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GOODNIGHT SAIGON

The families never got the answers they needed. There were seventy-one mothers and wives writing letters after the collision. One would write another that her letters to the secretary of the Navy had gone unanswered. “How easy it has been for the Navy Department to forget,” wrote the mother of brown-haired, brown-eyed Linden Orpurt, of Chicago, Illinois, to the mother of Andrew James Botto, a dark-haired, bespectacled young man who in letters liked to tease his sister Frances back home in Stockton, California. Both men were in their early twenties and had been on the *Evans* for nearly two years, serving in two deployments to Vietnam before they were declared lost at sea in terse telegrams that included little explanation for how in the world it happened.

Master Chief Lawrence Reilly would spend his last few years in the Navy on shore duty near Long Beach. Consequently, he’d be asked to assist with military death notifications in the areas in and around Orange and Los

Angeles Counties. As a grieving father himself, he identified with the families of those killed in Vietnam. By 1969 just over half the official death toll from the entire war would be reached—many more would follow the seventy-four killed on the *Evans*. This devastating year was only the midpoint.

Many of the other *Evans* survivors went about their lives, transferred to other ships and bases, and tried to move on. A few of them went on to fight in Vietnam with the brown-water naval forces—that is, on smaller boats that operated in the country's rivers. Many left the Navy altogether. Some, when they could muster the courage, sought out the families of other lost seamen to deliver their sympathy in person, to pay their last respects, and to explain that as shipmates they had been best friends.

The aft section of the *Evans*, dragged 650 miles from the collision site to Subic Bay in June, was investigated and decommissioned within a month. She was later stripped of any old parts that might be reused—in some ways, she went back to Vietnam—and was left practically dismantled, surrounded by construction scaffolding, her insides exposed, ripped and left bare. The sight of the rusted, crippled hull stunned many on their way to some other ship at U.S. Naval Base Subic Bay. It was like seeing a dead body—few who saw it could forget it. Yet parts of the *Evans* would live on, for a few more years at least, on other vessels sent to fight the continuing war in Vietnam.

On October 10 the floating hunk of debris was dragged out to sea again, to serve her country once more. The men on the destroyer USS *John R. Craig* were mournful about

the duty that lay ahead: half of a dead fighter floating in the turquoise water as target practice. That those who had died on her could have been them never escaped their minds as their own ship maneuvered into position. Vietnam, the war, the era really was a game of chance—they were the lucky ones. But there was no celebrating it. Young sailor Jan Thomas Igras described the scene:

The day was fair and sunny; the seas calm. Our gun crews first used what I was told were “sand shells” to fire on *Frank E. Evans*. They were non-explosive rounds that made a dust plume to register a strike. *Frank E. Evans* was fired upon all day long. Only the gun crews were at their battle stations. For the rest of the crew it was normal ship’s work routine. I, like most of my shipmates, went topside many times throughout the day to witness the morbid work in progress.

The announcement came over . . . that *Frank E. Evans* was about to sink. We could watch the death throes of a once vital man o’ war from our deck amidships. Perhaps 20 or 30 of *Craig*’s curious crew gathered there to watch her final minutes. She was less than a mile off our port side. Our ship began a high-speed run and both of our five-inch gun mounts, two guns per turret, opened fire. Several salvos found their mark. The explosions aboard *Frank E. Evans* could not be heard, but the large plumes of white smoke indicated that explosive shells had done their work. The last furious blows dealt by a friendly ship were too

much for the now twisted and sinking *Frank E. Evans*.

Her end was not spectacular.

She neither rose at the truncated bow nor the stern.

There were no explosions.

Frank E. Evans merely slipped beneath the gentle blue sea. It was as if the ship itself had given up in her struggle to remain afloat and had resigned herself to accept the watery grave that awaited.

Back in the United States, the *Evans* had been forgotten by most, upstaged by the news of the world. But she had left her legacy: the U.S. Navy would use her as a cautionary tale, one told through an official training video produced in 1975 titled *I Relieve You, Sir*. She would help solidify the U.S. Navy's need to instill pride in its surface officers with the creation of the Surface Warfare Officers designation in 1970. It was perhaps suiting that the first deputy chief of naval operations for surface warfare was Rear Admiral Jerome King, a Navy man who knew firsthand the dangers of poor training and lack of pride in the fleet. Years later the Navy would create the Surface Warfare Officers School to train incoming ensigns, for surface warfare was the only route for officers that did not include some form of post-commission schooling. Before then, newly pinned ensigns fresh out of college and officer candidate school had been sent to fill responsible billets at sea with no additional training—a lackluster education that made for a struggling fleet and deadly mishaps.

Outside the Navy few would remember the *Evans*. She was a blip lost in the larger picture of the bloody Vietnam War that continued several hundreds of miles away.