



Marblehead Biography of Lester Goughler



Please send a photo of
Lester to
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Lester Arthur Goughler was born on 11 Feb 1915 in Butler, PA, then an unincorporated town with a population of about 22,000, straddling Connoquenessing Creek. At the time, Butler had been growing at a rapid pace for a century due to its proximity to Pittsburgh 35 miles to the south, which was then America's steel capital and its third largest corporate headquarters after New York and Chicago. Butler, the seat of the county by the same name, became an incorporated city three years after Lester's birth.

Lester's parents were homemaker Pearl Mary Falkner and automotive industry laborer Harry Leroy Goughler. At his birth, Lester already had a sister, Violet Rose (1905 -2009), and when he was eight years old, Lester acquired a brother, James Lewis (1923 - 1992). The Goughler kids spent their childhood in Butler but we know little else of Lester's school days except for a passage in the 15 Mar 1935 Morning Free Press announcement of his impending marriage in Ventura, California which said that he had been "active in social and school affairs, being a talented singer". This jived decades later with Lester's obituary when it mentioned his being part of singing groups.

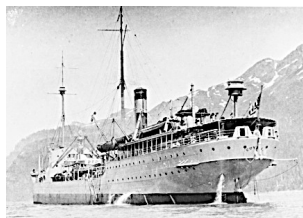
It seems plausible that Lester finished high school about 1932, that he worked in the Butler area for a couple of years, and as the Great Depression wore on, he moved to California. He married in 1935 in Ventura, CA where his bride resided, but at the time of the marriage, he lived in San Pedro, CA. San Pedro hosted a naval base which played a large role in U.S. naval history for most of the 20th Century, particularly after 1930. After his marriage, a 1935 Ventura residential directory listed his occupation as fireman, but the entry did not state whether he was a city fireman or a fireman in the Navy, i.e., an F2c. We suspect he was the latter. Their son Charles Arthur Goughler was born in 1936, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1939.

Still, determining Lester's naval service record was complicated. None of our *Marblehead* sailor biographies have benefited from having the subject sailor's full official naval record. Nearly all enlisted men's biographies have relied upon ship and shore station muster rolls to track the sailor's naval history. Navy Registers have played a similar role in researching officers, though those records are less informative.

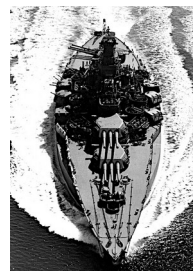
The earliest muster roll we found for Lester indicated that he had enlisted on 21 Oct 39 in Butler, PA, that he'd been assigned service #2503492, and that he had received basic training at San Diego, CA. His final muster roll said that he'd been honorably discharged on 3 Dec 1946. His obituary stated that he was a 10-year Navy veteran, but unfortunately, the dates above add up to only 7.5 years. His Pennsylvania Veteran's Compensation File, which gives a limited version of his service history, also indicates that he enlisted on 21 Oct 39 at San Diego, CA. That is most likely correct, but what it does not say is that the 1939 enlistment was probably his second.

Also supporting the idea that the 1939 enlistment was probably his second, was his rate in that first muster roll, i.e., Fireman 2nd Class. The Navy would not have awarded the rate of F2c on a first enlistment. In the 1930s and 1940s, three rates preceded F2c for advancement in the Navy –

Apprentice Seaman (AS), Seaman 2nd Class (Sea2c), and Seaman 1st Class (Sea1c). On average, in those days, it took 2.5 to 4 years of service to reach F2c.¹ Given the rapidity of Lester's subsequent promotions, it seems likely that he could have achieved it in 2.5 years, and if so, that would account for the "missing" 2.5 years in his service record. Of course, his duty stations between the presumed first enlistment and a second in 1939, whether ship or shore, could not be verified because muster rolls are not available before 1939. Therefore, below, we continue describing his naval career from that first



USS Cayama (AO-3)
Courtesy:
Naval History & Heritage Command

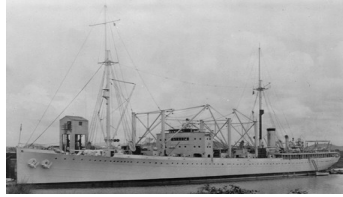


USS Tennessee
(BB-43) in 1943
Courtesy: Wikipedia.org

¹ Microsoft's Copilot research



muster roll which show him being transferred as an F2c on 21 Oct 39 from the Naval Station at San Diego, CA to the battleship *USS Tennessee (BB-43)* via the oiler *USS Cuyama (AO-3)*.



Ammunition Ship *USS Nitro (AE-2)* at Balboa, Panama Canal Zone 1938

Courtesy: US Navy

One and a third years later, on 3 Mar 41, Lester transferred as a MM2c from *USS Tennessee* via the Receiving Station at Pearl Harbor, HI to the ammunition ship *USS Nitro (AE-2)* which delivered him to the Asiatic Station at Manila, Philippines. There, on 29 Mar 41, he first boarded the obsolete light



USS Marblehead (CL-12)

Courtesy: NHHC

cruiser, *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, fondly known to her crew simply as *Marby*.

Lester would spend a year and ten months on *Marby*, one of the most exciting and professionally rewarding periods of his life. The events of that period included the bombing of the ship on 4 Feb 42 and her subsequent 20,589-mile, 90-day escape from Java to New York, a perilous journey fully described in [Marby's own biography](#) and in the 1944 book [Where Away – a Modern Odyssey](#).

Lester joined *Marby* late in her history with Asia which began in 1938 when she joined the Asiatic Fleet. 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. Sadly for China and for Shanghai in particular, both were the focus of Japan's strategy to dominate Asia. Japan's 1932 annexation of Manchuria, China's industrial heartland, and its subsequent commencement of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 seriously escalated tension with the United States.

By the time Lester joined *Marby*, Japan controlled all the ports of China except for Hong Kong. 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* dropped anchor off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI to await further orders. The ship was darkened for additional security.

Ten 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 south coast of Borneo, where she refueled. She then cut across the strait to Makassar, South Celebes Island to re-provision. By Christmas, she was at the Dutch Naval Base at Surabaya, Java, where Capt. Robinson granted his men limited shore leave despite the risk of Japanese air attack.

In the days that followed, details poured in on the Pearl Harbor disaster, particularly on the eight battleships sunk or damaged there. Then, on 10 Dec 41 came news of the loss of British battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* in the South China Sea east of peninsula Malaya. Previously, battleships had been considered invincible but Japanese air superiority had just made quick victims of Britain's behemoths. These events sharpened *Marby's* crew's focus on their 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



The Marby

from the Japanese fliers, what chance had an old bucket like the Marblehead 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.”²

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, *MS Marechal Joffre* had been brazenly captured by American naval aviators and ground crews in Manila Bay and used to escape Japan's 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](#)).

For a few days, *Marby* temporarily operated as 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 20 Jan 42, 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 five enemy ships were sunk, two badly damaged, and another two lightly damaged.

Marby spent the last week of January 1941 in Surabaya, and by 1 February, she was cruising off Madura Strait. On February 3rd, a flight of about 40 Japanese planes passed overhead enroute 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. ... 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.”*”³ By the time the message reached *Marby*'s Capt. Robinson, the ship's lookouts had already spotted 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 its successful evasive action on the first three bomb 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 her off, so they went after bigger prey, the heavy cruiser *USS Houston* (CA-30).

The Japanese would claim several times that they had sunk *Marby*, but they 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, five 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](#).

Japan claimed several times in the international press that it had sunk the *Marblehead*, but for security reasons, the Navy had kept her improbable voyage home secret until she 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 to bring the truth and joy to hundreds of families, and in one of his fireside chats, President Roosevelt would single out *Marby*'s crew as an inspiration to the nation. Now, dubbed a hero along with his shipmates, Lester soon took leave to go home to his family.

² Where Away – A Modern Odyssey, p. 42

³ Where Away – A Modern Odyssey, p. 108



Following his leave, Lester returned to *Marby* which was undergoing a six month overhaul in the Brooklyn Navy Yard in New York. He remained aboard *Marby* when she departed New York for the naval base at Recife, Brazil. From there, she hunted Nazi submarines and blockade runners, and rescued downed Allied airmen and survivors off sunken enemy vessels in Atlantic waters.

Marby was in Bahia, Brazil from 6-8 Feb 43. On 8 Feb 43 Lester received orders to transfer to the Diesel Engine School (Surface) at the Navy Training School in Norfolk. A U.S. Army flight manifest on that day shows Lester for a flight Brazil to Miami, landing on 10 Feb 43. One might assume that Lester met Miss June Elizabeth Woessner on that trip through Miami, but it is more likely that they already knew each other since June's father was a farmer in Franklin Township, a mere ten miles northwest of Butler. Still, Miami was where they chose to marry on 10 Jul 43, five months after Lester's flight from Brazil.

On 26 May 43 at the Naval Training School in Norfolk, VA, Lester was promoted from MM1c to MoMM1c, and three days later he transferred to the Sub Chaser Training Center in Miami, FL. Following training there, on 21 Aug 43, he transferred to the office of the Supervisor of Shipbuilding in Detroit, MI as part of the "detail" assigned to "fit out" the new sub chaser USS SC 687.

USS SC 687 was commissioned on 23 Aug 43, and Lester remained part of her crew until 23 Mar 44 when he was transferred to the US Naval Station at Taboga, Balboa, CZ. It is unclear whether June was with Lester during his time in the Canal Zone which lasted until his discharge in Jacksonville, FL on 21 Sep 1946. By then he had achieved the rate of Chief Motor Machinist Mate (CMoMM), the most senior non-commissioned Officer responsible for the operation and maintenance of machine tools, internal combustion engines and engine auxiliaries, and of related pressure and air systems and electrical systems at a Navy duty station.

By the time of the 1950 census, Lester and June were residing in Prospect, Butler County, PA, and Lester was utilizing his mechanical expertise in the tool and die department of Spang & Company, a manufacturing firm in East Butler, PA. After he retired from Spang, he owned a gun shop for several years. He was a member of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, in Adrian. A talented singer since his school days, in retirement, he joined the *Notables Barbershop Chorus* and the *Rinkydinks Quartet*. He also enjoyed golf and bowling.



Violet Rose
Goughler
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

Lester died on 28 Oct 2003 at age 88 while resident at Sugar Creek Rest home in Worthington, PA. Preceding him in death were a grandson, a great-granddaughter, and his brother, James Lewis Goughler, who died on 11 Sep 1992 in Coraopolis, PA. James had served as a platoon sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps in Guam and other Asia-Pacific locations during WWII. In addition to his wife, June Woessner Goughler, who would pass away on 9 Jul 2005 in Adrian, Armstrong, PA, Lester was survived by their daughters, Francine and Marcia, and their four grandchildren. His son by his first wife, Charles Arthur, also survived him, as did his older sister, the family's *grande dame*, Violet Rose, who



Daughter Francine
Goughler at Butler
H.S., 1963

Courtesy: Ancestry.com

passed away at nearly 91 in Prospect, PA.

Lester Arthur Goughler is listed on page 239 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 and from Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, and other Internet records.

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