

Jack & Claude by Jackson Sellers

This is an excerpt from "Old Tom," Jackson's unfinished sequel to "The Original Tomcat." While the latter is historical, following the USS Colahan through World War II battles, "Old Tom" is primarily personal, focusing on 1950s personalities, most especially on Ensign/LTJG Jack Sellers. In the sequel, Jackson writes about himself in the third person, distancing himself from the main "Jack" character.

Lieutenant Commander Claude N. DeBuhr, executive officer of the *Colahan* from late 1954 to late 1956, was detested by virtually everyone in the wardroom. The animosity was palpable. Jack referred to it in a "Dear Folks" letter written just two weeks after he reported aboard: "It seems that Mr. DeBuhr, the XO, is the unpopular one around here. Everyone likes the captain okay [Commander H.J. Brantingham at that time], but they can't stand 'Smiling Jack' DeBuhr."

In April 1956, a month after "No Periods" Keedy took command but well before Jack adopted a somewhat contemptuous attitude toward him, our young hero wrote: "I like our new captain a lot. He doesn't say much but he seems okay to me. I would like to get rid of the executive officer, though. He has never given me any trouble, and sometimes I even like him, much to the surprise and disgust of my fellow officers; but I believe he wouldn't hesitate to give me a great deal of trouble if I ever gave him even the slightest reason for doing so. Most of the other officers dislike him with a passion, and the rest dislike him without passion. But if you're really honest about it, you have to admit that his methods are quite efficient."

Like all junior officers aboard the *Colahan*, Jack saw Lieutenant Commander DeBuhr as a tyrant who made life miserable for everyone. Everybody hated the son of a bitch, so why not Jack? And yet, there was lack of strong conviction in Jack's letters. There was more than a hint of peer parroting in what he wrote at the time about the ship's executive officer. None or few of the other officers would have predicted, as Jack did in June 1956, that DeBuhr might make a good commanding officer.



Lieutenant Commander Claude DeBuhr, the *Colahan's* executive officer, was hated and feared in the wardroom, but Jack had mixed feelings about him.

“We will lose the executive officer shortly after returning to San Diego,” Jack wrote. “He has been given command of a ship slightly smaller than this one. Of course, everyone is heartbroken that we’re losing the bastard. You never can tell, though. He might make a pretty good CO. As I’ve said before, you don’t have to sweat the captain much. He’s just the big boss. It’s the exec who can make life miserable.”

Jack’s assessments of DeBuhr, relayed to his parents in letters and voiced on many occasions in 1955 and ’56, were much kinder than the sentiments expressed by the *Colahan*’s other junior officers. Why was that? The answer was surprisingly simple. In the months after Jack came aboard, there had been two brief and private exchanges of feeling between the young ensign and the executive officer. Almost accidentally, Jack discovered DeBuhr’s humanity. Thereafter, his basic attitude toward the man everybody else hated was slanted forever in the XO’s favor. No matter that Jack, in monkey-see, monkey-do fashion, continued to throw verbal darts at DeBuhr at every opportunity, in both correspondence and wardroom bull sessions. Among Jack’s peers, and even among the crew, XO-bashing was the fashionable thing to do, and Jack willingly played the game, grinning at times, frowning when appropriate, and shaking his head along with everyone else. DeBuhr was a scowling scumbag, nobody’s friend.

Lightly staffed on a Sunday in San Diego, the *Colahan* was unexpectedly ordered to move from a buoy to a pier. Captain Brantingham and all other officers except Jack and DeBuhr were ashore. So Commander DeBuhr, with minor assistance from Ensign Jack Sellers, got the ship underway, and the executive officer made a picture-perfect docking. Issuing engine and helm orders from the starboard bridge wing, DeBuhr skillfully nosed the bow close to the pier and then swung the stern parallel. The destroyer was quickly tied up and the special sea detail dismissed. There was no hesitancy, no fumbling around, no fuss. It was a beautiful job, recognized as such, even then, by shave-tail Jack, who barely knew his way around the ship.

It would be an exaggeration to say the executive officer acted like a schoolboy who had pulled off a neat trick, but the truth was something close to that. He took obvious pleasure in this feat of shiphandling. It wasn’t often that an executive officer who never stood deck watches got a chance to show his stuff. He wanted to brag about it, but the only immediately available audience of officer rank was lowly Jack, with whom he would have to make do. “I can’t get over how smoothly that went,” DeBuhr kept saying in the wardroom, where he and Jack were having dinner alone that evening. The emotion he shared with an unworthy junior officer was one of pride, the good kind, the kind that uplifts all mortals. For Jack, this was

an anthropomorphic sunburst. A sympathetic human quality had been bestowed on a creature suspected of having none.

Later, just prior to the start of the *Colahan's* 1956 Asian cruise, a seaman in Jack's Communications Division refused to take the required inoculations, because of religious convictions. The young man, a fine sailor, was sincere, no question about it. Jack and DeBuhr reasoned with him in the executive officer's stateroom. Navy rules required inoculations for all crewmen headed overseas. The seaman's eyes welled with tears. He was fighting a losing battle, all alone, against his division officer and the ship's executive officer.

This clash between religious principles and Navy regulations was painful for the young man, and for Jack, too. Finally DeBuhr did what he had to do. He gave the seaman a direct order to accept the shots. A hospital corpsman was called. As the inoculations were being administered to the downcast sailor, Jack and DeBuhr exchanged glances. After a moment, the executive officer lowered his eyes, tightened his lips and slightly shook his head, conveying a personal message to Jack alone. It had been painful for him as well. Another crack in the icon.

It would be outrageous and self-aggrandizing to compare Jack and DeBuhr with the *HMS Bounty's* Fletcher Christian and Captain Bligh. Historical analogies should not be carried too far, else they become pretentious and silly. But there *were* casual similarities. Mean-spiritedness and unpopularity do not cancel virtues. First Officer Christian, like Ensign Jack Sellers, understood this, and it was this understanding that contributed to the *Bounty* mutineer's post-mutiny agony. Captain William Bligh definitely had a personality problem, but he was an efficient captain, a dutiful officer and a marvelous sailor who, after the mutiny, led loyal seamen to safety in an open boat on an incredible 4,000-mile journey through waters infested with sharks, and islands inhabited by cannibals, eventually reaching England and becoming a Royal Navy hero who rose to the rank of admiral.

Jack never joined a mutiny — indeed, there was never one to join — but Jack did, like Fletcher Christian in the early days on the *Bounty*, distance himself from the crew's denunciations of an officer whom he judged to be superior in more ways than the official one. In Jack's memory, which survives on a remote Pitcairn Island within Jackson's cerebral ocean, Claude DeBuhr remains a flawed but respected figure.

Also, not to put too fine a point on it, there is lingering warmth associated with any shared experience, especially unforgettable ones, such as the time in San Diego when a *Colahan* coxswain found himself stretched horizontally between the captain's gig and the dock, suspended a few feet above the water, supported only momentarily by extended hands and feet, until *Splash!* In he went, while Jack and

DeBuhr, the gig's sole passengers, watched and grinned — what else? — since there was nothing they could do to stop the inevitable dunking. Jack wrote about the incident in a “Dear Folks” letter dated 15 October 1955, and DeBuhr, surely, has told the story, too.

Nevertheless, as late as June of 1956, halfway into the Western Pacific tour, Jack was still tossing barbs at DeBuhr and referring to the “happy day” when the executive officer would depart and assume command of the *USS Lansing (DER-388)*. “I’ll even carry his baggage,” Jack chortled.

But before we assume that Jack’s attitude toward DeBuhr had not really softened, that he was no different than the other junior officers, let’s delve into our hero’s psyche at the time he was volunteering to tote DeBuhr’s luggage off the *Colahan*. Can we dismiss the fact that Jack, at the moment he wrote those words, was restricted to the ship by order of the executive officer, and that he had missed several precious days of liberty in Japan? Did twenty-four-year-old Jack accept his well-deserved punishment without resentment toward the officer who imposed it? Of course not.

For the record, Jack was confined to the ship for missing muster. He overslept at a Japanese bargirl’s house. He was already impossibly late when his eyes popped open that morning in Yokosuka. A wild taxi ride to the ship could not save him from Commander DeBuhr’s ire.

“I was aware of my reputation in the wardroom. How could I not have been?” wrote retired Commander Claude N. DeBuhr in 1996, forty years after all this. “As you [Jack] suspected, yes, I was human. There were certain officers I liked and respected, and others I did not. Looking back, and given the same circumstances, I probably would do the job the same way if I could do it again. Maybe I would be a little less intense, a little more considerate. I think I demanded just as much from myself as I did from other officers. But if I had served under me, I would have been just as pissed off as all of you were.”

DeBuhr, retired in Los Altos, California, was communicating with the author after reading *The Original Tomcat* and draft chapters of *Old Tom*. “You’ve done a great job in putting the history of the *USS Colahan* into two excellent books. The first volume is really a naval history of the Pacific portion of World War II. I like it a lot. Now I know why the *Colahan* was called the ‘Tomcat.’ I admire the work you are doing. You’ve improved.”

Jack, now a grizzled Jackson, had to wait forty years for it, but he finally got a compliment from Commander DeBuhr.