



Marblehead Biography Of Frederick Henry Ritter



Fred Ritter (R) speaking with his brother Richard in Normal, IL in July 1942 after a 15-year absence.

Source: Newspapers.com

Frederick 'Fred' Henry Ritter was born on 20 Aug 1902 on a farm five miles south of El Paso, Woodford Co., IL near the tiny community of Kappa. His Illinois-born dad, John Henry (1863-1916) was a farmer, and his mom, homemaker Roseanna Anna Jackson (1865-1910), was from Ohio. Settled in 1833, Kappa's population at the time was about 175 (it was 229 in the 2020 census). The name Kappa, the 10th letter of the Greek alphabet, had been insisted upon by the Illinois Central Railroad because it was the tenth town between Dunleith (today's East Dubuque) and Bloomington, IL. Fred had five older siblings: Guy (1887-1961), Harry Melville (1889-1952), Camilla Arline (1891-1949), Richard Frederick (1895-1953), and Almira Gladys (1897-1938).

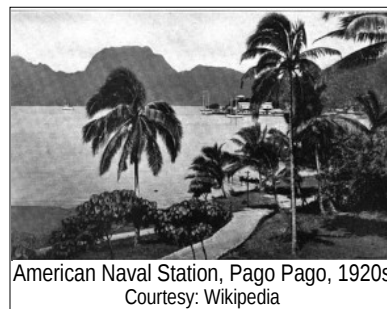
Fred's mother passed away in 1910 when he was eight years old, and his dad died in 1916, when he was 14. Perhaps one of Fred's older siblings raised him after that. Also unclear is where he went to school and what grade he attained, but he enlisted in the Navy on 23 Jan 1923, in Indianapolis, IN. It is likely that he underwent basic training at Great Lakes Naval Training Station on Lake Michigan, north of Chicago.

Since Navy muster rolls are not available for the 1920s and most of the 1930's, it was not possible to identify the ships that Fred served early in his career. However, a non-Navy travel document from 1933 provided a glimpse of one of his early, more exotic shore duty stations.



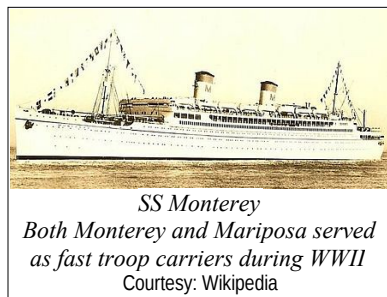
Pago Pago, halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand
Courtesy: Google Maps

The *SS Mariposa*, a Matson Lines' 'White Fleet' luxury liner¹, sailed from Honolulu, TH on 31 Jul 1933 bound for the U.S. Naval Station at Pago Pago Harbor on the island of Tutuila, American Samoa, midway between Hawaii and New Zealand. Built during the U.S. Navy's rule of American Samoa from 1900 to 1951, the station's commandant served as Military Governor of the territory. Aboard *SS Mariposa* were six Americans who would disembark in Samoa, including an eleven-year-old child and Fred Ritter, then age 30. The passenger list does not identify him as US Navy personnel, but he was apparently beginning a two-year assignment at the Naval Station in Pago Pago. His duties in Samoa remain unclear, but the photo at the right suggests that his weekends were idyllic!



American Naval Station, Pago Pago, 1920s
Courtesy: Wikipedia

Two years later, on 10 Aug 1935, one of *Mariposa's* sister ships in the 'White Fleet', *SS Monterey*, arrived in Los Angeles, CA from Pago Pago. Fred was among three passengers identified as US Navy personnel in the ship's manifest. The list did not indicate his rate or the rates of two other Navy passengers aboard, but it did indicate that Fred was attached to the Receiving Ship in San Francisco. Presumably, he was headed there. He was 32 and single.²



SS Monterey
Both *Monterey* and *Mariposa* served as fast troop carriers during WWII
Courtesy: Wikipedia

¹ The Navy often used private vessels to transport its sailors when its own vessels were unavailable.

² A subsequent *USS Marblehead* muster roll dated 26 Jul 1940 stated that Fred re-enlisted on 18 Jun 1935 in Pago Pago, just two months before his Los Angeles arrival aboard *SS Monterey*.



On 23 Aug 1939, Fred was received aboard the USS S-37 from heavy cruiser *USS Augusta*, then the flagship of the Asiatic Fleet. S-17 was an 'S' Class submarine. Because the muster rolls of *Augusta* are not available (except for her aviation unit) it was not possible to learn when Fred joined *Augusta*, however, the transfer to S-37 appears to have occurred in Tsingtao, China based on *Augusta's* service history (Wikipedia).

During the late 1930s, as hostilities increased after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, the Asiatic Fleet's S-boat schedule was altered to include more individual exercises and cruises. The submarines ranged throughout the Philippines and Netherlands East Indies (NEI; today's Indonesia), and they made shorter deployments to China.



On 18 Mar 1940, Fred transferred to *USS Canopus (AS-9)*, the submarine tender to which S-37 was attached, and in Tsingtao on 26 Jul 1940, he transferred to *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, or *Marby* as she was affectionately referred to by her crew. He would remain with *Marby* for three years and four months. When *Marby* left Tsingtao in early-September 1940,



it was the last time her crew would see China.

Fred would spend 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 1942 and her subsequent 20,589-mile, 90-day escape to New York, which are more fully described in *Marby's* own biography and in the 1944 book, Where Away – A Modern Odyssey.

He arrived late in the ship's history with Asia, which began when she joined the Asiatic Fleet in 1938. Normally, she wintered in the Philippines working from Manila and 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 Fred 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 1941, 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 her anchor off of 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 1941, *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 her 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 authorized limited shore leave for his men 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. 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 and now these ten were quick victims of Japanese naval air superiority. 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."

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 where she was inducted into the U.S. Navy. 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 sailed north, and on 20 Jan 1942, 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 left five enemy ships 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 (CA-30)*, 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." 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 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 *Marby* off, so they went after bigger prey, the *USS Houston (CA-30)*.

The Japanese would claim several times in the international press 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 1942. *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, Modern Odyssey](#).

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, Fred soon took leave to go home.

Effective 26 Jun 42, while *Marby* was still undergoing an overhaul in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, NY, Fred was honorably discharged and the next day he re-enlisted for four more years. He was still attached to *Marby* when, on 15 Oct 42, she departed New York and headed south to rejoin the fight operating from Recife, Brazil. Fred would remain attached to *Marby* until 18 Nov 43 when he was transferred effective 18 Nov 43 to NOF, Navy-120 (code for Recife) for further forwarding to the Navy Receiving Station in Philadelphia, PA for further forwarding to the soon to be completed *USS Wisconsin (BB-64)*. He was aboard *Wisconsin* for her commissioning on 16 Apr 44. He would remain on that ship until 26 Dec 44 when he was transferred to *USS Massachusetts (BB-59)* for duty. Fred remained attached to the *Massachusetts* until transferred on 18 Aug 45 to the *USS Garrard (APA-84)* effective 2 Sep 45, the day Japan surrendered. However, that final transfer may have simply been for transportation reasons since Fred was discharged eleven days later.



Navy Cross Citation: Frederick Henry Ritter

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Frederick Henry Ritter, Chief Electrician's Mate, U.S. Navy, for extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty in action during the attack on the Light Cruiser U.S.S. MARBLEHEAD (CL-12), by Japanese enemy bombers on 4 February 1942. Chief Electrician's Mate Ritter demonstrated extraordinary devotion to duty in directing and assisting in the repair and maintenance of temporary lighting, power, and communications circuits. His conduct throughout was in keeping with the highest traditions of the Navy of the United States.

Fred was honorably discharged on 13 Sep 1945 after 22 years and seven months in the Navy. He returned to Bloomington and went to work for the Illinois Telephone Company. It was there that he probably met Nancy Jane McDonnell, a secretary in the company's commercial office. Nancy was born in Bloomington, IL on 21 Nov 1917 to homemaker Mary E. Hart (1883–1945) and U.S. Postal Service employee George A. McDonnell (1878–1938). Fred and Nancy married on Saturday, 15 Jan 1949. He was 46 and she was 31.

Fred died on 25 Jun 74 at Travis Air Force Base, Solano, CA. Nancy worked many years as a secretary to the General Manager of GTE in Bloomington. She passed away there on 27 Dec 1999. Nancy and Fred left behind a daughter, Jane, son-in-law Charles, and grandchildren Sally and Fred. Nancy and Fred are buried in St. Mary's Cemetery, Bloomington, IL.

Frederick Henry Ritter is listed on page 245 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 Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, and other Internet records.

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