

U.S.S. Marblehead (CL-12)



Send a photo of Bud to spwade@gmail.com

Marblehead Biography Elmer Frank Agnew

Elmer Frank “Bud” Agnew was born on 14 Jan 21 in San Jose, CA. He was the second child of Elias and Josephine Agnew (nee Kelsey). His older brother Lynds preceded him in 1920, and a sister Alberta Nadine joined the family in 1924. Sadly, their dad died at age 40 in 1926. Their mother later remarried to Daniel E. Mahony, a farmer.

Bud attended school San Jose and joined the National Guard at age 14. He also rodeoed with his brother and rode in the Wild West Shows at the San Francisco World's Fair in 1939. He also got a job with a saddle making business where he honed a natural talent working with leather.



[USS Saratoga \(CV-3\)](#) underway 1942
Courtesy: Wikipedia

Bud enlisted in the Navy on 20 Sep 40 at San Francisco, CA, and was issued service no. 3761201 and sent to the Naval Training Station, San Diego, CA for basic training. On 29 Nov 40 he was transferred as an Apprentice Seaman to one of America’s first aircraft carriers, *USS Saratoga (CV-3)* aboard which he would soon be promoted to Seaman 2nd class. He would serve aboard *Saratoga* for almost six months.

On 5 Apr 41, Bud was transferred from *Saratoga* to *USS Henderson (AP-1)* for further transfer to the Asiatic Station, meaning either to Manila, Philippines or to Shanghai, China. *Henderson* was one of two veteran transport ships that kept the Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors (the other transport was the *USS Chaumont (AP-1)*). As an interim step, Bud transferred on 15 May 41 to *USS Houston (CA-30)* for duty while enroute to the Philippines. Finally, on 26 May 41, Bud was received for duty aboard the light cruiser *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* in Manila.



USS Houston (CA-30) firing near Chefoo, China in 1935
Courtesy: National Museum of the U.S. Navy

USS Marblehead, or *Marby*, as she was affectionately referred to by her crew, was the third ship to be named after Marblehead, Massachusetts, the town considered by many as the birthplace of the American Navy. Build by William Cramp & Son shipyard in Philadelphia, PA, she was launched in 1923.

After “showing the flag in Europe and Latin America, *Marby* joined the aging U.S. Asiatic Fleet in 1938. Focused on protecting American interests and missionaries in Asia, she wintered in the Philippines, operating out of Manila. and she summered in China, based in Shanghai, where tensions were already rising between America and Japan as the latter took ever greater control of Chinese ports.

By the time Bud joined *Marby* in May 41, she had traversed so much of the waters of East and Southeast Asia that she’d acquired another nickname - the *Galloping Ghost of the China Coast*, but by that time, she was obsolete by naval standards of the day, particularly when compared to the ships in her class in the Japanese navy. Still, as the world would soon learn, she had superb leadership and a well-trained, innovative, and motivated crew. Bud would spend 34 months (almost three years) aboard *Marby* during which time he and his shipmates would soon give the Allied world badly needed morale boost.



USS Marblehead (CL-12) off San Francisco 1935
Courtesy: Wikipedia

Bud’s time aboard would include some of the most notable events in the ship’s history. Except for a voyage to Guam, *Marby* would remain in Philippine waters for

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most of the next six months. Then, on 25 Nov 1941, in anticipation of war with Japan, U.S. Asiatic Fleet Commander Admiral Thomas Hart secretly ordered all major vessels under his command to quietly disburse from the Philippines into the neighboring Netherlands East Indies (NEI), today's Indonesia, and once there, to await further orders. The ship was anchored off Tarakan Island, eastern Borneo, when news arrived at 0328 a.m. on 8 Dec 41 of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, HI.

At dawn, *Marby* weighed anchor and steamed for the Dutch oil port of Balikpapan on Borneo's south coast to refuel. She then proceeded to the Dutch naval base at Surabaya where Capt. Robinson granted limited shore leave for Christmas despite the threat of air attack.

At the close of 1941, *Marby* was escorting a convoy of allied military and merchant vessels from Surabaya, Java to Darwin, Australia. While there, *Marby* took on additional crew and briefly functioned as "Radio Darwin" coordinating the regrouping of Allied vessels in Southeast Asia as part of preparations to slow the Japan's conquest of Southeast Asia.

In Europe at that time, only Britain, Russia, and various resistance groups stood in the way of total Nazi domination. Now, in the face of a quickly widening Japanese onslaught, the Allies were also in retreat in East and Southeast Asia too. America's only colony, the Philippines, British colonies in Hong Kong, Burma, and the entire Netherlands East Indies. Even India, Ceylon, and Australia had to be concerned.

As mentioned previously, *Marby* and her sister ships in the Asiatic Fleet were largely obsolete by comparison to ships in their class in the Japanese Navy. So were their tactics, and the same held true for the vessels and tactics of America's allies. For example, when Britain sent two of its most powerful vessels, battleship HMS Prince of Wales and battle cruiser HMS Repulse, to counter the Japanese, both quickly succumbed to Japanese naval air power and sank on 10 Dec 41. The Japanese Navy had a huge numerical advantage as well. Still, the Allies had to do their utmost with what they had.

So, on 8 Jan 42, *Marby* left Darwin and steamed once more into NEI waters, expecting to go on the offensive in a raid planned for Kema, Celebes (today's Kema, North Sulawesi). That attack was aborted on 17 Jan 42 due to poor communication. It was soon replaced when a Japanese force was spotted heading to capture Balikpapan and its significant oil infrastructure in southern Borneo. Balikpapan was key to securing Japan's oil imports, and its harbor and airfield were critical for the occupation of southern Borneo and eventually the Dutch colonial administrative and military centers on Java which lay directly south across the Java Sea.

Marby and its more modern sister ship, cruiser *USS Boise (CV-47)*, were scheduled to support the U.S. Destroyer Division 59 in a high-speed night attack on the Japanese invasion force as part of what would become known as the 1st Battle of Balikpapan, the first U.S. naval surface engagement in Asia since the Spanish-American War. However, *Boise* struck an uncharted reef and had to retire for repairs, and *Marby*, suffering from low steam pressure, had only one working turbine, which limited her speed. Therefore, she was assigned to cover the retreat of the destroyers. Originally comprised of six destroyers, the strike force was cut to four ships: *John D. Ford (DD-228)*, *Pope (DD-225)*, *Parrott (DD-218)*, and *Paul Jones (DD-230)*. Their attack on 23 Jan 42 sank four of the twelve enemy transports, but their success was limited by poor U.S. torpedo performance.¹

Ultimately, Allied efforts at Balikpapan were insufficient to halt Japan's advance, and the enemy was soon focused on the cities of Banjarmasin (Southern Borneo) and Makassar (Southern Sulawesi) which controlled the Makassar Strait. To counter this, on 4 Feb 42 an American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) cruiser-destroyer strike force, which included *Marby* and heavy cruiser *USS Houston (CA-30)*, sailed from Surabaya to meet the enemy in the Battle of Makassar Strait, off the north coast of Java. Unfortunately, this Allied effort was soon thwarted by enemy air superiority. *Marby* was so badly mauled by Japanese bombs,

¹ The Mark 14 torpedo was plagued with numerous technical problems that took almost two years to fix. Despite initial issues, the Mark 14 eventually became a reliable weapon and played a significant role in the U.S. Navy's success later in the war. (en.wikipedia.org)

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that the enemy left her for sunk and went after bigger prey, the *Houston* which would lose more men in the exchange but incurred less damage as the Japanese ran out of bombs. Both ships headed for the relative safety of Java's south coast, then considered beyond the range of enemy bombers, though they knew that would change soon after the Japanese took control of Makassar Strait.

In the battle, *Marby* had taken two direct hits and a devastating near miss. The strikes ultimately cost the lives of fifteen of her crew and wounded many others. They also led to significant flooding forward, jammed her rudder aft, and knocked out her electrical power, her gyroscope, internal and external communications, and set fires raging from stem to stern. Still, her well-led, highly trained crew rallied, bailing by hand for 72 hours, quelling the blazes, caring for the wounded, and devising ingenious "fixes" to save their home from a watery grave. In a condition later described in *Marby's* log as "Situation serious-doubtful," in lieu of a functional rudder, they varied the speed and direction of the ships propellers to navigate *Marby* safely though the Lombok Strait east of Bali, one of the most treacherous straits on earth, and they did so at night and in rain squalls." On the morning of 5 Feb 42, they entered the Indian Ocean, relatively safe from air attack. They turned north and steamed along Java's south coast towards Tjilatjap, a small fishing port with limited capacity to offer major repairs. Nevertheless, minor repairs were made, the wounded were treated in local hospitals, and the dead from both cruisers were buried with full honors in a local cemetery.

Admiral Hart soon flew in from Surabaya to inspect *Marby* and *Houston*. He deemed the former unfit to continue the fight and ordered that she depart for the U.S. as soon as possible. The less damaged *Houston* would remain in the fight, however, as it would turn out, she had less than a month to live.²

On 13 Feb 42, after limited, rudimentary repairs, *Marby* and her men embarked on a secret, perilous, and improbable 20,589-mile, 90-day voyage, much of it in crippled condition, from Java across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka), and then on to South Africa, where they got more substantial repairs. They then crossed the southern Atlantic Ocean to Recife, Brazil before heading northward to a heroes' welcome in New York Harbor on 4 May 1942. Bud was aboard for the whole adventure.

During that time, the Japanese had reported *Marby* as sunk on several occasions, but due to the ship's doubtful condition and because significant dangers still lay ahead, both above and below the waves, particularly in the Atlantic, the Navy kept her voyage home a secret. Consequently, the loved ones of sailors aboard *Marby* throughout her 90-day voyage thought their men were dead or in enemy captivity, that is, until news reports and telephone calls home quickly spread the news of their miraculous arrival in New York. Leave was also granted, and the men spent time with their families.

It is unclear whether Bud went home to see his family, but on 30 Jun 42, he was aboard *Marby* during her second quarter muster roll and he remained with the ship through her six-month overhaul in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. On 1 Aug 42 he was promoted to Sea 1c. He stayed with *Marby* when she redeployed to rejoin the war, this time in the Atlantic Ocean operating out of Recife, Brazil.

On 1 Mar 43, while *Marby* was on patrol with *USS Memphis (CL-13)* and *USS Davis (DD-395)* in search of Nazi submarines and blockade runners, and Bud was promoted to GM3c. Throughout the rest of 1943, *Marby* was at sea for long periods, occasionally refueling and reprovisioning at Recife or at other Brazilian ports such as Bahia, Pernambuco, and Rio de Janeiro, or Montevideo, Uruguay, or Asension Island in the mid-Atlantic.

² *U.S.S. Houston (CA-30)* was sunk in the Battle of Sunda Strait in the early morning hours of 1 Mar 42. Of the 1,061 aboard, 368 survived, including 24 of the 74-man Marine Detachment, only to be captured, sent to Japanese prison camps, and forced to work on the infamous Burma Railway. Of 368 Navy and Marine Corps personnel taken prisoner, 77 (21%) died in captivity from starvation, cruel treatment by the Japanese, and tropical diseases. Through the persistent efforts many over some sixty years, including those of the late Raymond D. Kester, former *USS Marblehead* Radioman, former secretary of the Asiatic Fleet reunion committee, and former webmaster of this website, 1 March has been observed as Asiatic Fleet Memorial Day.

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Effective 1 Jan 44, Bud was promoted to GM2c. On 25 Mar 44, he was transferred to the U.S. Naval Hospital (USNH) at Brooklyn for medical treatment (ailment unknown). For much of 1944 and 1945 he was in and out of hospitals in New York and later in Oakland, Ca. by a further transfer to USNH St. Albans, NY. On 15 Jun 44 he transferred to RS Brooklyn for class assessment for COM3. His last two duty stations appear to have been the US Naval Advance Base Personnel Depot (USNABPD) at San Bruno, south of San Francisco, and the Armed Guard Center (Pacific) on Treasure Island, San Francisco, CA. He was honorably discharged on 28 Nov 1946 after slightly more than six years of service.

He had met his bride-to-be, Margaret Joyce Williams (b. 26 Feb 24), in Sep 43 when *Marby* had an 18-day layover in Miami, FL. At the time, Margaret was a resident of Lake Worth, FL, south of Palm Beach, where they married on 9 May 44. Bud gave his residence at the time as St. Albans Naval Hospital, Long Island, N. Y., though it is unclear whether he was a patient there or it was his duty station.

After leaving the Navy, Bud and Margaret returned to San Jose, CA where their first child, Frank Clifford was born. They then bought a ranch in the High Sierras of northern California where their daughters, Joyce Nadine, and Linda Susanne were born. Bud later attended business college. He then moved the family to Florida and worked as an accountant for many years before returning to San Jose in 1961. The family moved to Idaho in 1976.



Margaret Joyce Williams
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

Bud was a lifetime member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans organizations. He dedicated his life to helping others. He had an infectious smile and won the hearts of everyone that met him. He attended Oregon Trails Church of God. He had the talent and knowledge to raise good horses and cattle. His dogs, Candy and Gypsy, were his constant companions.

Bud and Margaret died on 9 Jun 2006 and 3 Sep 2012, respectively, and are buried in Canyon Hill Cemetery, Caldwell, Canyon County, Idaho. Bud was preceded in death by his son Frank and daughter Joyce, and was survived by his wife of 62 years, Margaret, and their youngest daughter, Linda, plus grandchildren and five great-granddaughters.

Elmer Frank “Bud” Agnew is listed on page 234 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, Bud’s 14 Jun 2006 obituary in the Idaho Statesman, Boise, ID, and other Internet records.

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