

## **A SURVIVOR'S ACCOUNT**

Submitted by Andrew (Joe) Mulitsch MMFN

As a new Fireman (MMFN), I was ordered to report in early February 1969, to USS FRANK E. EVANS (DD 754), home ported in Long Beach, California. I had just completed Machinist Mate "A" School at Great Lakes Naval Training Center. FRANK E. EVANS was my first ship and now my new home as I was assigned a bunk in the rear berthing compartment, just forward and below the aft five inch gun. My rack consisted of a piece of canvas stitched amidst a metal pipe frame with a two inch thick, or so, mattress. I managed to acquire some accessories for my rack - two adjustable straps with hooks at either end that kept me in place during rough seas. I had a locker on the deck under my rack that was about thirty inches square, and not a foot deep. This was my home and where I could stow all my uniforms and personal possessions.

I was then introduced to the forward engine room (Main Control) where I worked and stood my watches. Work generally consisted of chipping, wire bushing, and painting the various pieces of machinery, mostly pumps that fed the boilers, usually the forward fire room. Our turbines turned the starboard screw to propel the ship. We also made electricity for the ship and distilled fresh water for the boilers and the crew to drink and shower. Since I was a MMFN striker, with school, I was sometimes allowed to pack a valve under close supervision by one of the petty officers. Mostly, I found myself in the bilges cleaning and painting.

FRANK E. EVANS was an old proud ship from WWII, Korea, and now she was going back to Vietnam. Shortly after I went aboard, we departed for a short 10 day shakedown cruise that introduced me to sea sickness. I always was able to make the adjustment within a day or two although it has really never gone away as my subsequent exploits at sea have continued to remind me. A week or so after our little excursion up and down the California coast we left for Pearl Harbor en route to the western Pacific, (WESTPAC) - Vietnam.

I remember being in Pearl. We mustered one morning to be entertained by WWII Zero replicas diving at a mock up of the Pearl fleet as it was on 7 December 1941. We found out later, they were filming the epic, "TORA, TORA, TORA." After refueling and reprovisioning, we set off to Yokosuka, Japan, then on to Subic Bay in the Philippine Islands; more fuel and food. During these excursions there was liberty. Time off to leave the ship for free time to yourself. As a healthy 19 year old male, I found out how to drink and have a great time ashore as all sailors do.

In early May we left for Vietnam and the "gun line" where FRANK E. EVANS supported the troops by doing directed gunfire with her five-inch guns. We were usually at "general quarters" -battle stations- when we were firing the guns. They were very loud and rattled the ship with each shot. You could not be outside the ship when they were firing. Of course I was in the engine room where it was already loud and very hot. We stood two hour watches because the temperature was 120 degrees in the engineering spaces. We were firing on one occasion when we had a shell jam in a hot five-inch gun barrel. The crew quickly responded with fire hoses to cool it down. The shell was prevented from detonating but the mess decks were all flooded out. I was sent forward to the mess decks to help remove the water. I can also recall the Swift Boats coming along side to trade movies. They were always sent away with some ice cream and whatever else they asked for and we had.

We had anchored just off the coast one day after doing some firing, when all of a sudden, there were splashes with loud reports along the shoreline. We were immediately called to general quarters. After a few minutes it was determined that the U. S. Army was over-shooting their target. When they finally got it all sorted out, we were back to sunning on the fantail with a leery eye to the shore.

Every day or two we put out to sea for underway replenishment. We took on fuel, food, and ammo from the supply ship . This evolution required an all hands working party. As the supplies were sent over to our ship, we formed human chains and passed a box, or a shell, or a powder casing from man to man until it reached its respective storage area. Imagine this is all taking place while two ships are tethered together doing 15 knots, or so, along side each other, and we are all balancing ourselves on the pitching deck. Even when the waters were smooth the ship had a tendency to roll back and forth, and up and down; and it never stopped.

After our stint on the gun line we went back to Manila and joined forces with many SEATO countries with many more ships. Australia provided the aircraft carrier for this exercise and show of force, HMAS MELBOURNE. We had met some of the Australian Sailors while on liberty in Manila. I was thankful for my tutorial on drinking and put my limited previous experience to good use. I now knew I was not going to die, it was just a hangover.

I remember being on deck as we slid effortlessly through the serene waters of the South China Sea. Beautiful! A moonlit night and everything was good. We were scheduled to be in Thailand in a few days and we were all looking forward to some great, well earned, liberty. It was about 2200. Since I had the midwatch (0000-0400), and my 19 year old logic told me I needed some sleep, I retired.

My watch on 3 June 1969, was supposed to have been the messenger. On that morning I asked the lower level watch, MM3 Roy Peters, to trade watches so I could get the necessary experience to become qualified for that position. Everything went well. Around 0300, Peters went aft to wake the next watch and he sent me forward to wake up the chief for the next watch, 0400-0800. Chief's berthing was all the way forward. I woke up Chief Vernon Cash and returned to the engine room and took more temperature and pressure readings on the equipment in my area on the lower level. There were six of us in Main Control with Boiler Tender Chief Senior Macayan in charge, Fireman Bob Lockwood was on throttles, Fireman Terry (Boot) Baughman was on the evaporators, Fireman Michael Peacock was the electrician on the switchboard, MM3 Roy Peters had the messenger assignment and I, MMFN Andrew (Joe) Mulitsch, was on the lower level.

The watch was nearly over. I had just completed work on my log sheet, when I decided to go up to the upper level. It was some time after 0310. I grabbed the ladder with one foot on the bottom rung. All at once the ship rose up and the lights went out! Water began rushing in from everywhere. I was swept up in the darkness, under the water with whatever last breath I had taken. My mind was working with so many thoughts simultaneously. I was looking for the hole where the ladder went up and onto the upper level. I was looking for an air pocket where I could get more breath, all the while thinking of what my family would think about me being gone, my girlfriend, what happened?

I had nearly met my limit and was resigned to die. There seemed to be some strange sort of peace and a bright light, oxygen deprivation, I suppose. Woossh! I popped up through the surface of the water. I got a breath! I felt exhilarated and calm all at the same time! The surroundings were all black. The loud sounds of the engine room had given way to some sobbing and whines of pain. There was a slight hissing sound and the air was dank with the smell and taste of steam. I immediately began looking up for the hatch and an escape from what I did not know. I did know there was a battle lantern at the top of the hatch. There it was, a faint, dim brown beam of light across the hatch at the top of the ladder. Unfortunately the ladder was gone. I knew there was a handheld lantern there as well. I yelled out, "Here it is, here is the way out!" I tried to get to that hand held lantern by climbing up and grabbing a pipe. It was a hot steam line and immediately released it from my grasp. I then found an adjacent compressed air line that provided a secure hand hold. As I got mid-thigh out of the water, and was rising up towards the hatch, I felt a tug on my belt. I was pulled back into the water. I turned and grabbed my anxious shipmate and pushed him ahead of me. We both struggled. He rolled out on the deck. I recognized it was the Chief. He was disconsolate. I momentarily tried to bring him to his senses but to no avail. I turned around. There stood Michael Peacock, the electrician. He was smiling. I'll never forget that smile! We then began helping our other shipmates up and out onto the deck. We were all accounted for and began moving about until we went out on the starboard side. As I looked aft I could see the motor whaleboat hanging in two pieces from its davits. I thought maybe a plane had crashed into us. I stepped back and then turned forward. To my total amazement the forward part of the ship was gone! I looked up to the port side and there sat MELBOURNE. I cursed her for what she had done to my ship.

I've lived with this over and over in my head for so many years. I am sharing it one more time. I now understand many things beyond my grasp then and out of my control now. I was 19 years old then and searching for my niche in life. I was fortunate and finally got it together later rather than sooner. How does one measure survival? Why was I spared when just a few feet away so many of my shipmates died? Everyone I ate dinner with that night perished. Two of them were young officers, Ensigns, that were learning as I was learning from another perspective.

I went to Australia for the 40<sup>th</sup> memorial. There I met many Australians who were also still deeply affected by this truly tragic event that occurred so many years and so many lives ago. I always thought the Australians were the true heroes that night. They did so much to save many lives and have carried the heavy burden of the lives of our 74 that were lost.

I cannot understand the recalcitrance of our own government to acknowledge the event for what it was: 74 lives lost during the Vietnam conflict; 74 sailors who gave the ultimate sacrifice while on station as ordered.

In the last 42 years, the government, the defense department, the Navy, and the private foundation that administers the Wall have come up with so many reasons why the names are not there on the Wall. I believe it is time for them to finally say, "Why not!"

I attended the funeral of Mrs. Eunice Sage last September. I always thought she was the most courageous woman alive every time I saw her. She lost so much, and really longed for so little: **THREE NAMES ON THAT WALL!** Gary, Greg, and Kelly Sage. Need I say more?