

Chapter 9: 1957: You Can't Tell Him a Damned Thing

Appropriate quote.

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Navy officer ranks are out of step with those of other military branches. They are *different*. Of course, the Navy has its admirals, and the Army, Air Force and Marines have their generals. An admiral equals a general. Everybody knows that. The equation is clearly understood. But there are plentiful opportunities for confusion and missteps below those exalted positions.



Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Jack Sellers added the half-stripe in September 1956 and quickly became the fourth most senior officer aboard the *Colahan*.

A full Navy lieutenant equals an Army captain, while a Navy captain — one who holds the rank of captain, not necessarily the commanding officer of a ship — stands shoulder to shoulder with a full Army colonel. Many a tale has been told about an Army captain giving a ration of aggravation to a Navy captain over the telephone, only to be jerked up sharply, surprised to learn that he is not dealing with a peer by a long shot. The Navy captain, with his four stripes, outranks the Army captain by three whole levels and may become a rear admiral before this impertinent Army whippersnapper makes major.

In the 1960s Jack's friend-to-be, Bill Billiter, found himself on the serendipitous side of a captaincy misunderstanding. Bill, a congressional aide at the time and also a captain in the Air Force Reserve, was a member of a reservist group that flew from Washington to Europe. The group's senior member was United States Senator Barry Goldwater, a Reserve general who, upon arrival in Europe, received all the honors that his rank and position deserved. Bill, one of several junior officers accompanying the general, enjoyed virtually the same treatment, for a while, because he was mistakenly listed as "Captain, United States Navy." For two days Bill wallowed in plush accommodations intended for high-ranking officers, until his junior ass was kicked into the Bachelor Officers Quarters where it belonged.

There is something magical about promotion from Navy ensign to lieutenant junior grade. The half stripe added to the full one on the sleeves and shoulder boards, the silver bars replacing the gold, the title “lieutenant” instead of “ensign” — all mean more than a landlubber can imagine. By any definition, “ensign” is a wimpy rank. Although it corresponds to second lieutenant in the Army, it hardly suggests an officer at all. To those unfamiliar with Navy ranks, “ensign” usually connotes something less than an officer — a cadet maybe, while “lieutenant,” even when denigrated by the suffix “junior grade,” has a

13 August 1956

From: Secretary of the Navy

*To: ENS Raymond J. Sellers, USNR
USS Colahan (DD-658)
Fleet Post Office
San Francisco, California*

Subj: Temporary Appointment

The President temporarily appoints you a Lieutenant (Junior Grade) in the Reserve of the United States Navy to rank from 4 September 1956.

*For the President
CHARLES S. THOMAS
Secretary of the Navy*

nice ring of authority. The suffix is seldom mentioned anyway; it is a tail never wagged, at least not by the officer to whom it is attached. By long-standing tradition, a lieutenant junior grade is a lieutenant, period.

As veteran junior officers left the *USS Colahan*, either for reassignment or discharge, Jack rose like cream in fresh milk, through no effort of his own. One by one, the JGs left, replaced by ensigns with bright stripes, and 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. Every officer on the right side of the table — that is, the captain's right — was always senior to the officer facing him. The captain was flanked, on his right and left respectively, by the executive and operations officers — 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 poorer cuts pass on to the ensigns and lieutenants junior grade whose dates of rank did not equal his.

“But he 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, and Commander DeBuhr, a stickler for protocol, told them so.

Jack's date of commission was March 4, 1955, the day he graduated from Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. The majority of the officers commissioned in 1955 held dates of rank in June, the traditional time of graduation at both the U.S. Naval Academy and the universities where naval officer training was offered. Jack had at least three months of seniority on them, and that, by God and by the Navy, was that. *Tough shit, fellows.*

USS Colahan, Vallejo, California, 10 February 1957:

It's been so long since I've written that I feel I should sign this letter with my full name so you'll know for sure who it is from. I've been very busy. Work here in the yard has reached a peak. The ship is slowly but surely being refitted for duty at sea. It almost seems like a ship again.

The *Colahan* was in Vallejo, California, near San Francisco, for extensive overhaul. In his spare time, Jack was teaching himself Japanese aboard ship and taking Japanese conversation lessons at the Berlitz school in downtown San Francisco.

I've been painting my stateroom the last couple of days. I could have waited until the stewards got around to it, but I felt they probably wouldn't do as good a job as I wanted anyway, so I decided to do it myself. I'm beginning to get things in good shape. I found a good bunk at the shipyard junkyard and I've had it installed in my room. It's more like a bed than a bunk.

I'm still studying Japanese. I'm doing pretty well, I think. I've been studying it for over a month now. I can say quite a few useful things, and I can write anything I can say. It's quite complicated, of course, but I'm doing fine with it. I'm certainly glad I have a solid understanding of English grammar, which helps a lot in studying a foreign language.

This self-congratulation comes from a young man who had just erred in his choice of “who” over “whom” in the first sentence of this letter.

The Japanese writing along the edge of this letter is written in Hiragana, one of the two basic sets of characters that the Japanese use. A good translation of it would be: “I am an American naval officer. My ship is a destroyer.” It’s good Japanese, but when I get further into the language I’ll be able to shorten it considerably with the use of Kanji, pure Chinese characters adopted by the Japanese. I know a number of Kanji already.

In Roman characters, the *Hiragana* that Jack wrote in the margin can be rendered thusly: “*Watakushi wa Beikoku no kaigun shikan desu. Watakushi no fune wa kuchikukan desu.*”

USS Colahan, San Diego, California, 4 April 1957:

How are things on the home front? Things are pretty tough on the sea front. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you just how busy I’ve been. We started our refresher training the first of this month. I’ve got a big communications inspection tomorrow. Also, I’ve been going to school — cryptography school. I’m not learning too much; I’m pretty sharp on that stuff anyway. When I talked the training officer into sending me, I was thinking only in terms of getting away from the ship, forgetting completely that this week was going to be such a tough one that I’d have to work aboard ship, too. Oh well, I’ll make up for it the first chance I get.

Just when I think this guy is maturing a bit, he starts swaggering and whining at the same time.

Since I left San Francisco, I haven’t had the time to learn much more Japanese, but I have found the time to study and practice what I already know. Maybe I can’t go ahead at the present time but I’ll be damned before I’ll slip back. I’ll let communications go to pot aboard this ship before I do that. I’ve got too much invested in it now.

Well, I’m very sleepy so I’m going to quit writing. I’ll call you before we leave for the Far East.

USS Colahan, San Diego, California, 13 April 1957:

It’s early in the morning and I’m on watch. I’m sitting in the wardroom when I should be on the quarterdeck, but the captain and the exec are at home,

Marcel Kyle and Smiling Jack

In St. Louis, Missouri, lives a 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 to his family, but along the way he earned two Bachelor of Arts degrees. He majored in urban affairs at Washington State University in Seattle, then became a certified French teacher after studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

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.

of course, so it doesn't make much difference.

I've been working hard. The training schedule aboard ship has been pretty rough. There's a lot to do. We've just finished another week of operations at sea, and now we're all happy to be back in port for a week.

I'm amazed at how fast time has flown in the last few weeks. It won't be long before we'll be heading for the Far East. I'm really looking forward to it after studying Japanese so hard. I wish I had more time for study. I've been pretty hard-pressed lately.

In late spring of 1957, the *Colahan* steamed west on the last Asian cruise she would ever make.

USS Colahan, Yokosuka, Japan, 7 July 1957:

Tomorrow we go to sea again. We'll conduct type training exercises for about a week and then join Task Force 72 in Taiwan. During the three weeks we'll spend there, we'll be patrolling the straits half of the time and pulling liberty in Kaohsiung the other half. There's not much to do in Kaohsiung — at least there wasn't last year, and I have no reason to think that things have changed — but it's a port anyway, and I prefer any port to being at sea.

*After our stint with Task Force 72, we'll go to Hong Kong. I'm planning to buy quite a few clothes there this year. I need them badly. All of my civilian clothes are rapidly going to pieces. In fact, my uniforms aren't in good shape either. I got screwed in Hong Kong once before, you'll remember, but I expect to have better luck this time. There's a tailor in Kowloon, on the Mainland, who's supposed to be pretty good. Last year a half dozen officers from the *Colahan* and quite a few from the other three ships in my division bought clothes from this tailor, and they seemed to have gotten a pretty good deal. We'll be spending about a week there, and I'm going to start right away and make arrangements for my clothes. That way I can be certain of fine materials and perfect fits.*

It won't be long before I'll be relieved of my job as communications officer. I am trying to get everything in good shape for my relief. I'm afraid he's going to have a pretty tough time at first. He hasn't been to Communications School and I don't suppose he'll get the chance now. But I'll be aboard for quite a



A somber LTJG Jack Sellers, near the end of his three-year Navy career.

while yet and I'll help him as much as I can. As I told you before, I'll become Combat Information Officer as soon as I'm relieved. It'll be a much easier job and I'm looking forward to it.

Like all ships, the *Colahan* sliced through the waves when she was steaming straight ahead, but when the rudder was brought left or right, she skidded through the water as she made the turn. For a short period of time before she settled onto her new course, her beam would be pushing against the awesome weight of the sea, propelled by the momentum of the old course. The physics involved here almost got Jack into trouble.

It is a curiosity of Navy life that good sailors come from landlocked regions. Jack, a Midwesterner by birth and inclination, was a good sailor in several important respects. For one thing, he had a cast-iron stomach and never got seasick even in the foulest weather. He was just as quick to hit the sack as the queasy ones when the seas got rough, but that stemmed from laziness, not seasickness. More important, especially for an officer of the deck underway, Jack possessed an acute sense of relative motion and spatial relations. In a formation of steaming ships, Jack could “see,” as though from great height, where his ship should be, and how to get there if the flagship changed course.

This assessment of Jack's shiphandling capabilities is not guesswork, nor is it overgenerous praise from a biased biographer. Jack was given a battery of tests shortly after arriving at Officer Candidate School in 1954. Unimpressed with his over-all performance, especially with his low score in math, he dismissed the results in self-deprecating fashion: “The tests proved what I've always suspected; I am not a genius. I'm somewhere in that happy middle-upperclass of bright but not ultra-bright individuals. That suits me. After all, I could have been born an idiot. Anyway, I'll just go my merry way, hiding my native stupidity behind a cloak of education.”

Overlooked by Jack, but not by the Navy, were his scores of 80 percentile in relative movement and 91 in spatial relations. Jack and other would-be officers, steeped in campus literary and mathematical traditions, had little appreciation of the importance of those esoteric measurements. The tasks awaiting them on the bridges of warships were still many months away. As college boys, they measured themselves by their scores in math and word relationships, skills acquired mostly in classrooms. Jack had scored 40 in math and 69 in language — respectable but not impressive.

Spatial relations, in its linear sense, refers to the conceptual arrangement of objects on an unlimited surface. That was kid stuff — something you are born with and occasionally tested on, not a skill to cultivate, to be proud of. But the Navy, with its specialized needs, knew that the objects on that surface were

ships on the ocean, and it saw that only nine percent of all former OCS students, constituting the cream of America's healthy male college graduates, scored higher than this barefoot boy out of Kentucky. Despite his many flaws, Jack had the stuff of a superior seagoing line officer.

Remember, there are no sign posts at sea. The flagship, the only tangible guide, moves this way and that. If your station is a thousand yards on the flagship's starboard quarter, and if the flagship changes course ninety degrees to port, you are suddenly far off station, and you must increase speed and come left to get back on it, meanwhile avoiding collision with all the other ships that are trying to do the same thing at the same time. It was Jack's talent in doing this that helped him become qualified as *Officer of the Deck, Underway, Fast Carrier Task Force*, the highest shiphandling qualification in the Navy.

On a hot, calm evening in the South China Sea, while the *Colahan* was steaming in formation, with Jack on the bridge as officer of the deck, the crew asked permission to show the nightly movie on the fantail, where a soft ocean breeze would make the entertainment more pleasant. It would be much cooler than the stifling crew's mess. Sure, Jack said, and he told the crew to go ahead and swing around the fantail gun mount to provide a backdrop for the movie screen. It was a routine matter, and he quickly forgot about it, turning his attention to the humdrum details of keeping the ship on station, which left plenty of time to admire the fading sunset and stare with hypnotic fascination at the phosphorous swirls generated by the ship's movement through the dark waters below the bridge.

The radio in the pilot house suddenly squawked to life. The commodore on the flagship, perhaps as bored as everybody else, was ordering a change of course. *Immediate execution!* The commodore wanted to see, in response to his order, a figurative puff of smoke from every stack. He wanted to see his ships jump to attention and race to their new stations. He was keeping everybody on their toes.

Jack obliged. He took a mental snapshot of the situation, then ordered the helmsman to make a sharp turn to port and come to a heading that would move the *Colahan* in the direction of her new station relative to the flagship. He also barked an order to increase speed to twenty knots. The duty crew in Combat Information Center, in the bowels of the ship, would figure out the precise course and speed, refining Jack's initial orders. But it never got that far, because, in the course of the turn, Jack was jolted to receive a report that a crewman, watching the movie on the fantail, may have been washed overboard.

When the *Colahan* skidded as she made the turn, a wave broke over the fantail, washing several sailors against the lines. In the confusion, someone may have fallen into the sea and might, at that very moment, be bobbing in the

Colahan's wake, watching with growing despair as the ship's lights receded in the wet darkness.

To his credit, Jack responded correctly. He ordered CIC to make a dead-reckoning plot back to the spot where the man may have been lost — a tricky calculation embracing several inexact factors, including the diameter of the ship's turning circle as she headed back to an estimated point in an unmarked ocean. The captain was called to the bridge. A muster of the crew was ordered. Spotlights on the flying bridge probed the darkness as the *Colahan* searched for her lost crewman.

A few minutes later, reports from all departments indicated that one man was indeed missing, and Jack, deprived of hope that it was all a horrible mistake, that it had not happened at all, began to sweat. Visions of a court martial popped into his head. As officer of the deck, he had been negligent, failing to issue a warning to exposed crewmen. He had maneuvered the ship in a way that endangered shipmates, causing the death of one of them. In all phases of life, it is permissible to be negligent only if you get away with it.

But in the end — long, agonizing minutes later — the missing man was found asleep in the boatswain's locker, oblivious to the muster call and all the excitement on the bridge and the weather decks. Everybody, especially Jack, was relieved to find the son of bitch safe aboard ship and not floating around somewhere out there.

The *Colahan*, whole again, a healthy microorganism in the always dangerous sea, sped off to rejoin her squadron, still conned by an officer with an unblemished record.

USS *Colahan*, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, 30 July 1957:

We are just finishing up with our second patrol and have only one more to go before heading for Hong Kong. We are a little late in returning to port because we had to join up with five small Chinese Nationalist ships for antisubmarine warfare exercises. We won't get into port before about 5:30 tonight.

Things have been pretty peaceful here on the patrol. We haven't done much except steam back and forth, taking good looks at the various merchant ships that come through. Most of them are British ships. As you know, England is trading quite a bit with China now.

I guess it's pretty hot in Evansville nowadays, huh? It's sure hot enough here in Taiwan, and we'll be even farther south when we arrive in Hong Kong.

I had some good news the other day. A message arrived which said: "Reserve officers serving initial tours of active duty and with release-from-duty dates in Dec., 1957, Jan., Feb., or Mar., 1958, will be released up to three

months early.” It couldn’t have been better if I’d written it myself. It means that I’ll probably get off this ship two or three months early. I’ll get my orders just that much earlier. If they give me shore duty in Japan, I’ll take it. If they don’t,

23 September 1957

From: Chief of Naval Personnel

*To: LTJG Raymond J. Sellers, USNR
USS Colahan (DD-658)
Fleet Post Office
San Francisco, California*

Subj: Release from active duty

When directed by your commanding officer on or after 1 December 1957 and in sufficient time to permit completion of separation processing prior to 20 December 1957, you will regard yourself detached from duty at your present station.... You will proceed to a port in the United States and upon arrival further proceed immediately and report to the appropriate activity nearest the port of debarkation for temporary duty in connection with your separation processing. Upon completion of your separation processing and when directed by the commanding officer of the activity at which you are separated, you will regard yourself detached and proceed to your home for release from active duty.

*For the President
CHARLES S. THOMAS
Secretary of the Navy*

I’ll get out of the Navy and go back to school for a master’s degree. Either one would be educational. I’ll be home for Christmas at any rate — whether for good or not will depend upon the Navy.

Jack was still toying with the idea of accepting promotion to full lieutenant and staying in the Navy for another few years. He would soon abandon the notion.

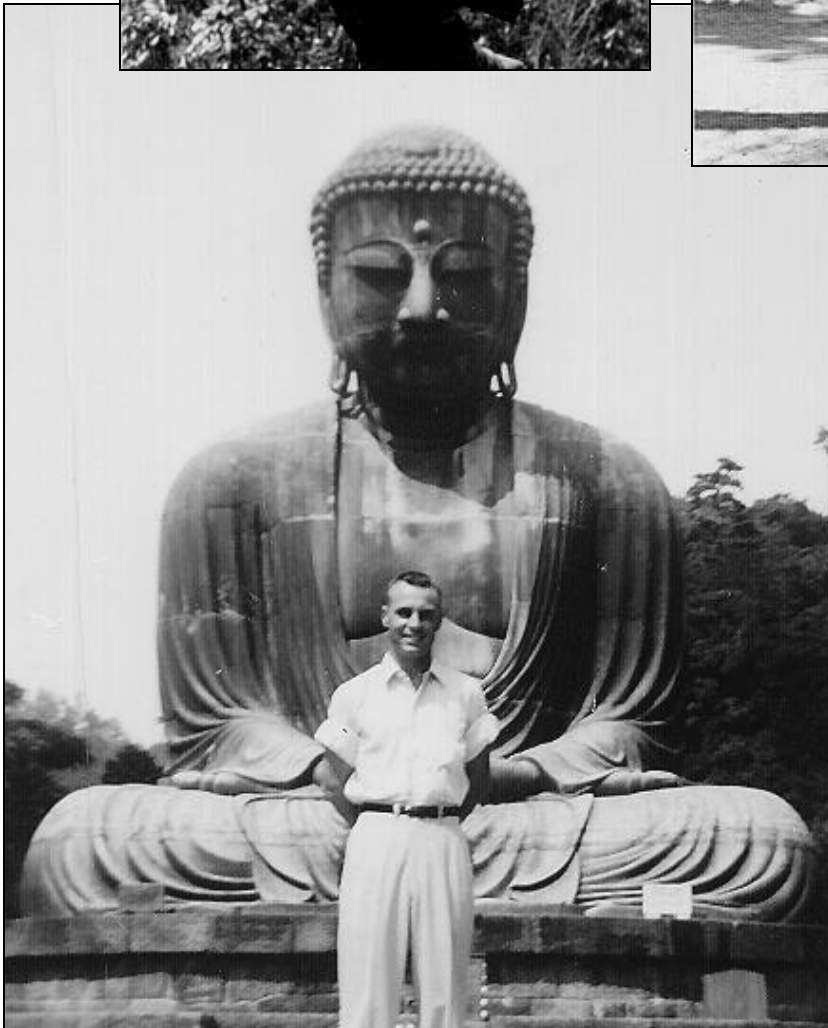
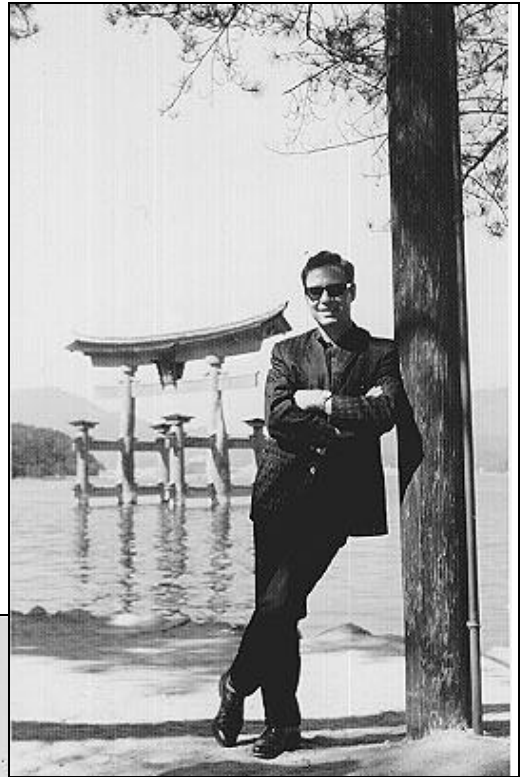
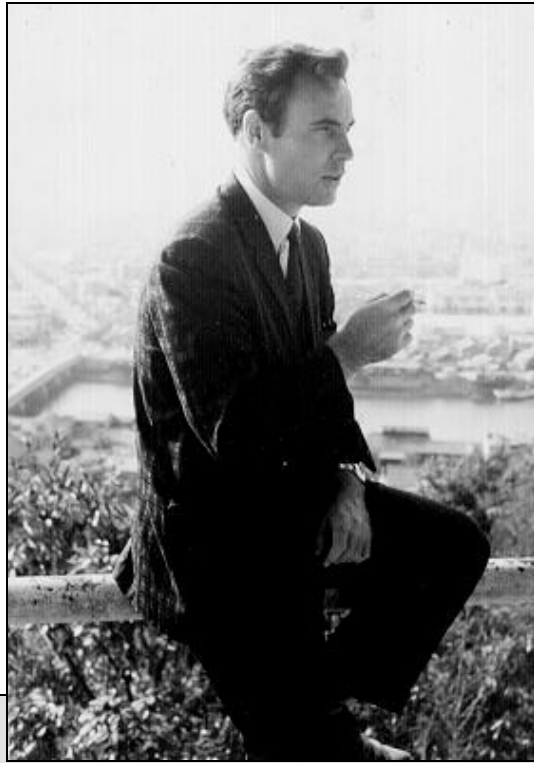
USS Colahan, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, 6 August 1957:

Today is our last day on patrol. Tomorrow at 0700, after refueling at Kaohsiung, we'll head for Hong Kong. It's not far from here — only twenty-four hours. We'll arrive there on the morning of the 8th. Everyone is looking forward to it. We left Japan almost a month ago and we haven't hit a decent liberty port since. If you remember, I don't think much of Kaohsiung and neither does anyone else. It has a few bars and that's all. Hong Kong is considered by most sailors to be the best liberty port in the Far East. Personally I prefer Japan, but I have nothing against Hong Kong. I'll probably play golf and then have dinner at the Foreign Correspondents Club. Also I'm planning to take a tour that I missed the first two times. But the big thing for me will be the purchase of new clothes. I need them badly. I don't have as much money as I hoped to have, but I think I'll be able to afford a sportcoat, two pairs of slacks and maybe a pair of shoes. Right now I don't even have a pair of shoes that would pass an inspection.

This year is going by awfully fast. Here it is August already — the downhill side toward Christmas. My ship will arrive in San Diego around the 20th of November. I'll be practically finished with the Colahan by that time. The ship probably won't go to sea again until the first of the year, and I'll most likely be off by then.

The Navy's new policy of letting reserve officers out three months early will help me a lot. It means I'll probably leave the Colahan early whether I extend or not — and believe me, I certainly want to leave this ship early. The captain has been giving me a tough time lately — not just me, of course, since everybody has been getting nipped by the Old Man's fangs, but I don't like it, and it has made me much more dissatisfied with this type of life than I was before. The captain, in a great many ways, is a stupid man — and 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 now at 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 about potatoes, and you can't tell him a damned thing.

Any naval officer who rises to command of a warship is deserving of respect. It doesn't matter if he is Captain Bly, Mister Roberts or CL Keedy. But there are degrees of respect. It is very likely, even probable, that Captain Keedy didn't think much of Jack either. DeBuhr on Keedy: "I thought he was lazy and inconsiderate. I remember that, while on patrol, he would maneuver the ship until there was no relative wind, so that he could sun-bathe while the rest of the



Clockwise from left, Jack poses before the Great Buddha at Kamakura, perches on a railing in Hiroshima and leans against a pole at Miyajima in the Inland Sea. Jack's fascination with Japan kept drawing him back to the island nation. After his Navy discharge, he returned to Japan three separate times, once as a student in the late Fifties, twice as a newspaperman in the early Sixties. The visits were long ones, totaling more than five years. He met his wife, Yoshiko, in Tokyo.

ship sweltered.” [Keep DeBuhr out of this, Jackson.]

So Jack goes home, on a slightly sour note, just in time for Christmas 1957 He spends the next seven years studying, working and just living on both sides of the Pacific. In the United States, he studies at Indiana University and works at the *Evansville Press* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. In Tokyo, he studies at International Christian University and works at *Pacific Stars & Stripes* and the *Asahi Evening News*. But all of that is another story In 1965 he adopts his middle name, Jackson, and gets married. He settles down and becomes a father. He goes to work again for the *Courier-Journal* as a writer, then for the *Los Angeles Times* as an editor. But that is still another story.