

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



George Richard Cook  
Source: The Minneapolis Star

## Marblehead Biography George Richard Cook

George Richard Cook was born on 9 May 1920 in Grand Rapids, Itasca County, Minnesota, not far from the source of the Mississippi River at Lake Itasca. His parents were Thomas J. W. Cook (1891–1921), a farmer from Modale, Iowa, and Wisconsin-born homemaker Edna Johnson (George would later serve on the *USS Wisconsin (BB-64)*). He was the second of three kids. His siblings were Ned Malcolm (1915-1999) and Melissa Margaret (1922-2005).

George enlisted 5 Dec 39 at Minneapolis, MN and was issued service #3286254. He completed his basic training at the Great Lakes Naval Training School just north of Chicago. On 1 Mar 40, as an Apprentice

Seaman (AS), George joined his first ship, light cruiser *USS Honolulu (CL-48)*, in the [Territory of Hawaii \(TH\)](#).



*USS Honolulu (CL-48)* in 1939  
Source: U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

On 19 Jun 40 George transferred to light cruiser *USS Phoenix (CL-46)* as a Seaman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class (S2c) while the ship was anchored off Lahaina Roads, Maui, TH. The *Phoenix* sailed shortly thereafter for [Balboa, Panama Canal Zone](#).



*USS Phoenix (CL-46)* in Panama Canal, 1939  
Source: U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

By 20 Nov 41, *USS Phoenix* was back in Hawaiian waters and George was transferred to the Asiatic Station, Manila, Philippines. The first stage of this transfer was to heavy cruiser *USS Pensacola (CA-*

24), probably then at Pearl Harbor, and then to the veteran Asiatic Fleet transport, *USS Chaumont AP-5*, one of two veteran transport ships that kept the Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors [the other was the *USS Henderson (AP-1)*]. George's ultimate assignment was the Asiatic Station, which meant attachment to a ship of the Asiatic Fleet or a shore assignment in either Manila, Philippines or Shanghai, China.

*Chaumont* left Pearl Harbor for Manila on 29 Nov 41 as part of the *Pensacola Convoy*<sup>1</sup>. Unbeknownst to its crew and passengers such as George, three events would soon render their transfer orders impossible to comply with:

### *The Asiatic Fleet, Nov 1942*

"On November 25, the MARBLEHEAD sailed out of Manila Bay for Dutch North Borneo. Only two days before Admiral Hart called a conference of his senior officers. There weren't too many as the 'Asiatic Fleet' actually applied only to the MARBLEHEAD and HOUSTON, thirteen overaged destroyers of World War I vintage, and their tender BLACK HAWK, twenty-nine submarines with their tenders, the CANOPUS, HOLLAND and OTIS, the tanker PECOS, a few minesweepers plus some antiquated gun boats and the five Yangtze River gun boats. The air arm consisted of 30 PBYS of PATWING 10 tendered by the LANGLEY. The BOISE joined later... 'Gentlemen,' Hart began, 'the negotiations going on in Washington have reached a critical stage and I have come to the conclusion that the time has come to put the initial phase of our basic plan into effect at once, that is the deployment of our surface craft to the southward so they will not be trapped in Manila Bay if hostilities actually begin. Robinson, I want you to take command of a detachment consisting of the Marblehead and the Black Hawk and the destroyers, then proceed to Dutch North Borneo and await developments. I have secretly informed the Dutch Admiral of this move but no one else so you should make your visit appear as much as possible to be of a routine nature. ... If everything goes well in Washington, I will call you back in a couple of weeks. Otherwise, goodbye, good luck and God bless you!"

Excerpts from the Diary of Admiral A.G. Robinson, then Captain, and Marby's skipper. Robinson willed his diary to John P. Bracken, then a Lt. Jg. and his Aide. Source: Bracken's 1993 book *The Call of the Siren*.

<sup>1</sup> *Pensacola Convoy* consisted of heavy cruiser *USS Pensacola*, gunboat *USS Niagara*, Navy transports *USS Republic* and *USS Chaumont*; Army transports *USAT Willard A. Holbrook* and *USAT Meigs*, U.S. merchant ships *SS Admiral Halstead* and *SS Coast Farmer*, and Dutch merchantman *MS Bloemfontein*. The convoy was sent to reinforce the U.S. Army Forces Far East (USAFFE) in the Philippines but Japanese attacks on the Philippines caused it to divert to Brisbane, Australia. Sources: en.wikipedia.org; monumentaustralia.org.au, and liquisearch.com.



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- First, on 25 Nov 41, Admiral Thomas Hart, the farsighted commander of the smaller, largely obsolete, Asiatic Fleet met with his senior officers and, in anticipation of hostilities, ordered them to depart Manila immediately, quietly, and without fanfare, and to disperse southward into the Dutch East Indies (NEI; today's Indonesia). Thus, these ships, such as the light cruiser *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, and their crews, would live to fight another day. See textbox at the right.
- Second, the Pacific Fleet, which had remained in Hawaii throughout the escalating crisis with the Japanese, was attacked there on 7 Dec 41. Fortunately, American carriers such as the *USS Lexington (CV-2)*, and other capital ships such as heavy cruiser *USS Pensacola (CA-24)*, which had departed Pearl Harbor on 29 Nov 41, were at sea and avoided the attack.
- Third, within hours of the disaster at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese hit the Philippines with a sustained invasion that would culminate with the fall of Corregidor on 6 May 1942.

Because of these events, *Pensacola*, *Chaumont*, and other ships diverted to Brisbane, on Australia's east coast. Following that stop, *Chaumont* continued to Port Darwin on Australia's north coast where many of the Asiatic Fleet remnants had gathered. There, on 7 Jan 42, George and eighty-three other sailors transferred to *USS Marblehead*, or *Marby* as she was lovingly referred to by her crew. At the time, *Marby* was serving as *Radio Darwin* to coordinate the regrouping of surviving Allied ships in Southeast Asia.

On 15 Jan 42, the American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) Command was activated. It included the remnants of the Asiatic Fleet. Its main objective was controlling the "Malay Barrier", a notional line running down the Malay Peninsula through Singapore and the southernmost islands of the NEI. ABDA was all that stood in the way of the Japanese. British Field Marshall Archibald Wavell was given overall command of ABDA, and initially, Asiatic Fleet commander Admiral Thomas Hart led its naval forces.

**'Marby' to Her Men**  
"A warship is only a piece of machinery, yet almost invariably, in the minds of the men who serve on it, it becomes a kind of governing personality. To begin with, it becomes 'she,' which automatically infers that her men's relationship with her shall exist principally on an emotional basis. However, psychologists say that ever personality, either male or female, has certain tendencies, comprises to some degree, the characteristics of the opposite sex. So perhaps it's well to point out that as the *Marblehead* was creatively mirrored in the minds of her men, she was not entirely female, for she was somehow touched with, and became part of, the feelings of comradeship and respect that each man for certain of his shipmates ..."  
*Where Away – A Modern Odyssey*

George would serve three weeks short of two years on *Marby*, which departed Darwin the day after he joined the ship. While he and his new shipmates had been spared the bombings at Pearl Harbor, within a month, the war would become a hot one for them beginning with *Marby's* coverage of the retirement of four destroyers comprising DesDiv 59 on its successful 24 Jan 41 raid on invading Japanese forces at the south Borneo oil port of Balikpapan. However, eleven days later, on 4 Feb 42, in the Bali Sea south of Makassar Strait, *Marby's* luck took a turn for the worse. Superb teamwork from *Marby's* bridge to its bilges by all hands had enabled the ship to avoid destruction by Japanese bombers on two successive bomb runs, but on the third bomb run, the enemy scored two direct bomb hits and a very crippling near-miss. Eleven of *Marby's* best were killed immediately and four more would later die of their wounds.

The strike on *Marby's* stern jammed her rudder causing her to steam more slowly and in a predictable circle making her a sitting duck for the next wave of bombers. The direct hit amidship knocked out her communications, electricity, and gyroscope. The near miss a few feet off her bow blew a 27-square-foot gash in her port side which, together with the jammed rudder, caused her to rapidly take on water and slow further. Fires soon raged from stem to stern. Fortunately, however, such was the extent of her damage, that the attackers concluded that the Java Sea would soon finish what they had begun, so they reported *Marby* sunk, and diverted to engage bigger prey, the *USS Houston (CA-30)*.

Indeed, in the moment, the idea of *Marby* escaping a watery grave, much less undertaking a 90-day, 20,589-mile escape to New York City, seemed preposterous, but the Japanese had little clue of the leadership, ingenuity, dedication, and heroism that was kicking in on that blazing hulk below them. For months to come, the ship's improbable escape, more fully described in [Marby's own biography](#), and in the 1944 book

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

[Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#), would provide much-needed morale boosts across America and her Allies who, until then, had had little to cheer about.

George was aboard *Marby* during the bombing and for the whole trip home, but since the escape was kept secret, his loved ones and those of all the sailors aboard *Marby*, thought their men were either dead or in enemy captivity until phone calls home and newspapers articles across America began spreading the news following *Marby's* arrival in New York. Later, in one of his fireside chats, President Roosevelt also praised the crew's courage and determination in saving their ship to fight another day.

Though no record has been found documenting it, George probably took leave to see his family at some point during *Marby's* subsequent six-month overhaul in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. However, he remained with the ship when she redeployed on 15 Oct 42 to rejoin the war effort, this time in the Atlantic Ocean homeported at Recife, Brazil from which it hunted Nazi subs and blockade runners, and occasionally rescued downed Allied flyers and enemy sailors in lifeboats after their ships had been sunk.

During this time, *Marby* also escorted convoys to England and Ireland. In Aug 44, she made several stops along the Mediterranean Sea coasts supporting the invasions of Sicily and mainland Italy. On 15-17 Aug 44, along with cruisers *USS Brooklyn* and *USS Omaha*, from positions off Saint Raphael, France, *Marby* fired 157 rounds into Nazi shore defenses during [Operation Dragoon](#), also known as the Invasion of Southern France. One of the most successful Allied operations of WWII in Europe, *Dragoon* liberated most of southern France in four weeks, inflicting heavy German casualties, taking 131,250 prisoners, and capturing the ports of Marseille and Toulon, from which, in Oct 1944 alone, 524,894 tons of supplies were unloaded, more than a third of all Allied cargo shipped to the Western front that month.<sup>2</sup>

On 16 Dec 43, at Recife, Brazil, George transferred to Norfolk, VA for further transfer to another light cruiser, *USS Astoria (CL-90)* as part of the detail assigned to fit out the ship and then become part of her crew upon commissioning, however George did remain not as part of Astoria's permanent crew. Instead, he was transferred to *USS Wisconsin (BB-64)* on 16 April 44, the date of that ship's commissioning in the Philadelphia Navy Yard. He was promoted to Coxswain (Cox) on 25 Jun 44.

After *Wisconsin's* sea trials and initial training in the Chesapeake Bay, she departed Norfolk, VA on 7 July 1944, bound for the British West Indies. Following a shakedown cruise conducted out of Trinidad, *Wisconsin* returned to the builder's yard for alterations and repairs.



USS Wisconsin (BB-44) at anchor May 1944  
Source: U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command



USS James C. Owens (DD-776) off Oahu, Hawaii  
Source: U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

In Mar 1945, George was received aboard destroyer *USS James C. Owens (DD-776)* from the Receiving Station, TADCEN, Camp Elliott, San Diego, CA. On 17 Nov 45, while the ship was in Yokosuka, Japan, George was transferred to the Personnel Separation Center (PSC) Minneapolis, MN for discharge. A 26-year-old Coxswain at the time, he was honorably discharged from the Navy on 15 Dec 45.

Probably unbeknownst to George, having just hosted Midshipmen from the US Naval Academy Class of 1948 on their [Youngster \(sophomore\) Cruise](#) down the U.S. East Coast to ports in the Caribbean, the *USS Marblehead*, on which George had covered more than half the globe, was decommissioned in Philadelphia where her keel had been laid in 1920. There too, *Marby*, whose crew had earned her two Battle Stars and had inspired America with their heroism in the early days of WWII, was scrapped on 27 Feb 46.

<sup>2</sup> [Operation Dragoon](#)



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George ultimately settled in [Sedro-Woolley, Skagit County, WA](#), a quaint little town of about 10,000 people today located some 90 miles south of the Canadian Border and an equal distance north of Seattle. Perhaps George had discovered this area when one of his ships put into the Bremerton Naval Shipyard west of Seattle. Incorporated in 1898 from the area's smaller railroading, timber and mining towns, Sedro-Woolley is now known as the 'Gateway to the Northern Cascade Mountains', and it has a growing hi-tech community in robotics and aerospace.

On 14 Mar 1972, at age 51, George married Maxine Wynona Jeffers in Skagit City, WA, southwest of Sedro-Wolley. She was 48 years old and from the nearby town of Burlington. She appears to have been married twice before – first to Edwin Laverne 'Verne' Gee (on 7 Dec 1945) in Sedro-Woolley and then to a Mr. Jeffers. It is unclear whether George had been married previously, and whether either of them had had children from this or previous marriages.

It is also unclear what occupation George pursued after the war, but he died in Sedro-Wolley on 4 Mar 97. Maxine had preceded him in death on 7 Aug 92. Both are buried in Union Cemetery on the eastern edge of Sedro-Woolley, five minutes north of the Skagit River with open fields and rolling hills all around. Inscribed on his grave marker are the words "Cox, US Navy World War II". Thus, he retained his hard-won rank to the very end.

George Richard Cook is listed on page 237 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 help from Ancestry member DougSinrud, Skagit Valley Genealogical Society genealogists Diane Partington and Candice Soine, and a multitude of Ancestry.com, Wikipedia.com, Newspapers.com, and other Internet records.*

*Corrections, additions, and photos are welcomed by email to [spwade@gmail.com](mailto:spwade@gmail.com).*