



U.S.S. Marblehead (CL-12)



Marblehead Biography

Clarence John Aschenbrenner

Clarence John Aschenbrenner was born on 30 MAY 1918 in New Ulm, Brown County, MN to Rosa Aschenbrenner (1900–1918). His dad's name remains unclear. Rosa died of diphtheria just months after Clarence's birth so he spent his boyhood under the watchful eye of his maternal grandmother, Mary Aschenbrenner, who was widowed six months after Clarence's birth. He attended St. Mary's Catholic school and worked on farms near New Ulm before enlisting in the Navy on 14 JUN 1938 in

Minneapolis, 95 miles northeast of New Ulm. He was assigned service # 3285300.

Why he was in the Philippines is unclear, but on 27 JAN 1939, Clarence came aboard oiler *USS Trinity (AO-13)* en route from Manila to Honolulu for transfer to the *USS Augusta (CA-31)*, a Northampton-class heavy cruiser notable later for service as a headquarters ship during Operation Torch, Operation Overlord, Operation Dragoon, and her occasional use as a presidential flagship that carried both Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Except for her aviation unit, *Augusta* muster rolls before 30 SEP 1941 are not on the Internet so it is also unclear when and where Clarence actually joined her.

The "Bull", as he would soon be known by his shipmates due to his great strength, first came aboard light cruiser *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, known as *Marby* to her crew, on 22 SEP 1940 at Tsingtao, China. He was one of two "Bulls" on the ship – the other was Martin John Moran, Msmth1c (Metalsmith 1st class). Both would end the year 1940 still with the ship in Cavite, Philippines.

Highly popular, Clarence was the subject of several tales in the book, [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#), published in 1944 as part of the U.S. Government's morale-building efforts.

The Bull "stood five feet six inches tall, had a shoulder spread of about a yard, the exuberance of a child, and the muscular development and power of a grizzly bear. Aboard ship he always did at least two men's work, did it well, with initiative and character and loved doing it. He was convinced that there was no more honorable or enviable job than being a bluejacket in the United States Navy." The authors added that when he went ashore, "he partook of spirits in the same grand and wholesale manner that he did everything else. And inevitably there came a point in his exhilaration when he could no longer restrain himself from having fun with that monumental strength of his. The Bull's barroom athletics never involved just one or two individuals. He loved to come to grips with veritable hordes of opponents, the number being limited only by the size of the saloon. The Shore Patrol had reconnaissance groups to keep an eye on the Bull, in order that the main body could, in the hope of circumventing international complications, reach the scene of carnage ahead of the local constabulary."

Clarence stayed on *Marby* for a year and a half. He was on deck in Cavite Navy Yard when the Pan Am China Clipper landed there on 31 MAR 1941. Aboard on 1 AUG 1941, he was promoted to SF2c (Shipfitter 2nd Class) while *Marby* was in TuTu Bay, Jolo Island, southern Philippines. Tu Tu Bay would also be *Marby*'s final port in the Philippines. On 28 NOV 1941, as the Asiatic Fleet dispersed in anticipation of Japanese hostilities, she anchored there. The ship was darkened for security but it was not for the first time:

"Not that this was the first blackout the *Marblehead* men had seen. The first one back in Manila had caught some of the crew in a local refuge-for-the-thirsty known as Jake's Place, as was later brought out at captain's mast [an onboard trial]. When Bull Aschenbrenner, the first of the accused, had been brought before the captain, he had said, "Captain, sir, we all like Jake, so we go there a lot. Well, this was the first night of the try-out blackout. We went in and the lights were out, and it was pretty dark. No light anywhere except one candle on the end of the bar. Well, Bill comes in and slaps Jake on the back, and Jake thinks somebody's trying to take a poke at him, so Jake takes a swing at him. Bill falls back on a table where some of the sailors are with some girls. One sailor picks up a chair and throws it at Bill because he was so clumsy and careless, but it misses Bill and



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hits the mirror at the back of the bar and smashes all the glasses and bottles. And, Captain, nobody was mad at nobody, but everybody starts slugging everybody else.

“The next three witnesses had given almost identical testimony. Finally, the captain got to the last man, a quiet little fellow. The captain had said to him, “And what about you? Can you throw any additional light on the subject?”

“‘Honest, Captain,’ he said, ‘there wasn’t no light to throw – only one little bittee candle.’”

“Captain Robinson had barely been able to choke out, “Mast dismissed.”

Two months later, Clarence was aboard during the bombing of the ship. Waves of Japanese bombers began multiple runs on *Marby*, nine in the first wave, eight in the next. For two runs, they dropped no bombs as they tested the range of the ship’s anti-aircraft guns. The following passage from Where Away painted the surreal scene as another wave of nine approached the ship and the anti-aircraft units responded:

“As the shooting was resumed, the engines were pushed up to flank speed. And again, the great rams drove the rudder hard left.

“Meanwhile, in forward repair, Bull Aschenbrenner begged so hard to be allowed to watch a minute or two of the shooting that he got special permission to go topside. As he came out on deck, the *Marblehead* was splitting through the water at twenty-nine knots [just over 33 miles per hour]. He saw nine planes start their run and saw the A.A. shells going up to meet them.

“On the bridge, Lt. Bishop said, ‘Captain, they’re at their release point.’

“‘Right rudder fifteen degrees. Tell engine room all speed possible.’

“The order was repeated and executed.

“Now in a very quiet voice, Commander Van Bergen said, ‘The bombs have been released, sir. It’s going to be close.’

“Over the loudspeaker came: ‘Seek cover. Bombs coming. Lie flat.’

“... All hands not required by their jobs to remain topside had been ordered below since the Japanese had in recent engagements been using anti-personnel bombs that exploded on contact with the first solid object they encountered.

“...The sound of plunging bombs cutting through the air whispered in his ear. The sea rose and erupted. Men atop the foremast were drenched. The bombs had plunged into the water and exploded sixty-five yards away.

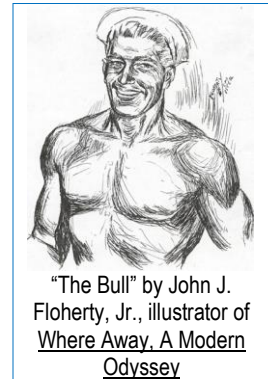
“But as the planes passed over, one of them began to smoke and the A.A. gunners to whoop and yell.

“Then the pilot of the crippled plane, unable to hold altitude, decided he’d make his wounded plane and the rest of his bombs count. He put his nose down, banked and started diving, smoking, into the *Marblehead*, as all her guns gave him their maximum volume of fire. ... as the plane dove towards the ship and passed within range of the 50-calibre machine guns, the gunners began stitching their tracers into the cockpit of the plane. In its rushing, roaring, increasing nearness, it seemed the size of a house. But the stream of lead going into it was heavy and incessant and merciless. Suddenly it turned straight down and crashed into the sea. The *Marblehead* crew broke into wild cheering.

“The Bull tore back to his station and yelled, ‘We just got a great big bastard.’

Another excerpt below described Bull’s response to the bombing:

“Up forward, a strange and powerful and almost mystic phenomenon had come into being. What the men there were seeing, and yet felt they could not be seeing, was that fire wouldn’t burn Bull





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Aschenbrenner and that tons of mangled metal could not shut off his way. Wherever the fire ranged hottest, there was the now demoniac shipfitter who had suddenly, in the ship's darkest hour, become a person of unlimited power. He fought fire with extinguishers until they were empty and then began clubbing the fires with mattresses or blankets or whatever lay at hand. Nobody knew how the Bull managed to move about in such incredible speed in the dark, smoke-filled compartments, where decks were waist-deep in rising oil and water, and where the broken, twisted overhead thrust down through the dark like bladed stalactites in an inky cave. At one moment the spreading flames would illuminate him on one side of a debris-built impasse beating out a fire. The next resurgence of the flames a few seconds later would show his broad, sweating back on the other side of the impasse wedging mattresses into a broken bulkhead. Wherever he worked men formed around him to help with the job, to be caught up in the vast currents of certainty and indomitability that emanated from this wild, unstoppable and unbeatable little giant."

Clarence survived *Marby's* bombing, but on the voyage home, at sea between Durban and Port Elizabeth, South Africa, on 18 MAR 1942, his luck ran out while trying to rescue his buddy, Bernard Joseph

When the Ship's Good Luck Deserted Her

Marby was not long out of Durban on 17 Mar 42, when the Bull awoke to go on night duty. He was coming topside when the man who had been standing watch with Ski Wardzinski came running across the deck.

"What's up?" the Bull asked.

"Ski went below to sound the forward hold. Something's got him. I yelled down but he don't answer."

The seaman ran on toward the bridge to report the news and the Bull ran toward the hatch. Perhaps Ski had only fallen and knocked himself out, he may of thought. But there was always the possibility of bilge gas. Something had to be done fast or Ski will die.

The Bull reached the hatch, and without hesitating, started down the ladder. When his feet hit the deck, his flashlight found Wardzinski. The Bull took two steps toward Ski and felt his eyes setting and something putting his legs out of commission. The air was peculiar and stinking. It required huge breaths, yet breathing only made things worse. His head felt as if it were made of brass and somebody were beating it with a hammer. Neither of the shipfitter friends survived the night.

As the news spread through the ship, stories began to be swapped.

"Just a few days ago," Red Percifield said, "the Bull and I were sitting on back aft. He said he wanted to finish his education and try to get somewhere. But most of all he wanted to get a little leave and go see his grandma. He wasn't gonna tell her when he hit the States. But just go a-helling home, bust through the door and say, 'Hello, Ma,' and hug her."

When the ship reached Port Elizabeth, the flag-draped coffins of the Bull and his friend were brought ashore and placed upon the waiting caissons. A company each of South African soldiers, bluejackets, and Royal Navy Marines marched up as a guard of honor and the funeral march began.

Later, the chaplain's simple phrases and the bugler's slow, eternally uncompromising notes made terrible anguish rise up in the men. It seemed as though the bugler would never be able to make the last note. And then the alien earth closed in over the coffins.

Source: Paraphrased from [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#).

Wardzinski CM3c (see [Wardzinski's biography](#)), who had been overcome by methane gas in one of the ship's compartments. Both men were buried with full military honors at Port Charles Catholic Cemetery in nearby Port Elizabeth. The Bull was later reinterred near his grandmother in New Ulm, MN.



For his efforts during and after the bombing and for his attempt to save his friend, Clarence posthumously received one of the first two Silver Stars ever awarded. At the time, it was the Navy's newest heroism decoration and it's 3rd-highest combat award after the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross.

The other Silver Star went to fellow Marblehead shipmate and Chinese cook, 38-year-old Fook Liang, who at the time of the award, was still recovering from shock caused by a bomb hit in his section of the ship.

Clarence John Aschenbrenner appears on pages 8, 23, 38, 49, 90, 103, 114, 132, 195, 231 and 234 of the book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#), and in the book's illustrations.

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