



Marblehead Biography of George Allen Agnew



George Allen Agnew
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

George Allen Agnew was born on 20 Aug 1922 in Gilbert, Story County, Iowa, a farming town right in the middle of the state with 221 souls living there at the time of George's birth. His mother was homemaker Iowa-born Leona Electa Mabie and Pennsylvania-born Albert Allen Agnew, a grain elevator foreman. George was the first child of the couple. George had one sibling, Nancy Claire (1926-2024).

Agnew enlisted on 10 Sep 1940 in Des Moines, IA. He first appears aboard USS Henderson, from which he was transferred to *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* effective 14 Sep 1941, corroborated by matching entries in both ships' muster rolls: Henderson shows him detached as she sailed from Tutuila, and Marby shows him received for duty the same day as a Fireman 2nd Class (F2c).

George joined *Marby* late in the ship's history with Asia, which began when she joined the Asiatic Fleet in 1938. Normally, she wintered in the Philippines working from Manila and she summered in China operating from Shanghai. Shanghai was then one of the globe's most cosmopolitan cities, a trading, financial and artistic powerhouse with a potent mix of opium smuggling, gambling, and prostitution. Unfortunately, China, and Shanghai in particular, were the focus of Japan's strategy to control Asia. Its annexation of China's industrial heartland, Manchuria, in 1932, and its commencement of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, had escalated tension with the United States. By the time George arrived aboard *Marby*, Japan controlled all the ports of China except for Hong Kong, and while *Marby* did spend the summer of 1940 in China, when she sailed from Tsingtao in early September that year, it was a final farewell. Except for a cruise to Guam, she spent the remainder of 1940 and most of 1941 in Philippine waters focusing on battle training as war grew increasingly likely in the minds of *Marby's* skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson, and the rest of the ship's leadership and crew.

On 25 Nov 41, sensing that hostilities were imminent, Admiral Thomas Hart, Commander of the Asiatic Fleet, ordered most of his ships to disperse without fanfare to the southwest and into the Netherlands East Indies (NEI; today's Indonesia). On the night of the 29th, *Marby* anchored off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI to await further orders. The ship was darkened for additional security.

Nine days later, at 0328 hours on 8 Dec 41, *Marby's* radio receiver crackled with news of the attack on Pearl Harbor and conveyed the order: "The Japanese have commenced hostilities. Act accordingly." *Marby's* General Quarters alarm blared moments later, and the crew's response foretold the training, discipline and spirit that would later save the ship, i.e., from their deep sleep, the entire 700+ crew was standing at attention at their battle stations within eight minutes.

At dawn, *Marby* weighed anchor and headed for Balikpapan, an oil port on the east coast of Borneo. Arriving on 11 Dec 41, the crew began stripping the ship of unnecessary items and otherwise prepared to execute war plans. During this stop more details poured in on the disaster at Pearl Harbor, where most of the crew had friends to worry about.

Word soon reached the crew that British battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* had been sunk on 10 Dec 41 in the South China Sea east of the Malay Peninsula. Previously, battleships had been considered invincible, but Japanese naval air superiority had just made quick victims of those British behemoths. These events sharpened *Marby's* crew's focus on the ship's vulnerabilities. "For if those great British and American battlewagons, with their vast belts of bulges designed to serve as torpedo shock absorbers, couldn't take it from the Japanese fliers, what chance had an old bucket like the *Marblehead*

Lunch-with-Ray¶

When word reached the *Marby* at 03:28 on 8 Dec 41 of the disaster at Pearl Harbor, Raymond (Ray) Delos Kester, RM2c, then a 21-year-old off-watch radioman, was catching a few winks on the floor of the *Marby's* transmitter room. Over lunch¹ in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC on 11 Sep 2016, still ambulatory and cracking jokes at 96, Ray recalled the call to general quarters that followed receipt of the historic message 75 years earlier. He said that the entire complement of the *Marblehead*, 725 officers and enlisted men, went from deep sleep to general quarters in a mere eight minutes, an early indication of the discipline and instinct for survival that would soon save the ship.¶

¹Lunch with this biography's author.¶



whose A.A. battery was but a tiny fraction of any of those capital ships and whose slender sides had no such protection? Any torpedo that struck her would strike below her fragile armor belt which was only three inches thick at its heaviest. Her main battery could not be used against planes, and the seven 3-inch A.A.'s plus four .50 calibre machine guns atop the foremast and four more aft amounted to something considerably less than impressive.”¹

Once fully fueled, *Marby* departed Balikpapan's fuel dock on 16 Dec and crossed Makassar Strait to Makassar City on Celebes Island, arriving on 18 Dec 41 to reprovision from cargo ship *USS Gold Star* (AG-12) and other sources. She departed Makassar on 22 Dec 41 for the Dutch Naval Base at Surabaya, Java, arriving on Christmas Eve. There, Capt. Robinson granted his men limited shore leave despite the risk of Japanese air attack.

On the last days of 1941, *Marby* was cutting across the Flores Sea escorting the French mail ship *MS Marechal Joffre* from Surabaya to Darwin, Australia. Formerly owned by the pro-Nazi Vichy French government, *Marechal Joffre* had been brazenly captured by American naval aviators and ground crews in Manila Bay and used to escape the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Once in Darwin, *Marechal Joffre* sailed on to San Francisco to be inducted into the U.S. Navy (see the [Marechal Joffre Story](#)), and for a few days, *Marby* temporarily became Radio Darwin, a beacon that facilitated the regrouping of remaining Allied warships to slow the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia. In that effort, *Marby* soon headed north, and on the night of 23-24 Jan 1942, she covered Destroyer Division 59 (*USS John D. Ford*, *USS Parrott*, *USS Paul Jones*, and *USS Pope*) in its retirement from a raid on a Japanese convoy at Balikpapan in which, according to the destroyer division commander's own after-action message, seven enemy ships were sunk and an undetermined number damaged.

Marby spent the last week of January 1942 in Surabaya, and by 1 February, she was cruising off Madura Strait. On February 3rd, a flight of about 40 Japanese planes passed overhead en route to bomb Surabaya. One plane lingered behind to get reconnaissance on the ships below which also included heavy cruiser *USS Houston*, the smaller Dutch cruisers, *De Ruyter* and *Tromp*, and seven Dutch and American destroyers.

The following morning “broke red, burnishing the bottoms of clouds that floated across the sky before a mild westerly breeze. The lookouts could see the high mountains of Bali looming in the distance.”² A little after 0900, Admiral Doorman on *De Ruyter* received a dispatch which he then flashed to all ships: “37 bombers to Surabaya, course SSW”. By the time the message reached *Marby*'s Capt. Robinson, the ship's lookouts had spotted the planes approaching from the east at 17,000 feet. Each had the red sun of Japan painted on its tail and wings. All hell soon broke loose.

Despite successful evasive action on the first three bombing runs, *Marby* eventually suffered two direct hits and a third near-miss close to her port bow. The damage was severe - one bomb jammed *Marby*'s rudder causing her to steam in a predictable circle. Another strike knocked out her gyroscope, all electricity and internal communication. Multiple fires soon swept the ship. The near miss ripped a large gash in *Marby*'s bow, flooding compartments and causing the ship to begin to sink. Fortunately, the enemy assumed the sea would finish off what their bombs had begun, so they flew off after bigger prey-heavy cruiser *USS Houston*.

The Japanese knew nothing of the character of the men to whom she was home. Eleven sailors were killed that day and another eighty-four were injured, four of whom later died of their wounds, but the remaining able-bodied crew defied the odds, the Japanese, and the Java Sea. After bailing by hand non-stop for more than seventy hours, over the next ninety days, they would coax the crippled cruiser 20,589 miles across the Indian and Atlantic oceans to enter New York harbor on 4 May 42. *Marby*'s bombing in the Battle of Makassar Strait and her escape to New York are described in detail in *Marby*'s [own biography](#) and in the 1944 book *Where Away: A Modern Odyssey*.

¹ *Where Away: A Modern Odyssey*, p.42

² *Where Away: A Modern Odyssey*, pp. 108–109.

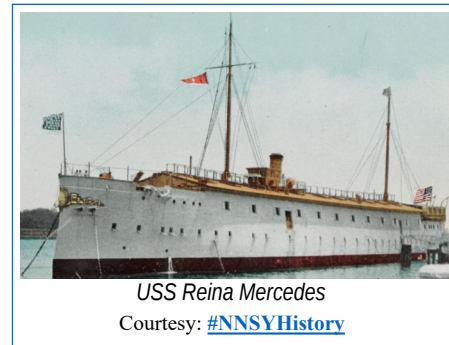


Japan claimed several times in the international press that it had sunk *Marby*. The Navy never contradicted those claims but kept the improbable voyage home secret for security reasons until the ship arrived in New York on 4 May. The secrecy meant that loved ones back home thought their sailors were either dead or in enemy captivity. On 5 May, phone calls began flooding across the nation, bringing the truth, and considerable joy, to hundreds of families who believed their loved ones lost. In one of his fireside chats, President Roosevelt singled out *Marby's* crew as an inspiration to the nation.

Muster rolls place George continuously aboard *Marby* at every quarterly muster from 30 Sep 1941 through 30 March 1945 - a run of roughly 3.5 years during which he progressed in rate from F2c at the quarter ending 30 Sep 1941, to F1c at the quarter ending 31 Dec 1941, to WT2c (Watertender 2nd Class) by the quarter ending 30 Jun 1943, and finally to WT1c (Watertender 1st Class) by 1 Oct 1943. He would retain this rate for the remainder of his documented service.

On 12 Aug 1945 George was received at the Receiving Station Pier 92 in New York City from the receiving station in Philadelphia. On 18 Aug 1945, he was transferred to RS Annapolis, MD; probably in connection with *Marby's* final summer training cruise for a group of USNA Midshipmen. That 18 Aug entry noted that his transfer was routed "via the receiving ship *USS Reina Mercedes*", a vessel that George probably had never heard of. When he arrived in Annapolis he may have found her story quite amusing.

Forty-seven years earlier, during the brief Spanish-American War, the 292-foot-long *Reina Mercedes* had been a Spanish cruiser. Named after Queen Mercedes (1860-1878), she served as a harbor defense ship in Cuba, where she contributed to the sinking of a U.S. Navy steamer before coming under heavy fire from American battleships *Texas* and *Massachusetts*. The Spanish scuttled her to prevent capture, but the U.S. Navy later raised her and towed her to the Norfolk Navy Yard for overhaul. In 1912, by then non-self-propelled, she was towed to Annapolis and put into service as a receiving ship. Her role was administrative, but periodically she housed enlisted personnel assigned to the Naval Academy and earlier she had periodically berthed midshipmen under punishment, a practice that ended in 1940. She was used as enlisted barracks at the Academy until the mid-1940s, consistent with Agnew's RoC. She was never self-propelled after entering U.S. service and remained moored to the seawall where she was often jokingly referred to as the "fastest ship in the fleet". She was scrapped in 1957.



On 1 Nov 1945, a RoC of the RS in Philadelphia showed George, then still as WT1c, being received from *Marby*. This final entry implies he was back aboard *Marby* as late as early Nov 1945, perhaps in connection with final details related to *Marby's* striking from the Naval Registry and impending scrapping.



A RoC dated 1 Jan 1946 shows George transferred, effective 21 Dec 1945, from the Washington, DC, Navy Yard to RS Brooklyn for further transfer to *USS Douglas H. Fox* (DD-779). This is the last documented service record that we could find.

By the 1950 U.S. census George, 27, was living on Baywood Lane in Contra Costa, CA. He was still in the Navy, but he was divorced. His mother, Leona, then 49 years old, was living with him and helping to raise his daughter, Washington, DC-born Melonie Lynn, then 4 years old, and his California-born two-year-old son Daniel A. In 1950, George and family were living in the Rollingwood area of Contra Costa County, California, which abuts San Pablo Bay in

the greater San Francisco area.



At some point, George moved to Prosperity, Newberry County, South Carolina, perhaps because some of his children lived there. On 14 Oct 1998, George A. Agnew, then 76 years old, died at the Palmetto Baptist Medical Center in Prosperity. He was survived by his 2nd wife, Audrey Sligh Zobel; son Daniel Alan Agnew of Chapin, SC; stepsons, Ralph Perry Zobel of Columbia and Thomas Charles Zobel of Newberry; stepdaughters, Nancy Z. Singley of Prosperity, Sally Z. Pickel of Lexington, and Cindy Z. Farr of Little Mountain; his sister Nancy Thoman of Temple Hills, MD; grandson Michael Allen Agnew, and several step grandchildren.

George Allen Agnew is mentioned on page 234 of the 1944 book *Where Away: A Modern Odyssey*.

Don't forget to read *Marby's* [own biography](#).

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, USS Marblehead 1939-1945, with contributions from Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, Anthropic's Claude AI, and other Internet resources.

Corrections, additions, and photos are welcomed by email to spwade@gmail.com.