



The Marby

Marblehead Biography Of Homer Percifield



Red as a senior at
Columbus High School
Source: 1927 The Log

Homer Martin 'Red' Percifield was born on 29 Jun 09 in East Columbus, Bartholomew County, southern Indiana, roughly halfway between Indianapolis, IN and Louisville, KY. His parents were factory laborer John Albert 'Bert' (1872–1940), and homemaker Anna Marie Arnholt (1877–1952), both Indiana-born. Four years later, his younger brother, Ralph Curtis (1913–1981), was born.

Red attended Columbus High School. News clippings from the late 1920s mention his skills in baseball, basketball, and football for his high school and other leagues in Columbus. His sports prowess would continue in the Navy.

Red enlisted on 23 Nov 32 in Columbus. He received 12 weeks of basic training at Grate Lakes Naval Training School on Lake Michigan, just north of Chicago. While there he was chosen as "honor man" in his company of seventy men based on his proficiency in drill, signaling, swimming, marksmanship, seamanship, boxing, prompt response to orders, and other important military skills.

Ascertaining the name of Red's first ship was difficult since he joined the vessel in the early-1930s, and Navy muster roles and other service records are available only for the 1939-1949 period. However, nearly seven years after his basic training, on a 45-day, September 1939 furlough, Red was interviewed by his hometown newspaper, *The Republic*. It mentioned that he had achieved the rate of Boatswain's Mate 1st class and was expecting to shortly ship out for Shanghai, China for three years of duty in the Far East. The article added that he had previously served on the battleship *USS Maryland (BB-46)* but no dates for his service were given. Fortunately, his last muster roll entry for *USS Maryland*, dated 31 Mar 39, indicates that he had joined her on 2 Apr 33. She was his first ship, and he had been with her nearly all his first seven years in the Navy. That was a very long time to serve on one ship, even in peacetime. Why so long?

Sports seem to have been the reason. *Maryland* had operated in the Pacific since the 1920s, and the interview mentioned that she had a football team. With two heavy cruisers, four divisions of destroyers and two submarine divisions stationed in China at the time, the fleet had had no shortage of talent, and team managers wanted to retain their best players as long as possible. The 6'3", 220-pound Red played end for *Maryland's* team, which according to the interview, had won the All-Battle Force Championship for seven years and had not been scored on in six seasons." Red had also played center on the ship's basketball team.

After his leave, Red headed to the West Coast where, on 16 Nov 39, he joined the *USS Henderson (AP-1)* in San Pedro, CA. *Henderson* was one of two transports that kept the Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors (*USS Chaumont (AP-5)* was the other). On 18 Jan 40, in Shanghai, BM1c Percifield was transferred to the obsolete light cruiser, *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, fondly known to her crew as *Marby*.

Red spent the next three and a half years 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, which is fully described in [Marby's own biography](#) and in the 1944 book, [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#).

Red joined *Marby* late in the ship's history with Asia, which had begun 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 Red arrived, 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* 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 reprovision. 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 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 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 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](#)), 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 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.

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



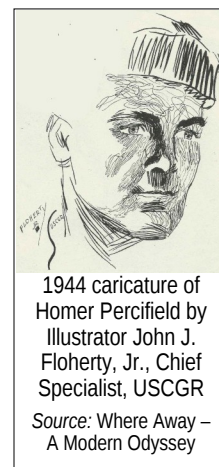
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The following morning “*broke red, burnishing the bottoms of clouds that floated across the sky before a mild westerly breeze. The lookouts could see the high mountains of Bali looming in the distance. ... A little after 0900, Admiral Doorman on De 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 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 *Houston*.

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. The truth brought joy to hundreds of families, and in one of his fireside chats, President Roosevelt singled out *Marby*’s crew as an inspiration to the nation. Now dubbed a hero, Red soon took leave to go home. And to get married!



Ruth Schaefer, senior,
Columbus High School

Source: *1926 The Log*
Ancestry.com; US School
Yearbooks

Like many others who had endured combat, Red may have worried that if he didn’t start a family soon, the war might deprive him of the opportunity of ever doing so. Fortunately, he had a girl in mind. She was Ruth Florence Mildred Schaefer (1908-1993), the daughter of John H. Schaefer (1869-1966), a flour miller, and homemaker Mary Carolyn ‘Mollie’ Bosse (1869-1939). ‘Ruthie’ to her classmates, she had been a year ahead of Red and active in Drama and Glee clubs at Columbus High School. The couple married at Columbus’ Saint Peter’s Evangelical Lutheran Church on 5 Jul 42. Betty Gray, Ruthie’s niece, was maid of honor and Red’s brother Ralph was best man. The couple honeymooned in New York, and when Red, already a Chief Boatswain’s Mate, returned to sea, Ruthie went back to Columbus where she worked for Irwin-Union Bank and Trust, founded in 1871 as a department of the dry goods store of Joseph I. Irwin, a prominent Columbus merchant, contractor, real estate developer, and tin plate manufacturer.

Red re-enlisted for four more years on 12 Oct 42, and following a six-month overhaul in Brooklyn Navy Yard, NY, *Marby* was redeployed to the South Atlantic on 15 Oct 42 with Red aboard. Operating out of Recife, Brazil, *Marby* pursued enemy subs and blockade runners, and

² *Where Away – A Modern Odyssey*, p. 108-109



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rescued Allied flyers and enemy sailors adrift in lifeboats. During this time, the ship visited St. Thomas, Virgin Islands; Rio De Janeiro and Bahia, Brazil; Ascension Island and other ports.

On 14 Apr 43, Ruthie bore their only child, Ruth Ann, but it was not until the following April, when Marby was in New York, that Red could take ten days off to see his daughter for the first time. "And I tell you, running convoy on her is a full-time job," he told his hometown newspaper.

On 6 May 43, his promotion to Chief Boatswain's Mate, until then a temporary assignment, was made permanent. On 28 Aug 43, as the ship sailed from Recife, Brazil, Red was promoted to Ensign, marking his entry into the ranks of commissioned officers. Since officers are not recorded in most muster roles, and his service record was not available for this biography, it is unclear whether Red was still aboard *Marby* when she supported the highly successful invasion of Southern France during Operation Dragoon in Aug 44. Nor has it been possible to determine the ships on which he served after leaving *Marby*. What is known is that he achieved Lieutenant Junior Grade on 1 Dec 44, full Lieutenant (Line) on 1 Jan 49, and Lieutenant Commander on 1 Mar 54.



Ruth Ann, Columbus High School Junior, 1960

Source: Ancestry.com; US School Yearbooks



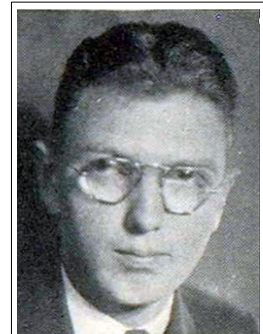
Homer Martin Percifield at retirement

Source: Navy Memorial Log

Red retired from the Navy in 1955, but he did not quit working. He returned to Columbus and went to work for the nearby Cummins Engine Company which had been cofounded in 1919 by banker William G. Irwin (1866–1943), son of Joseph Irwin who founded the bank that Ruthie worked for, and Clessie Cummins, a local mechanic. The company had focused on developing the diesel engine invented 20 years earlier, and the Cummins N Series engine became the industry leader in the post-World War II road building boom in the United States, with more than half the heavy truck market using a Cummins engine from 1952 to 1959. Red's timing could not have been better. By 2013, Cummins would have operations in 197 countries and territories.

Red's brother, Ralph Curtis (1913–1981), was born on 8 Jun 13 in East Columbus, Bartholomew County, Indiana. He served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during WWII, enlisting on 22 Sep 42 and receiving an honorable discharge on 30 Sep 43. He married twice, first to Mary Elizabeth Trautmann (1915–1991) in 1938 and then to Doris Larue Dalton (1918–2009) in 1953. Prior to his death on 6 Nov 81, Ralph had served in the US Army Air Force during WWII. After the war, he started his own business, Percy's Sundries in Columbus which he ran for 18 years and then he managed the South Central Paint Store from 1962 until his 1979 retirement. Ralph died on 5 Nov 81 in Bedford, Lawrence County, Indiana at age 68. His second wife, Doris, survived him. They had no children.

Ruthie passed away at 85 on 17 Oct 93 in Columbus. Red died on 4 Apr 96; three months shy of his 87th birthday. Both are buried at Garland Brook Cemetery in Columbus.



Ralph Curtis Columbus High School Senior, 1932

Source: Ancestry.com; US School Yearbooks

Red Percifield is mentioned on pages 26, 30, 58, 80, 83, 94, 97, 103, 147, 175, 185, 214, 227, and 244 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.