he saw the ship move from "red 20 to red 10" (340° to 350° relative—a right-bearing drift), "swore" at this 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 bunk—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*

Recalling a Collision

By Captain R. T. E. Bowler III, U.S. Navy (Retired)

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 earsplitting: 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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