



The Marby

Marblehead Biography Of Earl Awalt



Send a photo of Earl to
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Earl Awalt was born on 21 Oct 19 to Joe Awalt, a farmer, and Ruby Jane Davis, a homemaker in Winters, Runnels County, TX, a small farming community between Abilene and San Angelo.

Earl enlisted on 10 Jan 40 at Dallas, TX and was assigned service #3562293. By 27 Mar 40, he'd completed basic training and was sent as an Apprentice Seaman to the Naval Training School (USNTS) in San Diego, CA for instruction on becoming a proficient radio operator. While there, he spent 29 Jun to 26 Jul 40 in the U.S. Naval Hospital (USNH) in San Diego and on his release,

he completed his radio training.

On 12 Jul 40, as a Sea2c he was assigned to the *USS Rigel (AD-13)*, a merchant vessel acquired by the Navy in 1921 and converted to an Altair class destroyer tender. Named for Rigel, the brightest star in the constellation Orion, the ship was Earl's home in San Diego until Oct 40. He was promoted to Seaman 2nd Class (Sea2c) aboard her.



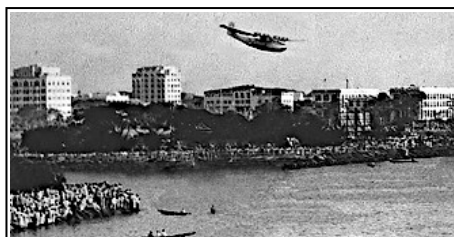
USS Rigel (AD-13) on the eve of WWII
Courtesy: U.S. Naval History and Heritage

On 16 Oct 40, Earl transferred to the heavy cruiser *USS Houston (CA-30)* from the Navy Receiving Ship at San Diego, CA. Launched in 1929, *Houston* became the flagship of the Asiatic Fleet in Feb 1931. Her first major action occurred early that year when, in response to Japan's invasion of the China' province of Manchuria, she landed Marine and Navy gun platoons to protect American interests and stabilize the situation. She remained in the area until the end of 1933. As his favorite U.S. Naval vessel, *Houston* hosted President Franklin Roosevelt's on several cruises during the 1930's.



Pan Am Clipper at the Golden Gate on 22 Nov 35
on the 1st regularly scheduled trans-Pacific flight.
Courtesy: Pan Am Historical Foundation

Earl finished 1940 on *Houston* and transferred to the light cruiser *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* on 29 Mar 41 at Cavite, Philippines. With the exception of a cruise to Guam in January, "Marby" as she was referred to affectionately



Crowds gather as Clipper lands at Manila Bay after stops in Hawaii, Midway, Wake & Guam.
Courtesy: Pan Am Historical Foundation

by her crew, spent most of 1941 in Philippine waters. Earl was aboard *Marby* when Pan American Airlines' China Clipper glided in for a signature water landing at Cavite on 31 Mar 41, nearly six years after the Pan Am had inaugurated the first regularly scheduled trans-Pacific flights in Nov 1935.

Marby ended Sep 1941 in drydock at Miraveles, Philippines. At nearly twenty years old, she was obsolete by the modern naval standards of that time, and particularly in comparison to the average cruiser in the Japanese Imperial Navy. For example, she had neither radar nor sonar, or even short-range radio to quickly communicate with other ships. However, she was blessed with a well-trained crew and farsighted leadership both aboard ship and in Asiatic Fleet headquarters. The latter was well demonstrated on 27 Nov 41 in the Philippines when Asiatic Fleet Commander, Admiral Thomas Hart secretly ordered his capital ships to quietly disperse from Manila in anticipation of hostilities. Afterall, US-Japan negotiations had just reached impasse in Washington, and as the authors of the book *Where Away, A Modern Odyssey* would later put it, "... while Pearl Harbor was 5,000 miles from Tokyo, Manila was only half that distance away and manifestly a dangerous place to be caught with a heavy concentration of ships in a sneak air raid."

Anchored of Tarakan Island, northeastern Borneo, *Marby* received word of the attack on Pearl Harbor early 3:28 a.m. on 8 Dec 41 (They were west of the international dateline at the time). At dawn she



weighed anchor at dawn and sailed south ahead of the Japanese onslaught, which hit the Philippines that same day.

By 25 Dec 41, she was in Surabaya, Java, and around that time, Earl was promoted to RM3c (Radioman 3rd Class). Despite the threat of Japanese air attack, Captain Robinson granted the crew Christmas leave in port. It would be their last break for some time.

On the last day of 1941, the *Marby* was in the Flores Sea escorting *MS Maréchal Joffre* from Java to Australia. The [Maréchal Joffre story](#) is a little known but very inspiring episode in WWII history.

By 2 Jan 42, *Marby* had become “Radio Darwin” in the northern Australian backwater that would serve as the base from which surviving Allied ships would launch several delaying actions against superior Japanese military forces. In that role, *Marby* departed Darwin on 8 Jan 42 as part of a combined force determined to stall Japanese aggression in Java.

Around this time, on the other side of the world, a young woman named Amelia Marinch moved from her small Pennsylvania hometown to New York City. She probably knew little of what was happening in Asia, had never heard of the *USS Marblehead*, and knew nothing of a Texas-born sailor named Earl aboard that ship. She was simply trying to start a new life in the big city, and she quickly encountered a problem. For reasons unknown today, perhaps to get a job, or a security clearance, or to meet some other demand of officialdom, she needed to produce an original of her birth certificate. She did not have one, and her parents had died some years before, so she returned to Pennsylvania and through family and friends she pieced together the affidavits required to applied for a “delayed” birth certificate from her home state. In her application of 12 Jan 42, she listed her address as 3601 Ave. J, Brooklyn, NY, in the Flatbush community an hour by bus south of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. She then returned to Brooklyn and went about her business, whatever that was. At some point in 1942, her younger sister Lillian joined her there.



USS Marblehead (CL-12)

the Dutch Naval Base at Surabaya as part of a joint American – Dutch strike force intent on disrupting Japanese plans for seizing control of the strategic Makassar Strait between the islands of Borneo and Celebes (today’s Sulawesi, Indonesia). The force was led by Dutch Rear Admiral Karel Doorman from his flagship *HNLMS De Ruyter*, a cruiser, and accompanied by Dutch cruiser *Tromp*, U.S. cruisers *Houston* and *Marblehead* and seven destroyers (*HNLMS¹ Banckert*, *Piet Hein*, and *Van Ghent*, and US destroyers *Barker*, *Bulmer*, *John D. Edwards*, and *Stewart*). No Japanese ship participated in the action,

Lunch with Ray

When word reached the *Marby* at 03:28 hours 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 remembered the call to general quarters that followed receipt of the historic message 75 years earlier. He said that *Marby*’s entire complement 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

The youngest of seven children, Lillian was born on 16 May 1918 in Martin, Fayette County, Pennsylvania, a tiny town on the banks of the Monongahela River south of Pittsburgh near the West Virginia border. Her parents were Slovakian. Her dad, John, was a coal miner, and after he died, her mother, Caroline, ran a general store. They had immigrated to the U.S. in 1901 and 1904, respectively.

Meanwhile, out in the Netherlands East Indies, on 4 Feb 42, *Marby* sailed east from

¹ His/Her Netherlands Majesty’s Ship. Use of “His” or “Her” depends on whether the ruler is a king or a queen.



which became known as the Battle of Makassar Strait, but, according to Japanese war records, sixty of their land-based bombers certainly did!

After dodging two bomb runs, *Marby's* luck ran out. She suffered two direct hits, one amidships which demolished her gyroscope, knocked out electrical power and shipboard communications, and killed fifteen *Marby* sailors and wounded many others. A second bomb struck her fantail which jammed her rudder causing her to steam in a very predictable circle. A near miss also exploded close enough off her port bow to rip a 3-foot by 9-foot hole in her hull which slowed her and caused rapid flooding of multiple compartments. Fires broke out from stem to stern.

Marby was now an easy, seemingly doomed target, but instead of finishing her off, the Japanese assumed the sea would finish what their bombs had begun, so they flew off after bigger prey, the *USS Houston*, on which they killed more American sailors, but inflicted less damage because they ran out of bombs. The wounded cruisers sailed for safety on Java's south coast, then considered beyond enemy bomber range, but their crews knew the respite would soon evaporate as the Japanese took control of Makassar Strait.

Marby's well-led, highly trained crew rallied, bailing by hand for 72 hours, quelling the blazes, caring for the wounded, and devising ingenious "fixes" to save their home from a watery grave. In a condition later described in *Marby's* log as "Situation serious-doubtful," in lieu of a functional rudder, they varied the speed and direction of the ships propellers to navigate her safely through the Lombok Strait east of Bali, one of the most treacherous straits on earth, and they did so at night and in rain squalls. Early on 5 Feb 42, they entered the Indian Ocean and turned west-northwest along Java's south coast heading towards Tjilatjap, a small fishing port with limited capacity for repairs. Still, minor repairs were made, the wounded were sent to local hospitals, and the dead from both cruisers were buried with full honors in a local cemetery.

Admiral Hart soon flew in from Surabaya to inspect *Marby* and *Houston*. He deemed the former unfit to continue the fight and ordered that she depart for the U.S. as soon as possible. The less damaged *Houston* would remain in the fight, however, as it would turn out, she had less than a month to live.²

While Japan's military quickly reported *Marby* sunk, they got almost everything wrong – the date, location, and nearest land mass, and even the water-body (the Java Sea). Most importantly, they got the "sunk" part wrong, too!

TOKYO (FROM A JAPANESE BROADCAST) MARCH 11-AP-IMPERIAL HEADQUARTERS DECLARED TODAY THAT A JAPANESE CRUISER SQUADRON OPERATING IN THE INDIAN OCEAN WEST OF AUSTRALIA HAD SUNK THE UNITED STATES CRUISER MARBLEHEAD. JAPANESE OFFICIALS SAID THAT THE CRUISER WAS SUNK IN A SUCCESSFUL ATTACK UPON AN AMERICAN CONVOY MARCH 2.

Japan made these claims on several occasions during the ensuing months, but due to the ship's doubtful condition and the significant dangers that still lay ahead, both above and below the waves, particularly in the Atlantic, the Navy kept the voyage home a secret. Consequently, the families of *Marby's* crew thought that their loved ones were either dead or in enemy captivity, that is, until news reports and telephone calls home quickly spread news of their miraculous arrival in New York. Leave was soon granted, but it is unknown whether Earl went home to Texas.

² *U.S.S. Houston (CA-30)* was sunk in the Battle of Sunda Strait in the early morning hours of 1 Mar 42. Of the 1,061 aboard, 368 survived, including 24 of the 74-man Marine Detachment, only to be captured, sent to Japanese prison camps, and forced to work on the infamous Burma Railway. Of 368 Navy and Marine Corps personnel taken prisoner, 77 (21%) died in captivity from starvation, cruel treatment by the Japanese, and tropical diseases. Through the persistent efforts many over some sixty years, including those of the late Raymond D. Kester, former *USS Marblehead* Radioman, former secretary of the Asiatic Fleet reunion committee, and former webmaster of this website, 1 March has been observed as Asiatic Fleet Memorial Day.



The Marby

On 13 Feb 42, after limited, rudimentary repairs, *Marby* and her men embarked on a secret, perilous, and improbable 20,589-mile, 90-day voyage, much of it in crippled condition, from Java across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka), and then on to South Africa, where they got more substantial repairs. They then crossed the southern Atlantic Ocean to Recife, Brazil where they refueled and reprovisioned before beginning the final leg to a heroes' welcome in New York Harbor on 4 May 1942. Earl was aboard for the whole trip.

By the time *Marby* arrived in New York, the previously mentioned Amelia Marinch was probably well settled in Brooklyn. It also appears likely that Amelia's youngest sister, Lillian, had joined her there during the first half of 1942. Lillian was 24 at the time. It's very likely that both had heard the news of the supposedly sunk cruiser's arrival in New York. It certainly made the city's newspapers and the papers of almost every significant city across America, as well as in the capitals of America's allies.

At that point in the war, the Allies were in retreat almost everywhere. In Europe, only Britain, Russia, and scattered resistance groups stood in the way of total Nazi domination. Now, in the face of a quickly widening Japanese onslaught, the Allies were losing in East and Southeast Asia. French Indo-China was already under Japanese control. America's only colony, the Philippines, was teetering, and their British counterparts in Hong Kong, Burma, India, Ceylon, and Australia were under threat. By the end of March, the Japanese would control all the oil and rubber-rich Netherlands East Indies, the largest European colony in Southeast Asia. The prospects were grim, but the exploits of the *USS Marblehead* were a significant shot in the arm for Allied morale everywhere. President Roosevelt made a point of mentioning the heroics of the men of the *Marblehead* in one of his Fireside chats.

On the bright side, Earl and most of his shipmates were now safely back in the U.S. and they could expect to remain there for the few months it would take to repair the ship. While there is no record of how it happened, or when, eventually Earl from Texas met Lillian from Pennsylvania and a courtship began which resulted in their wedding in Brooklyn on 24 Sep 42, roughly three weeks before *Marby* completed her overhaul and rejoined the war effort, this time in the Atlantic hunting Nazi subs and blockade runners.

The new bride and groom would not see much of each other for the next few years. Following the long trip home, Earl had briefly transferred to the US Naval Air Station, NY, NY for more training. He then rejoined *Marby*, and on 1 Jun 42 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Earl was promoted to ARM3c (Aviation Radioman 3rd Class) and was attached to the *Marby's* small aviation unit. On 1 Aug 42 he was promoted to ARM2c. But by the end of 1942, Earl and his *Marby* shipmates were on patrol off Brazil.

Earl was promoted to ARM1c on 14 Aug 43 and was aboard at the end of Sep 43 when the ship was enroute from St. Thomas, BWI to Recife, Brazil. The ship spent the rest of 1943 patrolling off Brazil. By 20 Feb 44 *Marby* was in Bayonne, NJ, and seven days later she departed as part of Task Force 69 with a convoy to Europe reaching Belfast, Ireland on 8 Mar. By 25 Mar she was back at the Brooklyn Navy Yard having her torpedo tubes removed, and on 8 May she anchored off Coney Island preparing for post-repair trials and night firing training. Earl spent a portion of this time on temporary duty at Floyd Bennett Field, NY from which he returned on 12 May 44.

The ship made more trans-Atlantic crossings, usually in convoys, and on 24 July 44, she transited Gibraltar enroute to Oran, Algeria for duty with the 8th Fleet. By 29 July 44, she was anchored off Palermo, Sicily, and Earl was transferred to the Navy Seaplane Base there for temporary duty along with the ship's aviation unit, as

Operation Dragoon

Initially code-named Operation Anvil and planned for execution in parallel with Operation Overlord in Normandy, Dragoon was postponed to Aug 44. At 10 p.m. on 14 Aug, a joint U.S.-Canadian Special Service Force began transitioning to assault rafts eight thousand yards off the beaches and fifty-foot cliffs of Port-Cros and Levant, two German-held islands south of Le Lavandou, France. German batteries atop those cliffs were neutralized just after midnight, enabling the *Marby* and other ships to safely position to support Operation Dragoon.

As daylight began to flood the beaches of Le Lavandou on 15 Aug, *Marby's* guns pounded German positions near Saint Raphael and they continued to do so for three days, after which Allied troops hit the beaches. The landings led to a German retreat into the Vosges Mountains and the capture of more than 100,000 enemy soldiers – about a third of the German strength in southern France. Fourteen US Divisions entered the fight for Europe via this breach along with 17,000 tons of supplies offloaded daily at Marseille and Toulon.



authorized in a secret dispatch, but it appears that the unit may have not been required for the next major operation, Operation Dragoon (see textbox at the right).

After stopping at Ajaccio, Corsica, and Naples, the ship reached Palermo where Earl and his mates in *Marby's* Aviation Unit rejoined the ship from Navy Seaplane Base on 29 Aug 44.

By the end of Sep 44, Earl was no longer aboard *Marby*. When and where he was transferred to is unclear as is his date of discharge from the Navy, though a second draft card signed by Earl suggests that he was discharged in early 1946. He and Lillian then moved to Arlington, TX and raised three children: Richard E Awalt (1947–), Gary Mathew Awalt (1951–), and Janet Linda Awalt (1952–).

Earl “stuck with radio” after the war and was an electronics technician for the Civil Service in Arlington, TX. He died there at age 48 on 12 Mar 1968 of occlusive coronary arteriosclerosis in Arlington where he had been resident for eleven years. After Earl died, Lillian moved to New Mexico, perhaps joining one of their children there. She passed away on 1 Aug 2000 in Rio Rancho, Sandoval, NM. She and Earl were buried in Pumphrey Cemetery about ten miles northwest of his hometown of Winters, TX.

Earl Awalt appears on page 234 of [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 substantial contributions from a multitude of records via Ancestry.com and Wikipedia.org. Comments, corrections, additions, and photos are welcomed by email to spwade@gmail.com.

To save space, months in all dates are truncated to their first three letters. Except when standing alone, years in the 20th century (only) are truncated to the last two digits - e.g., 7 December 1941 is 7 Dec 41.