



Photo by Paul Adkisson

Marcel Kyle & Smiling Jack

By JACKSON SELLERS

Excerpted and Updated From *Old Tom*,
Unfinished Sequel to *The Original Tomcat*



1956 Colahan Cruise Book

In St. Louis, Missouri, lives a great-grandfather who was once a snipe in the *USS Colahan*'s after engine room. As a very young man, a native of Belgium, he joined the United States Navy and reported to the veteran destroyer in early 1955. When he left the ship three years later, he was wearing the petty officer stripes of a machinist's mate second class. Thirty-seven years passed. Then, in 1995, he received an announcement concerning *The Original Tomcat* and *Old Tom*. The author of the *Colahan* histories was begging his old shipmates for sea stories, anything to enliven his narrative.

Dear Mr. Sellers:

Unfortunately I have no interesting anecdotes or sea stories to contribute to "Old Tom." I do, however, wish to reveal my single most frequently recalled dialogue during those years afloat. One day, while cruising the Pacific, military barriers between officers and enlisted personnel were momentarily broken for me. A young officer emerged on the main deck and walked toward me. I was standing near the after engine room hatch, waiting to go on duty. He smiled at me (most officers didn't). And then he stopped and spoke to me. Not about the after engine room, nor about my next watch. The condition of my dungarees was not an issue either. He was simply speaking with me! My foreign accent drew the usual question: "Where is home?" When I told him it was Brussels, Belgium, his curiosity grew and our conversation became even more friendly and cordial, although I remained shy in the presence of his intellect more than his rank. I believe he sensed my discomfort as he spoke of his schooling, so he asked me if I intended to further my education. I informed him of my wedding plans following my discharge. But he

insisted that I was college material and should pursue a degree as well. "I would be scared to death in college," I confessed. The officer stared at me in surprise. His smile widened. "You have it backwards," he replied. "College would be fun. It is marriage you should approach with fear." He patted my shoulder, suggested I give it some thought, and wished me well. My self-esteem expanded, but the officer's advice on education was shelved for the time being, waiting for maturity to intervene. Eventually it did! Thanks, Mr. Sellers.

Marcel Kyle

Indeed it did. Marcel Kyle married Sandra, fathered Jeff and Lisa, and eventually welcomed granddaughters Alycia and Emilie and even a third offspring generation to his family. But along the way he earned two Bachelor of Arts degrees, majoring in urban affairs at Saint Louis University and then obtaining a teaching certificate from St. Louis's Washington University.

Kei Sellers, the author's unmarried daughter, a student at the University of California in San Diego, laughed when she read Marcel Kyle's letter. Much more than once, she had heard Jack's decades-old caution on marriage. "It sounds just like you, Daddy," she said.

2007 Postscript: Marcel Kyle writes again:

Smiles were undoubtedly lacking on faces in the officers quarters of the USS Colahan. But Mr. J. Sellers smiled and chatted occasionally with enlisted members of the crew, as their equal. Mr. Edward Lull and Mr. J.J. Wachtel, both engineering officers, displayed similar friendly attitudes toward us "snipes." But that Sellers guy outshined them because, word had it, he was somewhat of a rebel.