

Chapter 12: The Death of the Colahan

*On sluggish, lonesome waters, anchor'd near the shore,
An old, dismasted, gray and batter'd ship, disabled, done,
After free voyages to the seas of the earth, haul'd up at last
and hawser'd tight,
Lies rusting, mouldering,
Awaiting her death!*

Walt Whitman, "Leaves of Grass"

Every captain who ever commanded her, and almost every seaman who ever sailed her, was still alive when she died. A famous admiral had dubbed her "Old Tom" when she was still young, and she was not really old now, in late 1966 — only twenty-three years had passed since her commissioning pennant rose in the midst of her first war — but it was time to die, as deemed fitting by her masters, the great gods of the United States Navy.

There is really not much to say about an old sailor's death. A cancer sprouts within his lungs after years of smoking cigarettes, or his heart erupts because of a genetic weakness, or a blood vessel in his brain bursts, or he just gets old and withers away. Sometimes he is killed by accident or in battle. Sometimes he is murdered. No matter what, he dies and that is the end of him. A ship is not much different. She is born, she sails on great adventures, and she dies like everything that has ever lived.

[The *Ammen* (DD-527) and *Collett* (DD-730) collision. A false lead.]

At least eighteen *Fletchers*, all of them World War II veterans, were hauled to sea in postwar decades and sunk as target ships. They were fish in a barrel, powerless, docile and harmless. American gunfire, bombs, torpedoes and missiles, fired or launched by aspiring warriors, did what the nation's enemies could not do. The ships, many of them heavily decorated, sank to the ocean's bottom, where they lie today. One was the *USS Colahan* (DD-658). The others were the *Waller* (DD-466), the *Beale* (DD-471), the *Conway* (DD-507), the *Cony* (DD-508), the *Eaton* (DD-510), the *Trathen* (DD-530), the *Tingey* (DD-539), the *Wickes* (DD-578), the *Young* (DD-580), the *Haraden* (DD-585), the *Bell* (DD-587), the *Burns* (DD-588), the *Howorth* (DD-592), the *Killen* (DD-

593), the *Ingersoll* (DD-652), the *Bryant* (DD-665) and the *Hopewell* (DD-681).

[The last captain. Circumstances of the *Colahan*'s death.]

*O, better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave.*

Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Old Ironsides"