

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



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Marblehead Biography Louis Alphonso Cahoon

Louis Alphonso Cahoon Jr. was born on 7 July 1917 in Worcester, Massachusetts, the first child of Louis Alphonso Cahoon Sr. and Mary 'Jessie' Stewart. His siblings were Edward Stewart (1918–1995), James Albert (1924–1999), Jessie Louise (1926–2020), Elizabeth Ann (1928–2020), Donald Stewart (1930–1930), and Mary Jane (1933–2019).

By 1930, the Great Depression was deepening, and Louis' parents moved the family north to the Victory, Vermont farm of Louis Sr.'s parents, Alonso Francis Cahoon and Martha Lenora Haley. Louis' farmer grandfather had once been a sailor himself, and the town of Victory was named in honor of the triumph of John Paul Jones' *Bonhomme Richard* over the British *Serapis*. The town was chartered in 1781, on the day that French Admiral deGrasse was engaging the British fleet off Yorktown, VA, the pivotal sea battle that set the stage for Cornwallis' total defeat ten days later.

Along with his father, Louis Sr. is listed as a farmer in the 1930 U.S. Census. Louis Jr., then 12, and his siblings attended St. Johnsbury Academy, a private boarding school founded in 1842 fifteen miles southwest of Victory. The nautical tales associated with Victory and his own grandfather may have influenced Louis' decision to join the U.S. Navy, but like so many others of his generation, it was more likely that it was the length and depth of the Depression that sealed his decision. In any case, he enlisted on 5 Dec 1935 in Brooklyn, New York.

The 1935-36 Rhode Island state census shows Louis 'doing basic' at the Newport Naval Training Station in Feb 1936. He was 18 ½ at that time. Since the muster rolls of U.S. Navy ships are not available prior to 1939, it was not possible to determine his very first ship, however he first appears in publicly available muster rolls on 28 Aug 1939 in Boston, MA aboard the brand-new destroyer *USS Moffett* (DD362). on the date of her commissioning. *Moffett* then began operating with the U.S. Atlantic Fleet out of Newport, RI and did so until 1941, however Louis left the ship well before that.



USS Moffett (DD362)
Source: [en.Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)

On 15 Apr 1939, he transferred to *USS Henderson* (AP-1), one of two veteran transports that kept the U.S. Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors. His orders read "FFT Asiatic Station," shorthand for "Further Forwarding to the Asiatic Fleet" for shore duty at either Manila, Philippines or Shanghai, China, or sea duty aboard vessels home porting out of either of those ports, depending on the season. On 9 Jul 1939, two days after his 19th birthday, along with many other sailors, including the father of the author of this biography, Louis reported for duty aboard the little-known, obsolescent light cruiser *USS Marblehead* (CL-12). She was anchored in the Huang-po River off the Bund, the colonial commercial center of Shanghai, then known as the "Paris of the Orient." By then, Louis was a Seaman 1st Class (S1c). He did not know it at the time, but he would spend three years aboard *Marby*, as the cruiser was fondly referred to by her crew. It would be the wildest ride of his life.

Aboard *Marby*, Louis would visit many of the exotic ports of China (e.g., Hong Kong, Tsingtao, Chinwangtao, etc.), the Philippines, French Indochina (today's Vietnam), and the Netherlands East Indies (today's Indonesia), and other areas. However, as tensions mounted between Japan and the U.S., in early-September 1940, when *Marby* left Tsingtao for Manila, it was the last she would see of China. *Marby* spent the rest of 1940 and most of 1941 operated primarily in Philippine waters with one trip to Guam. Intense battle training at sea was the focus of *Marby*'s skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson, and the rest of the ship's leadership.

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). On the night of the 29th, the *Marby* dropped anchor off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI to await further orders. Ten days later, at 0328 hours on 8 Dec 1941, *Marby*'s radio receiver crackled with



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

news of the attack on Pearl Harbor and conveyed the order: “Hostilities have commenced. Govern yourselves 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 –from their deep sleep, the entire 700+ crew was standing at attention at their battle stations within eight minutes.

The *Marblehead’s* bombing in the Battle of Makassar Strait on 4 Feb 1942 and her subsequent escape to New York are described in [Marby’s own biography](#) and in the 1944 book [Where Away – a Modern Odyssey](#). Though Japan wasted little time in proclaiming to the international press that it had sunk the *Marblehead*, the ship’s improbable 20,589-mile voyage home was kept secret until 4 May when *Marby* arrived in New York. The secrecy had meant that loved ones back home though their sailors were either dead or in enemy captivity until phone calls home on 5 May began flooding across the nation.

Furloughs for the crew followed, and Louis was soon up in Victory, VT visiting family and friends. There, he also gave an interview, and it turned out that he had occupied an advantageous position from which to witness *Marby’s* fight for survival against Japanese aircraft. The following excerpts are paraphrased from a 22 May 1942 article by Lowell Smith on the interview in the St. Johnsbury Republican newspaper:

“The young navy man said he had a wonderful opportunity to watch the entire engagement from his post. The guns he is in charge fight other warships and as no enemy surface craft were about, he did little else than ‘sit tight’ until needed elsewhere. So, there he stood. With powerful glasses to his eyes, he watched the wheeling Jap planes release their bombs. ‘You can’t see them coming,’ he said, ‘but you can see a flash or a glister in the sun when they leave the plane and nose downward. Then it’s only a few quick seconds before they hit.’

“Cahoon gave a graphic account of just how an engagement between aircraft and naval units is fought. ‘The Japs,’ he said, ‘come over in formations of 18 bombers as a usual thing. In the attack, this was the case. There were two waves of 18 planes aloft,’ he said. With them, but doing little, if any, attacking, was a 37th plane. He was apparently the leader, telling the flights what to do and how to do it. These two waves made run after run over the ship, carrying on the attack from 10:15 AM until about 1:00 PM., at 15,000 feet – about three miles.’

“... two hits, together with a ‘near miss’ were the only missiles during the entire fight which scored. ‘Taking all three together,’ he said, ‘they were terrible enough to knock the cruiser out of the fight and cripple her.’

*“The force of the explosions burned up oxygen below decks for a short space of time. The ship rose, then fell, submerged, shipped water, rose again to bound and toss as fires broke out fore and aft. Practically everybody aboard felt the ship was doomed. In fact, she was sinking. Her decks were slithered with oil, water, and patches of blood. She was a sinking piece of wreckage, but Captain Arthur G. Robinson calmly gave orders which put every man available to a specific task and the *Marblehead* was kept afloat by a hand-by-hand bucket brigade.’*

*“And what about these stories of suicide divers? Cahoon saw two of them come at his ship during the battle. ‘The gun crews love to see ‘em coming,’ he said, ‘as they make swell targets. Of course, they don’t try a suicide dive unless they have been ‘winged’ and can’t get back into flight. One suicide diver aimed at the *Marblehead* and was hit so squarely and so hard by anti-aircraft guns that nobody on board the cruiser saw the pieces fall. The big bomber was blasted to splinters and everybody into bits.’*

*“Another suicide diver wasn’t smashed so badly but the gunfire pushed it back and further back forcing it to fall into the sea only 30 feet from the side of the *Marblehead*. As the plane glided closer before the final crash, *Marblehead* gunners riddled the crew with machine gun fire. All were killed and the bomber immediately sank.’*



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

“The one ear-splitting moment when the Marblehead was hit by two bombs, and there was also a near miss. All blasts came so close together, it was difficult to ascertain at first that three bombs exploded. It sounded like one gigantic bomb blast,’ he said.

“The things the Navy calls near misses do more damage to a ship as far as seaworthiness is concerned, than a direct hit,’ Cahoon said. ‘When a bomb explodes in the water very close by, it will do terrific damage to the hull and will tend to sink a ship quicker than a succession of direct hits on deck.’

“The damage was so great the Marblehead was knocked out as a fighting ship. The concussion was so terrific that men aboard the Houston could see the sky of the horizon under the Marblehead’s keel. Then the great 10,000-ton monster dropped back into the sea, reeling, rolling, blazing, and buried itself beneath the waves for a moment or two.’

“Nothing aboard ship would work,’ Cahoon said. ‘The vessel was shipping water and the pumps wouldn’t work as they should. Lights below deck were out. Fires were raging threatening to ignite thousands of gallons of oil running wild in the ship. Dutch and American destroyers closed in to rescue the crew and cut up the oil patches so that if the men aboard had to leap for their lives, they wouldn’t dive into flaming oil.’”

One of the unintended consequences of Marby’s rapid, low-key departure from Manila in late-November 1941 had been that some sailors left loved ones behind in the Philippines. This appears to have been the case for Louis. In the interview mentioned above, he said that *“his Spanish wife and year-old daughter were left behind.”* He had no news of their whereabouts or situation, but he was hopeful that they would be reunited soon. It remains unclear whether Louis’ hopes ever materialized.

While Louis was visiting his family in Victory, *Marby* began a massive, six-month-long overhaul in Brooklyn Navy Yard. Louis remained attached to the ship for a time, but on 27 July 1942, he was transferred to the Naval Receiving Station in New York for “duty in *USS La Vallette (DD-448)* detail”. That detail was located at the Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company in Kearny, New Jersey where the brand-new destroyer was being completed. When she was commissioned on 12 Aug 1942, Louis was standing on her deck, now part Working Backwards Thru Your Emails Today - of her crew. After training and escort duty in the Caribbean and Atlantic, *La Vallette* departed New York 16 Dec 1942 for the Panama Canal and Pacific duty, but Louis does not appear to be with the ship at that time.



USS La Vallette (DD-448) underway in late-1942
Source: en.Wikipedia.org

Louis last appearance in the Navy muster rolls was on the heavy cruiser, *USS Baltimore (CA-68)* which he joined on 15 Apr 1943, the day of her commissioning. Following its fitting-out, *Baltimore* visited the U.S. Naval Academy, conducted exercises off the Virginia Capes, went to Norfolk, VA for upkeep, and departed for shakedown off Trinidad. She then steamed to Boston for repairs to correct deficiencies found during shakedown. She transited the Panama Canal to San Diego, trained off the west coast until mid-October, and then sailed to Pearl Harbor. Between November 1943 and June 1944 *Baltimore* provided fire support for the following: Makin Islands landings (20 Nov-4 Dec 1943); the Kwajalein invasion (29 Jan-8 Feb 1944), the Truk raid (16-17 Feb); the Eniwetok seizure (17 Feb-2 Mar); Marianas attacks (21-22 Feb), the Palau-Yap-Ulithi-Woleai raid (30 Mar-1 Apr), the Hollandia landing (21-24 Apr); the Truk-Satawan-Ponape raid (29 Apr-1 May), air strikes against Marcus Island (19-20 May), Wake Island (23 May), the Saipan invasion (11-24 June); and the Battle of the Philippine Sea (19-20 June). In July 1944, she took President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his party to Pearl Harbor and Alaska. Returning to the war zone in Nov 1944, she participated in attacks on Luzon (14-16 December 1944; and 6-7 Jan 1945); Taiwan (3-4, 9, 15, and 21 Jan); the China coast (12 and 16 Jan); Okinawa (22 Jan); Honshū Island attacks



USS Baltimore (CA-68) on 18 Oct 1944 off Mare Island, San Francisco, CA
Source: en.Wikipedia.org

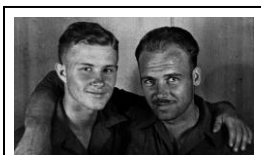


U.S.S. Marblehead (CL-12)

(16–17 Feb), Iwo Jima operation (19 Feb–5 Mar) and the 5th Fleet raids in support of the Okinawa operation (18 Mar–10 Jun). On 31 May 1945, Louis was transferred off *Baltimore* to the Naval Training School for Fire Control, Anacostia, Washington, DC, possibly to teach.

During this final assignment, Louis met Lenora Jean Bonnar, daughter of Homer D. Bonnar Sr (1893–1984) and Ms. Blanche Adela Cassidy (1895–1954), owners of a plumbing and heating business in Beaver, Pennsylvania. At the time, Ms. Bonnar was working for the U.S. Army Air Forces Headquarters in the Pentagon. On 19 Sep 1946, the couple married at Grovan's Christian church, near Baltimore, Maryland and they began residing at 173 Que Street in Washington, DC. By the time of the 1950 US Census, they were residing with Lenora parents in Beaver, PA, and Louis was a salesman for an aluminum retailer. Eventually, they would have three daughters – Pamela, Jann, and Valerie.

Louis' brother Edward Stewart was in U.S. Army's historic Texas 36th Infantry Division during WWII. He was born on 11 Sep 1918 in Bourne, Massachusetts. On May 28, 1944, Private Cahoon, as scout at the head of his squad, was fired upon by two enemy machine gun nests 30 yards away. He returned fire while his squad scrambled to advantageous positions. When his gun fell apart, Edward secured a rifle and continued to cover the squad's attack, which destroyed the gun nests, killed two of the enemy and captured 22 prisoners. This act earned him the Silver Star and later a citation from the Texas Senate. He also participated in Operation Dragoon (the invasion of southern France), during which his brother Louis' former ship, *USS Marblehead*, provided covering fire with its 6-inch guns. Later, Edward was severely wounded by a round from a German tank.



Kenneth Karsen (L)
with Edward S. Cahoon
Source: Ancestry.com

During this action, his close friend, 19-year-old Kenneth Karsen, was killed beside him. While recovering from his wounds, Edward wrote his mother Mary, and asked her to meet Kenneth's widowed father, Charles, and console him for the loss of his son. Mary later married Charles, thus making Edward and his late buddy, Kenneth, stepbrothers.

Louis' younger brother, James Albert Cahoon, was born on 9 Jun 1924, also in Bourne, MA. He registered for the draft at 18 on 30 June 1942 but he was never called up. He became a master autobody repairman and later, a home builder and repairman. He loved spending time with his family, and when he passed away in Georgia on 30 Jan 1999, he left behind 33 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.



James A. Cahoon
Source: BillBodkin

In an email that initiated this biography, Louis Jr. and Lenora's daughter, Pamela, conveyed the following:

"My father served as a Fire Controlman on the U.S.S. Marblehead. His name was Louis Alphonso Cahoon, Jr. He was on the ship when it was attacked. He once said his best friend was killed rescuing the ship's flag. We saw it in Marblehead, Massachusetts. He said the stains on the flag were his best friend's blood. My stoic dad cried as he told us this abbreviated story. He was 52 at the time. He came to attention and saluted the flag as tears poured down his face. It brought me to tears. Usually when we asked about his experiences during WWII, he'd stay quiet and get a faraway look. That was one of only two experiences he ever talked about. Thank you for preserving the history of the valiant men who served on the Marblehead."

Louis died on 5 APR 1980 in Richland, Washington. His wife, Lenora, passed away on 20 Jul 2001 in Sewickley, Allegheny, PA. Both are buried in Beaver Cemetery, Beaver, PA.

Louis Alphonso Cahoon is listed on page 236 of the 1944 book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#). Don't forget to it and [Marby's own biography](#).

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, USS Marblehead 1939-1945, with contributions from Louis' daughter, Pamela, and from BillBodkin, the Texas Military Forces Museum, Ancestry.com, en.Wikipedia.org, and other Internet records.

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