

# Old Tom

## *A Fletcher Destroyer in War and Peace*

**by Jackson Sellers**

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# Apologia, First Edition

Mickey Mantle, the New York Yankees' great centerfielder, expected to die young. It was a simple matter of genetics. Both his father and his grandfather were laid to rest in their 40s. So Mantle lived hard, for tomorrow he would surely die. But he did not die, at least not at an early age, and eventually he reached his 60s, in very poor health, with only a couple of years left but still alive and kicking. "If I had known I was going to live so long," he said, "I would have taken better care of myself." As always, his fans smiled.

I, Jackson Sellers, was born the same year as Mickey Mantle, in 1931 during the depths of the Depression. When Mantle batted his career-high .365 in 1957, I was serving my last year as communications officer of the *USS Colahan (DD-658)*. I took pretty good care of myself as my post-Navy years passed one after the inevitable other, but in regard to my current research into the history of the old warship, I can say something very similar to what Mantle said. If I had known I was going to write two books about this *Fletcher*-class destroyer, I would have taken better notes when I was aboard her. As it was, I had to rely on my fading memory, and on the memories of my shipmates, who, like me, are aging rapidly and forgetting details exponentially. In regard to what happened more than four decades ago, neither their memories nor mine are reliable sources of information. So there are mistakes here, warped conclusions based on insufficient evidence. My defense is that historians always face this dilemma. One guy says one thing, another says something else. Sometimes the essential facts can be double-checked, sometimes they can't. The historian simply does the best he can, presenting both sides of any argument that comes up, or, more often, simply adopting a viewpoint that may or may not be correct.

In my judgment, based on a lifetime of dealing with manuscripts, *Old Tom* suffers by comparison to *The Original Tomcat*. Things did not work out exactly as I had hoped. Curiously, the spare time I devoted to the Pacific War book matches, month for month, the postwar time I actually spent aboard the ship. A lad named Jack reported to the *Colahan* in June 1955 and left her in December 1957 — a span of two and a half years. I, Jackson, started writing *The Original Tomcat* in June 1993 and completed the third edition in December 1995 — two and a half years altogether. The Pacific War book was initially published in December 1994. Its popularity demanded two extra editions in 1995, and even a special fourth edition in 1997, and all this distracted me from work on *Old Tom*.

Also, the Pacific War, which set the stage for *The Original Tomcat*, offered built-in drama that the Korean and Cold wars lacked. In 1944-45 the *Colahan* participated in the greatest naval war of all time. Of course the Korean War of 1950-53 was significant — more Americans died in Korea than in Vietnam —

but in the final analysis the Korean affair was not much a naval war. For the most part, the heroes in that conflict were soldiers and marines on solid ground, not sailors aboard ships off the Korean coasts. In the far-ranging Pacific War the *Colahan* sailed with the big boys — the mighty aircraft carriers of Task Force 38/58. In the Korean War the destroyer was a bit player comparatively. She was an appreciated military presence, and she punished the enemy with her main batteries, but her adventures off the coast of Korea were not the most exciting events to write about.

In regard to *Old Tom*, let me paraphrase some appropriate thoughts from the apologia in *The Original Tomcat*, first edition, December 1994:

*Old Tom* is a work in progress, and its initial publication here, in late 1997, does nothing to change that. The book, *this* book that you hold in your hand, was written to deadline, 31 December 1997. It was then printed “as is,” and distributed to several dozen *Colahan* shipmates who saw fit to reimburse me for out-of-pocket expenses. And, too, it was written in my spare time, of which there is always too little. Under those constraints, much was left undone, much was left unsaid, and much was left unrefined. In my professional opinion, the book has both strengths and weaknesses in its syntax and content, in about equal measures. If, per chance, there is another edition of this book, I will attempt to correct whatever mistakes and misperceptions lurk within this one.

In its totality, the book, *this* book, falls short of my initial grand vision, which does not surprise me in the least. Virtually everything I have ever written or done has, in the end, been less than what I expected or hoped for, even as it satisfied my employers. But I need not make too many apologies here. This is a work in progress, dammit. For ego’s sake, the writer or the artist always says something like that: “It is not finished yet,” which is just another way of saying “Don’t judge me too harshly.”

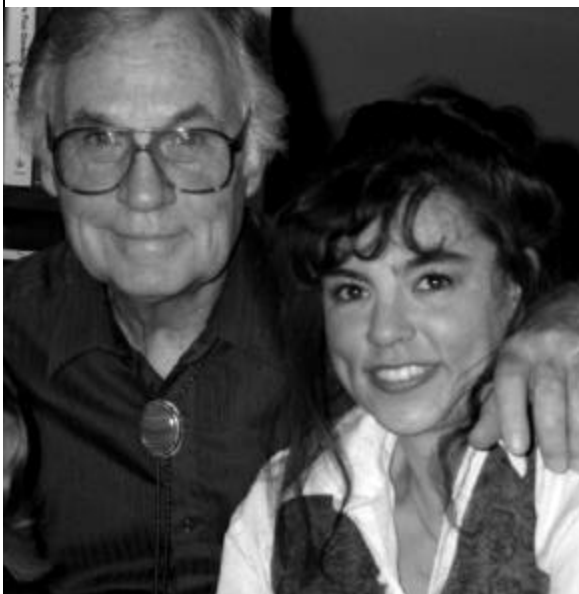
Meanwhile, as promised, I offer you *Old Tom*, the belated sequel to *The Original Tomcat*, as it existed on 31 December 1997, still unfinished but with plenty to say to those who served aboard the *USS Colahan (DD-658)* in the rosy Fifties, which many members of America’s 60-plus generation consider their finest decade.

This apologia is long because there is much to apologize for. I know good writing when I see it, but I seldom see it, initially, in my own. The whole process is agonizing. Even for someone like me, who considers himself a writer of professional quality, writing a book is a difficult, time-consuming task. *The Original Tomcat*, which went through four editions and wound up in the Library of Congress and several naval institutions, comes close to my idea of a good job. *Old Tom*, in its first appearance, doesn’t. There are reasons, of course. For one thing, I did not allow myself enough time. For another, I was distracted by personal problems, and *Old Tom* got much less of my attention than it deserved. Both of us, book and author, suffered in 1996.

My problems climaxed in December 1996 when Keiko Sellers, my daughter, my only child, a lovely daddy's girl, died. Of course her death after a lengthy illness did not end my pain. Many months passed before I found the willpower to resume work on *Old Tom*, and my motivation, when it came back, stood weaker than when she was alive. You see, this book and even *The Original Tomcat* to some extent grew out of my personal memoirs. I was writing all of this for her, and she was no longer here to read it. Nevertheless, *Old Tom* retains a number of "asides" addressed to Kei. These diversions, written before she died, have little to do with the *USS Colahan*. Under the circumstances, I should have excised them — why publish anything in which nobody is interested — but I did not do so. I didn't have the heart, in this particular instance, to follow my professional instincts.

One final apology: Inevitably, Ensign/LTJG Jack Sellers, a lackadaisical communications officer aboard the ship from mid-1955 to late 1957, gets more attention in this book than he deserves. Perhaps I can be forgiven for that. The *Colahan's* story is big enough to absorb a runty ensign at center stage. Also, Jack's "Dear Folks" letters, composed while he was actually aboard the *Colahan*, could not be ignored even if the warship's history were being written by somebody else.

Jackson Sellers  
December 1997



Jackson and his daughter Yvonne Keiko Sellers

*Oh God, Kei, how can  
I endure life without you?  
At odd times during my  
lonely days, I cry for you,  
for the unfair loss of you.  
How can I complete my  
memoirs and our family  
history if you, my inspira-  
tion, are not here to  
appreciate them? But I will  
try, darling. You would  
want me to try.*