Chapter 1: 1943-1945: The Colahan's Big War

Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale.

William Shakespeare, "King John"

The quote introducing this chapter applies to the author rather than the USS Colahan. There are times when a writer-slash-historian must tell his tale twice, and the second version, according to common wisdom, must be rendered in different words, even if the original words and phrases, born in creative agony, tell the story as well as it can be told, or at least as well as the author can tell it. Different words are what his faithful readers expect. It is the nature of his profession, a long-standing convention of publishing. The author recently finished a full-fledged book about this destroyer's adventures in the Pacific War. "The Original Tomcat," as it was called, told the story in three limited editions published in 1994-95, each revised and expanded for a small but appreciative audience. And now he must condense those finely crafted 384 pages into a single chapter for this sequel, because"Old Tom" deserves to be complete within itself. The Pacific War — the background against which "The Original Tomcat" was staged — must be dealt with here, once again, in some detail. All this for the edification of those who have not read the first book. Poor writers. On such occasions, they tediously and painfully truncate their own precious prose, which in their biased opinions cannot be improved, certainly not by condensation. Well, here goes. The author remains unconvinced that the Pacific War story can be squeezed satisfactorily into a single chapter, even a long one such as this, but the attempt must be made. With apologies to no one, he will be less than diligent, however, in revising the phraseology of the first book. Call it stubbornness or call it laziness. He cares not which. The story belongs to all of us, but the words are his to do with as he pleases, even if he chooses to do nothing.

Perhaps it should be noted that this "Old Tom" chapter was the progenitor of "The Original Tomcat." That is, it was outlined as a mere chapter long before it emerged as a book in its own right. You can see what happened. The author was working diligently and single-mindedly on his personal memoirs,

which covers several years in the Fifties when he served as a junior officer aboard the Colahan. He was simply trying to sum up the ship's Pacific War history, in which he had played no part. Well, the chapter got away from him, as though it had a mind of its own. It grew so large, 384 pages eventually, that it was suitable only as a full-fledged book. Who ever heard of a chapter of nearly four hundred pages? Still, this slimmed-down chapter remains a valid, even essential portion of "Old Tom." When you tell the history of anything — man, ship, anything at all — you must start at the beginning. This is the beginning of the USS Colahan.

On 23 August 1943 the *Colahan* was placed in commission, with Lieutenant Commander Donald Taylor Wilber commanding. Everything was spanking new and freshly painted. The *Fletcher*-class destroyer was tied up to a wharf at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The crew, most of whom were serving aboard their first ship, turned out in dress whites for this summertime ceremony. The commissioning pennant was raised. It was just a ribbon, a few inches wide, looking much like a horizontal strip from the top of an American flag, but as it rose on its halyard and caught its first breeze, the *Colahan* officially became a proud warship of the United States Navy.

Just minutes after the pennant was hoisted, a nervous murmur arose on the *Colahan*'s fantail. A gruesome discovery had been made during this solemn occasion in New York Harbor. Washing against the stern of the newly anointed ship, amid the usual flotsom in the narrow strip of water between the *Colahan* and the wharf, was the body of a premature baby, the earthly remains of a poor unwanted soul cast from the shores of a teeming city.

Sailors are a superstitious lot. They buzzed about it. *How awful!* Was it an evil omen? How could it *not* be? Here was a dead baby brushing against the hull of a brand-new ship on her way to war. Could this be the fabled albatross, the one that awaits unlucky seamen everywhere, come so quickly to the *Colahan*, from the waters below

Pacific War Campaigns

In the Asiatic-Pacific theater of World War II, the *USS Colahan* participated in eight campaigns — or "authorized operations and engagements," as the Navy called them. For each operation, the *Colahan* earned one battle star.

Kwajalein (Marshalls)	1/29/44-2/8/44
Guam (Marianas)	7/12/44-8/15/44
Palau, Philippines	9/6/44-10/14/44
Leyte, Formosa	10/10/44-12/16/44
Luzon, China Coast	1/3/45-1/22/45
Iwo Jima, Honshu	2/1/45-3/16/45
Okinawa Gunto	3/17/45-6/11/45
Japan Mainland	7/10/45-8/15/45

instead of the skies above? A chief petty officer thought so, and he promptly fled to shore, pledging never to return. The *Colahan* was jinxed, he declared, and he would not sail on her. Much persuasion from reasonable men was required to bring him back aboard.

More than three hundred crewmen were aboard, or soon would be, on that Monday afternoon in 1943 when the *Colahan* was commissioned at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in New York Harbor. She would go to sea with a full wartime complement. Eighteen officers and 311 enlisted men stood ready to perform their many duties as the *Colahan* prepared for her September shake-down cruise off Bermuda in the British West Indies. The shakedown turned out to be a horrible experience for Captain Wilber and the crew alike. Collisions and other mishaps competed with seasickness. Somehow the *Colahan* got through it. In October and November she engaged in further trials in waters near New York. Then she got underway from Norfolk, Virginia, enroute to San Francisco via the Panama Canal. As soon as she arrived at the West Coast port in early December, Commander Harry Bean Jarrett hoisted his pennant on board as commander of Destroyer Squadron 53 and Destroyer Division 105. Two days later the *Colahan* sailed for Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii, to join the rapidly growing Pacific Fleet.

"Commander of Destroyer Squadron 53 and Destroyer Division 105." Sounds impressive, doesn't it? Yes, "Beany" Jarrett, winner of the Navy Cross at the Battle of the Coral Sea, was now the commodore of a full squadron of destroyers, and he collaterally commanded one of its two divisions. On paper the squadron consisted of nine ships assigned to Destroyer Divisions 105 and 106. In actuality the *Colahan* was the only ship available to Jarrett at the time. As the first to be commissioned, she was the first in the squadron to go to war. The other eight *Fletchers* would follow as soon as they could, but the *Colahan* would journey to Kwajalein alone. She would represent the entire group in Destroyer Squadron 53's first battle.

Chapter 1: A Virgin at Kwajalein: *The Colahan runs aground in the Marshall Islands, damaging her screws and shafts. She is towed 2,200 miles to Pearl Harbor, where she spends three months in dry dock.*

On 11 December 1943 the *USS Colahan*, fresh out of San Francisco and carrying the flag of Destroyer Squadron 53, arrived in the Territory of Hawaii, the halfway point in her journey to the war in the Western Pacific. For the first of many times over the next quarter of a century, she entered Oahu's Pearl

Harbor, a once-sleepy anchorage and shipyard that now bustled with the business of naval warfare. On that same day, the heavy cruiser *Indianapolis* steamed in, carrying Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance and his staff. Like the *Colahan*, the *Indianapolis* moved past the sunken ruins of the battleship *USS Arizona*, which had died violently two years earlier in a rending burst of flame and black smoke, virtually the first victim of the Japanese air attack that had forever burned *Pearl Harbor* into the American consciousness.

Aboard the *Indianapolis* that day, Admiral Spruance of Battle of Midway fame was returning from the successful but bloody Gilbert Islands campaign, in which Tarawa was bombarded, invaded and captured at the cost of a thousand American lives. Despite the appalling casualties, Admiral Chester Nimitz, headquartered in Hawaii as commander of the Pacific Fleet, signaled his congratulations as Spruance's flagship nosed into the harbor.

The Gilbert Islands campaign was the first of the great Central Pacific island-hopping assaults that would destroy the mighty Japanese fleet and carry triumphant Americans, including the *Colahan* and her crew, into Tokyo Bay. The *Colahan* arrived too late for the Gilberts invasion, but from now on, during the final war years, she would participate in every major campaign, eight of them in all. At times she would fight under the steady and cautious Spruance, at other times under the brash and impulsive Admiral William "Bull" Halsey.

On 19 January 1944, with a still-green crew, the *Colahan* went to war, as ready as she would ever be. Under the command of Donald Wilber, who was now wearing the stripes of a full commander, she sailed from Pearl Harbor with a task group bound for Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, the Fifth Fleet's next target. The voyage to the hostile southwest Pacific was a heady first assignment for the perky new destroyer, the only true combatant in a group consisting of eight tank landing ships (LSTs), six infantry landing ships (LCIs), three submarine chasers (SCs) and four motor mine sweepers (YMSs).

The convoy was placed under the tactical command of H.B. "Uncle Beany" Jarrett, who, as commander of Destroyer Squadron 53, trod the decks of the *Colahan*, which offered the only set of decks the commodore *could* tread. Eight other brand-new *Fletchers* would eventually join the *Colahan*, filling out Jarrett's DesRon 53 organizational chart, but they had not yet left the States. On this journey to Kwajalein, the burden of defending the twenty-one vessels in the task group lay squarely on this lonely and inexperienced destroyer.

Sure enough, a crisis arose. Around midnight on 26 January, just beyond the 180th Meridian marking the International Dateline, the *Colahan* made a sonar contact with a presumed enemy submarine lurking near her defenseless

herd of sheep. Immediately the *Colahan* attacked, as she had been taught to do, dropping depth charges that churned the sea with great underwater explosions. The results were anticlimactic. No wreckage or oil was sighted, nor was the contact regained. Much relieved, the huddled group proceeded without further incident. But in this initial attack on a real or imagined enemy, the *Colahan* made her first mistake in the war zone. She dropped the depth charges, set for shallow discharge, while steaming at a leisurely eight knots. The warship narrowly cleared the explosions in her wake. "We almost blew off our own ass," a crewman said.

The motley collection of ships, led by a single *Fletcher* destroyer, reached the vicinity of Kwajalein Atoll on the evening of 30 January, barely in time for the battle. Early the next morning the *Colahan* was detached from the convoy and assigned to Task Group 52.8, a fire support group within Rear Admiral Kelly Turner's huge attack force. Turner was Admiral Spruance's crackerjack amphibious assault commander, and he would oversee the Kwajalein bombardment and invasion.

The *Colahan* and seven other *Fletchers* in Task Group 52.8, along with three smaller destroyers, guarded four old battleships and three heavy cruisers. The group began bombarding Kwajalein an hour or so after the *Colahan* joined up. The newcomer assumed screening duties for the *USS Mississippi (BB-41)*, an ancient dreadnought commissioned in 1917 during World War I. The wagons, cruisers and destroyers blasted away, delivering approximately 13,400 rounds of fourteen-inch ammunition, four hundred rounds of eight-inch, and five thousand rounds of five-inch. Two small Japanese cargo ships, plus an oiler and various other craft, were spotted in Kwajalein Lagoon. Task Group 52.8 sank them all.

A warship is designed for war, and a destroyer's first battle, like a woman's first love affair, deserves detailed recountal, even if she — ship or woman — would rather forget about it. Later battles, although just as significant, fade gently into jaded memory, while the first stands out, stark and clear, unforgettable, especially if it was also embarrassing. The *USS Colahan (DD-658)*, a virgin at Kwajalein, would be embarrassed in her first battle.

At 1800 on 31 January, after devoting her daylight hours to guarding the old *Mississippi*, the *Colahan* was reassigned to the antisubmarine screen surrounding Admiral Turner's flagship. The destroyer zigzagged through the night in company with Task Group 52.15, keeping station on the command ship, from which Turner issued directives to the forces converging on the enemy-held islands and islets of Kwajalein Atoll. Ship traffic was heavy and visibility was

poor due to intermittent rain squalls. It was still dark on this first morning of February, and the *Colahan* was forced to maneuver to avoid collision with vessels from other task groups. When it happened, she was knifing through the darkness at thirteen knots. At 0520, just hours before the troop landings, she ran hard upon a submerged coral reef south of Enubuj, a couple of miles from the Kwajalein landing beaches. The blades on both screws were either bent out of shape or sheared off, and the port shaft was out of line. Also, the sound dome was bashed in. The destroyer was out of action, dead in the water, unable to make way under her own power. Her first battle had lasted only twenty-four hours.

War does not wait on a damaged destroyer. Off the beaches of Kwajalein, the battleships *Mississippi* and *Pennsylvania* opened fire shortly after 0600. This bombardment was delivered against guns, obstacles and defenses behind the primary landing sites. The firing continued until 0745. Projectiles went directly over the grounded *Colahan*, or seemed to. It was an unnerving baptism for the wounded warship and her young crew. With nothing else to do, the crippled *Colahan* and the men aboard her "watched the show," according to a yeoman's diary.

The first wave of American troops hit the Kwajalein beaches at 0930. Within a few minutes, twelve hundred officers and men had landed without a single casualty, and thousands more would come ashore. Perhaps one-third of the five thousand Japanese defenders were dead or wounded, victims of the fierce bombardment, but the hunkered-down survivors, totaling three thousand, proved stubborn, unwilling to find honor in any circumstance short of death. They were Japanese soldiers, and that was their way. In a week of hard fighting, all but thirty-five of the Japanese defenders were killed. Kwajalein belonged to the Americans, who suffered relatively light casualties. Admirals Turner, Spruance and Nimitz were pleased.

The *Colahan*, poor thing, rested at anchor. Repairs of the magnitude required by the ship were impossible in the war zone. She would have to be towed back to the Navy yard at Pearl Harbor. On 8 February, shortly after the island was secured, the *USS Thuban (KA-19)*, a cargo ship, took the *Colahan* under tow. Thus began an eleven-day journey back to Pearl.

Towing on the ocean is not as simple as it sounds. The cable between the heaving ships must sag beneath the surface to provide sufficient catenary to dampen inevitable jerky tensions. If the cable is too short, it will snap free of the water, twanging like a great bowstring and terrifying everyone who sees or hears it. In the decades afterward, *Colahan* veterans would debate the number

of times the damned cable broke. The figures, plucked from their aging memories, would range from a low of three to a high of twenty-seven! As the cables were being resecured, the crewmen amused themselves by fishing for sharks from the deck of the wallowing destroyer. They caught three, one an eleven-footer.

After spending nearly three months in the Pearl Harbor yards, the *Colahan* emerged healthy and potent again, and still under the command of Donald Wilber. Despite running his ship aground, Wilber still ran his ship. Climbing a reef in the face of the enemy, as opposed to doing the same thing in peacetime, could be excused, or semi-ignored, and this was done in Wilber's case. He and his executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Grant Heston, received mild official reprimands. It was Lieutenant Ed Trudeau, the officer of deck at the time of the grounding, who paid the ultimate price. In addition to being reprimanded, Trudeau was shuffled off to the *USS Indianapolis*, which was sunk by a Japanese submarine in the waning weeks of the war. Only 316 out of nearly 1,200 men aboard the cruiser survived the tragedy. Ed Trudeau was not among them. He died when the ship went down, or perhaps a day or two later in shark-infested waters.

Chapter 2: The Captain and the Commodore: *The injured Colahan, recuperating in dry dock, welcomes the tardy members of her squadron. Captain Wilber, her first skipper, is despised by most of the crew. Commodore Jarrett, affectionally known as "Uncle Beany," is universally admired and respected. Jealousy raises its ugly head.*

Commodore "Beany" Jarrett's squadron began to come together in February 1944. Until then, it consisted of a single warship, the *USS Colahan (DD-658)*, Jarrett's flagship by default because there was no other choice. Destroyer Squadron 53's entry into the Pacific War, a few weeks earlier, had been less than triumphant. On the second day of the squadron's first battle, at Kwajalein, its only frontline ship ran aground, suffering severe damage to her screws. With shocking suddenness, the brand-new *Colahan* lay helpless, while the Marshall Islands invasion went on without her. And then she was towed ignominiously back to Pearl Harbor.

But these initial indignities did not diminish the *Colahan*'s distinctions. Among Destroyer Squadron 53 ships, she was the first to fly the unit flag, the first to go to war, the first to experience the violence and danger that awaited the eight *ingénues* rushing to join "Uncle Beany" Jarrett's sorority. Someday,

all nine warships would sail as the respected Tomcat Squadron, with the *Colahan* viewed as the senior Tomcat, the "Original Tom." But that was still a year away . . . .

As shipyard tugs pushed the crippled *Colahan* into Pearl Harbor's Dry Dock No. 1, three of the ship's younger sisters were already nearby, and five more would arrive eventually. While mending in dry dock that spring, the soiled young lady eagerly embraced a growing family of tardy virgins. All came from the same *Fletcher* mold. Even before their keels were laid, they had been assigned to the squadron whose flag the *Colahan* now flew. All were built by the Bethlehem Steel Company, half of them in Staten Island, like the *Colahan*, and the other half in San Francisco. At last they were showing up, gathering around their injured sibling.

The *USS Halsey Powell (DD-686)*, two months younger than the *Colahan*, steamed into Pearl Harbor on 12 February after completing her shakedown and

Destroyer Squadron 53

Pacific War, 1943-1945

Destroyer Division 105

Hull	Ship	Builder	Keel Laid	Commissioned
658	*Colahan*	BethSI	24 Oct 42	23 Aug 43
686	*Halsey Powell*	BethSI	4 Feb 43	25 Oct 43
687	*Uhlmann*	BethSI	6 Mar 43	22 Nov 43
796	*Benham*	BethSI	3 Apr 43	20 Dec 43
797	*Cushing*	BethSI	3 May 43	17 Jan 44

Destroyer Division 106

Hull	Ship	Builder	Keel Laid	Commissioned
540	*Twining*	BethSF	20 Nov 42	1 Dec 43
541	*Yarnall*	BethSF	5 Dec 42	30 Dec 43
683	*Stockham*	BethSF	19 Dec 42	11 Feb 44
684	*Wedderburn*	BethSF	10 Jan 43	9 Mar 44

BethSI=Bethlehem Steel, Staten Island. BethSF=Bethlehem Steel, San Francisco.

some minor escort assignments. Next came the *USS Twining (DD-540).* Two days later, on the 19th, the *USS Yarnall (DD-541)* arrived. Within a few weeks the *USS Ulhmann (DD-687),* the *USS Benham (DD-796)* and the *USS Stockham (DD-683)* joined Jarrett's squadron. The *USS Cushing (DD-797)* and the *USS Wedderburn (DD-684)* would report in due time.

Here, in one of the many "asides" that punctuate this unconventional ship's history, the author steps back and indulges a fantasy that may or may not be pertinent to the USS Colahan:

A North Atlantic veteran takes command of a Pacific Fleet warship. The officers and crew compare him to a highly popular officer, and find him lacking. He is a book man, a stickler for Navy protocol, and he quickly generates resentment in the wardroom. Like all captains, he needs the support of his junior officers, but he does not get a full measure of it. The ship runs aground — perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a captain. He wiggles out of trouble by citing the incompetency of his crew.

At Kwajalein in early 1944 the captain faces further shiphandling embarrassments. Collisions and near-collisions occur during that long year as the war rages across the Western Pacific. In the December typhoon that batters Admiral "Bull" Halsey's Third Fleet, he almost loses his ship. Officers discuss his sanity in hushed tones. Finally the Navy sees that he has mental problems, and this veteran of a two-ocean war is put out to pasture.

But wait. This is not Commander Donald Wilber, the Colahan's first commanding officer. This is Lieutenant Commander Philip F. Queeg of the fictitious USS Caine. This is the paranoid and stressed-out captain from "The Caine Mutiny," Herman Wouk's 1951 novel. No, this is not Donald Wilber, this is Philip Queeg. But the parallels between Colahan fact and Caine fiction are striking, even if they constitute only a personal fantasy.

Courtesy of Peter Dingman

The *Colahan*'s first skipper, Donald Taylor Wilber, strikes a martial pose on the destroyer's bridge wing, with his pistol handy. "I was scared to death of him," said a crewman, voicing the sentiments of many who went to war with him.

A warship's captain is a demigod in isolation, and he revels in it, sometimes out-

wardly, for everyone to see, but more often privately, as a kind of guilty secret. Especially at sea but also in port, he has nearly absolute authority over the lives of the crew and the fate of the ship. He answers immediately, if at all, to no one, certainly to no one aboard the ship. Among naval officers, his is a much-sought-after and envied job, the pinnacle of most careers.

Commander Wilber, the *Colahan*'s plank-owning skipper, enjoyed this singular and heady status for just over three months in late 1943. It was his first command, and he held it alone from 23 August, when the destroyer was commissioned, until 4 December, when she reached San Francisco on her way to join the Pacific Fleet for the war against Japanese aggression. Then another commander came aboard, not a ship's captain but a squadron commodore, Wilber's boss, a little baldheaded man with an endearing nickname.

Commander Harry Bean Jarrett, a certified Navy hero, quickly garnered the respect of the entire *Colahan* crew. The nickname of his youth, "Beany," had evolved over time into "Uncle Beany." His peers still called him "Beany" in obvious reference to his middle name and his naked cranium, but his juniors would always remember him as "*Uncle* Beany." He was one of those natural leaders who, without even trying, could create a sense of loyalty and admiration in those around them. Mere mortals, such as Captain Wilber, must step aside, in one way or another, graciously or not.

When a destroyer becomes a flagship, the political dynamics within "officer country" undergo inevitable and often uncomfortable changes. The commodore and his officer staff must be housed and fed and otherwise accommodated in the limited space normally occupied by the captain and *his* staff. Much elbow-rubbing cooperation is required between ship officers and flag officers in the small staterooms and the single wardroom.

As captain of the ship, Wilber continued to sit at the head of the wardroom table, while Jarrett displaced Grant Heston, the *Colahan*'s executive officer, whose chair stood to Wilber's immediate right. Lieutenant Heston, soon to be promoted to lieutenant commander, moved across the table to Wilber's left, and the chair-swapping rippled across the wardroom in accordance with Navy protocol. But Wilber, having kept his captain's chair, could not retain the captain's stateroom off the passageway outside the wardroom. Those choice quarters would henceforth serve "Uncle Beany," who had planted his flag squarely and authoritatively in the middle of the *Colahan*'s officer country. Wilber, surely with a sigh, shifted his personal gear to the cramped sea cabin two decks up, just behind the bridge.

Jarrett, a senior commander, would soon hold the rank of a Navy four-

striper, a *real* captain who fell just below the wartime rank of commodore. Like Wilber, he had seen plenty of action since the early days of the Pacific War. Now he commanded Destroyer Squadron 53 and Destroyer Division 105 — nine husky *Fletchers* in all. Never mind that Wilber's *Colahan*, at the beginning, offered the only deck to be found in the entire squadron.

As always, perception is everything. Jarrett occupied the captain's stateroom — the ship's throne, so to speak. And without even trying, he projected a commanding aura. Both officers and enlisted men recognized him as the big boss aboard the ship, the senior officer present — the *captain*, in effect. Even the displaced Wilber saw it that way. "When I am captain of this ship again, I'll do *such and such*," poor Wilber muttered on occasions when his resentment spilled over.

Photo by Author

"Uncle Beany" Jarrett retired in 1954 as a vice admiral. In his name, the *USS Jarrett (FFG-33)* steams with the modern Pacific Fleet. This portrait, in which he wears rear admiral stripes, hangs in the *Jarrett*'s wardroom.

An official Navy photograph shows the burning *USS Lexington (CV-2)* in the last hours of her life during the 1942 Battle of the Coral Sea. The aircraft carrier is doomed. She has been struck by torpedoes and thousand-pound bombs. Fires rage internally and constant explosions shake the great ship. Men are climbing down nets and dropping into the water. Dimly seen in the drifting smoke is a *Sims*-class destroyer, snug against the *Lexington*'s starboard beam, extending hoses in a last-ditch effort to extinguish the fierce blaze. She is the *USS Morris (DD-417)*, skippered by Lieutenant Commander H.B. "Beany" Jarrett.

"The *Morris* passed over two hoses," recounted Captain F.C. "Ted" Sherman, commanding officer of the *Lexington* and soon to become a rear admiral. "All of our crew who could be spared started down the lines to her deck. However, the fire was already beyond control. Explosions were occurring all the time. There was danger of the ship blowing up at any minute."

Jarrett and the crew of the *Morris* were well aware of the danger. Their little destroyer was nuzzled against a rumbling volcano. But they did what they could, passing fire hoses through the billowing smoke and taking aboard the men who came down the carrier's side. Captain Sherman was among the last to quit the carrier. Shortly afterward, the *Porter*-class destroyer *Phelps* adminis-

tered the c*oup de grâce*, putting four torpedoes into the burning *Lexington.* The huge ship listed over and went down with one last tremendous explosion.

The loss of the *Lexington* left the Pacific Fleet with only the carriers *Yorktown, Hornet* and *Enterprise* to fight the upcoming Battle of Midway, far to the north in this vast ocean. Commander Jarrett's *Morris* would be there, too, at Midway, throwing up a blazing shield of antiaircraft fire, then standing off as the stricken *Yorktown* suffered the same fate as the *Lexington*.

Commander "Beany" Jarrett won the Navy Cross for heroism in the Battle of the Coral Sea. The Navy Cross was, and still is, outranked only by the Congressional Medal of Honor. Today, more than fifty years later, the battle flag and commissioning pennant that flew from the masthead of the *USS Morris* in May 1942 are enshrined in a cabinet attached to the wardroom bulkhead of the *USS Jarrett (FFG-33),* a guided missile frigate commissioned in 1983. The *Jarrett*, of course, was named after Vice Admiral Harry Bean Jarrett.

Chapter 3: Guam: Free Again: *Restored to good health, the Colahan helps recapture the first piece of American territory that the Japanese seized in the early days of the war. She performs well, earning her second battle star.*

On 13 May 1944 the Navy took an aerial photograph of the *Colahan*, underway, starboard view, somewhere in Hawaiian waters. In her camouflage war paint, the resuscitated destroyer slashed through the water like a speedboat. Her bow was high, her stern low and almost hidden in the churning wake that flared out from her beam starting well forward of the No. 1 gun mount. There

Courtesy of George Whitney

The fully repaired *Colahan* plows the seas off Oahu after three months in a Pearl Harbor dry dock.

was nothing wrong with her screws and shafts. She was powerful again, ready to go back to war. This time, she trailed behind rather than going ahead. Her squadron sisters had already sailed west for the Mariana Islands campaign that was shaping up. It would be several months before the squadron would see the *Colahan* again.

Captain Wilber was happy. A few days earlier, as the *Colahan* prepared for her sea trials while her sisters shoved off without her, "Beany" Jarrett shifted his Destroyer Squadron 53 flag to the *USS Halsey Powell*. Captain Jarrett's departure was a distinct relief for Commander Donald Wilber, the *Colahan*'s real captain. Wilber was alone in his command again, as he preferred to be. His boss would no longer be looking over his shoulder in the daytime and sleeping in his bed at night.

Yes, the captain was happy, but for the *Colahan* herself, it was a demotion of sorts. She had been a proud flagship for five whole months. Never mind that she ran aground and lay in dry dock most of that time. Through it all, she had flown the squadron colors. Never mind that there were no DesRon 53 ships available to follow her flag or guide upon it. After Jarrett left her, the *Colahan* would steam the seas for more than twenty years, serving her country well in war and peace, but she would never again sail as a flagship.

At Kwajalein, during that brief span of time before she ran aground, the *Colahan* fought with Task Force 52 of Vice Admiral Spruance's Fifth (Central Pacific) Fleet. Meanwhile, Admiral William Halsey's Third (South Pacific) Fleet was operating in support of General Douglas MacArthur, farther south in the Solomons and New Guinea. While the *Colahan* was getting her screws fixed, Halsey's command was effectively dismantled. The Army troops and planes under Halsey went to MacArthur, and most of the Navy ships and planes shifted to the Central Pacific fleet. Spruance got a well-deserved promotion to full admiral. The new combined fleet, under the overall command of Admiral Chester Nimitz in Hawaii, acquired a unique — some would say *awkward* — seagoing command system. Spruance and Halsey would alternate as commander of the Central Pacific fleet during its great thrust toward Japan. Under Halsey, it would be called the Third Fleet. Under Spruance, the Fifth Fleet. One admiral would fight, while the other made plans for the next leapfrog strike against the enemy.

In the last year of the war, starting just after the Mariana campaign, the *Colahan* served almost exclusively in the famed carrier formation known as either Task Force 38 or Task Force 58. As Halsey and Spruance swapped jobs, the fleet's unit numbers changed in deference to whichever admiral found him-

self in tactical command. The initial digit — "3" or "5" — indicated the fleet to which the force, group or unit belonged, but the ships themselves, along with their commanders and crews, remained essentially the same. This confused the hell out of the Japanese, to about the same degree that it confused Americans.

But before the little *Colahan* could join the elite carriers, battleships and cruisers, she faced several months of mostly mundane duty in an amphibious campaign aimed at Saipan, Tinian and Guam, major islands in the Marianas. The Navy, advancing a thousand miles from its newly captured Eniwetok anchorage, would call it "Operation Forager," with capture of the three islands as the primary goal. The Mariana campaign would last two full months, but naval historians would distill it into the two-day Battle of the Philippine Sea, in which great American and Japanese carrier forces clashed once again, well out of each other's sight. People would remember, most of all, the aerial combat that raged west of Saipan as Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa's Mobile Fleet came out to challenge Admiral Spruance. American pilots were stunningly successful in those dogfights. And so the battle, from a popular perspective, would always be known as "The Great Mariana Turkey Shoot."

At the Battle of Midway, two years earlier, Spruance destroyed four Japanese carriers, seriously crippling the enemy's naval air strength. In two days in the Marianas, his pilots would shoot down more than four hundred aircraft — another devastating, even decisive blow. When the Japanese came up against Spruance, they always lost half the force they threw at him.

In American hands, the Marianas could provide bases and airfields for upcoming missions aimed at the very heart of Japan. From this cluster of islands on the Philippine Sea's eastern rim, the new B-29 "Superfortress" Army bombers could attack the enemy's homelands, even the capital city of Tokyo. Guam, which was American territory until the Japanese seized it early in the war, offered suitable launching sites for these huge bomb-laden aircraft.

With her screws in good shape, the *Colahan* steamed from Pearl Harbor to rejoin the Fifth Fleet for the Mariana campaign. In company with other vessels, she backtracked 2,200 nautical miles to Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, to the site of her big embarrassment four months earlier. At Roi-Namur on the huge lagoon's northern periphery, the destroyer joined Task Group 53.1, under Rear Admiral Richard L. Conolly. She would participate in operations against Guam. Conolly had conducted the successful strikes against Roi-Namur in February, while the *Colahan* was climbing onto that damned Kwajalein reef down south.

On 10 June an aircraft "fighter director team" consisting of three officers

and three enlisted men came aboard the *Colahan*. These men were experts in the complex business of vectoring planes to their targets. From 12 June until late in the month, the *Colahan*'s task group was held in readiness to support the far-flung campaign, maintaining a general position about three hundred miles north of the central Caroline Islands. Several enemy aircraft approached the group and were destroyed by American planes beyond the range of ship guns.

Spruance's "Forager" operation called for a Guam attack shortly after the Saipan landings. Task Group 53.1, its troop ships bulging with marines, was positioned to do just that. But those neat plans had to be postponed. Resistance on Saipan was so stiff that Spruance and others decided that additional troops should be brought from Hawaii in support of the Guam invasion, and that would take time. The *Colahan*'s task group withdrew to Eniwetok in the western Marshalls, where it arrived on 28 June. Guam could wait for a while, and the *Colahan*, assigned as a support vessel, was among those that waited.

After three weeks of intense fighting, the Americans took Saipan away from the Japanese, at dreadful cost to both sides. Twenty-seven thousand Japanese soldiers were killed and 2,000 captured. American casualties were 3,500 dead and 13,000 wounded. It had been much worse than expected. The *Colahan* remained at Eniwetok, far to the east. She engaged in offshore antisubmarine patrols until 17 July when, finally, she got underway with Task Group 53.3 to participate in the invasion and liberation of Guam. Three days later a message from the captain was printed in the *Colahan*'s "Salt Spray" newspaper, Vol. I, No. 39. With admirable candor and simplicity, Commander Wilber summed up the situation for the crew:

"The big attack on Guam, originally scheduled for last month during the occupation of Saipan, is at last to start on Friday, 21 July 1944. The forces making the landing will be the same Marine troops that were with us before. The forces in reserve will be a new Army division just brought out from Pearl.

"The operations, in so far as the Colahan is concerned, will be nearly the same as scheduled originally. We will leave our present formation about 0200 on William Day — 21 July — and take station as a radar picket north of Guam. Our subsequent operations will depend upon the turn of events, but we must be prepared for any eventuality. Almost surely we will have opportunities for anti-aircraft and shore bombardment action with possibilities always for surface and antisubmarine activity.

"With the airfield on Saipan now in our hands, permitting almost unlimited air support, and with the heavy bombing and bombardment which Guam has

been receiving for the last month, it is believed that the occupation will go forward with less difficulty than was experienced on Saipan. It must be recognized, however, that the Japs can always be expected to put up a strong resistance, and particularly in this case when we are reconquering the first piece of American territory of all they seized from us in the early days of the war."

On July 21 the 77th Army Infantry Division, the Third Marine Division and a Marine brigade assaulted Guam. Despite heavy pounding of the enemy-held island, resistance was almost as strong as on Saipan. But the island would fall to the Americans three weeks later. Meanwhile, on 24 July, the marines landed on Tinian near Saipan and captured it after nine days of fierce combat.

The *USS Colahan* and ten other destroyers, plus two minesweepers, guarded the troop ships that carried the Third Marine Division to the shores of Guam. This assemblage of transports and screening ships constituted the Northern Transport Group, designated as Task Group 53.3. As at Kwajalein, the *Colahan* was again without the support of her squadron sisters. DesRon 53, minus the *Colahan*, was up north somewhere.

The Third Marine Division, twenty thousand men in three regiments, landed on Guam's Asan beaches north of Apra Harbor. The regiments came ashore abreast on a 2,000-yard front. The first wave landed at 8:29 a.m. In the wee hours that morning, well before the marines disembarked from the ships, the *Colahan* was detached to maintain a radar patrol ten miles north of Point Ritidian.

The main objective of the Guam invasion was Apra Harbor with its fine anchorage and airfields. The invading forces landed on beaches five miles apart, north and south of Apra. On the northern beaches, just west of the town of Agana, the Third Marine Division faced Japanese defenders who occupied the high ground all around the beachhead. A Japanese counterattack was beaten off the next morning. The marines, well supported by artillery and naval gunfire, gradually cleared the cliffs and hills.

On 26 July, after five days on radar patrol, the *Colahan* approached the coast and took up duties in a fire control area. On this day the Japanese launched a carefully planned counterattack against the Third Marines. Small groups of enemy soldiers infiltrated the overextended American lines, while the majority hurled themselves in bloody frontal attacks against American positions. One battalion of the 9th Marine Regiment absorbed seven such frontal attacks and suffered fifty percent casualties. Cooks, clerks, truck drivers and even hospital patients joined in repulsing the infiltrators.

The Japanese launched a similar attack in the south, where the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, reinforced by the Army's 77th Division, had come ashore against stiff opposition five days earlier. The enemy ran headfirst into Marine and Army artillery. American howitzers fired pointblank at fanatics who just kept coming. In the two *banzai* attacks, the Japanese lost about 3,500 men and up to 95 percent of their officers. Some hard fighting still remained, but on this day the Japanese defenses were effectively broken.

The Marine brigade drove down the Orote peninsula, which formed the southern arm of Apra's harbor. The marines held the airfields while the 77th Division pushed east and north from the beachhead to join up with the Third Marine Division. The combined force then swept north, entering Agana on 31 July and reaching the northern end of the island on 8 August.

On 4 August the *Colahan* took station as a radar picket. She steamed alone fourteen miles east of Guam, plowing back and forth on a six-mile patrol that ran parallel to the coast. She was there on 10 August when the entire island was declared "secure." American Guam was free again. Now the airfields could be expanded and improved. Now the B-29s, with their cargos of fiery death, would be within range of Japan's cities. Three days later the *Colahan* was relieved by the *USS Prichett*, to whom the fighter director team was transferred. Soon she would return to Eniwetok, ready for her next adventure.

The marines on Guam quickly discovered that the Japanese had used the island as their main liquor supply dump. Nowhere else did American troops stumble on such prodigious stores. There were Scotch and American whiskies, and Japanese imitations thereof, along with sake galore and beer in huge quantities. Marines who would have sold their souls, just a few days earlier, for a swig of rotgut, could now be finicky over brands. Did *Colahan* crewmen get their share? Of course not. Here, as elsewhere in the war, ship-bound sailors were denied the scrounging opportunities so often enjoyed by the hated and envied marines. Bottoms up, you sons of bitches.

Chapter 4: The Colahan Joins the Big Boys: *Loaded with Pollywogs, the destroyer crosses the equator. Then she loses a man overboard. He was the first of two Colahan crewmen who would die during the Pacific War.*

Immediately after the Mariana campaign, Halsey relieved Spruance. In an instant, the Fifth Fleet became the Third, and Fast Carrier Task Force 58 became Task Force 38. Admirals William Halsey and Raymond Spruance would swap jobs two more times before it was all over. Between them, they

From the Gilberts to Tokyo Bay

MAJOR OPERATIONS OF FAST CARRIER TASK FORCE

1943-1945

The *USS Colahan* went everywhere with the huge carrier force commanded alternately by Vice Admirals Marc Mitscher and John McCain. There are only two exceptions and one feeble quibble. The Gilbert Islands campaign in late 1943 occurred before the *Colahan* joined the Pacific Fleet. The strikes against Truk in February were conducted at the very time the damaged *Colahan* was limping into Pearl Harbor after running aground at Kwajalein. The quibble comes with the Battle of the Philippine Sea, which was fought west of Saipan in the Marianas. The *Colahan*, only recently restored to fighting trim, did not participate in the "Turkey Shoot" itself, but she was nearby, as always, engaged in operations aimed at liberating Guam, a major island target in the Mariana campaign. Thereafter, the destroyer missed nothing, and entered Tokyo Bay with the victorious United States Navy.

The Gilbert Islands
Fast Carrier Strikes - 1 September to 6 October 1943
Makin - 19 to 29 November 1943
Tarawa - 19 to 23 November 1943

The Marshall Islands
Kwajalein - 31 January to 7 February 1944 **(Colahan)**
Eniwetok - 31 January to 4 March 1944

Truk
Fast Carrier Strikes - 17 to 18 February 1944

Palau, Hollandia, Truk
Fast Carrier Strikes - 22 March to 30 April 1944
Palau - 15 September 1944 **(Colahan)**

Marianas
Fast Carrier Strikes - 11 to 13 June 1944
Saipan - 15 to 21 June 1944
Tinian - 24 July to 1 August 1944
Guam - 21 July to 10 August 1944 **(Colahan)**

(Continued)

MAJOR CARRIER OPERATIONS (Continued)

Battle of the Philippine Sea
3 May to 24 June 1944

Okinawa and Formosa
Fast Carrier Strikes - 10 to 14 October 1944 **(Colahan)**

The Battle for Leyte Gulf
Leyte Landing - 20 October 1944
24 to 26 October 1944 **(Colahan)**

Lingayen Gulf
Fast Carrier Strikes - 10 December 1944 to 10 January 1945 **(Colahan)**
Landing - 9 January 1945

South China Sea
Fast Carrier Strikes - 10 to 20 January 1945 **(Colahan)**

Formosa
Fast Carrier Strikes - 20 to 27 January 1945 **(Colahan)**

Iwo Jima
Fast Carrier Strikes - 21 January to 1 March 1945 **(Colahan)**

Okinawa
Fast Carrier Strikes Against Kyushu - 18 to 31 March 1945 **(Colahan)**
Landing - 1 April 1945
Fast Carrier Support - April to May 1945 **(Colahan)**
Fast Carrier Strikes Against Kyushu - 15 to 16 April 1945 **(Colahan)**
Fast Carrier Strikes, Kyushu and Shikoku - 12 to 13 May 1945 **(Colahan)**

Japan
Fast Carrier Strikes - 2 June to 15 August 1945 **(Colahan)**

would command the Central Pacific fleet throughout that great 1943-1945 island-hopping thrust across the Western Pacific.

On 28 August the *Colahan* moved out of Eniwetok and headed south with her squadron sisters in Carrier Task Group 38.2. She would soon swing west and participate in air strikes against the Palau Islands. This was the *Colahan*'s first deployment with the carrier task force. After earning battle stars at Kwajalein and Guam, the little destroyer had finally been allowed to join the big boys. Now she steamed in company with the carriers *Intrepid*, *Bunker Hill*, *Independence* and *Cabot*. Rear Admiral Jerry Bogan, the group's commander, rode the *Bunker Hill*.

During this campaign, the *Colahan* crossed the equator for the first and only time in her long Pacific career. It happened on 1 September 1944 at 155° east longitude on the northern fringes of Melanesia. She moved west in southern latitudes for two days, then slipped across the equator again and passed near the Admiralty Islands on her way to the Palaus. Of course, the occasion had to be celebrated. Boisterous festivities aboard the underway *Colahan* would be fondly remembered fifty years later by decorated septuagenarians who were once young sailors on the bounding main.

"Davey Jones" and "Neptunus Rex," with the assistance of Shellback veterans who had crossed the equator at some time in the past, summoned the *Colahan*'s Pollywogs on 2 September. It was noted that the ship carried an especially "large and loathsome cargo" of landlubbers, beachcombers, sea lawyers, lounge lizards, plow deserters, parkbench warmers, chicken chasers, hay tossers, fourflushers, crossword puzzle bugs, dancehall shieks, drugstore cowboys and asphalt arabs. And each of these "low scum" specimens, these creatures of despicable land, was expected to "accept most heartily and with good grace the pains and penalties of the awful tortures that will be inflicted upon you to determine your fitness to be one of our Trusty Shellbacks." The meek Pollywogs were dunked into water-filled rubber rafts and whacked with shillelaghs that had been fashioned for the occasion.

The next day, 3 September 1944, the *Colahan* surrendered the first of the two shipboard lives that were to slip away during the Pacific War. Machinist's Mate Second Class William L. McGrath jumped overboard. The ship was steaming one degree north of the equator, approximately 150° east longitude, about four hundred miles northeast of the Admiralty Islands. With deliberateness and even a bit of flair, the sailor saluted the flag and stepped off a 20-millimeter ready box on the starboard side of the main deck.

"Man overboard!" The officer of the deck swung the ship with right full rudder. The *Colahan* heeled in a tight circle, rushing back to reclaim the young man who had escaped her motherly embrace. Lookouts and signalmen kept McGrath in sight for about ninety seconds, and then saw him disappear forever in the bright blue waters. Patrol planes from the carriers joined the search, but it was hopeless. McGrath wanted to die and he did, despite everything his destroyer could do to prevent it. Late that afternoon, with colors at half mast, Commander Wilber conducted funeral services for the *Colahan*'s first lost soul.

Carrier Task Groups 38.1, 38.2 and 38.3, commanded respectively by Vice Admiral John McCain and Rear Admirals Jerry Bogan and Ted Sherman, approached the Japanese-held Palaus in the extreme southern portion of the

Philippine Sea. For three days, beginning on 6 September, the islands were bombed and strafed. Special attention was given to Angaur and Peleliu, which the Americans intended to capture and occupy. During daylight hours, the carriers launched and recovered aircraft almost continuously, and with monotonous precision for the most part. Planes dotted the skies, some going out, others coming in. As always when masses of bombers and fighters were launched from flattops, or when the planes were returning home at the end of their missions, a small percentage fell into the water due to mechanical problems or pilot error. These were called "operational losses," as opposed to casualties of warfare.

In late morning of the second day, an SB2C Helldiver from the *Intrepid* crashed 1,500 yards off the *Colahan'*s port bow, and quickly sank. A lieutenant and a petty officer were left bobbing in the sea. The destroyer broke away from her No. 1 screening station and rushed to pick up the wet aviators. It had been seven long months since the *Colahan'*s last such rescue, back at Kwajalein, in her first battle. But the rescues would come rapidly now, trophies of a sort for any destroyer captain, since they attracted the attention of the admirals. By the end of the war, thirty-nine aviators would be hauled to the *Colahan'*s relatively dry deck.

Following this initial "softening up" of the Palaus, the *Colahan* took part in the first carrier strikes against the Philippine Islands on 9 September. Throughout the month, the task force struck hard at Mindanao and the Manila Bay regions, without losing sight of its primary mission in the Palaus. On the 15th, units of the First Marine Division landed on the beaches of Peleliu. The *Colahan'*s Task Group 38.2 provided air support, while the other groups, to the north, pounded the central Philippines. The marines moved forward slowly, against deadly opposition from 5,300 Japanese soldiers determined to fight to the last man. It took weeks to secure the small island, and fatalities were high. Nearly two thousand Americans died, and 5,000 were wounded. A time would come when the bloody Peleliu invasion would be seen as a costly mistake. The Palau Islands could have been bypassed without consequence to the total war effort, and almost everybody, afterward, wished they had been.

Amid all the air strikes that September, the Americans seized without resistance a piece of property that turned out to be especially valuable in this naval war against imperialist Japan. It was a ring of little islands called Ulithi Atoll, in the western Carolines, five hundred miles northeast of the Palaus. The large atoll, elliptical in shape, with its long axis extending about twenty miles, provided an anchorage large enough for the entire Third Fleet, or the Fifth Fleet if

Spruance was in charge.

Ulithi was a thousand miles closer to the Philippines than Eniwetok, which until then had served as the main Pacific Fleet base west of Hawaii. The American logistics effort, a massive undertaking by this time, took a giant step westward. Many times over the next calendar year, the *Colahan* would take refuge in Ulithi, where attending oilers, tenders and supply ships catered to her every need. She would even lose a couple of anchors there. A sailor smiles.

Chapter 5: Anchors Away! *The Colahan loses three anchors within five weeks. It may have been, and may still be, a Navy record of sorts. One anchor is lost, retrieved, then lost irretrievably, but we generously count it as only one. The third anchor falls into the Philippine Sea when the Colahan collides with Admiral Halsey's flagship for Christ's sake!*

For the *Colahan* and other Task Force 38 ships, operations during the month of September 1944 were intense and exhausting. Admiral Halsey's fleet waged war along the southwestern perimeter of the Philippine Sea, from the Palau Islands to Mindanao to Luzon. The *Colahan* stayed at sea almost constantly that month. Her engine miles in September totaled 13,146 — by far the largest monthly figure since the destroyer was commissioned. As the arduous month drew to a welcome close, the carrier task force finally took time to rest, rearm and replenish.

Early on the first day of October, the weary *USS Colahan* entered Ulithi lagoon and splashed her port anchor into the azure waters. She rested alone for a few hours, then got underway, just after lunch, to join a nest of destroyers alongside the tender *USS Dixie (AD-14)*. The *Colahan* moored herself to the outboard port side of the *USS Stockham (DD-683),* which was tied up to the *USS Owen (DD-536),* which in turn lay snug against the gigantic *Dixie.* The tender, a floating warehouse of supplies and machine shops, would nurse the the ships into fighting trim for battles still to come. The night was peaceful and restful enough, although storm clouds were building. Early the next day the *USS Sullivans (DD-537)* came alongside the *Colahan* and tied up to port. The *Dixie'*s nest now contained four *Fletcher* destroyers, all in need of sustenance and rearming.

In the wee hours of 3 October, a typhoon-driven storm engulfed the Ulithi anchorage. For a while, the lines on both sides of the *Colahan* held her tight in the *Dixie'*s nest. Normal bow and stern lines, as well as fore-and-after bow springs and fore-and-after quarter springs, gripped the *Sullivans* and the

Stockham. In addition, a wire rope, two and a half inches in diameter, ran from the *Colahan'*s bow to the steady-as-a-rock *Dixie.* Boiler No. 2 was providing auxiliary services. Suddenly, the thick wire rope linking the *Colahan* and the *Dixie* parted, followed almost immediately by parting of the lines between the *Stockham* and the *Owen.* The three outboard ships, with the *Colahan* wedged in the middle, broke free and drifted rapidly astern toward beckoning reefs.

In such crises during the Pacific War, when her welfare was very much at stake, the *Colahan* often rose to the occasion, and she did so again on this stormy night. In the next frantic minutes, fires were lighted under Boiler No. 1, while Boiler No. 2, already in service, was cut into the main steam line. But even more important, the *Colahan* managed to get her starboard anchor down. This would slow the drift toward the reefs. Also, she began maneuvering with her main engines to relieve the strain on the anchor, which was clutching the lagoon's sandy bottom in eighteen fathoms of storm-tossed water. She cut Boiler No. 1 into the main line, and she was ready to go, if she could just get the slowpoke *Sullivans* and *Stockham* off her back.

Finally the loadstones dropped away. The *Sullivans,* having generated sufficient steam, shoved off from the *Colahan'*s port side, and the *Stockham* moved out to starboard. Free at last, the *Colahan* abandoned her trusty anchor and its seventy-five fathoms of chain. The dug-in anchor had served its good purpose, and there was no time, under the hairy circumstances, to haul it up. Shortly afterward, our heroine surged into the channel to lead much of the Third Fleet to the safety of the open sea, with the rest of Destroyer Squadron 53 in column astern. The *Colahan* had lost her starboard anchor and both whaleboats, but she had a right to be proud of herself.

On October 4, after the storm had passed, the Americans returned to Ulithi lagoon and found that seventy-nine lighterage vessels, which provided cargo transportation between ships, had been lost, battered to pieces against the reefs. Soon enough, another piece of Navy equipment would be added to the underwater litter. In a fashion that could be seen as humorous only in retrospect, the *Colahan* lost her grip on the single anchor still aboard. At an assigned berth in the lagoon, she dropped her port anchor, and then watched, with growing distress, as the chain rumbled through the hawsepipe. The chain rumbled for a long time, until its bitter end tore loose from the shackle in the chain locker, if indeed it was actually attached. The end of the chain plopped with finality into the deep water. The *Colahan'*s port anchor now lay on the bottom of the lagoon along with the starboard one. It was enough to make a sailor grin. The deck gang had failed to operate the anchor brake properly, or perhaps the brake itself

failed. Either way, the port anchor went the way of the other, and both were unrecoverable.

But wait. The story of the second anchor was not that simple. There were delicious complexities. The Colahan's port anchor was lost not once but twice on 4 October 1944. The author's 1994 letter to Ted Knudson, written a half century after this embarrassing day, explains. Knudson, now a resident of Kelso, Washington, was the destroyer's plank-owning supply officer during the Pacific War. It was his unpleasant job to replace the anchors the Colahan lost.

Dear Ted:

I received a big bundle from the National Archives yesterday. It was another batch of *Colahan* logs. Included were the deck logs from early October 1944 when our favorite ship, in a comedy of errors, began losing all those anchors, one after another. The "Anchors Away!" chapter of *The Original Tomcat,* as initially presented at the *Colahan* San Diego reunion in June, is essentially accurate, as it turns out, but until now I did not have the logs covering the loss of the two anchors at Ulithi. I possessed, then, only the November logs detailing the collision with the *New Jersey*, during which the *Colahan's* starboard anchor bounced off the battleship's deck and fell into the Philippine Sea. Now, with the official logs in hand, I am blessed with a wealth of details and background information that can be woven into the chapter.

As has been noted, the *Colahan* often performed exceptionally well when her welfare was threatened, but she faithfully turned into a bumpkin when it wasn't. Early on 3 October 1944 she saved the day for herself and two other destroyers. She was sandwiched between the *USS Sullivans* and the *USS Stockham* when lines parted in stormy weather and the three ships drifted free from the tender *Dixie.* She got her starboard anchor down, and it held long enough for all three to get up steam and move away from nearby reefs. In the rush to get the hell out of there, the *Colahan* slipped her anchor and chain and escaped to sea with the rest of the fleet. The next day she returned to Ulithi anchorage and lost the port anchor when the entire chain ran out of the chain locker. Anchorless, the *Colahan* had to go back to sea for the night. Those are the essential facts.

But everybody, including you, remembered losing an anchor in a collision with a tanker. I knew nothing about that. I only knew that "everybody" could not be wrong. George Whitney [a Pacific War *Colahan* signalman who now lives in Scottsdale, Arizona] told me the

Colahan left an anchor on a tanker's deck when she came back into Ulithi one day after losing the first one. George, as always, was certain about it. But how could that be? How many damned anchors did the *Colahan* have? If she abandoned one on 3 October and let the chain run out on another the next day, how could she lose still another anchor to a tanker at the very same time? It stretched credulity. Destroyers don't carry spare anchors. Surely, I told myself, the anchor lost on a tanker's deck came at some other time, and I would simply have to wait until I stumbled on the details in the ship's logs. Well, I was delighted to discover last night, as I pored over the newly received documents, that George was right, even though logic had suggested he could not be. Truth often defies logic, as I have found in a long career as a newspaperman. It happened like this:

The *Colahan,* with only her port anchor aboard, needed refueling when she returned to Ulithi on the morning of 4 October after the heaviest portion of the storm had passed. She went alongside the *USS Nantahala (AO-60)*, port side to, and bumped into her at 1113. According to the deck log, "strong wind forced port anchor on deck of tanker, snapping chain and leaving anchor on deck of *USS Nantahala.*" Captain Wilber had the conn, and he, as we know, was never very skillful at bringing his ship alongside another. Blaming the collision on the wind was perhaps the best excuse he could come up with. He was fortunate that the anchor did not bounce off the tanker's deck and fall into the water. That particular brand of misfortune would come exactly one month later, when he collided with the *New Jersey* under the frowning gaze of Admiral Halsey himself.

The *Colahan'*s port anchor, the only one she could now call her own, even if she no longer possessed it, lay on the *Nantahala'*s deck for more than two hours. Refueling was completed by 1226, but it took *Colahan* sailors an additional hour to retrieve the anchor from the tanker and snug it up to the port hawsepipe. If they had known what was going to happen next, they could have saved themselves the trouble. The gods were playing with the *Colahan* this day. The anchor laboriously recovered at 1330 was lost forever at 1431, an hour and a minute later. The deck log told the sad tale: "Dropped port anchor in Berth 322; entire chain on port anchor slipped out . . . when bitter end came out of chain locker."

Commodore "Beany" Jarrett, in his flagship *Halsey Powell*, lost no time in dealing with this run-amuck destroyer. He actually boarded the *Colahan* and ordered her to relieve the *USS Benham* on patrol outside the harbor. Within twenty minutes of losing her last anchor, chain and all, the embarrassed *Colahan* was on her way to sea again, with Jarrett going along to keep an eye on her. One can imagine that the

commodore delivered some choice words to Captain Wilber.

> Ted, here is a log entry from the next day, 5 October, that will interest you. The *Colahan*, banished to sea the previous night, has returned to the anchorage, again tying up in a nest alongside the *Dixie.* At 1945 the destroyer "received one anchor and 90 fathoms of chain from the *USS Dixie*." This is the first anchor that you replaced in your hat-in-hand dealings with a Service Force commodore who, over a very short time, grew ever more impatient with the anchor-losing *USS Colahan*. This anchor, too, was doomed. Installed as the starboard anchor, it would be lost on 4 November when the *Colahan* collided with Halsey's flagship.
>
> Regards, Jackson

And so the *Colahan* got an anchor replacement, along with ninety fathoms of chain. She also received one whaleboat to replace the two that were lost in the Ulithi storm. "Whaleboats were easier to requisition than anchors," Knudson noted. Thus, the destroyer returned to the war, plunging into violent preliminaries to the Battle for Leyte Gulf, with one anchor instead of two, and with a single whaleboat instead of a pair. But within a month the *Colahan* would be down to zero anchors again, embarrassed once more.

It happened on 4 November as the *Colahan* approached the *New Jersey* to deliver both passengers and film. Starboard side to, as they say in the Navy, meaning that the huge battleship lay to her right as she closed the gap to get close enough to rig a high line. Her only anchor, gripped by her only anchor chain, was cinched securely against the starboard hawsepipe on her bow.

As the *Iowa*-class battleship *USS New Jersey (BB-62)* plowed through the sea, her four screws created deep hollows behind the stern and on each quarter. Small ships coming alongside were told, even warned, to stay up close to the battleship's bridge and not to drop astern, where screw suction and disaster lay. The *Colahan* failed to follow this good advice. While maneuvering to get within high-line distance, she let herself fall too far back and was drawn into the huge ship's port quarter. Steel slammed and scraped against steel, producing an awful sound for any ship's captain, especially for Commander Donald Wilber, who had heard it so often.

The *Colahan*'s anchor got caught in the *New Jersey*'s lifelines. As the destroyer yawed to port in an effort to clear the powerful suction, the anchor broke away from its chain. The *Jersey*'s steel lifelines, gripping the loose anchor like a pebble in a slingshot, snapped back and tossed it onto the battleship's deck, where the poor thing, only recently placed in the *Colahan*'s care,

bounced once before falling between the two warships and disappearing forever into the Philippine Sea. The *New Jersey* was left with damaged stanchions, life-lines and chocks. The destroyer withdrew with holes and dents in her starboard bow. And once again, to the *Colahan'*s humiliation, she possessed no anchor at all.

Chapter 6: The Battle of Bull's Run: *The Philippine island of Leyte was invaded by the Americans on 20 October. The invasion set the stage for a series of engagements that, collectively, would be seen by many prominent historians as the greatest naval battle of all time. The Colahan performed her role in two of four official clashes with the Imperial Japanese Navy, and then participated in an unofficial one, the waggishly named "Battle of Bull's Run."*

The Battle for Leyte Gulf, involving more ships, more planes and more men, on both sides, than ever before, must be regarded as the naval engagement that sealed the fate of the Japanese Empire and guaranteed victory to the United States. For Japan, defeat in the Leyte Gulf battles meant the loss of the Philippines, and that, in turn, meant the loss of the South China Sea shipping lanes that carried vital materials from Southeast Asia to the empire's home islands. And it was at this battle that the Imperial Japanese Fleet, bloodied but unbowed, made its last desperate stand. Many months still remained in the war; many fierce battles were still to be fought; kamikazes would swarm into the sky with their deadly cargoes. But never again could Japan muster a naval force that seriously challenged the powerful Americans. After Leyte, Japan could find little fuel for its skeleton fleet. After Leyte, Japan was unquestionably defeated.

That October, however, as American troops prepared to invade Leyte's eastern beaches, the Japanese fleet was not to be taken lightly. The superbattleships *Yamato* and *Musashi,* with their large-caliber guns, still roamed the Indochina coast to the west of the Philippines. A half-dozen conventional battleships, plus numerous cruisers and destroyers, also stood ready to oppose General Douglas MacArthur's Leyte landings. Four fleet carriers, including the *Zuikaku*, veteran of the Pearl Harbor attack, huddled in Japan's Inland Sea, waiting for the right moment to come out. A couple of Japanese oddballs, the *Ise* and the *Hyuga,* would sail with the carriers. These two vessels were half battleship and half carrier, neither one nor the other, a curious pair that would survive to the war's bitter end, no matter how often Admiral Halsey chased them.

The battle was not waged in a single great clash. Four widely separated naval engagements constitute what has became known as the Battle for Leyte

Gulf, and none was fought in the gulf itself. The first came on 24 October when Halsey attacked Admiral Takeo Kurita's fleet in the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea and sank the *Musashi*, one of the two superbattleships. The other three battles occurred the next day. In early morning darkness, Rear Admiral Jesse Oldendorf's old but still potent dreadnaughts, serving within Vice Admiral Thomas Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet, "crossed the T" on Admiral Shoji Nishimura at the Battle of Surigao Strait. Later that morning, Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague's plucky jeep carriers and destroyers, also belonging to Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet, fought off Kurita's powerful force in the extraordinary Battle Off Samar. Meanwhile, Halsey's Third Fleet rushed north from San Bernardino Strait to destroy Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa's carriers near Luzon's northeastern tip. Halsey's mop-up action was called the Battle Off Cape Engaño.

The *USS Colahan*, operating within several thousand yards of Halsey's *New Jersey* flagship, participated in the first and last of the four battles. She also steamed with the ships that rushed futilely back to San Bernardino Strait as Halsey attempted to recover from a notoriously unwise decision. This final action, this fifth "battle," would forever be known, to Halsey's annoyance, as "The Battle of Bull's Run," a sobriquet that waggishly connoted both the admiral's nickname and the famous Bull Run battles of the American Civil War.

The Battle of the Sibuyan Sea began on the morning of 24 October. At 0812 a search plane from the *Colahan*'s Task Group 38.2 sighted Admiral Kurita's force off Semirara Island just south of Mindoro. The enemy battleships, cruisers and destroyers were moving through Tablas Strait toward the Sibuyan Sea, which washes the inland coasts of the central Philippines.

"*Large Japanese force of warships sighted off southern tip of Mindoro Island*." Lieutenant Junior Grade Bob Rehfeld made this entry in the *Colahan*'s log at 0825. Admiral Jerry Bogan's task group, positioned northeast of Samar in the Philippine Sea, was galvanized into action by the search plane's report, and Rehfeld, the *Colahan*'s officer of the deck, shifted gears himself. He turned the destroyer into easterly winds and increased speed to keep up with the carriers as they launched aircraft. "*First attack against Japanese fleet*," Rehfeld noted thirty minutes later. The *Colahan*, which had been steaming with the carriers for only two months, strived to maintain her screening station seven thousand yards from Admiral Halsey's *New Jersey* flagship.

Fighters, dive bombers and torpedo planes from the *Colahan*'s group streaked across the Philippine Islands to attack Kurita. Since the Japanese ships had no fighters to protect them, the American planes leisurely took their positions, then roared in. The fighters came first, raking Japanese decks with

machine-gun fire. Then came the dive bombers, rolling out of formation and slashing down like deadly arrows. Torpedo planes swept in from all sides.

The *Musashi,* along with sister *Yamato* and the other Japanese ships, threw up great clouds of multicolored antiaircraft fire, but the American planes bored through it with surprising ease. The first torpedo struck the *Musashi* around ten o'clock. Others would follow, one after another, during the long day before blessed night. Dive bombers scored hit after relentless hit. Finally, pounded to helplessness by countless bombs and at least nineteen torpedoes, the great Japanese battleship turned on her side and went down.

As Task Force 38 launched its attack on Kurita early on 24 October, a single 550-pound bomb mortally wounded the light carrier *USS Princeton* in Rear Admiral Ted Sherman's group off the Luzon coast. Several carriers would be damaged during the *Colahan*'s tour with the elite task force, but only the *Princeton* would go down. The cruiser *USS Birmingham* prepared to take the carrier in tow. In midafternoon a tremendous explosion tore off a huge portion of the *Princeton*'s stern, and sent deadly debris flying everywhere. Shrapnel of all shapes and sizes raked the *Birmingham*'s decks. The cruiser, engaged in a benign rescue effort, suffered nearly twice as many casualties as the enemy-ravaged carrier. The *Princeton* could not be saved. She was scuttled.

As the light carrier sank into the Philippine Sea, Rear Admiral Bogan's Task Group 38.2 steamed impatiently off San Bernardino Strait, just north of Samar. Three aircraft carriers, two battleships and three light cruisers were screened by the *USS Colahan* and seventeen other *Fletcher*-class destroyers. Like a cat crouched outside a mouse hole, the American task group waited for Admiral Kurita's force to venture out. From Admiral Halsey on down, the Americans were ready, even eager, to pounce on Japanese warships that might sortie from the strait in an attempt to slip down the east coast of Samar and interfere with Leyte Gulf operations. They waited, with Halsey in the battleship *New Jersey*, and then they waited some more. But Kurita would not come out. The battered Japanese fleet even appeared to be retreating to the west, away from San Bernardino Strait. And finally, as the sun sank low over the Philippines, Halsey could not stand it anymore. The enemy was withdrawing. He was a man of action who preferred to chase a fight, not wait for it. He would seek another target, one that beckoned to the north.

Midnight came and went as Halsey raced north in the Philippine Sea. It was 25 October 1944, the 90th anniversary of the Charge of the Light Brigade. Well, *that* is very interesting, but why even mention it? Surely, at this time and place in the Pacific War, no cogent relevance to Task Force 38 can be found in

a Crimean War cavalry attack. Nevertheless, the obscure anniversary would, that very day, play a significant, almost comical role in the tactical operations of Task Force 38 and its array of carriers, battleships, cruisers and destroyers.

During the Battle of Balaklava in the Crimea on 25 October 1854, a small brigade of British cavalry made a gallant but senseless attack on a strong Russian position. Nearly 250 of the 673 men in the "Light Brigade" were killed or wounded. The stupidity and personal rivalry of two British officers were perhaps the chief causes of the tragedy. The attack itself was not important; it accomplished nothing, but British poet Alfred Lord Tennyson made it famous in his poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade," which glorified the notion that a soldier must blindly obey orders.

Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Those are the most famous lines from the Tennyson poem, memorized ever since by countless schoolboys wherever England, preening in victory or defeat, is admired. Without stretching logic too far, several parallels applicable to the Halsey-Ozawa confrontation off Cape Engaño — and certainly the Oldendorf-Nishimura clash in Surigao Strait — can be found in the old cavalry charge, and in the poetry that focuses on it. But never mind. Tennyson's final stanza contains the line that is most pertinent to our story:

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.

"*The world wonders*." Remember those words as we consider the glory and shame of Halsey's Third Fleet on 25 October 1944, ninety years to the day after the Light Brigade made its famous but fruitless charge.

East of Luzon in the Philippine Sea, the *USS Colahan* steamed north with the Third Fleet's fast carrier task force on the morning of 25 October. The mighty Task Force 38 fairly growled in anticipation of a clash with Ozawa's Japanese carrier force, which had ventured from Japan's Inland Sea to add a new dimension to the Battle for Leyte Gulf. Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher in his flagship *Lexington* was in tactical command, but when Admiral William F. Halsey was nearby, as he was this day aboard the *New Jersey*, Mitscher was reduced to a functional flunky, mostly going along for the ride, since nobody

except Halsey ran Halsey's fast carriers. As always, Halsey was in charge.

"Enroute to intercept major units of the Japanese fleet," noted OOD Rehfeld in the *Colahan*'s midwatch log. Plowing the dark seas, the *Colahan* held snug in the Task Group 38.2 screen, while the *Cushing* and the *Sullivans* operated as radar pickets twelve miles ahead.

Task Force 34 was formed at 0254 in expectation of surface action ahead. The *Colahan*'s task group contributed the battleships *Iowa* and *New Jersey* and the cruisers *Biloxi, Vincennes* and *Miami*. Four other battleships and eight more cruisers were drawn from Task Groups 38.3 and 38.4. The heavily armored battleships and cruisers, plus screening destroyers, broke from the three Task Force 38 groups and maneuvered at high speeds to get out front. In making preparations to attack Ozawa, they threaded their way among the carriers and screening ships they would leave behind.

Admiral Bogan's task group, minus all of its big guns, was reformed, with the *USS Intrepid* as guide in the formation's center, four thousand yards from the *Colahan*. Aboard the *Halsey Powell*, which had succeeded the *Colahan* as Destroyer Squadron 53 flagship, Uncle Beany Jarrett took over as commander of Bogan's screen.

Meanwhile, Admiral Kurita gathered his nerve and maneuvered his powerful fleet through San Bernardino Strait early on 25 October, fully expecting to encounter Halsey's snarling Third Fleet. Instead, he found no opposition at all. The plan to lure Halsey out of position had worked even better than the Japanese admirals hoped. There was not a single American destroyer to sound the alarm. He was free to raise havoc in what would be called the Battle Off Samar. A jeep carrier and three destroyers, all members of Rear Admiral "Ziggy" Sprague's Taffy 3, fell victim to Kurita's heavy guns.

Admiral Kinkaid was upset as Sprague, doing the best he could, fended off Kurita. Kinkaid was a commander who had been flanked, much as Fighting Joe Hooker's Union army was flanked by Stonewall Jackson's Confederates at Chancellorsville during the American Civil War. Disaster was in the wind. It was a situation that disturbs a military leader more than any other. The wolves were among Kinkaid's sheep. Unlike Hooker, who did not know that Jackson was anywhere near his rear, Kinkaid was well aware that Kurita's battleships and cruisers lurked up north, but he assumed Halsey was protecting him with Task Force 34 guns broken out of mighty Task Force 38. He was mistaken. Vice Admiral Willis Lee's battleships and cruisers were chasing Ozawa far to the north, along with Halsey's carriers, along with the *USS Colahan* and other screening ships. Halsey had done just what the Japanese high command hoped

he would do. He had run off to pursue toothless weasels, leaving the gate open for a marauding pack of fang-bared wolves.

Then came the most famous communications goof-up of the entire war. At Pacific Fleet headquarters in Pearl Harbor, Admiral Chester Nimitz heard Kinkaid's radio pleas for help, and he, too, became concerned over the fate of Taffy 3. Like Kinkaid, Nimitz thought Task Force 34 was guarding San Bernardino Strait, but obviously it was not. What was happening? The jeep carriers were in trouble off Samar, and Halsey's battleships and cruisers, guardians of Kinkaid's northern flank, were missing from the place where they were most needed. So Nimitz dictated a brief message to the Third Fleet commander, asking a simple question. *Where is Task Force 34?*

Standard American procedure in the Pacific War called for coded messages to begin and end with meaningless phrases, or padding, to confound Japanese cryptoanalysts. In Nimitz's communications room in Hawaii, a young ensign added the required padding and, as was also required, set off the nonsensical words with double consonants. As radioed to Halsey aboard the *New Jersey*, the message read as follows:

> TURKEY TROTS TO WATER RR FROM CINCPAC ACTION COM THIRD FLEET INFO COMINCH CTF SEVENTY-SEVEN X WHERE IS RPT WHERE IS TASK FORCE THIRTY FOUR RR THE WORLD WONDERS.

Where is Task Force 34? That was Nimitz's query, and nothing more was intended. The padding — *TURKEY TROTS TO WATER* at the beginning and *THE WORLD WONDERS* at the end — should have been removed aboard the *New Jersey* before it was handed to Halsey. That was also normal procedure. All padding was to be excised when a message was typed for delivery to the admiral. Important operational dispatches, however, were not typed. Since Nimitz's message reached the *New Jersey* at 1000 amid the expectation of imminent battle, it was rushed to the bridge as soon as it came out of the decoding machine. Appropriately enough, the *TURKEY* padding was ripped off the tape, but the *WORLD WONDERS* portion "sounded so infernally plausible," as Halsey himself wrote much later, that it was left attached.

Where is Task Force 34? The world wonders. That was the message Halsey got from Nimitz — a simple question with an apparently sarcastic addendum. "I was stunned as if I had been struck in the face," Halsey recalled. "The paper rattled in my hands. I snatched off my cap, threw it on the deck, and shouted something I am ashamed to remember" — something that those acquainted

with the crusty admiral could well imagine.

The Third Fleet continued north in pursuit of Ozawa for another hour as the angry and frustrated admiral dwelled on Nimitz's insulting words. Finally, at 1055, still in a rage, Halsey ordered most of Task Force 34, along with the *Colahan*'s carrier group, to swing south and go to Kinkaid's aid. He did not want to do it, but what else could he do after receiving such a stinging query from his boss? At the time, he wrote later, Ozawa's fleet "was exactly forty-two miles from the muzzles of my sixteen-inch guns . . . . I turned my back on the opportunity I had dreamed of since my days as a cadet. For me, one of the biggest battles of the war was off, and what has been called the Battle of Bull's Run was on."

The world wonders. On this ninetieth anniversary of the Charge of the Light Brigade, the offending phrase was curiously reminiscent of the Tennysonian "All the world wondered." But the young officer responsible for the unfortunate padding denied conscious association. "It just popped into my head," the poor ensign insisted. Maybe so, or maybe a poetic gremlin put it there.

The Battle Off Cape Engaño, in which Halsey sank four Japanese aircraft carriers, was curiously anticlimactic when viewed against the full scope of the Leyte Gulf engagements. But the death of the *Zuikaku* proved particularly satisfying to Americans. She was the last of the six Japanese carriers that had spearheaded the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor almost three years before. Four of the enemy carriers engaged in the Pearl Harbor attack — the *Hiryu*, the *Soryu*, the *Akagi* and the *Kaga* — were sunk in the 1942 Battle of Midway. The *Shokaku* went down in the Battle of the Philippine Sea, a victim of the U.S. submarine *Cavalla*. Now, at last, the mighty *Zuikaku* joined her sisters on the ocean bottom. Pearl Harbor was fully avenged.

Chapter 7: The Tale of the Cat: *Warships, like children, often pick up nicknames as their personalities and talents emerge. It was time for the seasoned USS Colahan to acquire hers.*

The *Colahan* earned her "Tomcat" nickname during Pacific War service under Vice Admiral John S. McCain, who twice took command of the fleet's fast carrier task force, both times relieving Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher. Admiral McCain himself bestowed it on this frontline destroyer. The *Colahan*, a perennial wallflower, was pleased to be noticed. She carried the nickname proudly through the final two decades of her life.

"Slew" McCain first relieved Mitscher on 30 October 1944, just after the

Leyte Gulf battles. The Luzon campaign of late 1944 and early 1945, involving operations stretching from Okinawa to Indochina, saw the inauguration of "Tomcat Stations," a Task Force 38 scheme that made maximum use of large destroyers such as the *Colahan.* Single destroyers were stationed as advanced radar pickets, fifty to sixty miles in front of the main body. They were lone wolves, sometimes teamed up with others but always roaming in hostile seas. Their mission was three-fold. They would detect and destroy low-flying enemy aircraft. They would detect and identify high-flying planes, whether enemy or friendly. And they would detect and destroy enemy picket boats and submarines. A covering air patrol, or CAP, consisting of three or four planes, was provided for each "Tomcat." The destroyers selected for such duty became the forward eyes and ears of the fleet, and of course they also became the first available targets for in-bound enemy aircraft.

The *USS Colahan* was one of the first destroyers, perhaps even *the* first, to take this dangerous assignment. As McCain's task force steamed the seas in all compass directions from Luzon, attacking here and then there, the *Colahan* often found herself alone, still part of the great formation but exposed, with no visible friends from horizon to horizon, except for the CAP that circled high above.

At least once in the early weeks of the Tomcat patrols, Admiral McCain personally dubbed the *Colahan* as *The* Tomcat. "Here comes the ol' Tomcat," he said — or something close to it — as the *Colahan* moved into fueling position alongside his flagship, the *USS Hancock*. Somehow the word was passed to the destroyer. Like a sudden breeze on a sweltering day, the admiral's casual remark swept the *Colahan*'s decks, and caused young men to puff with pride. Sailors are suckers for a pat on the back — or for a sobriquet that suggests manliness and agressiveness and, well, virility. An old sailor smiles.

Courtesy of Henry S. Gaffin

The *Colahan*'s Tomcat insignia was painted on the battle-gray forward stack. The cat itself was black and white against a yellow background. The initial C, unique to the *Colahan,* was dark green.

In the late spring of 1945, as the Okinawa campaign wound down, McCain again relieved Mitscher. As he started his second tour of duty as Task Force 38 commander, the admiral fondly recalled the *Colahan*'s early Tomcat service in the vanguard of the carrier fleet. Busy as he was, he

took the time to send a friendly message to the destroyer, a battle-hardened Pacific War veteran by then:

HOW IS THE ORIGINAL OLD TOM HIMSELF X McCAIN

The *Colahan*, then skippered by Martin Shellabarger, responded promptly to "CTF 38," as the commander of Fast Carrier Task Force 38 was designated. The destroyer's reply contained a sly hint of concern about serving alone so far in advance of the fleet:

OLD TOM IS STILL FULL OF FIGHT BUT HAPPY
TO HAVE COMPANY WHEN ON THE PROWL

In the fleet's warship pecking order, destroyers ranked well below cruisers, battleships and aircraft carriers. As "little boys," they did not receive many personal messages from lofty admirals. Thus, McCain's message was quickly, that very day, distributed to the entire *Colahan* crew. The admiral's "Old Tom" greeting was published in the ship's *Salt Spray* newspaper, along with Shellabarger's reply.

Not surprisingly, the admiral's christening stuck. The *USS Colahan* became "The Tomcat," although she continued to share Tomcat honors with her sisters in Destroyer Squadron 53. Early on, Commodore "Beany" Jarrett's entire group anointed itself as the "Tomcat Squadron." Each of the nine ships in Destroyer Divisions 105 and 106 painted a Tomcat insignia on the forward stack. But even then, the *Colahan* stood out. She was the first to wear the insignia, and hers was distinctive from all the rest. Through the remainder of the war, Jarrett's destroyers would sail as the Tomcat Squadron, but the *Colahan*, thanks to Admiral McCain, would always be *The* Tomcat.