THE SHIP THAT WOULDN'T SINK

By George Sessions Perry and Isabel Leighton

The Story:
The cruiser Marblehead was one of a tiny band of American warships in the Pacific when the war opened. The men aboard her, Capt. Robinson, Bull Aschenbrenner, and Commanders Goggins and Van Bergen, knew that the odds were terrific. But they fought their cruiser quietly and efficiently until she was bombed, north of Java. Then everything happened. Her fantail was hanging in shreds and her rudder jammed hard right. A near-miss buckled her plates under the bows. Her decks were cluttered with wreckage. No one aboard would have bet a nickel that she'd stay afloat five minutes. She was down by the head and steering by engines only when Captain Robinson ordered her taken through Lombok Strait.

Conclusion

By the time the Marblehead neared fthe northern entrance of Lombok Strait, sound-powered phones had been strung between the bridge and the engine rooms. Through these phones the officer on the bridge could give steering orders to the engine rooms.

Her foredecks were almost awash, but her people were gaining practice in steering by the engines alone. Now she was yawing only from forty-five to sixty degrees off course.

Then, as she was almost inside the mouth of the strait, a crosscurrent caught her, made her sheer so that a series of waves slammed into her almost broadside and set her turning. The only recourse was to let her circle completely. To try to back her down was out of the question. After the circle was complete, Captain (now Rear Admiral) Robinson once more headed her into the strait. The late afternoon faded into night.

Even though the ship was sometimes crosswise in the strait, the struggle to keep her afloat and a few of her most vital functions in operation never slackened. Men in the bucket brigades worked without pause. Dale Johnson and Martin Moran undertook a with some repairs, might carry enough steam to drive a pump. He knew, moreover, that there was a huge pump in the engine rooms which was, at the moment, serving no vital purpose. He got permission from Mr. Camp to undertake the Herculean job of raising this three-and-a-half-ton piece of machinery to the main deck and to try to move it along to the broken, oil-covered passageways to a position up forward where it could work against the flooding.

There were only the stars, the vague, shadowy shore lines outlined on each side the subdued wink of lights from the accompanying destroyers to warn the Marblehead when she, was careening into danger. In the pilothouse, Commander (now Captain) Van Bergen, who was giving the steering orders to the engine room, had much the feeling of trying to negotiate a rapids in a canoe, using a billiard cue for a paddle.

Suddenly something huge and ominously dark loomed up ahead in the strait. Very soon it was upon them – a blinding tropical squall that brought all visibility to absolute zero. The Marblehead was lost in the rushing currents of Lombok Strait. Except for the totally unreliable compass, which now swung crazily beneath the screened light that rimmed its

binnacle, there was no earthly way to tell whether the ship was headed for the shore, for the reefs, or whether she would plow into the depth-bomb-laden stern of one of the destroyers. A messenger approached the captain and said, "Dr. Ryan wishes to report sir, that two more of our men have died."

"Very well," the captain said and walked to the other side of the bridge and looked out into the encompassing blackness. And at this moment, although the men on the Marblehead's bridge had no way of knowing it, a sharp crosscurrent, running in from the right, was taking hold of her stern and beginning inexorably to turn her battered stem in toward the near-by shore

Then the squall passed, just as suddenly as it had enveloped them. The light of the stars revealed the vaguely silhouetted shore toward which she was heading. The captain said, her right to 130 degrees."

After she'd begun to swing back on course, Van Bergen called over the phones: "All engines ahead standard. ... We know we're asking a lot. We need a lot. You're doing a great job down there."

A messenger brought a lookout's report to the bridge. Very quietly he said, "Another black squall ahead, sir."

"Very well," the captain said.

The Marblehead was approaching the narrowest part of the strait. The seas began to grow abruptly higher. Again they were engulfed by a driving rain. Through pitch black darkness the Marblehead plowed on.

After five minutes that seemed interminable to Captain Robinson as he went from window to window peering into the inky darkness, the squall passed. With great relief Captain Robinson saw that his ship had accomplished the seemingly impossible. She had made it. She was now plunging through the heavier swells of the Indian Ocean.

About one o'clock that night, Walter Jarvis and Carpenter Billman were working below decks up forward, trying to get lights going, and making chalk marks on the bulk- head every ten minutes so that they would have some idea of the rate of flooding. Each time they looked back from their work the chalk mark was gone beneath the water.

Men inside the ship never knew when dawn came. There was too much work to do. although they were greatly helped by the fact that Johnson and Moran and the dozens who were on the job with them had finally got the big steam pump installed up forward and it was working. But to the men on deck, dawn was both relief and menace. At least they wouldn't sink in the night! Yet they were again open to attack by the Japanese planes.

Some time after the captain had finished his ten-o'clock coffee and cigarette, a messenger ran to the bridge with the message, just received, that a large flight of Japanese bombers was headed in his direction.

"Sound air defense," he said.

At the sound of the bugle blowing out the air-defense call, the utterly exhausted men set down their buckets, looked at one another, and started to the remaining magazines to bring up what undamaged ammunition was left. There wasn't much. They found that they could carry it in one trip.

The sunken-eyed doctors broke out life jackets and made ready to throw their patients over the side if the ship were hit. The ship could not absorb a hit and live.

A plane was sighted on the horizon. Fuses were set and shells rammed home in the guns. Then a strange thing happened. Lt. Commander J. J. Hourihan was bringing his destroyer, Paul Jones, along some miles astern of the Marblehead. She was a four-stacker and except for being smaller, looked, from a great altitude, very much like the Marblehead. And the Japanese now mistook the Paul Jones for the Marblehead and swarmed above her.

Now. as "Red" Hourihan stood on his bridge and fought his lunging, darting little ship, he gave a radio play-by-play account which came clearly over the Marblehead's T.B.S. system throughout the fury of the attack.

She survived the first run and then the second, while Hourihan kept the wiry little ship doing the dipsy-doodle at thirty-five knots. There were about forty bombers with nothing to do but ride above him and drop their bombs where it would hurt the most, knowing that if they could plant just one it would be another nice, clean, no-survivor job.

At the end of an hour, the Paul Jones was, miraculously, still alive. Finally, over the T.B.S. came the decisive news:

"Planes gone. Seven runs. No hits. All errors."

Things Only Money Can Buy

That afternoon Joe DeLude look the first respite that he'd had since the beginning of the attack. Now it had begun to look as if the ship had a chance to make port. That money which he'd saved and which now was gone meant a thousand things which Joe might have enjoyed yet had denied himself: liberties in dozens of ports where he might have gone with the rest of the fellows and whooped it up and had a little fun. Instead of that he'd stayed aboard ship making himself little speeches that weren't particularly convincing—speeches to the effect that when you'd seen one, you'd seen them all—this referring to ports and women and saloons.

Too, there had been his real feeling of responsibility to make some kind of provision for his sister's future. There were such a lot of things a young girl would need that only money could buy: a pretty dress now and then and, well, damn it, a chance in life. The linens which he'd planned to give her, which he'd selected with such care and such a pleasant sense of being a qualified expert in such matters, were now somewhere in the bottom of the ship under water and either burned so badly or so thoroughly soaked in fuel oil that

they'd never be of any use to anybody. He was completely miserable and dejected when "Red" Percifield came across the deck to him and said. "Hello, Joe."

Red stuck something in Joe's pocket. Joe sat looking at the sea flowing past the Marblehead's wrecked hull. Suddenly he gave a start. He reached in his pocket, pulled out the envelope and opened it. It was full of money.

A kind of spasm passed over Joe's body. He couldn't believe it. He looked first at the money, then at Red, took the bills out, started to count them, found himself unable to, and looked back at Red.

"Good God!" Joe said.

"Somebody had got to the safe ahead of me," Red said, "and carried the drawers up to the coding room. I found them on a table. And there was your money, safe and sound."

"Good God . . ." Joe mumbled.

A Well-Deserved Tribute

At daylight the next morning. February 6th, the Marblehead, by now drawing a few feet less water, was met off Tjilatjap by the tugs that would bring her into port, where the Houston was already moored. The last the Houston had seen of the Marblehead, she was burning and sinking. The Houston's men knew what it must have cost in sweat and brains and guts to bring her in. And as the battered old Marblehead was towed past her, the Houston's men, who normally would have come to attention and saluted, broke into wild cheering.

Since the Japanese were moving, both by sea and land, ever closer, and moving fast. whatever repairs could be made would have to be made quickly unless the ship was to be either bombed to the bottom of the harbor or seized or scuttled in pint.

The only drydock in Tjilatjap was a floating one which belonged to a Batavian engineering firm. But it was much too short for the Marblehead. lt would be possible, the Dutch said, to sink the drydock beneath the Marblehead's bow. Then after slowly pumping out the drydock's tanks, perhaps the cruiser's bow could be lifted out of the water so that some kind of repairs could be effected. But there was a great probability that the overloaded little drydock might capsize. Such an outcome would certainly result in great loss of life. It was an extremely dangerous undertaking.

Captain Robinson said, "We'll try it."

Meanwhile, out on the topside of the ship, the new Executive Officer (Commander Goggins was among the wounded who had been sent ashore) was walking silently, almost blindly around the ship for the third time, speaking to nobody. Now that there was a moment's respite, the true desperation of the ship's circumstance had intruded on Van Bergen's consciousness for the first time. He could not help realizing that here they were in the middle of a war with a ship without a rudder. Soon she would be partially lifted out of the

water, on a steep slant, and with a constant tendency to relaunch herself stern end to. with her stern flooding worse than ever. Worst of all, she was in bombing range of the Japanese, and if they dropped so much as a hand grenade on her while in this precarious drydock, she'd probably capsize and drown all her men.

A big crane had been brought out for lifting off the huge curl of steel that had once been the deck of the fantail. But when the crane arrived, it was learned that the only man who could operate it had left town. The whole mass of decking would have to be cut in pieces small enough for a man to carry.

"Send for the Bull," Mr. Drury said. A few minutes later, "Bull" Aschenbrenner came, grinning, carrying a 130-pound steel flask of acetylene gas, his helper bringing the a tiny torch. He connected the torch, pulled his goggles down over his eyes and began cutting the deck into small pieces.

Frank Blasdel was over the side in a diver's rig plugging up holes in the bottom of her stern with wooden wedges where rivets had been blown out.

When the Marblehead had arrived, she had been met by a Dutch hospital train, which had already evacuated the Houston's wounded. The Marblehead's forty-five seriously wounded were taken ashore. As the hull rose out of the water, the bystanders saw a strange sight. The hull had been blown inward over an area twenty-seven feet square. In the center of this huge indentation, there was a hole three feet wide and nine feet long which had been blown squarely into the Group 1 magazines, from which belts of fifty-caliber ammunition hung out through the ship's bottom like seaweed. Apparently a bomb had missed the Marblehead's foredeck, falling about six feet to the left. The powder train inside the bomb had started burning the instant it struck the water. At the time, the ship had been describing tight circles to the left at high speed, so that, as soon as the bomb went into the water, the ship had begun to move over it. The explosion had occurred just as the turn of her hull passed over the bomb. The weight of the sea had remained constant and noncompressible. There had been nothing to give way but the Marblehead's thin hull.

Under the Eye of the Enemy

There were no facilities whatever in Tjilatjap to restore the Marblehead's steering. All that could be hoped for was to slam some kind of patch over the hole in her bow and make a getaway before the Japanese came. Japanese reconnaissance planes were overhead every day observing the progress of the work.

The Marblehead remained in Tjilatjap a week. On the night of February 12th. Captain Robinson wrote, "We are as ready as we can be but that isn't saying much. This place is getting hot."

Water was still pouring into her from im-perfect welds made in great haste. But enough pumps were going, so that, if she sustained no further damage, had reasonable luck with the weather, did not break in two (which two British officers were willing to bet would happen) and did not get caught by the enemy, she had a chance to make it to the next port.

As the Marblehead slipped out of port, the crew of a Dutch ship brought a phonograph up to the microphone of her public- address system, put on a record and turned the speaker horn toward the Marblehead. It was The Star-Spangled Banner.

Then abruptly this scene changed from one of deep fraternal emotion to one of danger. The date was Friday the 13th. Apparently the Marblehead's luck was gone. The line to the tug which was towing the warship suddenly parted and the rudderless Marblehead was adrift in the mine field outside Tjilatjap Harbor.

Captain Robinson was aghast, as was the Dutch pilot, who had seen those mines planted and who knew any one of them could blow the ship to kingdom come.

"All right now," the captain said, "Let's take it easy and try to hold her in the channel with her engines."

Meanwhile the tug was frantically making sternway in order to take another line. In his haste, the tug captain brought his boat up against the bow of the helpless cruiser. There was a collision. The only forward compartment that was still watertight was torn open.

By this time it was too late for the tug to take a line and be of any assistance. It was up to the captain and the pilot to steer her through with her own engines while the waves washed into this new rupture in her hull.

The Marblehead began to stagger 4,000 miles across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon, dragging herself as best she could toward an adequate drydock, the only kind of way station where she could be fully enough repaired to plow on .. .where? Almost no one dared think of it. Home lay half around the earth. A mild typhoon or any sort of enemy vessel could make a drowning man realize what a fool he'd been to have tortured himself with thoughts of home. But since the mind travels irrepressibly, men found themselves entertaining faint but unkillable hopes of actually, by whatever magic, coaxing the old ship along, of patching, and of eventually reaching home.

On February 21st, the crew of the Marble- head managed to bring their battered vessel into Trincomalee, Ceylon. And there they found that the drydock which they'd been seeking, and so desperately needed, was not to be had. The Marblehead, after steaming almost 4,000 miles with her rudder locked amidships, must, without remedy to her still flooding hull, straggle on and seek another haven.

Just before the Marblehead left Trincomalee, Walter Jarvis started running to the bridge. For a week he had been confined in the steering engine room. He had worked there, eaten there, and slept there.

Captain Robinson turned to the out-of- breath warrant officer and said, "Yes, Jarvis?"

"I'd like to report, sir, that the rudder has just been tested and found ready for limited service."

"Wonderful!" the captain almost shouted. "Convey 'Well Done' to all the men who've been working on it." He turned to the officer of the deck: "Call all special sea details. We sail at once."

Half an hour later the Marblehead, with all hands now in high spirits, stood out to sea. The old cruiser crept across the Indian Ocean toward the Royal Dockyard at Simonstown, South Africa, just at the Cape. Luckily the weather held generally fair, and the fact that the rudder was working again to a limited extent cheered everyone enormously. On .March 15th. the Marblehead steamed into Durban Harbor, 5,000 miles out of Trincomalee.

It was in Durban that the Bull, in all innocence, went back to war. He was in a bar one night and was still thirsty when the place closed. A taxi driver said he knew a place that stayed open all night, and the Bull climbed into the taxi and was taken to a very dark alley. The driver stopped the car, said, "Follow me." and they started up the alley.

But they had gone only a few steps when four men closed in behind them. By now the Bull was pretty sure it was a hijacking party. A moment later they drew up with him and demanded his money.

"Sure," the stocky Bull said, backing toward an alley wall. The Bull reached for his wallet with his left hand. His assailants were in close, and he hit the nearest one with his fist and pole-axed him. got another with a sledge-hammer blow of his elbow. Now that there were only three the Bull felt the pressure was off. But he was annoyed that these people should have, in this uncalled-for way. interfered with his evening's recreation. So he beat the remaining three into a coma, cut off each man's necktie as a souvenir and went on down the street to try to locate some relief for his now increased thirst.

Misfortune Strikes Again

It was on the next leg of their voyage, after the Marblehead left Durban on March 17th. that, for the first time since the bombing, the ship's good luck really deserted her.

One evening near midnight, "Ski" Wardzinski went below to take a regular hourly sounding of the forward holds. There was no reason at all why Ski should have felt any special trepidation about this duty. Someone had done it each hour ever since she had been hit. It was simply a matter of going down into the bottom of the ship and measuring the accumulation of water there. There was also no reason to expect that it was any higher than usual. All pumps were working and, though on the preceding day the sea had been rough, it was reasonably calm tonight. And if there was ever a time when Ski's premonition of death should have been momentarily in abeyance, this was the night.

Another man was with him. but he waited topside while Ski began climbing down the twenty-five feet to the bottom of the forward hold.

Overhead the stars shone brightly as he started down into the blacked-out ship. Once he passed below the possible vision of any nearby submarine, he turned on his flashlight so that he might see where he was going.

He had neither seen nor felt anything out of the ordinary until he reached the bottom of the ladder. As he took his first step forward, there was a slightly peculiar feeling in his chest which, with each succeeding breath, began to result in a somewhat pronounced inability to get enough air in Ins lungs. It smelled very much like mud flats when the tide had gone out. Every sort of debris had settled into the bilges: boxes of soap powder, lye. rope, fuel oil, food, paint. dozens of other things. The fact that the turbulence of the seas on the preceding days might have churned this rotting mixture to a point where it would exude lethal gases never entered Ski's mind until his respiratory difficulty had not only become acute but had been attended by a strange weakness in his legs.

A Premonition Comes True

He was already falling when the realization came upon him that his old enemy had slipped up on him in a form that could not be seen, and was clutching him. He knew that at all costs he must scramble his way back to the ladder.

But the same fast-developing weakness that had come into his knees had also permeated his hips and thighs and shoulders. Wild desire and terror could no longer be served In his weakened members, his weakly heaving lungs. He was caught, and he knew he was caught, that he'd never get out alive. Me tried to call, but a groan was all that be could tear out of his aching, gas-filled lungs. He lay helpless, face upward in the water of the bilge.

Up at the top of the ladder the man who had been on watch with Ski sat down on the up-ended bucket and wished he had ?????-rctte. Then his thoughts ???? on to the next port the ship would touch. He wondered whether he would have as good a time there as he had had in Durban.

Finally he yawned and looked at his watch. Ski had been below now for almost five minutes.

"Hey. Ski!" he yelled. "You gonna spend the night down there? Come on. Them other guys ought to be ready to lake over by now."

No answer. All he heard was the echo of his own voice in the big empty compartment

"Look, Ski. this ain't no time for pranks. Come on up, and let's check out. I'm sleepy."

Still no answer.

"Ski!"

Complete silence. Panic seized Ski's companion. He started running for help.

It was almost midnight. The Bull was going on watch. He had a bad cold, and he was drinking coffee in the galley and talking to a seaman.

"You know." he said. "I feel swell. Maybe we haven't got much sense, but we didn't let those dirty bastards get the old Ghost down We just messed around and monkeyed around and slammed her back together."

"I guess we did all right." the seaman said "If we'd stalled around much, she might have gone down."

"Sure she would." the Bull said. "We just got in a weaving way. This is a pretty good gang that the old Ghost has got, pretty salty Joes. Strictly China sailors."

The Bull took the last swallow of inky col- fee, mashed out the now quarter inch-long cigarette and started out.

The man who had been standing watch with Ski Wardzinski was running across tin deck when the Bull got topside.

"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 went on toward the bridge. The Bull started running toward the hatch. Perhaps Ski had only fallen and knocked himself out. But there was always the dread possibility of bilge gas. Something had to be done and done fast.

When the Bull reached the hatch, he started, without a fraction of a second's hesitation, down the ladder. When his feet were on the deck, his flashlight found Wardzinski. The Bull took two steps toward Ski. then things began happening to him. He fell his eyes setting and something putting his legs out of commission. "Ski." he gasped. The air seemed peculiar and stinking and it was doing him no good. He seemed to require the most enormous breaths, yet the breaths made things worse instead of better. His head felt as if it were made of brass and somebody were beating it with a hammer. The Bull found to his surprise, that he was on his knees, then on his hands and knees, catching the edges of bilge frames in his fingers. Now he was simply pawing—blind, insensate, striving; then a quick winding transition, the last phase of the transition between consciousness and oceanic night.

The man who'd been standing watch with Wardzinski next reached the bridge. The officer of the deck, thinking immediately of the possibility of bilge gas, ordered a boatswain's mate to call away the Fire and Rescue party. which would rush the Rescue Breathing apparatus to the scene of the accident. Messengers were sent to the captain in his emergency cabin, and to Van Bergen, asleep in his cabin below. Half-dressed, Van Bergen started running.

When he got there some minutes later, neither Wardzinski nor the Bull had come out or answered when shouted at. The Fire and Rescue party were in action with Carpenter Billman trying to find a full flask of oxygen among the many that proved to be partially depleted. Realizing this might take some time and knowing that minutes counted, Van Bergen tied a rope around his waist and started below. He reached the bottom of the ladder, holding his breath as he went, and focused his light on the Bull slumped over near

Wardzinski. Then Van Bergen's eyes began to set and he ceased to see, as his legs gave way beneath him.

By now, Billman had located rescue apparatus which, though not in prime shape, would, he felt, enable him to stay below a few minutes at a time—he hoped long enough. By the time he started down, the unconscious Van Bergen was being hauled up by the rope around his waist, and Billman knew that he, and the wise and careful use of his equipment, were the last hope the Bull and Wardzinski had. He put on his mask and started below.

Effecting the Rescue

Once he'd climbed down the ladder, he hastily secured lines around the Bull and Wardzinski and signaled for the men above to pull them out.

When they came up, they were still unconscious, but did have some pulse. They and Van Bergen were rushed to the wardroom and laid out on tables as the doctors began working over them, doing everything that their own medical knowledge and ingenuity and the facilities of the ship would permit. There was almost no chance for Wardzinski, because of the length of time he had been below, but they hoped to be able to save Van Bergen and the Bull.

By now the whole ship had heard what had happened and was deeply alarmed. At one point it was reported that Van Bergen's pulse had stopped altogether. That report was true, but the condition was only temporary. In half an hour or so he came to with a start. "Ace" Evans was working over him, and Van Bergen tried to climb off the table. Ace held him.

"How are the other men?" Van Bergen asked, struggling.

Ace Evans looked him in the eye and told two lies. "They are fine," he said, "and the captain has ordered you to stay where you are."

The word immediately passed through the ship that Van Bergen was conscious, and everybody was encouraged.

Little groups of men were now standing around outside the wardroom. Fire Control Man Riches was telling about the time in Surabaya when Ski had refused to go to the fortuneteller because he had dreaded having the fortuneteller verify his own conviction that very soon he would die. "And now poor Ski's in there dying," Riches said, "when that was the one thing that always seemed so terrible to him. He wasn't ever scared of nothing else."

A Medical Corps man came out.

Soft voices asked, "What's the dope?"

"It ain't good."

"You mean . . .they're gonna conk out?"

"They ought to have done come to by now, if they're coming to."

"But Mr. Van Bergen made it."

"He wasn't down there so long . . . Ski's just lying quiet. Looks like whatever keeps you going when you're unconscious had about been beat out of him."

"What about the Bull?"

"It breaks you up to watch the poor old Bull. He ain't conscious and he can't get no air. Looks like his lungs are messed up some way. He rears clear up on his elbows gasping, like if he could get a little higher, maybe he could get some air. He's fighting . . . hard. But he ain't winning."

Men moved away from the group to walk over and look at the sea. It had never occurred to any of them that anything could stop the Bull—that poison gas, even death, was big enough to encompass him.

"By God, I'm still willing to lay dough he makes it," one man said in response to nothing but his own thoughts. "Why, damn it all, there's a God, ain't there?"

They knew now that while the Bull had been putting that ship back together he'd welded himself into their hearts more deeply than they realized.

"Will you ever forget," one seaman said haltingly, as they waited outside the ward- room, "when the rest of us punks was having our girls' names tattooed on our chests in Shanghai? Not the Bull. He had his name tattooed on the floozie's leg."

"Just a few days ago," Red Percifield said, "the Bull and I were sitting on a couple of bitts 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 and bust through the door and say, 'Hello, Ma' and hug her."

All over the ship, in officers' quarters and enlisted men's spaces, men talked about the monumental goodness and animal vitality and generosity of the Bull. If he had been wounded and if transfusions would have helped, his shipmates would have given a hundred gallons of blood.

Throughout the night the struggle went on. But the Bull had given too freely of himself too long. A little after dawn the last weak beating of his pulse ceased.

When the ship touched at Port Elizabeth, South Africa, the flag-draped coffins of the Bull and Ski were brought ashore. A company each of South African soldiers, blue- jackets, and marines from the Royal Navy marched up as a guard of honor. The Bull's and Ski's shipmates came down the gangway and formed on one side of the coffins. Then a slender man with four gold stripes on his blue coat sleeve came out of the captain's cabin and took his place

at the head of the Marblehead's people. The Bull and Ski were carried by their closest friends and placed upon the waiting caissons. The rest of the men from their own division led the guard of honor. The funeral march began.

At the cemetery the bugler began the slow. deliberate, eternally uncompromising notes. The coffins began slowly to sink into the earth. Captain Robinson's face was now covered with tears as he saw these good men who had followed him so willingly and trustingly, yet with such dynamic fury when it was needed. Then, over the coffins, alien earth closed in.

Into Drydock at Last

But life and the processes of life had to go on as the ship made one more lap of her homeward trek. And since the ship was to be deprived henceforth of the Bull's two powerful arms and never-sagging back, it was well that she was pulling into the Royal Dockyard at Simonstown where she could at last be made seaworthy. Here there would be facilities for sealing her leaking bottom and temporarily bracing her internal structure so that she might undertake her trip through the South and North Atlantic to an American Navy Yard to be rebuilt to fight World War II. She arrived at Simonstown on March 24th. and when she finally was brought into a perfectly adequate drydock. Captain Robinson and all his officers and men breathed their first real sigh of relief, got the first momentary respite in almost two months.

On April 15th. twenty-three days after arriving in Simonstown, Captain Robinson took his ship to sea again. As one lad said: "The old Galloping Ghost has throwed up her tail and she's a-heading for the barn."

There is a quality about an "Omaha" class cruiser that gives her many of the exciting attributes of a destroyer. She's got lots of go and seems to have a sort of randy ebullience. When she tucks her little stern down into the water and starts digging, at the same time lifting a bow wave that rises up and covers her forefoot, she not only is a thrilling sight, but is also getting somewhere.

On April 23d the Marblehead reached Recife, Brazil. An American man-of-war then in port challenged her. When the so-often-reported-sunk Marblehead gave her call number, the other ship signaled back "Are you sure?" and went to General Quarters. They were convinced the Marhlehead had long since been sunk and they refused to be taken in by this enemy ruse. But before they could open fire. Captain Robinson convinced them that this really was the Marblehead, so they let her come in without a light.

Two days later, with her bunkers full of oil and some hastily improvised depth-charge racks added to her equipment through the foresight of her skipper, the Marhlehead headed out to sea and northward.

At this time the submarines were winning the Battle of the Atlantic hands down. The Marblehead had no escort whatever and no supersonic gear for detecting the approach of underwater craft. On Captain Robinson's chart were hundreds of pins, each pin representing the reported location of a German submarine.

One morning at about nine o'clock the lookouts began yelling and pointing, and the officer of the deck turned and saw a submarine dead ahead and riding on the surface.

A fast decision had to be made.

The submarine could crash dive before the Marblehead gun crews could get the range and open fire, and with the Marblehead closing the range, the by then submerged submarine should be able to torpedo her handily and with impunity.

"Sound the general alarm. Right full rudder," the officer of the deck said. "All engines ahead full."

He was going to show that submarine the Marblehead's slender little stern and just how fast she could get out of sight.

In fifteen minutes, during each second of which a well-placed torpedo could have overtaken her and blown her stern off. the crisis was past, and once the horizon was between the Marblehead and the submarine, she turned back north and kept on digging toward home. . . .

John Wohlschlaeger was wondering if Joe DeLude's sister was the kind of girl that would want a big church wedding with a lot of fuss, or just Joe and somebody else for a witness in a justice of the peace's office. And then what about the honeymoon? It was- too bad that there were so many aspects of all this wonderful business that it seemed just as well not to discuss with Joe.

Then night fell. That last night at sea Sleep? On this sweet-running, genuinely trying ship? Then dawn, and finally . . . land. a vaguely dark shape on the horizon. A symbol for which 600 men. now speeding back to it had stood almost all alone, and very, very far out in front, and taken it on the chin hard—and managed by what unbelievable miracle to get back.

Millions of people have come into New York Harbor: Kings. Millionaires. Immigrants coming to a strange and baffling land whose secret was supposed to be surcease from hundreds of fears and hungers. But the one most exciting way to come in is the way that the men on the Marblehead were coming. They had taken everything the enemy could hand out and against virtually impossible odds had made it home. As the Marblehead stood into the Harbor, there wasn't an unshined shoe or nonsinging heart. She was bringing home prideful men, who knew they'd pulled their weight in the boat.

It was necessary to anchor in Gravesend Bay to discharge the remaining ammunition. The delay was brutal and seemed endless.

And the Long Trek Over

Then, miracle of miracles, here was New York all around the ship—Brooklyn on one side, Manhattan on the other. Just below the Navy Yard the tugs came out, but when the heaving lines were thrown aboard the tug off the starboard bow, the deckhand didn't catch it. He

couldn't because he had both hands raised and clasped above his head in waving welcome and congratulations.

The ship was brought alongside the dock, lines cast and doubled over the cleats and bollards on the dock.

On the bridge Commander Van Bergen was saying to himself over and over in quiet, thoughtful disbelief: "We made it."

Captain Robinson started down to his cabin.

By now the telephone lines were being rushed aboard.

"Don't say much, sailors," the officers said. Tell'em you're safe and give the next man a chance."

One of the phones was within earshot of the captain's cabin. On his desk there lay a letter awaiting his signature. It was a thing that haunted him, something with which he had struggled so long.

Outside a sailor was saying, "Hello, Mom! This is Eddie!"

Captain Robinson read:

"Dear Mrs. Aschenbrenner:

"Early last month it was necessary for me to request the Secretary of the Navy to advise you of the death of your grandson, Clarence Aschenbrenner, who died in line of duty. He was buried with a shipmate in Port Elizabeth, South Africa . . ."

He thought of the old lady out in New Ulm, Minnesota, who had, minute by minute, reared that brimming and warm and yet somehow cyclonic boy. The old lady for whom the telephone would not ring tonight or ever. How empty was this letter of the tenderness, of the healing balm he wanted it to have.

Outside at the phone Eddie was saying, "Gee, Mom, I just said it was me and I'm in the States and okay. What you crying about?"

Captain Robinson read on: "We had served together in this ship for many months. I as his captain deeply share your sorrow ..."

Now the sailor outside was crying.

Captain Robinson caught his trembling lip in his teeth, "Oh, God!" he said and dropped his head down on his arms. The Marblehead had come home. The End