

Too Young to Drink, Too Young to Vote, Old Enough to Serve

He was too young to drink liquor and too young to vote, but that didn't stop Henry Cochran from joining the Navy. On the last day of February 1942, as the United States was still transitioning from peacetime to war, Henry Hutchinson Cochran entered the service. He was sent to Norfolk, Virginia for basic training and then to the University of Illinois where he graduated from the Navy's signal school. Perhaps Cochran felt at home on that college campus, having attended Clemson the previous year as a freshman member of the Class of 1944.



Henry Cochran was well known as an athlete, having played center on the Bantam football team at the High School of Charleston. His success as a track and field athlete, had won him more than 14 ribbons and four medals—along with the nickname “Runner.” An English major, he completed his first year at Clemson in June 1941, but did not return for the fall semester of his sophomore year.

One of the Navy's newest sailors was assigned to one of its newest ships. Having earned his rating as a signalman, Cochran was assigned in August 1942 to the USS *DeHaven* (DD469) the keel of which had been laid only the previous September. *DeHaven* was one of a growing number of new ships joining the Navy as the United States belatedly embarked on a shipbuilding program in anticipation of the expanding world conflict. The ship had been launched in June, but was not formally commissioned until September, after Cochran's arrival. Following battle-readiness exercises off the coast of New England, *DeHaven* departed Norfolk for the South Pacific on November 8.



The attention of the country that fall of 1942 had been riveted on Guadalcanal, an island in the faraway Solomon Island chain. US Marines had staged America's first ground offensive against the Japanese by invading Guadalcanal in August and were locked in a deadly struggle to expel the Japanese from the island. The Marines had been successful in capturing and holding the island's main airfield, but command of the seas surrounding the island was an unsettled issue. Japanese ships continued to stage nightly raids into the area.

DeHaven, with Cochran aboard, arrived at Guadalcanal as part of the escort for a convoy of troopships on December 7. For a week, *DeHaven* screened the convoy before sailing out of the battle area to Espiritu Santo and Noumea, major military supply and support bases for the South Pacific area of operations. She patrolled in the waters of the Southern Solomons to stop

the "Tokyo Express," the nightly effort to resupply the beleaguered Japanese troops still fighting on Guadalcanal, and took part in two bombardments of Kolombangara island during January 1943.

On 1 February 1943, *DeHaven* was ordered to screen six landing craft and a seaplane tender establishing a beachhead at Marovo on Guadalcanal. While escorting two of the landing craft back to their base that afternoon, *DeHaven* was warned of an impending Japanese air attack. At 1445, the crew, including Cochran, rushed to battle stations. *DeHaven's* lookouts sighted 14 unidentified airplanes, six of which peeled out of formation and headed toward the destroyer. *DeHaven's* gunners downed three of these planes, but not before all six had dropped their bombs. *DeHaven* was hit by three bombs and further damaged by a near miss. One bomb hit the superstructure squarely, killing the commanding officer instantly. Two bombs smashed on her bow and another exploded below her waterline, splitting open her hull plating. The ship lost propulsion and the ability to steer.

Severely crippled, *DeHaven* glided to a halt and began to settle swiftly by the bow. Five minutes after the last bomb had hit, the destroyer's bow was well under, her stern high out of the water.

Ensign C.L. Williams, the only officer who was not killed or wounded, passed the word to abandon ship. While the personnel below decks were scrambling to escape *DeHaven* suddenly upended and plunged beneath the water. *DeHaven* lost 167 of its officers and crew, including Henry Cochran of Charleston, who two months short of his 21st birthday, was still too young to drink, too young to vote, but old enough to make the ultimate sacrifice for his country.

