

# PLANNER, RETIREE CO-AUTHOR BOOK ON NORWICH ABOLITIONIST

**E**lectric Boat Planner **Vic Butsch** (D355), with **Tommy Coletti**, who retired from Planning after 36 years, have published “A Journey to the Gallows,” a novel based on the life of Aaron Dwight Stevens, an overlooked American hero from Norwich whose hanging ultimately helped end slavery.

When Butsch and Coletti met 30 years ago working on the Seawolf program, Coletti had never heard of Stevens, but liked to write and had already published three books. Butsch, who learned about the abolitionist from Norwich City Historian Dale Plummer, had a big story to tell.

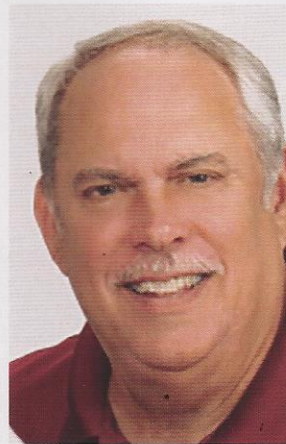
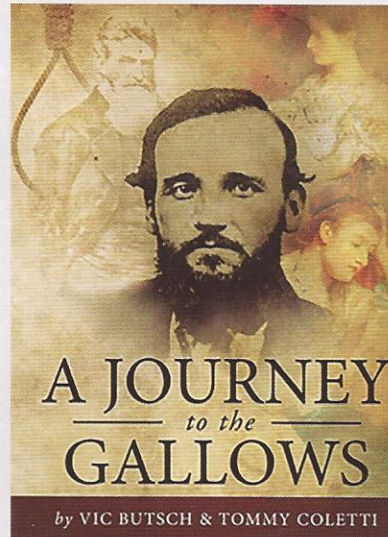
“We were already friends,” Butsch said, “After I read his first book, I asked him to consider writing about Aaron Dwight Stevens. Tommy had never heard of him, even though he was a native of Norwich, Conn. John Brown dominates most history books about abolitionists, and every school child has at least heard of the story of the Harpers Ferry raid. However, few people have ever heard of Aaron Dwight Stevens, although he played a pivotal role in the raid and in changing the reality of slavery in the United States. I knew this story had to be told, and I knew that Tommy was the man to write it.”

“I had tons of research but very little experience to develop the character,” Butsch continued. “Once Tommy came on board, we were ready to begin telling this incredible tale.”

Agreeing to co-author meant Coletti had to catch up on research Butsch had been doing for more than a decade. “It took me six months to read and look at all the articles and books he had highlighted,” Coletti said.

The research did not end, however. Taking the historical facts and weaving a believable narrative meant exploring many unknown details of life in the 19th century. “For example,” Coletti said, “We knew Stevens left Norwich on a train. We had to look up what kind of trains there were in the 1840s.”

The facts Butsch had gathered about Stevens provided plenty of fodder for Coletti’s creativity. “Dwight (Stevens) grew up a soldier and adventurer, and evolved into an American hero who, of course, had his faults, but also had an unwavering sense of right and wrong. He also had that



**VIC BUTSCH**



**TOMMY COLETTI**

strong American trait of fighting and sticking up for the underdog, the oppressed, and those who could not fight for themselves,” Butsch said.

As a 15-year-old, Stevens convinced the 1st Massachusetts Regiment of Volunteers that he was old enough to fight in the war against Mexico. He returned home only to leave again a few years later when he joined the elite Dragoons cavalry regiment. During his time in New Mexico, he sent a letter to his sister that asked how she would feel if he brought home a bride from New Mexico.

“We know he did have a woman friend in New Mexico,” Coletti said. “So we created ‘Maria,’ a voluptuous young girl whose father is a doctor.”

Butsch’s facts about Stevens are true tales of the Wild West, including how he was involved in a riot and jailed by the famous sheriff, Kit Carson. After his arrest, Stevens was sentenced to death. That sentence was commuted but Stevens had to walk 720 miles from Taos, N.M., to Fort Leavenworth, Kan., tied behind a wagon. “He was shackled in disgrace,” Coletti said.

Stevens did hard labor at Leavenworth, but eventually escaped. Using an alias, he joined abolitionist John Brown’s militia. The subsequent “Bloody Kansas” skirmishes between pro-slavery and free-state forces further branded Stevens as a radical abolitionist by some historians. In 1859 he was wounded and captured in the raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Va. Stevens, convicted of treason and conspiring with slaves, followed Brown to the gallows and was hanged in 1860. Their deaths rallied support to the anti-slavery movement and helped precipitate the Civil War.

For Butsch, a member of the Norwich Historical Society, Stevens is a hometown hero. “In all the letters he wrote and all the words written about him, I have never found any words of complaint or weakness,” Butsch said. “In fact, he was called, by one who knew him well, the noblest man he ever knew.”

Release of “Journey to the Gallows” was timed for the 155th anniversary of Steven’s hanging and the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War. The book is being published by Next Century Publishing. 🍷