

Postscripts: Vietnam vet still fights to honor men who died on the USS Frank E. Evans

By Steven Slosberg

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The “Lost 74” memorial car at the Big Y in Mystic. (Steven Slosberg, Special to The Sun)

Parked in the lot at the Big Y market in Mystic the other day was a car, a modest sedan, that serves, in effect, as a mobile memorial as well as a banner of appeal for the enshrinement on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., of the names of 74 members of the U.S. Navy who died in one collision at sea during the war in Vietnam.

The driver of the car was not around — in fact, as I later learned, she was inside the Big Y serving up samples of fish and chips to shoppers — but her husband, Bill Thibeault, of Norwich, who created the memorial on the car, featuring the photos of all 74 dead, on both sides of the car, readily explained the

history, both past and present. He was one of the sailors who survived the incident in which the officers and crew members were killed.

The USS Frank E. Evans (DD 754), a 376-foot-long destroyer built in 1944 at Staten Island, N.Y., and commissioned toward the end of World War II, was returned to service during Vietnam to provide artillery support for ground troops and to act as an escort for carriers.

As cited by Wikipedia: "According to the U.S. Navy Awards file, Frank E. Evans served in the waters off Vietnam for 12 days from July to September 1965. Evans was again in the vicinity of Vietnam for 61 days from August to November 1966. Evans returned to Vietnam and served there for 66 days from October 1967 to 20 February 1968. During the Tet Offensive, on 3 February 1968, Frank E. Evans provided naval gunfire support to the 101st Airborne Division near Phan Thiet against the 840th VC Battalion. Evans also spent an additional 14 days in 1969 in the Vietnam war zone."

On the morning of June 3, 1969, the Evans, then conducting maneuvers with the Australian aircraft carrier Melbourne and its battle group in the South China Sea, about 650 miles from Manila, mistakenly maneuvered across the bow of the Melbourne, which sliced through the destroyer, sinking half the ship in three minutes and killing 74 of the 273 crew onboard.

There was no warning, no alarm, no time to prepare, said Thibeault, who was then a 19-year-old cook aboard the Evans, working in the galley just forward of where the Melbourne hit. But he was not on kitchen duty at the time. Thibeault was still asleep in a top bunk, and after the collision, landed on the deck and woke up.

"By the time I got up on deck there were helicopters flying around, and the carrier had tied lines to what was left of our ship and was dropping down cargo nets for us to climb aboard," he said in an interview published in 2003. "When I got up on deck I looked back and saw only half our ship was there."

In the decades since, Thibeault, now 70, has joined with other survivors of the collision and members of the USS Frank E. Evans Association to have the names of the "Lost 74" added to the Vietnam Memorial.

Former Congressman Rob Simmons, of Stonington, when he was serving in Washington in the early 2000s, signed on to legislation that would have allowed the names of people killed as a result of the war to be added to the memorial.

There was no question that the Evans was actively involved Vietnam. However, the fact that the Evans was outside what was deemed the war zone when it went down has frustrated the efforts to enshrine the victims. "Really what we're doing here is focusing on the Evans, but we're asking the Secretary of Defense to look at the broader issue of veterans who died in the course of conduct of the war but might

not have been in-country or in an aircraft over the country at the time of their death,” Simmons said about the legislation in 2003.

I sent an email to Simmons after seeing Thibeault’s vehicle at the Big Y.

“I worked hard for them but the average grunt in Vietnam does not see their ‘accident’ as anything more than that,” Simmons replied. “Did Patton get a Purple Heart for dying in a car accident in Germany in the post-war era? No. And neither do they. They were way off shore. Not in-country. Not in combat. Hard to accommodate.”

I wasn’t quite sold on the Patton post-war Purple Heart business. The crew of the Evans died during the height of Vietnam and they were there because of Vietnam. But Thibeault did agree that Simmons worked hard on behalf of the “Lost 74” when he was in Congress.

An amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act sponsored in 2019 by Rep. Adam Schiff (D-California), and passed by the House, to add the names of the sailors to the Wall also ultimately failed. Now, said Thibeault, a bill with the same intent is moving through the U.S. Senate.

Thibeault, a musician, has written and recorded a song, “Recognition,” about the incident and the long effort to inscribe the names. The song is available on YouTube.

And just to drive the effort home, as in throughout the nation, Thibeault, with the photo banners affixed to his car, motored across country to the 50th anniversary reunion of the Evans tragedy last June.

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