



Franciszek Flis, shown above in a fantail photo, with the hands of fellow *USS Colahan* firecontrolmen resting on his shoulders. Flis painted the “Tomcat” on the *Colahan*’s stack.

The Painter of the ‘Cat’

While writing *The Original Tomcat*’s Chapter 7, “The Tale of the Cat,” I had considerable difficulty in even identifying the *Colahan* crewman who designed and painted the “Tomcat” insignia on the ship’s forward stack in 1944. Dick Jones told me the artist must have been someone on the *Colahan* because the *Colahan* was the first of the nine Destroyer Squadron 53 warships to sport the insignia. Henry S. Gaffin and Frank Gardner eventually came up with the unlikely name of Franciszek Flis. That was more than 10 years ago. Only this month (February 2005) did I get a look at the face of young Franciszed Flis, a plank-owner, a firecontrolman and the initial cartoonist for the destroyer’s mimeographed “Salt Spray” newsletter. There he was, standing sixth from the left in a photograph forwarded by Bob McDonald. His artwork adorned a Pacific War squadron of *Fletcher*-class destroyers.

The *Colahan*’s WWII “Cat” insignia was unique in that it was painted inside a large “C” (C for *Colahan*). But Flis’s angry tomcat was quickly adopted by the eight other ships in Destroyer Squadron 53. In their case, a system of bars and slashes was devised so that individual ships could be readily identified with binoculars. I

am told by Pacific War signalmen that these large stack insignias were handy at sea, because wartime hull numbers were so small and *Fletchers* mostly looked alike. The *Colahan* could never be mistaken for a sister. Flis drew inspiration from a Cat's Paw rubber heel advertisement that he surely saw in a magazine. It had to be a tomcat because the *Colahan* was one of the first, perhaps THE first, to be sent out on "Tomcat" patrols 50 miles ahead of the fleet's fast carrier task force – a lonely and very dangerous place to be in those *kamikaze* times. And because Vice Admiral John S. McCain said "Here comes the ol' Tomcat," or something close to it, as the *Colahan* moved into fueling position alongside his flagship in late 1944. The *Colahan* damned near became McCain's pet destroyer. Once, in a message that had no purpose other than fondness, the admiral referred to "the original Old Tom himself," and another time he sent ice cream "with compliments to Old Tom." Flis's artwork solidified the nickname for everybody. Desron 53 would steam for nearly a year as the "Tomcat Squadron" but the *Colahan* would always be THE Tomcat.

In *The Original Tomcat*, I misspelled Flis's given name, rendering it as "Franciszed" instead of "Franciszek" in the chapter called "The Tale of the Cat." His name was spelled correctly only in Appendix G, which lists *Colahan* plank-owners. I never said I was perfect. Anyway, after five editions, the book is engraved in stone and can't be modified.

Jackson Sellers