

Sage Brothers Update

The Quest To Honor The 'Lost 74'

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF
randy.dockendorf@yankton.net

Ernest and Eunice Sage endured the pain of losing three sons at once during the Vietnam War.

The Niobrara couple suffered one of the largest American wartime losses of a single family. The Sages' sons — Gary, 22; Greg, 21; and Kelly, 19 — were among the 74 soldiers killed June 3, 1969, on the *USS Frank E. Evans* in the South China Sea. The destroyer was sheared in two by an Australian aircraft carrier, the Melbourne.

In their grief, Ernest and Eunice Sage were dealt an even greater blow when the federal government refused to put the names of the "Lost 74" on the Vietnam Wall.

The Department of Defense (DoD) says the *Evans* wasn't in a war zone at the time of the wreck. Those fighting to put the Lost 74 names on the Vietnam War argue the ship was engaged in combat activity and its fatalities deserve the formal recognition.

In the meantime, supporters are raising funds to build a Vietnam Memorial Wall in Niobrara to complement the current Sage Brothers Monument.

The DoD's refusal to place the Lost 74 on the Vietnam Wall in Washington dishonors the sailors' lives and memory, said Steve Kraus, vice president of the Frank E. Evans Association.

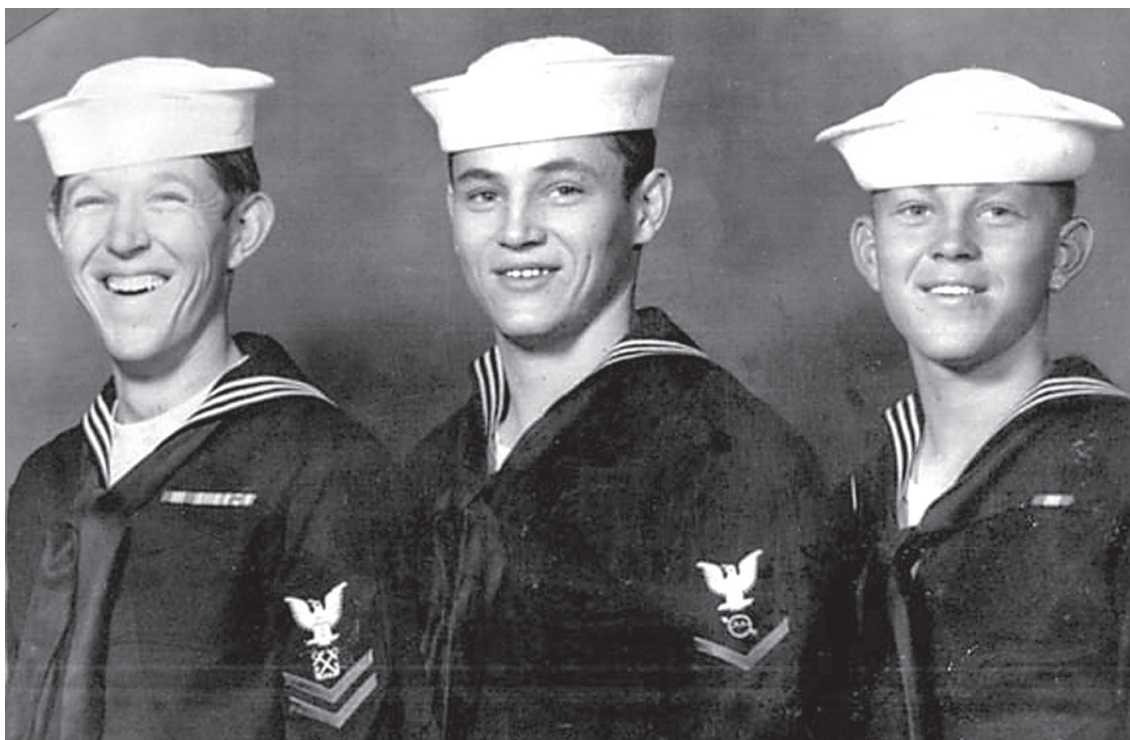
"To us, these guys died for their country," he said. "They died in the Vietnam War. Why have we not recognized them, and is it important where they died?"

Eunice Sage and others continued the Vietnam Wall effort after her husband's death. She enlisted the assistance of former U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), who later served as Defense Secretary. Mrs. Sage met with Hagel when he attended the 1999 dedication of the Sage Brothers Monument in Niobrara.

However, Hagel didn't secure a place for the Lost 74 on the wall as either a U.S. senator or Cabinet member, to the particular disappointment of Nebraskans.

"All of the efforts we attempted through Chuck Hagel failed," said Kraus, who lives in California.

The effort picked up an ally in Congress as U.S. Rep. Adam Schiff



COURTESY PHOTO

Gary, Gregg and Kelly Sage of Niobrara, Nebraska, were killed when the USS Frank E. Evans was sunk in the South China Sea in 1969. However, the names of the 74 crewmen who died in the attack have never been added to the Vietnam Wall because the Department of Defense said the incident didn't meet its criteria for inclusion. The work to remedy the situation continues.

(D-Calif.) sought to get the names on the wall. Schiff has continued his involvement.

The effort has gained a powerful ally on the U.S. Senate side, Kraus said.

"Currently, Sen. (Chuck) Schumer from New York has joined our campaign and is making contact with the DoD, requesting they put the names on the wall," Kraus said. "We hear (Schumer) carries a big stick in D.C., so hopefully he can get this done."

Schumer sent a letter to Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, calling denial of the 74 names "an atrocity," Kraus said, adding that Mabus responded positively.

"The Department of the Navy has been supportive from the beginning," Kraus said.

Schumer has also sent a letter to current Defense Secretary Ashton Carter. In addition, the inclusion of the Lost 74 names was made part of the defense spending bill in an effort to win support.

"Sen. Schumer's office was very extremely positive that we were going to make this happen, and we would all be enjoying having the names revealed during a Memorial Day ceremony," Kraus said. "To

make that happen, things would need to move pretty quickly as far as putting the 74 names on the Wall."

SPREADING THE WORD

The effort has gained another ally in the form of freelance writer Louise Esola of California. Esola became involved when, as a reporter for the *San Diego Times Union*, she interviewed a veteran at an American Legion event who told her about the *Evans* and how the names were kept off the Wall.

The story of the Sage Brothers caught her eye and attention.

"I wrote an article (about the *Evans*), and there was only one sentence in my article that stated three brothers were lost on the ship," she said.

While the Sage brothers received brief mention in the article, Esola decided to pursue the story. She met Eunice Sage in order to learn more about the brothers, their upbringing and their tragic deaths.

"I got on an airplane a couple of weeks later to go to South Dakota. I went through Yankton and crossed the (Missouri) river into Nebraska

to get to Niobrara," Esola said. "Eunice Sage spent that weekend being interviewed. It was the journalist and the mother."

During the interview, Esola learned the Sages held concerns about their sons serving together in Vietnam.

"Ernie, who was a private in the U.S. Army during World War II, told (his sons) to join the Navy to stay safe because the Navy generally didn't go into battle," Esola said.

Other brothers had served together, and it seemed a natural arrangement for the Sages.

"The boys did everything together. They were very close and requested to be on the same ship," Esola said. "Ernie didn't have a huge problem. He thought his sons were safe, and they were very close (and could watch out for each other)."

Eunice, on the other hand, was fearful of having three sons on the same ship, Esola said. Eunice may have had a mother's natural unease about their absence or a sense of the dangers that lay ahead, the journalist said.

"Eunice told me she had reservations. She was haunted by it. She was very worried," Esola said. "She

was uneasy with all the boys on the same ship at once."

And then came the devastating news of the three sons' deaths in a strange land halfway around the world, Esola said.

The pain intensified when the Sages learned their sons and other Lost 74 members were denied a place on the Vietnam Wall.

"Eunice was upset, and she felt that nobody cared (about her sons)," the journalist said. "But people do care. I left (the interview) with a great deal of empathy for her."

The interview's timing proved crucial, as Eunice Sage died two weeks later at age 87.

"I was the last reporter to talk to her," Esola said. "The personal connection) kept me on the story."

Esola would quit her reporting job, devoting the next four years to researching national archives and interviewing dozens of people. The effort resulted in the book, "American Boys." The title reflects Eunice Sage's description of her sons and the other lost sailors.

"American Boys' has fast become the only chance right now for this issue being reversed. It's showing how these gentlemen were killed in the Vietnam War," Esola said.

"American Boys' shows how this (Wall effort) is a slam dunk. My book is very solid on why these names deserve to be on the Vietnam Wall."

Esola made an important distinction as she dug deeper into the story and any chance of getting the Lost 74 on the Vietnam Wall.

"We don't want to make this about feelings. It needs to be about facts," she said. "I have the facts. This was very much a Vietnam War disaster. The *Frank E. Evans* was awarded a Vietnam Service Medal on the day it sank. To get that medal, you have to do something in the war, and the Navy is mum about that. The DoD doesn't want to answer that question. They're stonewalling."

Government red tape appears the main reason for the denial of a place on the Vietnam Wall, Esola said.

"The big hang-up, according to the feedback I get back from the DoD, is that this (accident) happened outside the official combat zone for Vietnam," she said. "As far

BROTHERS | PAGE 6B



Thank You...

To all past and present members of our military.





For career and education opportunities, contact Bridget Benson at bridget.benson@appliedengineering.com



Thank You, Veterans.

For their courage, hard work and dedication to their country, we salute the men and women of our Armed Forces past and present. It is because of their sacrifice that America remains the land of the free, and we thank them for protecting our citizens and our country.

2601 Fox Run Parkway, Yankton
www.lewisandclarkspecialty.com
605.665.5100 • toll free 1.866.556.3822

Physician Owned