

41

THE PIECES

My research became two-pronged. I wanted to learn more about the people—the seventy-four men who died on the *Evans*, the families they left behind, and the men who survived the collision—but I also wanted to know why the survivors thought these names belonged on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, why the names had thus far been excluded, and whether it was just. The people and the Vietnam Wall were my story.

At times it was just like that first morning in Niobrara, thinking I should leave. Often the research made me feel as if I was swimming to the bottom of the ocean, prying around a silt-covered, crushed, rusted shipwreck. These were final resting places, and sometimes I thought I should just leave things alone. At least one family member hung up on me. Some spoke curtly, telling me that they were busy and would call back, but they never did. One veteran told me he would talk to me and called back about an hour later in tears, choked-

up syllables to cancel the interview. Maybe time had brought a sort of peace to these families and these men, allowing the terrible things to sink into the deepest abyss of memory. Maybe I was now bringing these back to the surface, and maybe, I worried, something would break along the way.

I didn't want to hurt anybody. But I wanted to tell this story and get it right. I told families how sorry I was. I told them that I knew they'd rather be here talking to their son, father, brother, or husband, not some journalist with a tape recorder. I almost dropped the project at least once. June 3, 1969, had been the last day of an old world for many of them, the day something had broken between the past and present. And I was bringing it all back.

In April 2012 I went to the town of Sebastopol in Northern California to meet Ron Stever, who had lost his twin Jon in the collision. Before I got there, Ron had already spread photographs and newspaper clippings out on the dining room table in his wine-country home. He had also just finished making copies of some of Jon's last letters. There were tapes, too, though he regretted to say that he had nothing to play them on. The family was from Altadena, California, and their house was so immaculate that, long after they left, it had been used in films and television shows.

Ron told me about when his parents received the telegram stating that Jon was among the lost, and about the day in the early 1980s when they found out his name would not be on the Vietnam Wall—before the memorial was finished. They wrote numerous letters to lawmakers, but the replies were

not favorable; over and over again, they brought up what they saw as an unfamiliar term, *combat zone*. Yet the family had received several letters from Jon while the ship was on the gunline off Vietnam. As one of those last letters stated, they were going back—four more times, one letter revealed.

There were other things that bothered Ron in particular. Well into retirement from a career in computers, he had studied theology and become an ordained minister. He wondered often how his twin brother died; it consumed his thoughts at times. Was he killed right away? Did he suffer? Did he have time to pray? Ron was trying to put together the pieces, and so was I.

By that time I had already read all there was to read about the collision and had read, at least twice, the 611-page board of inquiry report. At the time I was indexing the massive document. I knew Jon had been a junior officer, and that his stateroom was at the front of the ship. It was the most terrible ordeal to imagine. The door had been blocked by a ladder that had come loose from the wall upon impact. I knew about the banging on this door leading to junior officer territory, and that all four of the men inside had died, trapped. At first I didn't want to say anything to Ron, but he kept talking about the collision—where Jon had slept, what he did on the ship. He spoke about a vision he had, things that he thought might have happened, and how it bothered him that he just didn't know.

I don't know when I crossed the line from objective journalist to something else, when I went from outside looking in to inside, their side. I found myself wanting to bring peace. I thought of the seventy-four nearly every day, it seemed. In

my own silent way, I became a part of the Second Watch. I never joined the USS *Frank E. Evans* Association; I wanted—on paper, at least—to remain objective. Somewhere I had crossed a line and become part of the story, violating one of the first rules of Journalism 101, but where, and when? Was it when survivor Pete Peters introduced me once at a memorial service in 2013 as “one of them”? Or was it perhaps at that very moment, at Ron Stever’s dining room table?

My lips trembled, and I looked away at a pretty picture on the wall. My eyes had welled up in tears, as had happened many times during these sorts of interviews. I looked at Ron sitting next to me at the dining room table and asked, “Do you really want to know?” He could see that I knew something. Ron had a kindness about him; he was the sort of person who would help anybody, and the sort of person I wanted to help.

I looked at him—I was crying—and he reached across the table for my hand. I tried forming the words. I took a deep breath, and I told him, in all likelihood, how his brother had been killed.

I drove across the fog-laden Golden Gate Bridge that night with tears in my eyes. Had I done the right thing? I received a letter about a week later from Ron. I had.

There were other instances like this. Sometime after that, I located an old United Press International photograph on the Internet auction site eBay. It was an obscure photograph that I am sure few knew was there: a picture of Linden Orpurt, standing in a small communications station deep in the belly of the *Evans*, dated 1969. Linden had big eyes and

a rounded face with light brown hair and plump cheeks. In the photograph he was looking straight into the camera while standing on station, most likely where he was killed on June 3, 1969. I'd taken to searching for *Evans* photos periodically; collectors often listed old wire photographs. This one had likely been taken sometime before the collision but offered to the press as the face of an *Evans* casualty. I first phoned the Orpurt family in Chicago. I had spoken to a sister once, but I knew the family was not interested in an interview; it was just too much, and too long ago. Later on I read letters written by Mrs. Orpurt to Mrs. Botto, who had also lost her son. Mrs. Orpurt's letters were those of a broken woman, of one who had to endure the holidays and prepare for a daughter's wedding but could not move on. In one long letter written in January 1970, she confessed that she just couldn't seem to "function or participate in the activity of everyday life," she wrote. I hesitated to call the Orpurt family, but knew I just had to. The phone rang several times and then went to voicemail. My message was brief: *I am sorry to bother you again, and forgive this intrusion . . . There was a photograph of Linden on eBay . . .*

And then I called Dean Wyse in Arizona. Dean had been Linden's best friend and was supposed be on duty alongside him that night, but he'd been sent back to his rack in the aft section of the ship. It was going to be a quiet night, Wyse was told. The interior communications plot was a small compartment that sat low in the forward part of the ship; Linden didn't stand a chance. Dean Wyse had terrible nightmares about it; he saw Linden drowning, trapped in a whirlpool, screaming, dying. Dean went to his computer when

I called to tell him about the photograph, and I led him to the page on eBay. Dean was silent for a few minutes. "I have to go," he said, and hung up. Linden's sister phoned me later on, thanking me. But I couldn't get Dean out of my mind. I felt, in a word, terrible.

Some time later I saw Dean at a June 3 memorial service in Long Beach and felt uncomfortable. I felt as if I had disturbed something. When Dean approached me, I didn't know what to expect. It was a pleasant surprise when he let loose a smile and told me that after that night in front of the computer, his dreams got better. He didn't see Linden drowning anymore. He saw him alive. He saw him like he remembered him, his friend.

In 2011 I sat across from Marcus Rodriguez at a coffee shop in Fresno, California, as he relayed to me the long list of injuries he'd received when he was flung from the roof of the signal shack on the *Evans* to the steel flight deck of the *Melbourne*. In the 1960s he was tall and handsome, and had once been scouted by the Philadelphia Phillies. He now walks with a cane. His list of injuries sounded like something out of an autopsy report. Yet he was alive, sitting in front of me. Marcus had planned to attend the *Evans* reunion in 2010 as his first meeting with his old shipmates, but he'd changed his mind at the last minute.

Somewhat bitter, Marcus couldn't understand why no one had come looking for him as he lay battered and in a full body cast for months in an Air Force hospital. When he got back to his family's farm in Fresno, he was alone. A little girl from down the road came to bring him a cake, and he

shooed her away. He cried when he told that story. “I owe that angel an apology.” I later found out that many presumed he had been killed; a USS *Kearsarge* sailor would swear he’d heard over the public announcement system on the morning of June 3, 1969 that the injured man who had been airlifted to Vietnam had died.

Another thing bothered Marcus for years: he blamed himself. He thought he had missed something, overlooked some signal telling the *Evans* what to do. Not until some twenty years later, after his son had looked up the incident on the Internet, did Marcus get the relief he needed: “He told me, ‘Dad, it wasn’t your fault.’”

Marcus cried and laughed during our afternoon at the coffee shop. I brought along Frank Jablonski’s book, and Marcus looked at all the names and faces. It was like going back in time, he told me, and followed with funny stories of the sorts of pranks they played on one another back then. He was sad about the friends he lost—he knew a lot of them. Yet he said he wasn’t so sure the names of the seventy-four belonged on the Vietnam Wall. Looking at me squarely, he continued, “If you died in a car accident in Vietnam, should your name be there?”

Marcus was a decent man, yet a broken one. It wasn’t just bones shattered that day in 1969. At first he didn’t want to tell me anything, and said so just as I ordered the first of what would become four cups of coffee. But still, he had agreed to meet me, and I could tell he was all heart, telling funny stories about his shipmates. I knew as soon as he finished that last word about the Vietnam Wall question—*there*—that he had

based his beliefs on a powerful misconception. As respectfully as I could, I told him that yes, if you died in an accident in Vietnam, your name would be on the wall. I'd repeated this often to doubters. I had to tell them that although Hollywood made people believe it, not everybody who died in Vietnam died in a firefight.

In reality, 25 percent of those whose names were on the Vietnam Wall died not as the direct result of combat but of other causes. Accidents were at the top of the list. The 134 sailors who died on the USS *Forrestal* in 1967 are listed on panel 24E. There were car accidents too numerous to list, and helicopter crashes. There was at least one death of natural causes: in 1966 David McLean Desilets, an officer on board the USS *Pyro* in the Gulf of Tonkin, contracted and died of meningitis. His daughter campaigned to have him included, and his name was added to the Vietnam Wall in 2012.

And not every name was of someone who died in Vietnam's combat zone, either. In one of the first major additions to the wall, the U.S. Department of Defense approved the inclusion of the names of sixty-eight men killed in a plane crash in Hong Kong in 1965—nearly a thousand miles from the combat zone—at the urging of then-President Ronald Reagan. I found out later that the wall included the name of U.S. Air Force captain Edward Brudno, who had taken his own life on American soil in 1973. After spending more than seven years as a prisoner of war, Brudno reportedly “shunned his own homecoming,” news obituaries would reveal. He didn't want to celebrate—wanted no part in it, his father would tell reporters following his son's death at

33 years old. Had there been no Vietnam, the reasoning went, he would have never been shot down, never have endured the spirit-crushing life of a prisoner in an infamous North Vietnamese prison, and thus never have killed himself on June 3, 1973. His name was added in 2003.

But the *Evans* crew can employ that same rationale: if the Vietnam War had never happened, their seventy-four shipmates might still be alive. Ron would have his brother, and Eunice, her sons. And Marcus might have played baseball again.

My research took me to the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, to the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California, and to the Naval History and Heritage Command in Washington, D.C.—more or less the last stop, since all trails led there. I was searching for connections between the *Evans* and the Vietnam War, the obvious and the more obscure. “The Navy still has all of that,” an archivist in College Park told me one morning in the fall of 2011. I was told I could find it all in the U.S. Navy archives, housed in an old building at the Washington Navy Yard and, as I would soon find out, crumbling.

I made numerous unsuccessful Freedom of Information Act requests to the Naval History and Heritage Command. Long before my research trip to the Navy archives in 2012 I pleaded for more hours in which to search: the research room was only open on Mondays and Fridays and I knew I was looking for needles in a haystack. I needed uninterrupted days on end. Nothing worked to override the preset hours; e-mail

requests went unanswered, as did phone calls. The archives were “relocating,” I was told in 2011. (As of early 2014, it should be noted, they were still relocating.)

In person, I found the command to be disorganized. One historian urged me to check the Australian archives, claiming that they were better at organizing historical documents. I discovered that the Naval History and Heritage Command’s previous director had resigned under pressure in 2012, that the archives were wasting away; an April 23, 2012, *Navy Times* article revealed that there was a “growing backlog of uncataloged holdings.” When I arrived one sweltering summer day in July 2012, with only that one day to search, I found that the air conditioning wasn’t working and overheard a hazardous-materials crew in the background speaking of rat droppings. Vermin were, as I understood it, literally eating naval history.

I saw other problems right away. The researchers pulled out boxes upon boxes of information, rolling them to me in carts. The file boxes, every single one of them, read VIETNAM. Southeast Asia Treaty Organization records were kept in the Vietnam archives—dozens of them. The scope wasn’t the only problem; everything about the command seemed problematic. I had actually arrived at the archive a day ahead of my scheduled visit to see if I could make my request early, so I wouldn’t need to spend an entire morning waiting for files; I was told no. I asked whether I needed cash for the copier, and was told I needed to pay by check. But when I arrived the next day, I was told that the copying machine had broken two days earlier. When I asked whether I could use a copier in another

building, I was told I couldn't move the archives. "I have a camera on my phone," I said, to which I was told, "No phones allowed." After asking to see a supervisor, I waited an hour to talk to one. Finally I was allowed the use of my phone's camera; I had barely three hours left by then. I was, at that time, one of two researchers in the room. The other woman there worked for a defense contractor. Wishing me luck, she explained that she had been there a week earlier, examining a file; when she came to reexamine it, she was told that it was "classified."

Meanwhile, some materials listed on my request forms were still classified or had gone missing. And key items were simply not there. Mysteriously, the file that contained all the daily "ship locators"—maps that plotted the U.S. Navy ships in the South China Sea in 1969—was missing the dates May 30 to June 2. The Navy's Vietnam casualty file for May and June 1969 was also missing. By the late afternoon I was sweating. But I wasn't defeated.

Just two months before my 2012 trip to Washington, ten names were added to the Vietnam Wall. Four of these were the names of naval aircraft crewmen who died just off Cubi Point in the Philippines in May 1966, after their pilot ordered them to abandon the aircraft in severe turbulence. The four men, "the back end crew," jumped into the South China Sea; only one body was recovered. The men were left off the Vietnam Wall in 1982 because they had been lost outside the combat zone. It took the work of one former naval aviator, working with families and the surviving navigator, to produce the documents to prove that the flight's purpose was surveillance over South Vietnam—it was a military operation. In the

words of the man who helped put the names on the wall, “Bureaucracy forgot but the families didn’t.” I was hoping for a similar outcome in my search for documents related to the *Evans* tragedy in the South China Sea. Before my trip I knew the ship had collected a Vietnam Service Medal dated “2 Jun 1969 to [blank].” Other warships there earned Vietnam Service Medals during this time period. I wanted to know how and why the *Evans*, and the others, qualified for this medal. According to the Department of Defense:

To qualify for award of the [Vietnam Service Medal] an individual must meet one of the following qualifications:

- (1) Be attached to or regularly serve for 1 or more days with an organization participating in or directly supporting military operations.
- (2) Be attached to or regularly serve for 1 or more days aboard a Naval vessel directly supporting military operations.

It was a mystery. If the *Evans* hadn’t been in the combat zone, then where was she? When I had a cartographer create a digital map for this book using coordinates provided by the U.S. Navy, the collision site was roughly 125 miles from the combat zone, 225 miles from Vietnam—off by 25 miles when compared to the U.S. Navy’s original press statement that it occurred 200 miles from Vietnam. (Deck Logs from ships such as the USS *Larson* and USS *Kyes*—both present when she sunk—put her in the vicinity of the Navy’s coordinates.) Other than the SEATO exercise, what else was the *Evans* doing? By then I knew, through communications among the USS

Frank E. Evans Association, lawmakers, and the Department of Defense, that the ship would have had to be returning to or leaving the combat zone for its fallen seventy-four to be included on the Vietnam Wall—a coming-and-going loophole that got the names of the sixty-eight men from the plane crash in Hong Kong on the wall in 1983. Given the Vietnam Service Medal, would that qualify the fallen *Evans* crewmen for inclusion on the Vietnam Wall? Or did I need to find a record of some sort of peripheral operation? A link that earned the *Evans* her final medal?

There were still a few research requests to make, and I knew I would have to come back. But within three months the naval archives were closed to researchers. Sequestration due to federal budget constraints was the official reason, in harsh red font on the Web site. E-mails to the new director went unanswered, and my research stalled. Some time later the history command stated on its Web site that it was limiting research requests to “official government inquiries only.” This was the same Web site that, if you looked up the *Evans*’s ship history, the chronology stopped at the Korean War. (By 2014, photographs of the *Evans* were dead-linked: “Page cannot be found.”) Bureaucracy had forgotten. The words, the attitude, incensed me; it wasn’t fair. I couldn’t wait, and neither could the survivors of the *Evans* collision. Already by 2013 two of those survivors—men I had interviewed and spent time with—had passed away.

Eventually I moved on with what I had, and what I had was enough. For now.

Although the *Evans* left U.S. Naval Base Subic Bay in late May 1969 to participate in the SEATO exercise, she was on call; she left with a full war complement of both men and ammunition. If she was needed in Vietnam that's where the Navy would send her. The SEATO exercise was secondary. I knew from letters that she was slated to go back to the gunline once the exercise was completed. Following the collision, deck logs confirmed that every ship in her destroyer squadron did indeed go back to the gunline or Yankee Station, otherwise known as the Gulf of Tonkin. I knew war planners wanted their ships in the South China Sea, close to Vietnam—memorandums all the way up the chain of command to the White House confirmed this. They wanted the world to know that they had the sea covered in America's battleship gray. I knew SEATO had much to do with Vietnam. These strings of connections meant little alone; but wound together, they created a rope. A transcript of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing of March 6, 1974, confirmed this: "As I recall, Secretary of State Dean Rusk in testimony before this committee did definitely tie the operations in Vietnam with SEATO," said Alabama Senator John Sparkman, the committee chairman. SEATO was no sideshow; it was part of the main event.

What I couldn't get past was that all the ships stationed there—not just the *Evans*—had been awarded the Vietnam Service Medal during and after the SEATO exercise. While these ships were anchored near the floating aft section of the *Evans*, their crewmen taking pictures and saying prayers, their vessels were collecting Vietnam Service Medal credit. I also

discovered that other ships, during previous and subsequent SEATO exercises, had been awarded this same medal during strikingly similar maneuvers. Even a submarine had earned a Vietnam Service Medal during parts of a SEATO exercise.

But what had the *Evans* crew done to earn that one final unit medal? It was an answer worth fighting for. The evidence could be eleven hundred fathoms down in the South China Sea, or in an old building somewhere by the Potomac River, being eaten by rats, closed to researchers. This combat zone didn't mean much for the Seventh Fleet ships that cruised in and out of it weekly, I found—some intentionally cruised into the official war zone just for the slight bump in pay that its tax-free status offered. Ironically, a memorandum to President Richard Nixon dated June 3, 1969, noted that this sort of abuse was fast becoming a problem. The combat zone, created by President Johnson in 1965, was a vehicle through which the Internal Revenue Service could decide whose pay would be taxed and when. It had nothing to do with strategy, as is evidenced by the fact that Cambodia and Laos—roped into the war later on—were not originally part of this combat zone.

As I dug for information, I knew that the Vietnam Wall had become an incredible place of healing for many veterans. I knew that it had helped some out of a foxhole they swore they couldn't climb out of on their own. I knew how some of the *Evans* families had discovered that the names were not on the wall: they had saved money and cashed savings bonds for trips to Washington, D.C., to see names. And when they found no names, the pain was incredible. It didn't make sense, they said.

Frances Box, a mother in Alabama who lost her son,

Thomas Belue Box, on the *Evans* in 1969, went to Washington some two decades later to see his name etched in that granite. When I went to see her in Athens, Alabama, in 2011, Frances was living in the same house she had been in when she waddled three city blocks to the town hospital to deliver her firstborn son on a blustery day in late November 1947. She held that giant baby in her arms, and it was love, “as all I could see. Just love.” It was in that same house that Tom learned to walk, weaned himself from the bottle, throwing it on the hardwood floor because the milk didn’t pour out fast enough. She remembered their last family photo; it was Christmas in 1968, and towering, barrel-chested Tom, huddled in with his mother, father, and three little sisters, was bigger than the Christmas tree. Losing him had crushed her, and when she arrived home from her trip to Washington in the mid-1980s, she was brokenhearted again. “Did it mean he didn’t die?” she wondered silently.

When I visited her, Frances insisted she, her daughters and I take a twenty-minute drive to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Ardmore, Alabama, near the Tennessee border. This wall, located off Interstate 65 and next to a massive Saturn 1B rocket left over from the space race, is dark and chevron-shaped. This memorial was built long after Frances’s heartbreaking trip to Washington. Approaching her ninetieth birthday when I met her, Frances walked with a cane. She had a head of thick, curly gray hair and wore pink lipstick. In her friendly southern drawl, she told me that this wall here in Alabama with her son’s name on it and a small headstone over an empty grave in the Athens City Cemetery was “all

there was.” That, the memories, and the terrible feeling that the country had forgotten that she had given her only son to that war.

I later found out that many smaller state, city, and school memorials to the Vietnam War dead have included the seventy-four casualties from the *Evans*. Columbia University in New York included *Evans* Ensign John Townsend Norton on its war memorial, under the heading VIETNAM CONFLICT. In Stockton, California, a Vietnam War memorial remembers Andrew Botto among its fallen. Not all memorials recognized the seventy-four at first, likely relying on the Pentagon’s cropped list of casualties, but they later added them with little prodding. In 1968 Patrick M. Corcoran was a pizza-hustling, paper-delivering city kid from Philadelphia who enlisted in the Navy when the draft was breathing down his neck. By then several hundred Philly kids had already died over there, and his father, a Navy veteran, convinced him to go into the Navy. The Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial did not include Patrick’s name when it was unveiled in 1987, but Tom Corcoran, a meat department manager at a local supermarket, wrote letters late at night. Within a year his son’s name was added, making front-page news in Philadelphia on October 20, 1988. There was the poignant photograph of a man with a cane standing amid fallen leaves; he had just run his hands across a set of letters engraved in stone, much as one would stroke a child. “Beautiful,” he said. Those who approved the addition of Patrick’s name on the memorial echoed the sentiment once more: if there had been no war in Vietnam, he would not have been on that warship. That Tom never got to see his

son's name on the wall in Washington was his second greatest heartbreak after losing his firstborn son. Tom died in 2006. Meanwhile, Patrick's alma mater, Father Judge Catholic High School in northeast Philadelphia, recognizes the young man as a Vietnam casualty.

In the years I spent gathering stories and documents, I knew the veterans and families were right. I knew that no matter how far the 74 were from the bulls-eye on the scope of an enemy's rifle that they did in fact die in the death march that was Vietnam, and that they had been overlooked in the carnage. I knew that some entity—the Nixon administration, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy—had worked to obscure the *Evans* connection to the unpopular war. They shrouded the *Evans* and her embarrassing fate for the sake of politics, sweeping seventy-four American boys out of the big story.

They put them in a footnote, eleven hundred fathoms down.