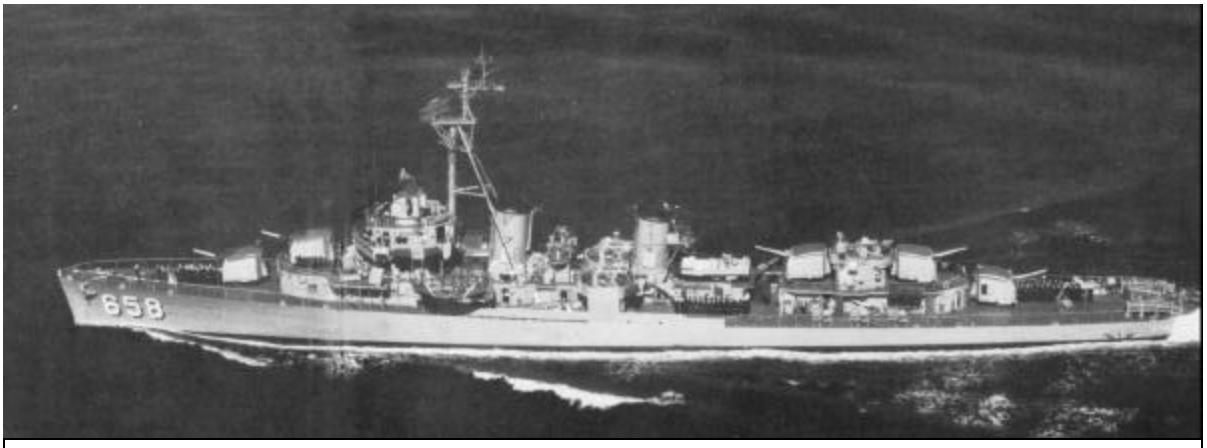
Introduction: Fletcher-Class Destroyers

Well done, destroyers. You always deliver the goods.

Rear Admiral Jocko Clark in the Marianas, 8 July 1944

We are old men now, we sailors of the *USS Colahan (DD-658).* The life of this obscure *Fletcher*-class destroyer began in 1943, when warfare raged everywhere in hot patriotism, and it ended twenty-three years later, more than thirty years ago, in 1966, when a frustrating little war in Vietnam nagged at America's cooling soul. All of us — discounting, perhaps, a few very young men who rode the mothball-destined ship on her last voyage in the mid-Sixties — were born before the *Colahan* was launched, and we were still relatively young men when she died, before we were old enough to appreciate her. As youngsters aboard this destroyer, we cursed her and fled to shore at every opportunity. Now, like old sailors through the ages, we look back at the warship



The *USS Colahan (DD-658)* and other *Fletcher*-class destroyers were pretty ships, nicely balanced from stem to stern. It has been said that the *Fletchers* were the first destroyers to "get it right." Their hulls, power plants and armaments complemented each other and allowed the ships to perform to the optimum in both war and peace. This photograph of the *Colahan* dates from the mid-Fifties, a full decade after the Pacific War. Peace has brought obvious changes. Hull numbers are large instead of inconspicuous, and the quintuple torpedo mount between the stacks has been removed to make room for 40-millimeter quad Bofors. But the most striking postwar change is the mast. During the Pacific War, the *Colahan* steamed into battle with a simple flagpole mast. Here, in middle age, she wears a tripod structure designed to hold a jumbled cluster of electronic gear. The mast supports were installed during a yard overhaul in 1952, just after the ship's first Korean War tour.

of our youth, for no particularly good reason, except to remember what we choose to see as better times. Wiser now, we remind ourselves that the times in which we were young were not necessarily the best, or even better than other times; they only seemed to be.

The *Colahan* belonged to a noble class of American destroyers. The *Fletchers*, all 175 of them, were built at the Navy yards in Boston, Charleston and Puget Sound, and at eight civilian shipyards on the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific coasts. Many keels were laid down before the United States entered World War II. The first twenty-four *Fletchers* — DDs 445 to 451 (*Fletcher* to *Chevalier*) and DDs 465 to 481 (*Saufley* to *Leutze*) — were ordered in the summer of 1940. The next eighty-nine — DDs 498 to 502 (*Philip* to *Sigsbee*), DDs 507 to 522 (*Conway* to *Luce*), DDs 526 to 541 (*Abner Read* to *Yarnall*), DDs 544 to 547 (*Boyd* to *Cowell*) and DDs 550 to 597 (*Capps* to *Wiley*) — were ordered late in the year. All the rest, including the *USS Colahan (DD-658)*, were ordered after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

The first *Fletchers* were commissioned in the summer of '42. By that time America was waging a two-ocean war against the Japanese in the Pacfic and the Germans in the Atlantic. Fleet destroyers, speedy enough to run with aircraft carriers, were badly needed. From keel-laying to launching, construction took six months or more, often much more. To a sailor's eye, they were handsome ships, devoid of the barn-like structures on the decks of destroyers that came along decades later. Officially weighing in at 2,050 tons, the *Fletchers* were the largest destroyers ever commissioned in the United States Navy, until the *Sumners* and *Gearings* emerged late in the war.

Every Navy ship takes its class name from the first such ship to be built. The *USS Iowa (BB-61)* gave her name to the great class of battleships that included the *New Jersey*, the *Missouri* and the *Winconsin.* The *USS Essex* became the namesake of all *Essex*-class aircraft carriers. Likewise, the *Fletcher* destroyers got their class name from the *USS Fletcher (DD-445)*, which, as the first to be authorized for construction, held the lowest hull number. But destroyers, complicated as they are, can be built much faster than big ships, and shipyard construction times can vary considerably. So it happened that the *USS Nicholas (DD-449)*, not the *Fletcher*, was the first warship of this design to be commissioned and placed in service.

If I were writing these books for profit instead of personal reasons; if I were catering to a wide audience instead of a couple of hundred old shipmates, I would cold-bloodily choose the USS Nicholas as my heroine, not the Colahan.

The Nicholas was a marvelous forerunner for the Fletchers. She popped up everywhere in the Pacific War. For nearly three years she fought at all the hot spots, winning a Presidential Unit Citation for 1943 action at Kolombangara Island, New Georgia, Solomon Islands. In the end, victorious in Tokyo Bay along with the Colahan and twenty other Fletchers, the Nicholas carried Douglas MacArthur to the USS Missouri, where the general accepted Japan's unconditional surrender. She came out of the war with sixteen battle stars, twice as many as could be claimed by the Colahan, a much younger sister.

To win a place in the history books, a warship must either do great damage to the enemy or suffer great damage to herself. The *USS Colahan* did neither. She was like the good soldier, or good sailor in this case, who goes to war, fights, survives and then comes home, with hardly a mention in the hometown newspaper. In Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison's fifteen-volume *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II,* the *Colahan* is listed often in tables of organization, because she was always in the thick of things, but she is mentioned only once in Morison's massive narrative. That was when she ran aground at Kwajalein in her first battle.

To be perfectly accurate, the *Colahan* was not cited at all in Morison's original narrative. She was a mere afterthought at the very end. In the fifteenth and final volume, which served as a supplement and index to all that had come before, the destroyer's misfortune at Kwajalein finally came to the historian's attention. A notation was made under "Cumulative Errata." The following sentence, Morison decided, should be added to Page 257 of Volume VII: "At 0535 [1 February 1944] destroyer *Colahan* grounded on the reef south of Enubuj, but was later towed clear, somewhat damaged, by tug *Tekesta.*"

And so it goes. Whole books have been written about the Mariana campaign, without ever mentioning the *Colahan.* But she was there, helping to free Guam, the first piece of American soil recaptured from the Japanese. Whole books have been written about the liberation of the Philippines, without ever mentioning the *Colahan.* But she was there, protecting the aircraft carriers and battleships that were, strategically speaking, more important than she was. Whole books have been written about Iwo Jima and Okinawa, without ever mentioning the *Colahan.* But she was there, surviving when others were not. Whole books have been written about the final days of the Pacific War, without ever mentioning the *Colahan.* But she was there, patrolling the entrance to Tokyo Bay as the Japanese finally lay down their swords aboard the *USS Missouri*.

As often noted in *The Original Tomcat*, the author's Pacific War history of the *Colahan*, the ship was a first-class survivor, not necessarily a top-notch warrior. She damaged the enemy on occasions, but survival was her dominant trait. If warships possess personalities — and they do, they really do — the *Colahan* can be seen as a clumsy but lucky lady. When seas were smooth, and there was not a speck of danger in the skies, she bumped into things. She lost anchors a surprising number of times. She collided with ships that dared to come close. "*I am the target for tonight*," signaled one wry captain as the *Colahan*, during her 1943 shakedown trials, approached his docked ship. Of course he hoped he was only kidding. A year later the destroyer collided with the battleship *New Jersey*, to name only the largest of her "targets." And she damned near sank an American submarine, mistaking the friendly vessel for a Japanese patrol boat. But when her welfare was at stake, when there was a possibility she might get hurt, the *Colahan* always rose to the occasion, becoming sharp as a tack for a while, until things returned to normal and she could resume her bumbling ways.

Invariably she was lucky, which is one of the best things a warship can be. In World War II battles, when others were dying and suffering horribly, she always emerged unscathed from encounters with kamikazes, bombs, gunfire, torpedoes and mines. Through clumsiness, she inflicted damage on herself, and she was not immune to the battering that a stormy sea can administer. But she was never injured, not even dented, by anything the enemy threw at her. Decades after the Pacific War, in a poem written for a *Colahan* reunion, an old destroyerman aptly called her "The Indestructible Destroyer."

In fierce 1944-1945 campaigns against stubborn Japanese naval and land-based forces, the *Colahan* fought and defended herself in hostile seas stretching from Kwajalein to Tokyo Bay, earning eight battle stars. She won five more stars in the Korean War of the early Fifties, and she steamed with Task Force 77 in the Cold War of the late Fifties. As a Naval Reserve training ship on the West Coast in the Sixties, the elderly destroyer answered America's call once again and found herself patrolling briefly off Vietnam in the early days of that unfortunate war. She served five American Presidents — Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson — and then died in anonymity at a mature age, when she was no longer needed. She deserves, at the very least, an epitaph, and she gets one here, in a couple of tomes written by a nostalgic fan.

A half century ago, in that now-quaint period of American history known as World War II, a total of 175 *Fletcher*-class destroyers were built at eleven

American shipyards. From mid-1942 to early 1945, the sleek new ships joined the fleet as quickly as they could be outfitted and manned, and they served with distinction in both oceans. Among all the warship classes, the *Fletchers* were the most populous, and they easily won the most Pacific War battle stars — 873 to be precise, or five each on average. Nineteen of the class were sunk or damaged beyond repair. At war's end, most of the survivors were placed in reserve or mothballs, but many were recalled for the Korean conflict in the Fifties, and some continued in commission into the next decade and even beyond.

The Navy disposed of the *Fletchers* in a wholesale manner in the late Sixties, leaving only a few as Naval Reserve ships in the early Seventies. Within a shockingly short time, none were left on the U.S. Naval Vessel Register. They had all been broken up or sold to foreign navies. Those that escaped the junk yard found themselves flying strange flags. The *USS Charles Ausburne (DD-570),* Captain Arleigh Burke's flagship in the famous "Little Beavers" *Fletcher* squadron in the Solomon Islands during the Pacific War, was transferred to West Germany and renamed *Z-6.* The *USS Guest (DD-472)* went to Brazil, where she entered service as the destroyer *Para.* The *USS Ringgold (DD-500)* became the West German *Z-2*, the *USS Converse (DD-509)* became the Spanish *Almirante Valdes,* the *USS Heerman (DD-532)* became the Argentine *Brown*, the *USS Bradford (DD-545)* became the Greek *Thyella*, and the *USS Richard P. Leary (DD-664)* became the Japanese *Yugure.* They and others carried foreign flags to their graves.

Louisiana Naval War Memorial Brochure

But in the end, after all had been stricken from the Navy's official list, three remained behind, at home, nicely preserved as memorials at seaside naval museums. And they float there today, docked forever in their snug harbors, safe from the havoc that heavy seas can bring — the *USS Kidd (DD-661)* in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; the *USS Sullivans (DD-537)* in Buffalo, New York, and the *USS*

Cassin Young (DD-793) in Boston. As the century draws to a close, the memorial *Fletchers* are the only ones still afloat in American waters. They once steamed with the *USS Colahan* and the other *Fletchers,* but they stand alone now, suspended in time, testimonials to the most famous class of destroyers ever built. Their huge family of sisters, including the *Colahan,* are gone forever. Well, almost gone, as we shall see later.

The *Kidd,* the *Sullivans* and the *Cassin Young* are just three of more than fifty warships on display along American coasts and waterways. The memorial vessels include aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers, destroyers, submarines and PT boats. If all these ships could be resurrected and sent to sea again, they would constitute the third largest Navy in the world. The three *Fletchers,* along with several cruisers and five destroyers of other classes, could adequately screen the new fleet. It would be a grand sight for the eyes of old sailors.

The *Fletchers* were popular, perhaps the most popular of all American destroyers, but they were not the largest class, as is often claimed. That distinction belonged to the *Clemsons,* flush-deck four-pipers commissioned in 1917-22, during and immediately after World War I. Out of a class totaling 273, not a single *Clemson* remains afloat today. In response, perhaps, to this total loss of four-stack destroyers, the U.S. Navy set aside three *Fletchers* as prospective memorials in the mid-1970s. The first to be preserved was the *Sullivans,* which is displayed at the Naval and Servicemen's Park in Buffalo. The second was the *Cassin Young,* which is moored with "Old Ironsides," the *USS Constitution,* at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston. The last of the *Fletchers* to be saved from the salvage yard was the *Kidd,* which rests in a unique berth on the Mississippi River at the Louisiana Naval War Memorial in Baton Rouge.

The *Kidd,* serving as a museum for all *Fletcher*-class destroyers, sits in an ingenious "cradle" that allows her propellors, rudder, stabilizer fins, sonar dome and bow shearing blade to be viewed completely out of the water whenever the Mississippi River falls to low stages. What were once crewmen's lockers have been converted to display cases for memorabilia from her many sisters. A copy of *The Original Tomcat,* the book that preceded this one, can be found in the *USS Colahan's* display case aboard the *Kidd.*

The *Sullivans* is a four-gun *Fletcher* with three-inch antiaircraft weapons, while the *Kidd* and the *Cassin Young* are five-gun ships, like our heroine. All three memorial *Fletchers* served with the *Colahan* in the Pacific during World War II. The *Cassin Young* won four battle stars, the *Kidd* eight. The *Sullivans* picked up nine, one more than the *Colahan*.

The eight-volume "Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships," compiled by the Navy Department in the decades following World War II, is a fine source of information on warships, but it errs on the matter of the USS Kidd's battle stars. The destroyer is credited with only four stars. This was annoying to the Louisiana Naval War Memorial Foundation, which diligently maintains the Kidd as a tourist attraction in Baton Rouge. Rectification was sought. In 1993, fifty years after the Kidd entered the Pacific War, the Navy Department's Ships History Branch issued a correction. The memorial Fletcher had won <u>eight</u> battle stars for the following operations: Wake Island 1943, Bougainville 1943, Gilbert Islands 1943, Marshall Islands 1944, Western New Guinea 1944, Mariana Islands 1944, Leyte Gulf 1944 and Okinawa 1945.

The *Cassin Young* had the dubious distinction of being struck by kamikazes on two separate occasions. In April 1945, during the Okinawa campaign, she shot down six Japanese planes, but one suicide aircraft got through and hit the ship's mast. The explosion killed one crewman and injured fifty-nine. On 30 July, also at Okinawa, a single kamikaze crashed into the *Cassin Young*'s main deck near the forward smokestack, setting off a tremendous explosion that left twenty-two dead and forty-five wounded.

When the keel of the *Sullivans* was laid, she was designated the *USS Putnam,* but President Franklin Roosevelt renamed her in memory of the five Sullivan brothers who died aboard the cruiser *Juneau (CL-52),* which fell victim to a Japanese submarine off Guadalcanal in November 1942. A shamrock painted on the *Sullivans'* forward stack proved an effective good-luck charm. Like the *Colahan,* she was never seriously damaged in the Pacific War.

The *Kidd* was among numerous *Fletchers* that suffered major damage at Okinawa. On 11 April 1945 a kamikaze struck her, killing thirty-eight men and wounding more than fifty. Her hull was torn open at the forward fireroom. The ship's crew restored the *Kidd*'s speed to twenty-five knots within three minutes of the attack, an amazing feat that probably saved her from further damage.

Off the Pacific coast of Mexico, in the Year of Our Lord 1996, steams a handsome destroyer named *Cuitlahuac (E-01),* a workhorse in the Mexican Navy. The ship's classic silhouette can be seen as she leaves and enters Manzanillo, her home port 125 miles southwest of Guadalajara. She is heavily armed with five 5"/38-caliber guns, five 40-millimeter twin Bofors and five fat 26-foot-long torpedoes. Her flush-deck hull sweeps 376 feet from stem to stern. Her main deck, from beam to beam, measures nearly forty feet. Sound familiar,

shipmates? Yes, the *Cuitlahuac* is a Pacific War-vintage *Fletcher*-class destroyer, the former *USS John Rodgers (DD-574)*, built fifty-four years ago at the Consolidated Shipbuilding yards in Orange, Texas. Despite her advanced age, she performs vigorously in Mexico's antidrug patrols, striking terror in criminals who dare to transport marijuana and cocaine through coastal waters.

The *Cuitlahuac* (pronounced "Queet-La-Quawk") is one of the early *Fletchers*, with a high, round-faced bridge. Later *Fletchers*, like the *USS Colahan*, sported low, flat-faced bridges that provided a bulwarked platform forward of the pilot house, so that the captain or officer of the deck could rush from the port to starboard wings, or vice versa, without barging through the crowded wheelhouse. The 1995-96 edition of *Jane's Fighting Ships* shows a 1994 photograph of the *Cuitlahuac* alongside a Mexican dock, with flags flying on a line stretching fore and aft from her masttop. The ancient ship appears nicely painted and well maintained. The sight warms a destroyerman's old heart.

The *John Rodgers* entered the Pacific War in 1943, two years before the bloody conflict ended. Her career in the Southern and Western Pacific reads like a summary of the war itself. At Bougainville, while screening transports, she assisted the cruiser *USS Santa Fe* in splashing a Japanese torpedo bomber. She saw action in the Gilberts, the Marshalls and the Marianas. She bombarded Guam alongside the *USS Colahan*. She screened the Morotai landings in preparation for the liberation of the Philippines. She protected the ships that carried General MacArthur and his troops to Leyte. She participated in assaults on Iwo Jima and the Japanese homeland. At Okinawa she shot down two kamikazes that were diving on American flattops. By the time she sailed triumphantly into Tokyo Bay, where the *Colahan* was waiting to greet her, the *John Rodgers* had fought in almost every major offensive campaign of the Pacific War, without losing a single man. And she sailed home with twelve World War II battle stars, a quite high number among *Fletcher*-class destroyers. Any ship with double-digit battle stars did a lot of fighting.

After the war, in Charleston, South Carolina, the *John Rodgers* was decommissioned and placed in the Atlantic Reserve Fleet. In the Fifties she was assigned to Philadelphia, then to a Texas port. In 1970, four years after the death of the *Colahan*, she was transferred to the Mexican Navy to begin a new career under a foreign flag. Her hull number evolved over the years from *F-2* to *E-02* to *E-01*. As the *Cuitlahuac*, she plows the seas today, more than a half century after she was born. Again, inevitably, an old destroyerman smiles.

In all the world, in all the navies of the world, only three other active

Fletcher-class destroyers still exist, and none of the trio are in what can be called good shape. Their days are numbered. According to *Jane's Fighting Ships 1995-96*, the *Twining (DD-540)*, the *Kimberly (DD-521)* and the *Yarnall (DD-541)* are performing limited service for Nationalist China in Taiwan. Their "active" status can be considered little more than an official courtesy. But never mind. At the very least, if nothing else, they are still carried on Taiwan's warship rolls, and at this late date they should be honored for that.

The *Twining* and *Yarnall* were Pacific War squadron sisters of the *USS Colahan*, and in postwar years the *Twining* joined the *Colahan* in Destroyer Division 172 for the Korean and Cold wars. Now the three ships serve Nationalist China under the names *Kwei Yang (908)*, *An Yang (918)* and *Kun Yang (919)*, respectively. All three were transferred to Taiwan more than a twenty-five years ago. For reasons best known to the Chinese, their hull numbers began as *DD-8*, *DD-18*, and *DD-19*, then became *956*, *997* and *934*, and finally *908*, *918* and *919*. The *Kun Yang* is outfitted as a minelayer, and all three are equipped with missiles. But none of this matters very much. Because of the poor condition of their hulls after all these decades, their time at sea is extremely limited, hardly ever. All three are scheduled to be scrapped soon. And that will leave the Mexican *Cuitlahuac* as the last active *Fletcher*. Who knows? Maybe the last *Fletcher* will outlast us.

In *The Original Tomcat*, the book that outlined the *Colahan*'s Pacific War adventures, the author wrote: "The *USS Mullany (DD-528)*, three months older than the *Colahan*, was operational in the Nationalist Chinese Navy just a few years ago, steaming under the name *Chiang Yang*. Even now, as she did as a youngster, this *Fletcher* could be frolicking on seas that seemingly stretch forever." The author assumed, then, that the *Mullany* would hang on and become the longest-lasting *Fletcher*. Sad to relate, she did not make it. She was "stricken," as they say, and sent to the scrap heap, like so many of her sisters.

One *Fletcher* that reached moderate old age, if not the immortality of the three American memorial ships or the extended life of the four *Fletchers* still serving under foreign flags, was the *USS Colahan*, the heroine on which this book dotes. In the decades following the Pacific War, she was the first of the last to be disposed of. There she was, in 1966, an eight-star veteran of the Asiatic-Pacific Operational Theater of World War II, winner of five battle stars in the Korean War, a sturdy sentinel in the Cold War. For more than two decades, she did her job well. A native of Staten Island on the Atlantic coast, she spent her entire adult life in the Pacific Ocean, across the North American

continent from her birthplace, from which she sailed to war, and to which she never returned. Her enemies always wore Asian faces. In her youth she fought the Japanese during the second half of the Pacific War. In middle age and beyond, as America tried to hold back the Communist tide in the Far East, she stood up to Koreans, Chinese and Vietnamese, before finally being laid to rest in homeland waters off the West Coast.

Today the *Colahan* lies at the bottom of the Pacific, at Latitude 32 degrees, 21 minutes north, Longitude 118 degrees, 15 minutes west — about forty miles southwest of San Diego. Relentlessly pounded by United States aircraft, the *Colahan* slipped beneath the waves on 18 December 1966. With callous efficiency, the Navy buried this old veteran and got itself some target practice at the same time. She was only twenty-three years old, and had earned thirteen battle stars in two wars, but her country no longer required her services. Her death was seen as a training exercise for a new generation of Navy pilots, young men who would never see the battles she had seen.

"The Japs couldn't sink her, so the U.S. Navy did it," a *Colahan* veteran commented sourly, only one of many sailors whom the Navy annoyed when it used the ship as a target. Scrapping — the process of cutting her into reusable pieces — would have been painful enough to those who knew her, but it would have been a more dignified death for this old warrior. We sigh, but we are not sentimental old fools; we understand. We, ship or man, can seldom choose the manner of our deaths.

It has been said that a destroyer is a thin skin of sheet metal wrapped around four boilers. A destroyerman smiles, as he often does in these two books. Perversely, he enjoys the analogy, which conjures up the image of a tin can or a bucket — appellations he has used himself, frequently. But his smile is strained. He knows his ship was much more than that. A *Fletcher* destroyer nurtured a wartime crew of more than three hundred men, and enjoyed a peacetime complement of 260. Her decks carried armaments that were sincerely feared by the heftiest of her enemies. In schoolyard terms, she was a wiry runt whom bullies could not annoy with impunity.

If ever there was an archetypal "tin can," the *Fletcher*-class destroyer was it. Long and lean, powerful and fast, the *Fletchers* dashed into the Pacific War in desperate times, and they were eagerly embraced by the "big boys" — the carriers and the battleships — which carried long offensive sticks but, up close, needed the protection of the tough "little boys." They came out of retirement for the Korean War, the Cold War and even the Vietnam War. No admiral ever

had enough of these fine warships. Once in combat, the *Fletchers* quickly became, and have stubbornly remained, to this very day, the most admired class of destroyers ever built.

By the time the *Fletchers* were ordered, in the early Forties, the United States Navy was free to build destroyers of any size. Naval treaties in effect since World War I had imposed size, weight and armament limitations. Now, with the outbreak of a new war, the treaties were tossed aside. The *Fletchers*, the first U.S. destroyers with a flush deck since the "flush deck four pipers" of pre-World War I design, could be built without regard to outmoded international rules. The new destroyer's hull was composed of three basic sections. The center section housed four large machinery spaces consisting of alternating boiler rooms and engine rooms. The forward and aft sections were divided by two platform decks and several transverse bulkheads housing magazines, fuel, water, dry stores, workshops and accommodations for the crew. She was a good hefty warship, a gem of her time.

The overall length of a *Fletcher*, from stem to stern, was 376 feet 6 inches. Such measurements are nicely precise, but they hardly convey the correct image. "She was seventy-six feet longer than a football field." Ah, that's better. Many a destroyerman has used this description to refute a landlubber's ignorant notion that a *Fletcher* destroyer was a small ship. Her girth was ample as well. The main deck, nearly forty feet wide at the beam, provided a relatively stable platform for a variety of weapon systems that could be fired at air, surface, underwater and coastal enemies. A target nine miles away, or five miles high, or several hundred feet under the waves, was not out of her reach.

Design displacement was 2,050 tons, climbing to 2,150 tons and well beyond as armaments and other equipment were added. In common Navy parlance, the difference was usually split, and the ships were called "twenty-one-hundred tonners." For destroyers, at that time, this was heavy tonnage. The pre-war Navy could claim not a single destroyer that exceeded two thousand tons. Most fell between 1,100 and 1,650. Closest to the *Fletchers* was the handful of *Somers* and *Porter* destroyers, which weighed in at 1,850 tons. For a short time during the Pacific War, the *Fletchers* were the biggest "little boys" afloat, until the 2,250-ton *Sumners* and 2,425-ton *Gearings* came along in 1944-45.

The *Fletchers* were powered by General Electric geared steam turbines. With their four Babcock & Wilcox boilers, they introduced high pressure steam to American destroyers. The result was greater speed and more endurance. Twin propellers provided propulsion, and a single center-line rudder offered steerage control. Shaft horsepower of 60,000 could generate a top speed of thir-

ty-six knots, sometimes even more as the *Colahan* occasionally demonstrated. The maximum cruising range was 4,800 nautical miles at fifteen knots.

Additional equipment and armaments were added to the *Fletchers* throughout their lives. Of course, the added weight increased their displacement, and they rode ever lower in the water. This resulted in the only severe criticism leveled at the class. In heavy weather, they were very wet, as anyone who has ever served on a *Fletcher* can testify. Another criticism, of lesser severity, was their relative lack of maneuverability in confined waters, a weakness that stemmed from the single rudder.

These two shortcomings of the *Fletchers* were offset by their many advantages over previous destroyer classes. By destroyer standards, they had great survivability due to compartmentation and the ability to steam with a split plant. Their flush decks gave them a strong hull with less weight than that of high-forecastle destroyers, and they enjoyed a stability reserve that, all in all, permitted the weight additions. Performance of the *Fletchers* in World War II was admirable. There is no question that they earned their reputation as the best known and most reliable destroyers in the Pacific War.

By the end of the war, however, the *Fletchers* were aging. Their essential specifications had been drawn in the years before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. The larger, newer and more maneuverable *Sumner* and *Gearing* classes became the primary fleet destroyers. Additional armaments, along with twin rudders and greater internal space for “black box” equipment, made the the *Sumners* and the *Gearings* more desirable in a shrunken postwar Navy. The new destroyers tended to eclipse the surviving *Fletchers* after 1945, although they never quite managed to overcome the *Fletcher* reputation. Even so, many *Fletchers* would be recalled for the next war, the Korean conflict of the Fifties. Their big younger sisters were not quite as fast and could not handle things alone.

At birth, the Fletchers were like human babies. As soon as one emerged from the shipyard womb, looking much like all her sisters, with just a few variations, she almost at once began to evolve into what she eventually would be, a distinct individual possessing a unique personality. A destroyerman, visiting a ship of the same class as his, was always struck by how different his host was. As even the dullest man could see, everything was relative. What was comfortable and familiar for one sailor was vaguely disturbing to another. There were no cookie-cutter Fletchers. As much as they were alike, they were all a bit different.

During the Pacific War the Navy named its warships in accordance with

well-established conventions. Destroyers carried the names of naval heroes, while cruisers got theirs from cities, and battleships from states, and aircraft carriers from either famous battles or old warships. Today the Navy allows carriers to bear the names of Presidents and other high government officials — politicians who splash their egos on everything. But never mind. This is the story of a destroyer that bore the name of a Spanish-American War hero.

At first she was known only as hull number 658. Then, about the time her keel was laid, she drew the name of Commander Charles Ellwood Colahan, United States Navy, and thus she became the *USS Colahan.* Her namesake, born in Philadelphia on 25 October 1849, graduated from the Naval Academy several years after the American Civil War. His long career in both the Atlantic and Pacific included command of the *USS Chesapeake*, the *USS Indiana* and the *USS Cleveland.* At one point he held an assignment aboard the famed training ship *USS Constitution* in Philadelphia. During the Spanish-American War he served aboard the *USS Detroit* in blockade duty off Havana, Cuba, and in the bombardment of San Juan, Puerto Rico. He held the Spanish Campaign Medal awarded for these operations. After a period in the Bureau of Navigation, Washington, D.C., Colahan reported in March 1900 to the Naval Academy as Commandant of Midshipmen. In March 1903 Commander Colahan assumed command of the newly commissioned *Cleveland.* A year later, on 11 March 1904, he died at his home in Lambertville, New Jersey. He was only fifty-four.

The *Colahan* was built by the Bethlehem Steel Company, Staten Island, New York, at a cost of six million dollars. Her keel was laid on 24 October 1942, and construction continued for six months. She and another *Fletcher* destroyer, the *USS Charles J. Badger (DD-657)*, grew up together at the civilian shipyard, and they were launched just a month apart. The *Badger* would go to war in the Atlantic, the *Colahan* in the Pacific. Meanwhile, the Staten Island shipyard intensified construction of the *Colahan'*s Pacific War division sisters — the *Halsey Powell*, the *Uhlmann*, the *Benham* and the *Cushing.* The *Colahan* slid down the ways on 3 May 1943, the very day the *USS Cushing'*s keel was laid. A white-haired lady, Mrs. Polly Colahan Hinkomp, served as the ship's launching sponsor. She was the adopted granddaughter of the late Commander Colahan.

In most respects, the *Colahan*'s vital statistics were identical to those of other *Fletchers.* Original displacement was 2,050 tons, rising several hundred tons when the ship was fully loaded. Length was 376 feet 6 inches, beam 39 feet 8 inches, draft 17 feet 9 inches. As defined by the 1936 London Naval

Treaty, standard displacement was “the displacement of the vessel, complete, fully manned, engined, and equipped ready for sea, including all armament and ammunition, equipment, outfit, provisions and fresh water for crew, miscellaneous stores and implements of every description that are intended to be carried in war, but without fuel or reserve feed water on board.” In other words, everything was counted except fuel and water for the boilers. In a fully loaded *Fletcher*, fuel oil weighed 739 tons and diesel oil 26.5 tons. Thus, ...

Armaments are the essence of a warship. Without them, the vessel becomes a mere cargo carrier, valuable enough in many situations but a threat to no one. In general, a *Fletcher* detroyer’s Pacific War armaments consisted of five 5-inch guns, ten 21-inch torpedoes, six depth-charge throwers, two depth-charge

Courtesy of Dale Sullinger

This photograph shows all of the *USS Colahan*’s Korean War armaments, with the single exception of the hedgehog mounts forward of the bridge, which are hidden from view. There are the five-inch/38-caliber guns, of course, but also visible are the 40-millimeter quads between the stacks, the torpedo mount aft of the after stack, the 40-millimeter twin atop the after superstructure, and the depth charge racks on the stern. Twenty-millimeter guns are found near the beam rail adjacent to the torpedo mount and also within a tub on the fantail. Depth charge throwers, or K-guns, can be seen on the deck alongside the after superstructure. The photograph was taken in the early Fifties, no later than mid-1952. The flagpole mast would be traded for a tripod in the summer of ’52.

stern racks, five 40-millimeter twin Bofors and a varied number of single-barrel 20-millimeter guns. When referring to 175 ships constructed at eleven shipyards over a period of several years, it is necessary to speak in generalities. The 20-millimeters, especially, were installed in a catch-as-catch-can sort of way, depending often on availablity of the weapons. Sometimes six or seven were mounted, sometimes ten. Also, as World War II progressed, and as the ships returned to American shipyards for one reason or another, they were upgraded to 20-millimeter twins and 40-millimeter quads.

The five-inch, 38-caliber guns were dual purpose in the sense that they were effective against distant aircraft as well as surface and land targets. To a casual observer, it might appear that the five-inch guns were the ship's *only* weapons. The large mounts, with their sixteen-foot barrels sticking out, were prominent, even at a distance, while the other weapons were less visible. But the other armaments were there, and all were useful in offensive operations aimed at enemy aircraft, submarines and even surface craft. The Bofors and 20-millimeters provided close-up antiaircraft protection. A 20-millimeter gun could spit rounds at 450 per minute, out to an effective range of two miles. A 40 was capable of 160 rounds per minute, out to a mile. The torpedoes, loaded in quintuple mounts forward and aft of the after stack, could be launched in either direction over the beam rails, while the depth charges, rolled off the stern or thrown to port or starboard, could cripple or destroy enemy submarines.

[Korean War armaments]

Terminology relating to Navy guns is confusing to the uninitiated. For most people, a reference to "caliber" conjures up the standard dictionary definition: "The diameter of something of circular section, as a bullet, or the diameter of the inside of a tube, as the bore of a gun." One thinks of a .38-caliber pistol or a .22-caliber rifle. But the Navy sees "caliber" as a unit of measurement in determining the length of the barrel. When it speaks of a "five-inch, 38-caliber" weapon, it is referring to both the bore and the barrel length. The bore, or projectile diameter, is five inches in this case, while the length of the barrel is thirty-eight times the bore, or 190 inches, or almost sixteen feet. It is confusing, but that is the way the Navy does it.