

The *USS Colahan* Goes to Hollywood

By JACKSON SELLERS

As beautiful as a movie heroine, the *Colahan* plunges through the opening credits of *Men of the Fighting Lady*, a 1954 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer release. “This is an MGM film that can sit very proudly alongside *Battleground* and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*,” wrote Bosley Crowther, the respected *New York Times* film critic. Maybe so, but others, especially television and video reviewers in the decades following Crowther’s assessment, judged the movie with less enthusiasm. The word “tepid” often seemed the perfect adjective. But never mind. The pace of the plot, or even the content, is not our primary interest. We remain focused on the initial forty-five seconds of the movie, when the *USS Colahan* (DD-658) fills center stage. All the short while, we curse those damned credits, which keep blocking the view of our heroine.

Starring Van Johnson, Walter Pidgeon, Louis Calhern, Dewey Martin, Keenan Wynn and Frank Lovejoy, *Men of the Fighting Lady* tells the story of an aircraft carrier stationed off the east coast of Korea around Christmastime of 1952. Brave pilots, namely Johnson, Martin, Wynn and Lovejoy, make daily sorties against enemy railroads and other land targets in the vicinity of Wonsan. Pidgeon plays the



ship's wise and sympathetic doctor, while Calhern portrays the movie's only real-life character, James Michener, the acclaimed author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Tales of the South Pacific*. You see, a Michener article in *The Saturday Evening Post*, entitled "The Forgotten Heroes of Korea," provided inspiration for Art Cohn's screenplay, and Michener, in the person of Calhern, was given a role to play.

Those were the early days of jet fighter combat. The jets launched into battle in 1952 cost a mere \$250,000 each, and they could reach maximum speeds of only 600 miles per hour. Degrading words such as "mere" and "only" are chosen here in smug hindsight, a license enjoyed by all historians. At the time the movie was produced, in the early Fifties, the dollar and speed figures were impressive enough to be written into the script for elocution by the actors. Of course, these costs and speeds would in time seem quaint, just as everything eventually does.

The *Colahan*'s role in *Men of the Fighting Lady*, such as it was, called for her to deliver James Michener to the aircraft carrier, so that the famous author could gather information for his *Saturday Evening Post* piece. A blurry, unrecognizable figure, dangling in a boatswain's chair above choppy waves, was hauled by highline from the destroyer to the carrier. Then, in closeup, the actor Calhern landed on one of the huge ship's interior decks. "I'm a little too old for this sort of thing," he said jocularly, despite the fact that he had never actually experienced "this sort of thing." Which was just as well. A highline trip between underway ships can be scary.

Among shipmates who called the movie to the author's attention, there was uncertainty as to when the *Colahan* sequence was filmed. Bob Darling of Beloit, Wisconsin, an engineering officer aboard the destroyer, recalled: "A film crew from Hollywood took some movies of the ship in 1952. It was during the transit to or from our yard overhaul in San Francisco. I can't remember which." He was referring to the extensive refurbishing the *Colahan* received that summer over a period stretching from June to September. When the author acquired the *Men of the Fighting Lady* film in video format in mid-1996, there remained no doubt. It can be stated emphatically that the ship was photographed *after* the overhaul. In the images that danced across the television screen, the *Colahan* sported the tripod mast she would carry for the rest of her life. Up until then, throughout her Pacific War service (1943-45) and her first Korean War tour (1951-52), she had sailed with a single-pole mast. At the San Francisco shipyard,

in mid-1952, her mast was braced to support heavy radar and communications gear. Also, not to belabor the point, she was marvelously spiffy-looking in the movie, nicely painted, obviously fresh from the yard, a perfect *Fletcher*-class candidate for this Hollywood appearance.

The *USS Yorktown (CV-10)*, a 1943 replacement for the *Yorktown* lost in the Battle of Midway, was “The Fighting Lady” of the Pacific War, and of course she was the Korean War aircraft carrier to which the movie title referred. But there was one little problem for the scriptwriters. The *Yorktown* was nowhere near Korea during Christmas of 1952. The tri-masted *Colahan* was there, firing her guns at land targets and performing other destroyer chores in the bitter cold of that winter, but the *Yorktown* wasn’t. After nearly six years in the Pacific Reserve Fleet at Bremerton, the *Essex*-class carrier was recommissioned in the very month that the cinematic action was taking place. It was not until September 1953 that she arrived in the Far East and joined Task Force 77. By that time the Korean War armistice had been signed, and so, nearly a year after the movie’s time frame, she conducted training operations rather than combat missions. The famous *Yorktown* had missed the Korean War altogether, and was never even mentioned in the 1954 film that carried her nickname in its title.