



Marblehead Biography of Thomas Earl Owens, Jr.



Thomas Earl Owens, Jr., age 60

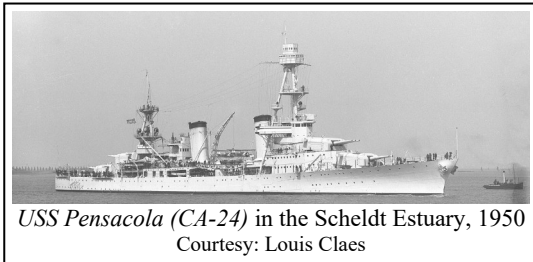
Courtesy of Owens himself.

Thomas Earl Owens, Jr. was born on 5 Nov 1918 in Paris, Lamar County, Texas, to homemaker Laura Elizabeth “Bessie” Crocker (1894–1987) and farmer Thomas Earl Owens Sr. (1883–1949).

By the 1930 U.S. Census, the family was living and farming in the Klondike area of Delta County, TX, about 29 miles farther to the southwest. By that time, Thomas had four siblings: Eva Ray (1911–1917); Mary Lorena (1913–2007); Mildred E. (1921–1995); Laura Belle (1923–1944), and Hubert Lorenza (1925–2013).

It is highly likely that Thomas Sr. was a cotton farmer. Klondike was heavily tied to cotton cultivation in the 1920s. Two large

cotton gins operated there along with an active rail hub. However, after the 1929 stock market crash, Texas’s agriculture, oil/gas, and lumber sectors fell into economic depression. Cotton prices plunged to 5 cents a pound, below production cost, and thousands of farmers faced ruin. The Owens family may have been among them. Later in the 1930s, New Deal programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided some job growth through infrastructure and conservation projects, but by the time Earl graduated high school, employment prospects in the area were bleak.



USS Pensacola (CA-24) in the Scheldt Estuary, 1950
Courtesy: Louis Claes

It is unclear which high school Thomas attended in Delta County (most likely Klondike H.S. or Cooper H.S.), but it seems likely he graduated in 1936. Despite the hard economic times, the U.S. Navy was hiring that year, so Earl headed 76 miles southwest to Dallas where he enlisted on 14 Jul 1936. It is unclear where he underwent basic training, but he was assigned Service #3559882, and his first duty station was the heavy cruiser *USS Pensacola (CA-24)* which had

joined the [Pacific Fleet](#) in 1935 and initially operated from San Diego, CA. By early 1939 he was serving as a Radioman Third Class (RM3c) attached to *USS Pensacola-related* aviation units. In March–June 1939, Earl appears in *Pensacola* and *VOS Squadron Four* records as attached to *USS Pensacola/USC Salt Lake City* aviation-units and assigned to Fleet Air Base/Fleet Air Detachment San Pedro, California.

On 28 Aug 1939, Earl was honorably discharged aboard *USS Pensacola*, and he reenlisted the next day for four more years. He was still serving aboard *Pensacola* at the end of 1939 when, effective 16 Dec 1939 he was promoted to Radioman Second Class (RM2c). He continued to serve aboard *Pensacola* until Nov 1940 when he was reassigned to the Asiatic Station, home of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet. After crossing the Pacific as a passenger aboard the heavy cruiser *USS Northampton (CA-26)*, Earl underwent processing at the Naval Receiving Station at Cavite, Philippines, and was assigned to the light cruiser *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*. By that point Earl had been promoted to Radioman First Class (RM1c). He first stepped aboard *Marby*, as she was affectionately referred to by her crew, on 22 Nov 1940. The ship was then anchored at Olongapo, Zambales Province, home of America’s Subic Bay Naval Base. Thus began one year, four months and fifteen days aboard *Marby*, likely the most exciting, dangerous and transformative period of Earl’s life.

He was joining the ship late in her career in East Asia. She no longer called on Chinese ports for, with the exception of British-held Hong Kong, they were all under Japanese control. 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 Asiatic Fleet Commander Admiral Thomas Hart, *Marby’s* skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson, and the rest of the ship’s crew.



Bessie and Thomas Earl, Sr. wedding

Courtesy: Ancestry.com



The Marby

From afar, Admiral Hart had been closely monitoring the failing U.S.-Japan negotiations in Washington, DC. In contrast, the flamboyant, headline seeking General Douglas MacArthur, commander of U.S. and Filipino army and air forces in the Philippines, and comfortably ensconced in his suite at the Manila Hotel, was woefully unprepared for what was to come. Meanwhile, Admiral Hart drew the right conclusions.

On 25 Nov 41, sensing imminent hostilities, Hart ordered all seaworthy Asiatic Fleet vessels to disperse without fanfare to the southwest and into the Netherlands East Indies (NEI; today's Indonesia). Four days later, 29 Nov, *Marby* anchored off of Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI, to await further orders. Darkened for additional security, she was anchored roughly 700 nautical miles (805 statute miles) south of Manila.

At 0328 hours on 8 Dec 41, *Marby's* radio crackled with news of the attack on Pearl Harbor: "The Japanese have commenced hostilities. Act accordingly." See textbox on the right.

At dawn *Marby* weighed anchor and headed for Balikpapan, an oil port on the south coast of Borneo, where she refueled and then cut across the strait to Makassar, South Celebes Island to reprovision. By Christmas, she was at the Dutch Naval Base at Surabaya, Java. 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 December 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 naval air superiority had just made quick victims of those British behemoths. These events honed her crew's focus on *Marby'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 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

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](#)). For a few days, *Marby* temporarily became Radio Darwin, the beacon that facilitated the regrouping of remaining Allied warships to slow the Japanese conquest of the rest 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 1942 in Surabaya, and by 1 Feb 1942, 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.

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¶

¹ [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#), p. 42.



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.”*”² 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 its 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 knocked out her gyroscope and 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 appear to begin to sink. This was a blessing in disguise because it caused the Japanese to assume that the sea would finish off what their bombs had begun. Hence, the bombers left her to that fate and went off to hunt bigger prey, the heavy cruiser *USS Houston (CA-40)*.

The Japanese made several claims to have 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 men defied the odds, the Japanese, and the Java Sea. Initially, they bailed by hand non-stop for more than seventy hours to keep her afloat and get her into Tjilatjap harbor for critical repairs. Then over the next ninety days, they coaxed her, still in crippled condition, 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 improbable escape to New York are described in detail in *Marby’s own biography*, in the 1944 book *Where Away – a Modern Odyssey*, and in a memoir that Earl completed in 1982. Earl transferred off *Marby* on 6 Apr 1942 in Bahia, Brazil, after spending a year, four months and 15 days aboard the ship, at once the most dangerous and exciting period of his life.

Earl completed an 89-page memoir ([Memories of the Marblehead, and the fate of his friend ‘Ski’](#).) about his time aboard *Marby*. It is unclear whether the memoir was ever formally published, but at some point, he did give a copy of it to *Marblehead* shipmate and fellow Radioman, the late Raymond D. Kester. That copy was re-discovered in mid-2025 by Kester’s son who succeeded his father as webmaster. The memoir is now available beneath the Books/Media tab on the www.USSMarblehead.com’s website. It is a comprehensive, worthwhile read, and in some of its ‘damage photos’ Earl even takes time to identify his shipmates in action during the post-bombing clean up.

In his memoir, Earl recalls a fellow Radioman that he’d met aboard *USS Northampton (CA-26)*, the heavy cruiser that delivered both men to the Asiatic Station in the Philippines in 1940. On arrival, Earl was soon assigned to *Marby*, but Ski was assigned to shore duty as part of the communications team at the 16th Naval District headquarters at the Cavite Naval Station in Manila Bay. Still, the two became good friends, and whenever *Marby* made port, the two of them would venture together through Manila and other parts of Luzon. During those times, Earl always referred to his friend simply as “Ski”, largely because Ski’s full name was a three-part, 29-letter mouthful. Decades later, as he wrote his memoir, Earl could only recall those three letters of the last name, i.e., ‘Ski’. Still, he recalled the good times and frequently pondered what became of “Ski” in the aftermath of the Japanese invasion of the Philippines which began just hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Perhaps Earl felt some remorse that he and his shipmates had side-stepped that disastrous invasion due primarily to the farsightedness of Admiral Hart while men who were attached to shore stations, as Ski was, had few options for escape. The pair never had the opportunity to meet again.

In his memoir, Earl mentions hearing scuttlebutt from Navy friends suggesting that “Ski” had been captured by the Japanese and had died on the Bataan Death March. But scuttlebutt, often nothing more than unverified gossip, prompted us to explore the matter further.

² [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#), p. 108-109



First, we had to determine Ski's real name. We suspected Polish ancestry, but that too was just a guess, so we turned to the Reports of Changes of *USS Northampton* and searched for a Radioman whose family name ended in 'ski', and who had first arrived in Manila in October 1940 as Earl had. One sailor did fit that description - Valentine Stanislaus Wisniewski, service # 2339727, who arrived in Manila on 18 Oct 1940.

Second, there was the relative geo-positions around Manila Bay of: a. Mariveles, the town at the southern end of the Bataan Peninsula, often cited as the starting point of the Death March on 9 Apr 1942; and b. the Cavite Naval Base, Ski's duty station which sat on a much smaller peninsula roughly 28 miles due east of Mariveles as the crow flies across the waters of Manila Bay.

At roughly 1:00 p.m. local time on 10 Dec 1941 fifty-four Formosa-based Japanese naval bombers struck the Cavite Navy Yard where Ski was stationed. In a two-hour raid from altitudes beyond the reach of the base's anti-aircraft defenses, the planes targeted ships and small craft in the bay but primary in their sights were the base's power plant, dispensary, fuel depot, torpedo repair shop, supply office, signal station, commissary, receiving station, barracks, and officers' quarters, drydocks, repair shops, warehouses, and radio station. An explosion at a torpedo warehouse compounded the destruction, though the ammunition depot escaped direct hits. Fires spread rapidly out of control.

USS Sealion (SS-195), which was undergoing an overhaul at the time, took two direct hits and was later scuttled. Minesweeper *USS Bittern (AM-36)* suffered heavy damage and was eventually scuttled. At the time, sister submarine *USS Seadragon (SS-194)* was moored to *Sealion* in the dock and was damaged by the force of the explosions on *Sealion*. However, disregarding the danger, Submarine Rescue Vessel *USS Pigeon (ARS-6)* moved in and towed *Seadragon* into the channel enabling the latter to continue out of Manila Bay under her own power. *Seadragon* later received repairs from sub-tender *USS Canopus (AS-9)* and *USS Pigeon*. On the night of 15 Dec 1941, *Seadragon* embarked members of the Asiatic Fleet staff and headed out of Manila Bay the following midnight. She would survive WWII with 11 battle stars having sunk 10 Japanese ships with displacement totaling 43,450 tons during World War II. *USS Peary (DD-226)* was also caught in the raid but escaped damage only to be sunk in a Japanese raid on Darwin, Australia on 19 Feb 1942.

At 2100 on the day of the raid, Rear Admiral Francis Rockwell, commander of the 16th Naval District to which Ski was attached, ordered the base abandoned, with all military personnel moved off base to the town of San Roque. Shore-based personnel returned through the main gate the next day to begin cleanup and salvage work, and remaining supplies and materials were ferried across Manila Bay to a small base at Mariveles on the southern tip of Bataan and to Corregidor, which also became Rockwell's new headquarters. Rockwell and his staff agreed to salvage what they could and disperse the remaining torpedoes, mines, ammunition, and small arms to Corregidor and the Mariveles Naval Section Base. [U.S. Naval Institute](#)

Rockwell inspected the base by daylight on 11 Dec, confirmed it was virtually demolished, and deemed it too dangerous to allow large numbers of personnel back into the station. Admiral Hart, after reviewing the damage reports, weighing Japanese air superiority, and conferring with Rockwell, ordered Cavite abandoned, and reported to Washington that the Manila area was untenable for further naval operations. Overall, subsequent casualty counts at the Cavite Base have varied, with 167 dead and 285 wounded being the highest estimates.

Displaced Cavite personnel were absorbed into the broader Manila Bay defense over the following weeks. Base personnel and matériel went first to Mariveles on southern Bataan and to Corregidor starting the day after the attack. By late December, as Manila itself was evacuated and declared an open city, most remaining Asiatic Fleet shore personnel had been consolidated at Mariveles.

The most significant use of Cavite's displaced sailors came in January 1942 when Commander Francis "Frank" Bridget organized roughly 150 naval aviation ground crewmen, 330 sailors drawn from various ships and bases, and 120 Marines, some 600 men in all, into the Naval Battalion, with Lt. Commander H.P. Goodall as second-in-command, to guard the previously undefended Bataan coastline near Mariveles.



As the Bataan front began to collapse, just before dawn on 9 April, roughly 650 officers, enlisted men, and 70 civilian contract employees crowded into the island bastion of Corregidor ('The Rock') from Mariveles, bringing the Rock's complement to about 200 officers, one nurse, and over 2,300 enlisted men, including the crews of the old Yangtse River Patrol gunboats *USS Oahu (PR-6)*, sunk at the "tadpole's tail end" at Corregidor in 20 feet of water; *USS Mindanao (PR-8)* scuttled 2 May 1942; and *USS Luzon (PG-47)* scuttled 6 May 1942. That 9 April movement is essentially the tail end of the story — Bataan fell that same day, which is what put a few of the Cavite-yard-turned-Naval-Battalion sailors who didn't make it to Corregidor into the Death March itself. [U.S. Naval Institute](#)

- **Bataan fell 9 April 1942:** Major General Edward P. King Jr. surrendered the approximately 76,000 American and Filipino troops on the peninsula to Japanese forces, triggering the Bataan Death March. Ski **was not** among those prisoners.
- **Corregidor fell 6 May 1942:** Roughly four weeks later, Lt. General Jonathan Wainwright surrendered the fortress after the Japanese landed on the island on the night of 5–6 May, ending organized U.S. resistance in the Philippines. The Mansell.com Pacific POW Roster, with about 46,000 names, is considered the most comprehensive individual-level database for Pacific POWs including camp assignments, hell ship rosters, and liberation details indicated that Ski was first held in the 92nd Garage area on Corregidor for two or three weeks and was then transferred to Bilibid Prison, Manila for a short transit stay before being forwarded to Cabanatuan Camp No. 3 and later Camp No. 1, the main holding camp for Corregidor survivors where men were held for months to years prior to Japan transfer. There he would have been issued a Japanese uniform and placed in the hold of a Japanese vessel destined for Japan. Thereafter he boarded the *Dainichi Maru* one of the notorious Japanese Hell Ships. On arrival in Japan, he was assigned camp code 618 (the Sendai group) which reflects only his final destination in Japan. The Sendai camp group, a slave labor camp, was located north of Tokyo where he likely worked as a slave in a mine.

Ski was repatriated to the U.S. after WWII and went on to serve a total of 21 years in the Navy before retiring to his home state of New York in the town of Batavia where he lived for twenty more years. "Ski" died at age 66 in the U.S. Veterans Hospital in nearby Rochester, NY on Wednesday, 12 Jan 1977, but down in Texas, a decade before the Internet, it was unlikely that Earl was aware that Ski was back in the U.S.

His wife, Dora Kathryn Miller, was born on 22 Oct 1924 in Cumby, Hopkins County, Texas. She died on 21 Nov 2025 in Commerce, Hunt County, Texas. It is unclear whether they had children.

Earl retired on 1 Sep 1957 and died in Dallas, TX on 21 Jul 1989 never having learned of Ski's fate.

Thomas Earl Owens, Jr. is listed on page 244 of the 1944 book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#).

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

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, USS Marblehead 1939-1945, with contributions from R.D. Kester and his son Ray, and from Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, ClaudeAI and other Internet records.

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