

# Jack's Colahan Captains

By Jackson Sellers

Published in the September 2010 Issue of the *USS Colahan DD-658 Newsletter*

WHEN Commander Henry J. Brantingham took command of the *USS Colahan* in July 1954, Jack Sellers was driving a taxicab in his Evansville, Indiana, hometown and occasionally delivering sacks of buttered popcorn to whorehouses in the red-light district near the riverfront. Jack, a 22-year-old Indiana University graduate with double majors in journalism and English literature, was surely the city's most highly educated taxi driver. As a cab-driver, he was just killing time and making pocket money until the Navy embraced him at the Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. For him, it was either the Navy or getting drafted into the Army. Foxholes had no appeal. Jack had never heard of the *Colahan*, never even seen a destroyer, but he was a landlocked Midwestern reader of swashbuckling naval fiction and he liked the idea of becoming a Hornblower-like officer aboard a small combatant. Too bad Navy ships didn't have sails anymore.

Jack spent the 1954-55 winter at the huge Newport naval base – just a seaman apprentice, with only an “OC” shoulder patch to identify him as an officer candidate. He wore a blue woolen sailor suit. Thirteen buttons secured the front flap of his flared pants. He was surprised that the outfit was so comfortable. In early spring, upon graduation, Jack donned a tailored ensign's uniform and was sworn in as an officer and a gentlemen, with



**HANK BRANTINGHAM**

a “USNR” suffix, not the “USN” that Academy guys got. Right away, after getting his commission, Jack toted his belongings across a bridge and checked into spiffy bachelor officers quarters. For months he had been living in communal barracks and eating chow slopped onto compartmented metal trays. Never again. Now he would dine at linen-covered tables with stewards hovering nearby. Don't blame Jack, shipmates. The Navy was not a democracy noted for its equality.

A couple of months of officer communications training, a bittersweet love affair – never mind about that – and then Jack was off to catch up with the *USS Colahan*. Trouble was, the ship was far away, across the ocean in the Western Pacific. A prop-driven Navy aircraft out of San Francisco took 24 hours,

actual flying time, with stops in Hawaii and Wake Island, to deliver Jack to Yokohama. A bus with tiny Japanese seats hit every pothole as it took him to Yokosuka. Three days later, he learned that the *Colahan* had arrived and was moored to a harbor buoy. Eager-beaver Jack rushed to the harbor, where, serendipitously, he ran into Executive Officer Claude DeBuhr and Communications Officer Jack Zimmermann. It was Zimmermann whom Jack would eventually relieve. They had come ashore in Captain Brantingham's gig. So Jack rode the covered gig to the *Colahan*, somewhat in style. He climbed the accommodation ladder, but since it was dark, he couldn't figure out which way to salute the ensign flag. It was a fifty-fifty deal and he saluted the wrong way. Well, it didn't really matter. He was finally aboard his ship.

THE very next day, Lieutenant Commander DeBuhr informed Jack that he would serve as assistant communications officer under LTJG Zimmermann and as assistant CIC officer under senior Ensign Terry Sutherland. Later, Commander Brantingham noted Jack's journalism background and added public information officer to the new ensign's duties.

“Captain H.J. Brantingham seems like a nice fellow, although I've only exchanged a few words with him,” wrote Ensign Jack Sellers, already a compulsive chronicler of what was going on around

him. "I think we will get along fine. He's about what I expected in a captain.... I'm quite impressed with him and I believe I'll enjoy serving under him. He's a fanatic acey-deucey player and spends much of his leisure time playing the game with the supply officer, Mr. Dick Kuhlman."

DEEPLY tanned and ramrod straight, 38-year-old Brantingham nicely fit the role that Jack's imagination had cast for him. He was halfway into his *Colahan* captaincy, having relieved Commander "Wild Bill" Brooks in a brief fantail ceremony the previous year. Hank, as friends called him and as he called himself, had donned chicken guts and a third half-inch gold stripe six years earlier, while he was teaching chemistry at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. His promotion to commander had come after distinguished and much-decorated service in World War II torpedo boats and destroyers. Toward the end of the war, he served as XO of the *USS Benson (DD-421)* and as CO of the *USS Satterlee (DD-636)*, then held brief postwar command of the *USS Sigourney (DD-643)*, a *Fletcher*-class sister of the *Colahan*. Most recently he had made Arctic expeditions as executive officer of the icebreaker *USS Edisto (AGB-2)*.

Brantingham, no doubt, saw the *Colahan* as a career stepping-stone toward promotion to a four-stripe captaincy and command of a destroyer division or squadron. *Colahan* commanding officers always rose to the rank of captain, just shy of admiral. But Brantingham's ambitions would be frustrated. The rank of commander was the highest he would ever achieve. Perhaps this

career stagnation stemmed from what happened early in his *Colahan* tour, just a few months after he took command, or perhaps it grew out of his lack of regard for a man named John Fitzgerald Kennedy, during WWII and later. One seldom knows these things for certain.

As a junior officer in World War II, Brantingham played a prominent role in two notable events, one occurring in the Philippine Islands in March 1942 and the other in the Solomons in August 1943. He participated, as executive officer of a PT-boat, in the evacuation of General Douglas MacArthur from beleaguered Corregidor in 1942, taking the general, his family and some of his staff to Mindanao, from which an escape to Australia was effected. In 1943, as commanding officer of a PT-boat squadron, Brantingham directed the rescue of LTJG John F. Kennedy, one of his PT skippers. A Japanese destroyer had rammed Kennedy's PT-boat and left the future President of the United States stranded on a remote isle in the Solomon Islands. Several days later, Kennedy was hauled aboard Brantingham's rescue boat. JFK, surely grinning, asked: "Any coffee?"

BOTH rescues were historical feathers in Brantingham's military cap, but the Kennedy affair also spawned political problems for him. In postwar years, Brantingham could not or would not say that LTJG Kennedy had made no mistakes, that the popular U.S. congressman and senator from Massachusetts wasn't to blame for losing his torpedo boat and the lives of two of his crewmen. It wasn't what many Kennedy worshipers wanted to hear.

Against the great backdrop

of the Pacific War, Kennedy's collision with an enemy destroyer ranks as a minor incident, just a historical footnote. It assumed importance only as Kennedy drew near and then achieved the Presidency. Historians often speak of the "fog of war," meaning that nobody really knows what the hell happened. In regard to Kennedy's *PT-109* drama, the question was this: Who was to blame? Surely no fault lay with Kennedy, the nation's current hero, the man destined to be the leader of the Free World. What about this squadron commander, Lieutenant Brantingham? Didn't he do this, or fail to do that? Accusations would badger Brantingham for decades.

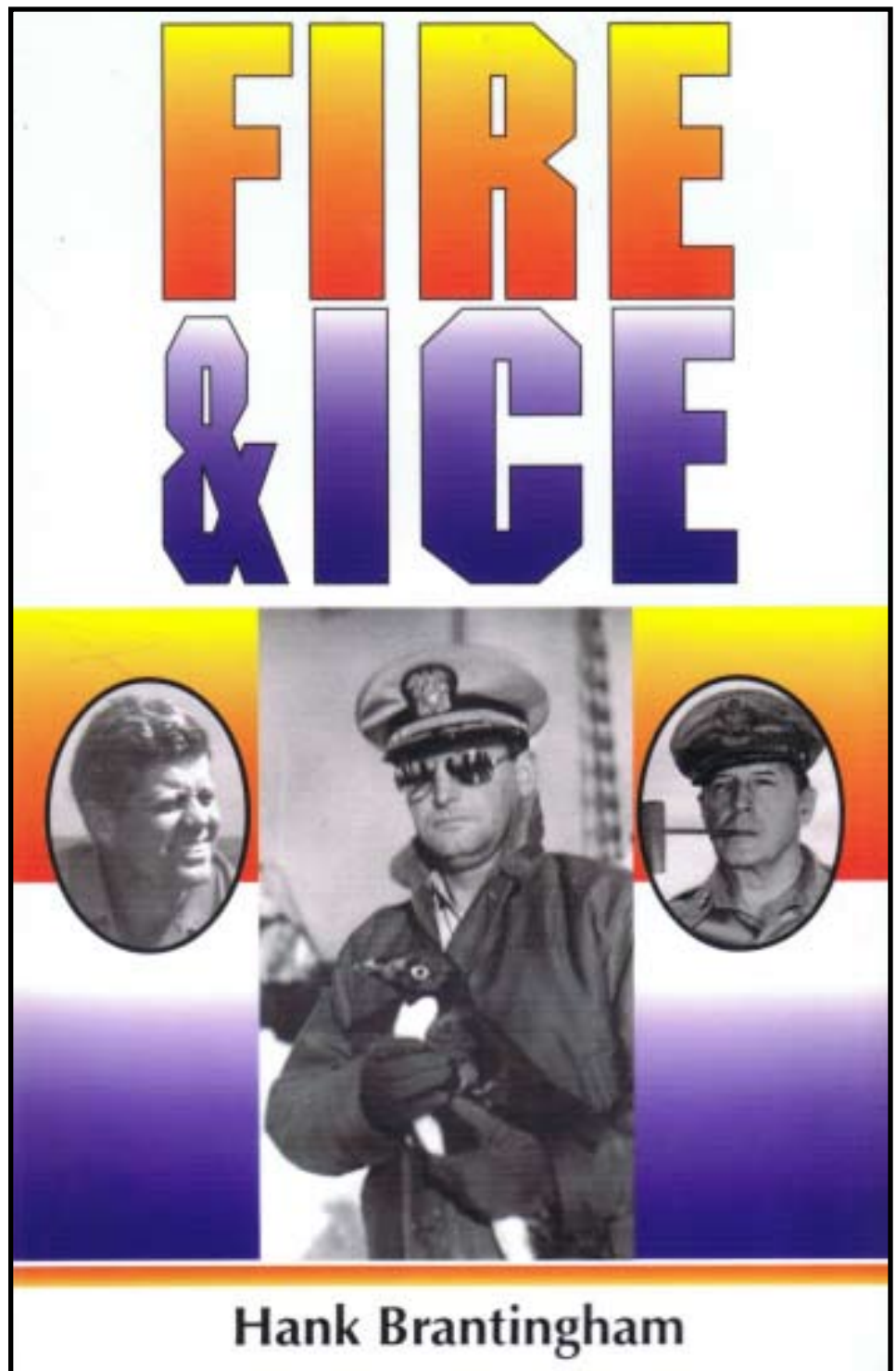
In 1960, several years after his *Colahan* service, Brantingham was a Cruisers and Destroyers Pacific Fleet staff officer, headquartered in San Diego. Kennedy was running for the White House and sent an invitation to his old commanding officer. Would Hank like to join him in a publicity ride in a PT-boat in San Diego harbor? Brantingham rather rudely declined!

ONE must smile. If nothing else, Brantingham was constant in his personal convictions. An arch-conservative, he favored Vice President Richard M. Nixon in the 1960 presidential election. But in addition to smiling, one might conclude that seldom has a naval officer made a bigger political blunder. Kennedy, of course, went on to become President of the United States and commander in chief of American armed forces, someone who could promote a military supporter with the stroke of a pen. Brantingham remained a mere commander for the rest of his life.

**B**UT who knows exactly why a military career stalls? In the late 1990s, after Hank died at age 80, his widow Elaine corresponded with Jack, now known as Jackson at the *Los Angeles Times*. The “vindictive Kennedys,” she said, let Hank retire as a commander. She also loaned Jack a copy of Hank Brantingham’s 1995 *Fire & Ice* memoirs, a slim volume with JFK and MacArthur mugs on its cover. In the book, the septuagenarian traced his “nonpromotion” to a couple of *Colahan* collisions – one with a hard-nosed destroyer squadron commander, another with a San Diego buoy.

But the best accounts of those misadventures came from retired Commander Claude DeBuhr, not from Brantingham himself. At the same time that Jack was dealing with Elaine Brantingham, he was also renewing his acquaintance with DeBuhr. Virtually all mid-1950s shipmates remember DeBuhr, the *Colahan*’s XO from 1954 to 1956, as a thoroughly hateful officer. Ensign Jack, however, had mixed feelings about him, feelings that often rose to admiration. Anyway, here are quotes from DeBuhr’s lengthy letters:

*“When I joined the Colahan in late 1954, she was commanded by Commander Hank Brantingham, and she had just completed a yard overhaul. She was probably the filthiest naval vessel I had ever seen. Yard debris was scattered throughout the ship, and she badly needed a good washdown and a good paint job. Brantingham was a nice man and a good captain, but he was too tolerant of his officers’ performances. We didn’t operate well at sea, and got atrocious grades on our competitive exercises.*



*es. The officers, a pleasant group, didn’t seem to care about the ship, and they let things slide, maintaining a status quo. Although likable, they were lethargic. The word got around, because one day we received a visit from ComDesRon 17, Captain Glyn R. Donaho, a highly decorated World War II submarine commander, now the commodore of the destroyer squadron in which*

*the Colahan served. A more vicious man I never met.*

*“This visit was made while we were underway in an exercise area off San Diego, and Donaho came aboard by highline. After an hour’s look-around, he and Brantingham went to the captain’s cabin. Soon I was called. Upon entering the cabin, I found a shaken CO and a furious squadron commander.*

*Donaho launched into fifteen minutes of verbal abuse concerning the Colahan's condition. When he finally left, he promised to return in two weeks, and if he didn't see improvement, heads would roll, namely mine and Brantingham's.*

*"Needless to say, we were concerned. As XO, I became the taskmaster, the overseer, the whip. My job was to get the officers off top dead center, to make them do something about the situation. It was difficult and stressful, but the job got done. This was when I began demanding only excellent performances from the officers. I didn't accept laziness, excuses or procrastination from anyone. I also had to clean my own house. During my first weeks on board, I discovered, in my stateroom, drawer after drawer full of unanswered correspondence and incomplete reports left by the previous XO [Lieutenant Commander Leo Nelson]. These I quickly took care of. I dropped them over the side. The officers, of course, didn't react very well to the new requirements, but conditions slowly improved. The Colahan began looking and performing better."*

CAPTAIN Glyn Donaho wore four stripes against Commander Brantingham's three, but the difference was much more than one stripe. Donaho was a very senior naval officer, just short of an admiral, someone to be reckoned with, even to fear. The Colahan's captain and executive officer were "concerned" over the dressing down, as DeBuhr phrased it, and there were some mighty good reasons to be concerned. As commodore of Destroyer Squadron 17, Donaho was the boss of the Colahan's ComDesDiv 172. In other words,

he was the boss of Brantingham's boss. Not only that, he enjoyed a huge reputation in the Navy. He was a certified hero, a powerful killer of the nation's enemies, and this was only his latest tour as a commander of commanders, not at all his first. A decade earlier, in late 1944, American submarines organized themselves into wolf packs in the campaign to liberate the Philippines and bring the Japanese empire to its knees. Donaho was the boss then, too.

AS if Captain Brantingham didn't have enough problems, the Colahan "kissed" a San Diego buoy in November 1954, just a few weeks after Commodore Donaho chewed him out. A hole was punched in the destroyer's hull. Magazines were flooded. Ensign Jack wasn't aboard at the time, so let Claude DeBuhr tell the story:

*"One morning while the Colahan was getting underway from a buoy in San Diego Bay, a small yard water tanker crossed our stern as we were backing down, causing us to stop to keep from colliding with her. The tide drifted us down on the buoy, and our keel got entangled with the buoy's anchor chain. At that time, unbeknownst to us, the ship's bottom was torn, and water started leaking in. Captain Brantingham, suspecting something might be amiss, sent the damage control officer below to sound out the compartments, to see if flooding was taking place. The DCO returned and reported everything dry. The DCO was awaiting discharge soon, and was not performing well. In this instance, he really did us in, because he had not inspected all compartments. Two or three hours later Brantingham noticed*

*that the ship was sluggish and did not handle smoothly. This time he sent the chief engineer to take the soundings and found that there was several feet of water in one of the forward magazines. We were promptly sent to the Navy yard. Ammunition was unloaded, and the ship was drydocked and repaired. A board of investigation was convened, and both the CO and the DCO received letters of reprimand, thus effectively ending Commander Brantingham's career."*

In March 1956, Commander CL "No Periods" Keedy Jr. relieved Commander Brantingham as captain of the USS Colahan. The "No Periods" moniker stemmed from the fact that "CL" stood for nothing – hence, no periods in his official signature. A couple of officers, less polite, called him "The Pig Farmer." DeBuhr, still the XO, treated Keedy with starched respect, but confessed decades later: "I thought he was lazy and inconsiderate. While on patrol, he would maneuver the ship until there was no relative wind, so he could sunbathe while the rest of the ship sweltered." Ensign Jack, now the ship's full-fledged communications officer, liked the new 40-year-old captain at first, but saw him as a sycophant, someone who seeks favor from higher-ups through flattery, a trait that the departed Hank Brantingham sorely lacked.

THE seahorse, one of the many strange creatures in the sea, was the symbol of Destroyer Squadron 17, which, in the 1950s, linked eight warships, including the Colahan. And thus a toady idea was born. Captain Keedy decided to install a seahorse aquarium in the wardroom. The unstated but

obvious purpose was to impress Squadron 17's commodore, a four-striper who, after having his ass kissed, would surely see Keedy as a fine and loyal captain. Well, what the captain wants, the captain gets, but not necessarily without generating resentment in those who are convinced they have more important things to do. Several grumbling officers, primarily mustang LTJG Joe Wachtel, the chief engineer, supervised the construction and installation, often lending clean and uncalled hands to this messy project. Ensign Jack Sellers made a trip ashore to buy aquarium compound. Eventually the tank was in place, filled with seawater, anchored to the deck and bulkhead, properly aerated and, most important of all, inhabited by a pair of seahorses feeding on tiny shrimp eggs. Such exotic food, unavailable in the *Colahan's* pantry, had to be purchased ashore. The tank was subject to all the pitching and rolling of the destroyer itself, so the aquarium cover had to be, and was made to be, slosh-proof. All in all, it was a troublesome project requiring never-ending maintenance, and thus was very unpopular among those charged with keeping the seahorses alive and the wardroom dry.

OVER a period of time, the seahorses multiplied. The male became pregnant. Yes, that is the way seahorses do it. The process is natural to them, even if the very thought makes male humans queasy. Finally the little seahorses were born – and mysteriously, almost immediately, one by one, they began to disappear. The adults must be eating the youngsters, the captain was told. Eventually all the babies were gone, eaten, it was said, by their carnivorous parents.



CL KEEDY JR.

Then, one night, an *adult* disappeared. Captain Keedy surely suspected, by then, that someone was tossing the creatures overboard, but he said nothing, perhaps realizing he did not have the support of his officers on this one. The aquarium was allowed to languish and eventually was removed.

THANKS to Jack, a handsome oil painting of the *Colahan* was introduced to the wardroom. But Jack, truth be known, was a very reluctant contributor to the ambiance. Early in the 1956 Western Pacific cruise, the ensign sought out a Yokosuka artist named Nobuo Kanazawa, who agreed to paint a large portrait of the ship. Jack, even then, could envision a time when the painting would serve as a focal point for the book-lined study that surely lay in his future. "Yes," Jack would say to admiring guests, "that was my ship, the *USS Colahan*." The artist Kanazawa spent several days on the project, referring for technical details to a ship photograph supplied by Jack. He painted a seascape that managed to be

both menacing and benign at the same time. The *Colahan*, underway, basked in sunshine breaking through gray clouds. The price was ridiculously low, a mere 5,000 yen, about 14 American dollars at the official exchange rate of that time. When Jack toted the painting aboard the ship and showed it off to the other officers, Captain Keedy immediately appropriated it, answering Jack's whimpers with assurances that the painting could be retrieved from the wardroom upon Jack's discharge from the Navy. And so a frame was fashioned in a destroyer tender's carpentry shop, and the painting was bolted to the light green bulkhead, becoming a centerpiece for the officers' dining room. It looked nice, but poor Jack was worried. He was aware that possession is nine-tenths of everything, and he feared he would have trouble reclaiming his masterpiece. Well, he would wait and see. Discharge was 18 months away.

LIKE Brantingham before him, Keedy had no wars to fight as captain of the *Colahan*. The hot Korean War had ended. This was the so-called Cold War, with only occasional heated flare-ups. The closest the ship came to a hot war in these early Cold War years was Taiwan patrol duty. Jack rather liked it. Out of it, he knew, would come the China Service Medal, the only medal he would ever receive. As always, Jack scribbled away when he had the time. Here is what he wrote to his parents in July 1956 as the *Colahan* operated out of Taiwan's Kaohsiung:

*"We're patrolling the Taiwan Straits now. We arrived in Kaohsiung last Sunday, after*

*leaving Hong Kong the day before. It was a hot and muggy day. The Colahan's officers assembled in the crew's mess aboard the oiler that serves the ships assigned to the patrol. Several senior officers explained the mission of U.S. naval forces in Taiwan. It isn't a very unusual assignment. Two destroyers will patrol the straits at all times. One destroyer will patrol to the south and one to the north. The mission is to protect the Nationalist Chinese from aggression by the Communist Chinese. Those two factions are warring with each other. There is more shooting around this part of the world than is generally realized. But don't worry about me. U.S. patrol vessels here have been fired upon only once, and that was by a Nationalist Chinese ship that got confused in the dark and thought the American ship was its enemy. No American has ever been hurt. The Colahan and the Shields left Kaohsiung at noon yesterday and steamed to their assigned stations. We were told to relieve the USS Eversole, which we did at 2300 last night. We are now steaming around in the northern part of the Taiwan Straits. It's sort of like a game of hide-and-seek that we are playing with the Commies. We are watching them and they are watching us. Their ships are not very big. Most of them are mere junks. Some are equipped with radar and they usually have a field piece of some kind mounted on the forecastle. We are not expecting them to give us any trouble. The Twining and the Erben are still at Kaohsiung. The Erben will relieve us two days from now and we'll go into port for a few days before coming out again. We'll be doing this for the next three weeks."*

As veteran junior officers left the *USS Colahan*, either for re-assignment or discharge, Jack rose like cream in raw milk, through no effort of his own. One by one, the JGs left, replaced by ensigns with bright stripes. Soon-to-be-LTJG Jack Sellers suddenly found himself the fourth most senior officer aboard the ship, immediately behind the captain, the exec and the operations officer. From now on, Jack's official seat in the wardroom would be near the head of the long table at which the officers conferred and dined. Of course the captain sat at the very head of the table, with the supply officer stationed at the other end. Eight officers took positions in between, four on each side, lined up according to rank. Officers on watch would eat later.

CAPTAIN Keedy was flanked, on his right and left respectively, by the XO and the operations officer – and then came Jack, the communications officer, rubbing elbows with the exec as he took his meals, picking the best cuts of meat as the main course was served by rank in good old Navy fashion, letting the perceived poorer cuts pass on to the ensigns and JGs whose dates of rank did not equal his. "But Jack isn't even a department head," whined some officers who were department heads but who, nevertheless, sat at the wrong end of the table. Yes, what they said was true, since Communications was only a division within the Operations Department, but they had missed the point. It did not matter. Jack's date of rank ruled among the junior officers. DeBuhr, a stickler for protocol, told them so. *Tough shit, fellows.*

Proximity to Captain

Keedy, at dinnertimes and other times, must have bred contempt in LTJG Jack Sellers. Certainly by mid-1957, in the midst of still another WestPac tour, Jack's written comments on the Navy in general and Keedy in particular were becoming rancorous, even spiteful, definitely harsh. Any naval officer who rises to command of a warship is deserving of respect. It doesn't matter if he is Captain Bligh, Mister Roberts or CL Keedy. Of course there are degrees of respect, and it is likely, even probable, that Captain Keedy didn't think much of Jack either. Jack wrote:

*"The captain has been giving me a tough time lately – not just me, since everybody has been nipped by the Old Man's fangs. But I don't like it at all, and it has made me much more dissatisfied with Navy life than I was before. The captain, in a great many ways, is a stupid man. That's not just my opinion. It's shared by most of the wardroom. Of course, he's the commanding officer, and it's his right to let off steam if he wants to. I won't deny him that. But most of us are professionals in our own specialties, and we feel entitled to a little more respect. When the captain first came aboard, he didn't know beans about a destroyer. Now he knows a little bit about beans and a little bit about potatoes, and you can't tell him a damned thing."*

JACK's uncharitable attitude may have stemmed from his concerns about yanking the beautiful *Colahan* painting off the wardroom bulkhead. He had been right. It wouldn't be easy to reclaim Jack's bought-and-paid-for oil painting. As his discharge drew closer in 1957, Jack broached the subject



to Captain Keedy. “Ah yes, Mr. Sellers,” said this annoying commander, “but before you can take the painting, you must replace it with one just like it. We can’t have an empty frame on the wardroom bulkhead, can we?” It was unjust as hell, but what could a junior officer do? Jack went looking for the artist Kanazawa in the narrow streets of Yokosuka, a hopeless search, of course. The artist he *did*

find was twice as expensive and half as skillful. A new painting was executed, financed again by Jack. Captain Keedy, somewhat to Jack’s surprise, allowed the substitution to take place – whether from generosity or artistic ignorance, Jack never knew.

Today, more than five decades later, Kanazawa’s painting hangs above the fireplace in Jackson’s library in Lake Forest, Cal-

ifornia, very much as young Jack envisioned when he commissioned it. “That was my ship,” Jackson says to admiring guests. “The *USS Colahan*, a *Fletcher*-class destroyer, winner of eight battle stars in the Pacific War and five more in the Korean War.”

Yes, the *Colahan* was the ship of Jackson’s youth. Never mind that he personally and thankfully had nothing to do with those 13 battle stars.



***Colahan* newsletter editor Bill Martin and Jackson Sellers at Jackson’s Southern California home, posing with the painting that graced the warship’s wardroom in 1956-57.**