



The Tale of the Cat

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Published in *The Tin Can Sailor*, October 2006

In the final year of the Pacific War, an admiral fondly nicknamed a *Fletcher*-class destroyer, a pioneer picket in a dangerous Fast Carrier Task Force tactic. And then an entire destroyer squadron adopted the newly christened destroyer's "Tomcat" nickname as its fighting symbol.

The *USS Colahan* (DD-658) was that original "Tomcat," the first to paint the image of an angry cat on each side of her forward stack. The *Colahan*'s artwork was duplicated aboard other *Fletchers* in Destroyer Squadron 53 — the *Uhlmann*, the *Halsey Powell*, the *Benham*, the *Cushing*, the *Stockham*, the *Twining*, the *Wedderburn* and the *Yarnall*. For the rest of the war, DesRon 53 warships steamed as the "Tomcat Squadron," and they carried their stack markings proudly into Tokyo Bay for Japan's surrender.

The *Colahan* acquired her "Tomcat" nickname during picket 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. It was Admiral McCain himself, grandfather of the U.S. senator from Arizona, who bestowed the nickname on this frontline destroyer.

McCain first relieved Mitscher on 30 October 1944, just after the Leyte Gulf battles. Two months earlier, following the Mariana campaign, Admiral William Halsey assumed command of the fleet, taking over from Admiral Raymond Spruance. The Fifth Fleet became the Third, and Carrier Task Force 58 became Task Force 38. In general, Mitscher was Spruance's carrier task force commander and McCain was Halsey's, but Mitscher hung on under Halsey through the initial strikes on the Philippines, while McCain, then commander of a task group, impatiently waited for Mitscher to step aside.



Courtesy of Henry S. Gaffin

Colahan's Stack Insignia, 1945



Vice Admiral John S. McCain

Now, finally, “Slew” McCain got his chance to lead the mightiest naval attack force the world had ever known.

The Luzon campaign in 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 *Fletcher*-class destroyers such as the *Colahan*. Single destroyers were stationed as advanced radar pickets, as much as fifty 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 notion was not new. In June of 1944, as Task Force 58 aligned itself under Spruance for what would become known as “The Mariana Turkey Shoot,” Rear Admiral Joseph “Jocko” Clark sent two CAP-protected destroyers fifty miles ahead of his task group. He was the first Pacific War admiral to make operational use of advanced radar pickets, but McCain, now commander of Task Force 38 under Halsey, would turn Clark’s concept into standard procedure. In December 1944, McCain placed selected destroyers far in advance of the carrier strike force. The Tomcats became the forward eyes and ears of the fleet, and of course they also became the first targets for in-bound Japanese aircraft.

The *Colahan* was one of the first destroyers, perhaps *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.

“*On Tomcat duty by ourselves,*” noted the *Colahan*’s Albert Sikorski in his diary on 14 December 1944. The yeoman’s succinct comment, recorded as usual on a typewriter in the ship’s office, had a plaintive quality to it. Another diarist aboard the ship, deckhand Bill Greenough, was also uneasy. “*Out radar jamming,*

60 miles ahead of task force,” he jotted in his notebook diary that day. “Have got three fighter planes for escort.” The trio of friendly planes buzzing overhead was a source of comfort to the young crewmen. The *Colahan*, three days out of Ulithi with Task Force 38, was involved in carrier strikes against Japanese-occupied Luzon, which was heavily defended. In her advanced picket station, far removed from the collective security of the fleet, she faced the very real threat of attack by land-based enemy planes. In this new assignment, she found herself in significant danger, and Sikorski and Greenough knew it.

Other men in the Pacific Fleet, many of them in high places, knew it, too. Commodore Arleigh Burke, a blackshoe destroyerman who served as chief of staff to the brownshoe Marc Mitscher, was appalled at the very notion of placing solitary destroyers in the path of attacking aircraft. A single destroyer could not possibly fight off simultaneous attacks by planes coming from several directions, and she might need help in repulsing even a one-plane attack. Far better, Burke felt, would be pickets assigned in division strength. Four or five destroyers, clustered together, could cover themselves with an umbrella of anti-aircraft fire.

The commodore, who earlier in the war had commanded the famed “Little Beaver” squadron of eight Fletchers, knew a thing or two about destroyers, but for the time being, in late 1944 and early 1945, Burke was out of the operational picture. He and Mitscher were back in Pearl Harbor, planning for 1945 assaults on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Admiral John McCain was in charge now, as the Luzon campaign shaped up, and he had different ideas.

In the final analysis, it would not matter to the *Colahan*, a warship on which fortune often smiled at just the right time. From beginning to end, from battle to battle, hers was a charmed life. Others would die in agony. Still others would be terribly maimed. But the *Colahan* would survive, by luck and by pluck, no matter where she was sent, no matter how perilous the situation. She would sail through the great battles of the Pacific War, and emerge with hardly a dent to console the enemy. And when the *Colahan* was attacked on Tomcat duty in April 1945, she furiously shot down two Japanese planes. This destroyer, something of bumpkin in peaceful seas, always excelled when danger was afoot.

At least once in the early weeks of the Tomcat patrols, Admiral McCain personally dubbed the *Colahan*. “Here comes the ol’ Tomcat,” he said — or something close to it — as the destroyer moved into fueling position alongside his flagship, the *USS Hancock (CV-19)*. 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 aggressiveness

and, well, virility. An old sailor smiles.

The *Colahan*'s stack insignia was designed by a firecontrolman named Franciszek Flis. He was not a professional artist, but he was an adequate cartoonist for the *Salt Spray*, the ship's mimeographed newspaper. In fashioning the snarling tomcat with claws bared, Flis drew inspiration from a Cat's Paw rubber heel advertisement found in magazines of the time. When painted on the stack, the tomcat itself stood out in black and white against a bright yellow background, snug inside a dark green "C" — the *Colahan*'s initial, of course.

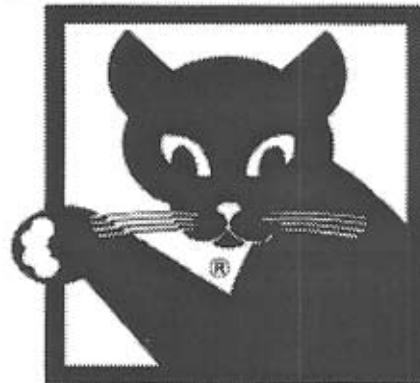
Commodore Harry "Beany" Jarrett liked it, and adopted it for his entire nine-ship Destroyer Squadron 53, which would be known informally as the "Tomcat Squadron" thereafter. "Uncle Beany was extremely proud of that insignia, and woe to the skipper who let his 'cat' get shoddy or in need of painting," said Dick Jones, a signalman on the commodore's staff. A system of chevrons and slashes was devised, and these markings stuck out from the central design for identification purposes, with the *Colahan* alone sporting a unique initial signature with nothing else needed. As a signalman, Jones could appreciate, more than most, these distinctive stack insignias within the squadron. "There were many times when we couldn't make out the small hull numbers at great distances, but the stack markings were clear," he said.

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 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? McCain

The *Colahan*, then skippered by Martin Shellabarger, responded promptly to "CTF 38," as the commander of Fast Carrier Task Force 38 was called. The

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The logo above was designed long after World War II, after Biltrite Corporation of Waltham, MA, acquired the Cat's Paw Rubber Company of Baltimore. But the logo at left, from a 1936 trade journal advertisement, may be the one that guided Franciszek Flis.

captain'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.

Whenever McCain was around, this destroyer always performed exceptionally well, very much as though danger were lurking. On three separate occasions in June 1945, the *Colahan* sped to the rescue of downed F4U pilots off the *USS Shangri-La (CV-38)*, a new long-hull *Essex*-class carrier that now served as McCain's flagship. Each time it happened, the admiral's attention was drawn, however briefly, back to the *USS Colahan* — the "Original Old Tom," as he himself called her.

Yes, this was one of the destroyers that, six months earlier, had inaugurated McCain's idea for advanced Tomcat early-warning pickets, a naval tactic in which he took a certain pride. Also, this was the destroyer whose name kept popping up in the first week of his first tour as task force commander, back in the autumn of 1944, when the *Hancock* was his flagship. The busy *Colahan* rescued ten *Hancock* aviators during those few days. She plucked five men from three floating wrecks on 29 October, then added five more from two downed planes in early November. Now, in June 1945, she was doing the same thing, rescuing pilots who, for one reason or another, were forced to ditch their planes in the ocean after taking off from McCain's new flagship, the *Shangri-La*.

So, on the Fourth of July, as the war neared its end, the admiral did one more nice thing for this little gray workhorse. He forwarded a message to her:

*Vice Admiral McCain and Shangri-La sending ice cream
with compliments to Old Tom.*

Excerpted from *The Original Tomcat* by Jackson Sellers, Xlibris (2004)