

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

Marblehead Biography Carl Hayes Epperson



Carl Hayes Epperson was born on 21 May 1913 in rural Union Township, Nevada County, Arkansas to Lorenza Joseph Epperson (b. 1878– d. 1955), a farmer, and Alice Fredonia Long (b. 1888 – d. 1967), a homemaker, both of whom were born in Arkansas. They owned their farm free and clear. Carl was the fifth-born and had three brothers (Carson, Steen, and Morris) and five sisters (Florence, Wilma, Marguerite, Geraldine, and Mamie).

(In 1985, at age 72, Carl recorded much of his life story on cassette tape, and thus inadvertently became a contributor to this biography of his time on the *Marblehead*.)

When Carl was growing up, his Papa had a combination mill on their property, including a grist mill, a cotton gin, and a lumber mill all run by one engine. He said, *“I was always fascinated by the operations of machinery,”* and he spent most of the time at the mill when he was not in school or helping with chores on the farm.

Carl enlisted in the Navy in Mar 32 and was assigned service # 3465062. After completing his recruit training in Norfolk, Virginia, he went aboard the *USS Marblehead*, a light cruiser, affectionately referred to as “*Marby*” by her crew. He recalled, *“I think there were 12 of that class. They were the fastest ships in the Navy, 36 knots. It had 11 six-inch guns, 4 three-inch anti-aircraft guns, 6 torpedo tubes, and 2 amphibious planes launched from catapults. It had 12 boilers and 4 main engines, so I had my cup of tea for engineering work for a home for the next ten years.”* Carl studied and completed training courses to qualify for his next rating, but advancement was frozen due to the Depression. He said, *“I worked hard and played hard and studied hard, and I was on the race boat crew and on the wrestling team.”* In 1934, promotions resumed, and he advanced three grades to Machinist Mate Second Class by 1936, when he made his first visit home. He decided that a career in the Navy was better than farming.

In 1937, *Marby* escorted a troop ship to China with 1500 marines to protect American property after Japan sank the *USS Panay (PR-5)*, a *Yangtze River Patrol* gunboat. Carl reported visiting several ports in China such as Hong Kong and Tsingtao, and he thought they would receive orders to return to the US at any time. However, they were assigned to the Asiatic fleet and remained in the Orient until World War II. He said when they went up the Mekong River in Saigon, French Indochina, the local government requested that they make *“as much speed as possible so that the wake would flood the rice fields along the riverbank.”* They also received some special sound equipment and surveyed and charted much of the China seas, anchoring in small ports at night.

Radar was the new development, and in 1941 *Marby* was scheduled for radar installation in Manila, but Asiatic Fleet Commander Thomas Hart, who was privy to intelligence on the failure of U.S.-Japan negotiations in Washington, expected imminent hostilities and ordered his ships to quietly disperse out of the Philippines and into the neighboring Dutch East Indies. *Marby* left on 25 Nov 41 and went to Borneo, along with three destroyers. Carl recalled, *“We went up a river in Borneo and kept 6 of our 12 boilers hot so that we could get underway at a moment’s notice.”* *Marby* was anchored off Tarakan Island, northeast Borneo, when news of the attack on Pearl Harbor arrived.

Marby sailed on ahead of the Japanese onslaught which hit the Philippines 8 Dec 41 and quickly thereafter, the European colonial possessions in Southeast Asia. By 25 Dec 41, *Marby* was in Surabaya, Java, where Captain Robinson granted the crew Christmas leave despite the threat of Japanese air attack. It would be their last break for some time. On the last day of 1941, *Marby* was in Flores Sea escorting *MS Maréchal Joffre* from Java to Darwin, Australia. The *Maréchal Joffre* story is a little known but very inspiring episode in U.S. Navy’s WWII history.

By 2 Jan 42, *Marby* was serving as ‘Radio Darwin’ in the northern Australian backwater that would serve as base for surviving Allied ships (collectively known as the Combined Forces). On 8 Jan, she sailed north, part of the Allied initiative to stall Japan’s onslaught. The first significant encounter with the enemy would occur on 24 Jan 42 back off Borneo, where four U.S. destroyers making up Task Force 5 staged a successful torpedo attack on a

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Japanese invasion force at the port of Balikpapan. *Marby* stood in reserve just over the horizon to cover the retreat of the destroyers. Carl recalled the event as follows: “*We went down the straits of Borneo to the north of the Java Sea arriving there at night where we found some Japanese warships and troop ships anchored in a harbor. We fired star shells over them to illuminate them, then we had a real duck shoot for 40 minutes when we left most of them on fire and sinking. We went on to the Java Sea where we were to join forces with one of our newer ships, the heavy cruiser Houston, and others.*”

On 4 Feb 42, *Marby* took two direct bomb hits and a very damaging near-miss from a squadron of Japanese bombers off the North Coast of Java and near Makassar Strait in the Netherlands East Indies. Carl recalls they had just replenished fuel, food and other supplies from a fleet tanker and supply ship that had come up from Australia. “*Just as we were completing this operation, we were quite sure we saw a Japanese spotter plane, very high. We cut that operation short and left the harbor and headed out to open seas. And surely enough in about 3 hours, a string of bombers was sighted. All ships went to full speed and started maneuvers. We dodged the first 2 strings of bombs that were released, but on the third one we caught three 750-pound bombs. One was in the Chiefs’ quarters in the steering engine room right in the stern of the ship. One was right by Number One boiler room which put the three boilers there out of commission, and one was down beside the hull of the ship that exploded like a torpedo and made a huge hole and flooded several compartments in the bow of the ship.*”

Ablaze, rapidly taking on water and steaming in an uncontrollable but very predictable circle because her rudder had been jammed by one of the direct hits, *Marby* seemed doomed but instead of finishing her off, the Japanese assumed that the ocean would complete what their bombs had begun, and they went off after bigger prey, the *USS Houston (CA-30)*. Japan’s Imperial high command wasted no time in reporting *Marby* sunk, and in the long tradition of fake news, they got just about everything wrong – the date, the location and nearest land mass, and even the water-body (it was the Java Sea). They got the “sunk” part wrong, too!

In Carl’s words, “*I guess we overloaded the Number Two boiler room in demand for steam by Number One boiler room being knocked out, and they started putting out a lot of black smoke. The rudder was jammed at about 25 degrees so we started running in a circle, and there wasn’t anything we could do about it until we could get that rudder straight. And that was not something that could be done in just a moment.*” *The Houston* had sustained damage to their Number Three turret, and one destroyer had slight damage, but Carl said, “*we were the only ship that was critically damaged and in no condition to fight anymore until some repairs were made.*” In the ensuing 70 hours of non-stop toil for Carl and the rest of his shipmates, the survivors put out fires, manned bucket brigades to supplement pumps in bailing around the clock and engineered simple repairs. The dead were identified, and the wounded treated. Still without rudder control, Captain Robinson used *Marby*’s “screws” to take the ship through the treacherous Lombok Strait east of Bali in darkness and a rainstorm.

On the morning of 7 Feb 42, *Marby* limped into the tiny Indian Ocean port of Tjilatjap, on Java’s south coast (Sir Francis Drake had stopped at that tiny fishing port in 1580 long before the Dutch made it part of the Netherlands East Indies. Today, it is known as Cilacap and is a major oil port for the Indonesia’s national oil company, Pertamina). There, *Marby* sent her seriously wounded to local Dutch hospitals, buried her dead, and got very basic repairs. Carl recalled that when they went into the dry dock and lifted the ship’s bow, they discovered “*a hole about the size of a school bus that had damaged several oil tanks and two large compartments. We went to work to brace up that part of the ship as best we could by welding strips of metal across. We had no metal there in the dry dock large enough to completely cover the hole, and we were just going to cover it by welding strips across.*” On 10 Feb, *Marby* began her long, perilous journey home, the first leg of which involved crossing of the eastern Indian Ocean to Trincomalee, Ceylon (today’s Sri Lanka). Two British officers watching her depart wagered that she would break apart before ever seeing port again. In contrast, a Dutch commander ordered his vessel’s band to play the *Star Spangled Banner*.

The exigencies of war often speed up promotions, and this was true on *Marby* after her bombing. On 28 Feb 42, at Trincomalee, Ceylon (today’s Sri Lanka), the second largest natural deep-water port in the world, Carl reenlisted for another three years. On the same day, he was promoted to Chief Machinist’s Mate on a temporary basis, and

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immediately thereafter promoted again to the same rank on a permanent basis. That was also the final day of America's famed Asiatic Fleet.

In the early hours of the morning of 1 Mar 42, the Asiatic Fleet ceased to exist with the sinking of her flagship, the *USS Houston (CA-30)* in the Battle of Sunda Strait (which separates Sumatra from Java). On the following day, through superb leadership and the constant toil of her crew, the supposedly sunk *Marby* departed Trincomalee and continued to defy the odds and Japanese propaganda by sailing onwards across the Western Indian Ocean to South Africa with stops at Durban, Port Elizabeth, and Simonstown where she got more substantial repairs. Carl commented on the trip from Ceylon to Cape Town: *"That was quite a long haul for the condition of our ship and for the amount of fuel we could carry, because we had several damaged fuel tanks that had so much salt water in them, we couldn't use them. We still didn't have the use of our rudder and had to use our engines to speed up on one side and reverse on the other or vice versa to steer us, and we used lot of fuel that way. But we made it to Simonstown Naval shipyard which was about 30 miles from Cape Town, and it was quite a relief to get in there and feel somewhat safe and secure. I don't think I had more than 2 hours of sleep at a time since we got bombed."*

Marby departed Simonstown on 15 Apr 42, bound for Recife, Brazil, which held another Allied naval base on the southern Atlantic Ocean. Arriving on 23 Apr, *Marby's* crew encountered unexpected trouble! The Recife authorities would not let them into the port. Having seen multiple previous Japanese reports of having sunk *Marby*, the port authorities suspected a Nazi ruse to enter and destroy the port. Though *Marby's* crew had correctly answered all the questions thrown at them by the authorities, giving answers that only Americans were likely to know, the authorities refused to budge until one of *Marby's* radiomen, Ray Kester, became aware that another cruiser, *USS Milwaukee*, was also in Recife. Kester had previously served with *Milwaukee's* Chief Radioman Newell Phelps who was soon called into the conversation. Phelps ended the standoff by quickly verifying that the man 'on the other end of the line' was his former shipmate Kester. Over the next two days, *Marby* reprovisioned and refueled for her final leg home, departing 25 April for New York. There, on 4 May 42, *Marby* completed her 90-day, 20,589 miles "escape", entering the harbor to a hero's welcome.

Across the U.S., the same Japanese press reports of having sunk *Marby*, combined with the fact that her voyage home had been kept secret, had led the crew's loved ones to believe that their men were either dead or in Japanese POW camps. However, soon after her arrival, tears began flowing as phone calls home spread the news that most of them were safe and sound in New York and would soon be home on leave.

Carl remained aboard *Marby* when she left New York on 15 Oct 42 a five-and-a-half-month overhaul in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. She redeployed to the mid-Atlantic, operating out of Recife to escort convoys, hunt Nazi subs and blockage-runners, and rescue downed Allied airmen and survivors off sunken U-boats.

On 11 Jan 43, Carl was transferred from *Marby* to Natal, Brazil for further forwarding to the Receiving Ship at Philadelphia, PA. There, Carl joined a detail assigned to fit out a new battleship, the *USS New Jersey (BB-62)*, which had been launched on 7 Dec 42. Carl appears in that ship's first muster roll when she was commissioned on 23 May 43. It is unclear exactly how long Carl was attached to "Big J," as the *New Jersey* was called, because on 28 Jan 45 he was promoted to Warrant Officer (effective back to 15 Dec 44) and as a result, he ceased to appear in enlisted crew muster rolls. Annex A on page 5 hereof lists the actions that Carl participated in while aboard *USS New Jersey* and suggests he may have served aboard her until 16 Jan 45. After WWII, Carl remained in the Navy on ships such as *USS Leyte (CV-32)*. (see article on the right).

The Camden News

19 Jun 47

CARL HAYES EPPERSON RETURNED TO STATES

Carl Hayes Epperson, chief machinist's mate, son of Mr. and Mrs. L. J. Epperson of Chidester, Ark., has returned to the United States aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Leyte*, after an extensive tour of the Mediterranean area.

While on the cruise, the *Leyte* visited Istanbul, Turkey; Souda Bay, Crete; Alexandria, Egypt; Naples, and Gibraltar.

Highlight of the cruise was a visit to the ship by the President of Turkey.

In 1947, while serving as part of a military team escorting fallen servicemen home for burial, Carl encountered the love of his life, Macel Marie Owen, who was born 19 Oct 23 to William Nye Owen of Celeste, TX (b. 14

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May 1900 d. 4 Oct 1986) and Alyce Erma Elliott of Merkel, Texas (b. 10 Feb 1899 d. 31 Oct 1943). At the time, Macel was part of the administrative staff in the American Graves Registration office in Memphis, TN. Macel, a graduate of Electra High School in her hometown of Electra, Wichita County, TX, knew immediately that Carl was her man!

The couple got married on 27 March 48 in Memphis. The young family was subsequently stationed in Newport, Rhode Island when their son, William Carl Epperson, was born in 1951. On 7 Jun 52 Carl was promoted to Chief Warrant Officer. In Jacksonville, Florida,



Macel and Carl - wedding day, 1948

daughter Lynn Marie joined the family in 1956. Carl appears to have retired from the Navy on 19 May 58 and the Eppersons moved to Camden, AR to be close to Carl's parents and siblings. Carl had a peach orchard, and although he did most of the work, the summer harvest was "a family

team effort" according to Lynn. After the Navy, Carl served as a rural relief carrier for the U.S. Postal Service office in Camden and later as the Area 4 Coordinator for the office of Emergency Services for the State of Arkansas until he retired.



Carl (left) with colleagues and coffee. "He loved it black!"

Carl passed away on 11 Feb 99 in Camden, Ouachita County, AR, ending a rich life notable in his service to others. He is buried in Chidester Cemetery, Chidester, Ouachita County, AR. Macel passed in 2020 and is buried beside him.

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, USS Marblehead 1939-1945, with significant and invaluable additions, many in Carl's own words, provided by his daughter, Lynn Epperson Kersten, which were in turn enabled by the link to Lynn provided by Carl's cousin, Carolyn Lee. A multitude of records, photos and other documents were also sourced from Ancestry.com, Wikipedia, and other Internet sources.

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

Note: To save space, herein, all months are truncated to their first three letters, and except when standing alone, all years in the 20th century (only) are truncated to their last two digits - e.g., 7 December 1941 appears as 7 Dec 41.

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Annex A

Carl Hayes Epperson – U.S. Naval Service aboard USS New Jersey

Provided courtesy of Carl's daughter, Lynn Epperson Kersten

<i>Date</i>	<i>USS New Jersey</i>
1-29 to 2-6-44	Participated in air strikes, support and occupation of Kwajelein Atoll, and air strikes against Eniwetok Atoll, Marshall Islands, from 29 January to 6 February 1944.
2-16 to 2-17-44	Participated in air strikes against Japanese Naval Base at Truk and in surface engagement with Japanese Naval Forces.
3-19-44	Participated in shore bombardment and engagement with Japanese shore batteries on Mille Atoll, Marshall Islands.
3-30 to 4-1-44	Participated in air strikes against Palau and Woleai and engagement with Japanese aircraft.
4-21 to 4-29-44	Participated in air strikes, support, and occupation of Aitape and Hollandia, New Guinea
4-29 to 4-30-44	Participated in air strikes against Japanese Naval Base at Truk, and engagement with Japanese aircraft.
5-1-44	Participated in shore bombardment of Ponape Island.
	<i>Bonins, Marianas and Western Pacific</i>
6-10 to 6-24-44	Participated in the neutralization of Japanese bases in the Bonins, Marianas and Western Pacific.
6-11 to 6-24-44	Participated in the capture and occupation of Saipan.
6-19 to 6-20-44	Participated in the battle of the Philippines Sea.
7-3 to 8-15-44	Continued in the neutralization of the Japanese bases in the Bonins, Marianas and Western Pacific.
7-12 to 8-2-44	Participated in the capture and occupation of Guam.
7-25 to 7-27-44	Participated in the Palau, Yap, Ultini raid.
	<i>Palau – Philippine Campaign</i>
9-11 to 9-25-44	Provided air strike support during raids on Cebu, Leyte, Negros, Panay, Bohol, Samar, and Luzon during the occupation of Palau.
10-18 to 1-21-45	Participated in support of air strikes on Philippine Islands and in

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<i>Date</i>	<i>USS New Jersey</i>
	support of landings and occupation of Leyte, Samar, Mindoro, and Luzon.
10-23 to 10-26-44	Participated in the Battle of Leyte Gulf (second battle of the Philippine Sea).
	<i>Nansi Islands</i>
10-10 to 10-11-44	Participated in support of air strikes against Okinawa.
1-22-45	Participated in support of air strikes against Okinawa.
	<i>Formosa</i>
10-12 to 10-15-44	Participated in support of air strikes against Formosa during persistent attacks by Japanese aircraft.
1-3 to 1-4-45, 1-9-45, 1-5 to 1-16-45	Participated in support of air strikes against Formosa in support of landings on Luzon.
1-21-45	Participated in support of air strikes against Formosa.
	<i>Operations in South China Sea</i>
1-12-45	Participated in support of air strikes on Camranh Bay, Saigon, and Japanese shipping on the east coast of French Indo-China.
1-15 to 1-16-45	Participated in support of air strikes on Hong Kong, Swatow, and Amoy, China, and the island of Formosa.

<i>Ribbons</i>
Good Conduct Medal
Philippine Liberation
Philippine Defense
China Service