

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

## Marblehead Biography Wheeler Thero Gibson



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Wheeler Thero Gibson was born on 27 Nov 1920 in Opp, Covington County, Alabama, then a town of 1,556 people. Six half-siblings awaited Wheeler from his father's first marriage to Laura Zoella 'Ella' Boswell (1882-1919). They were John Watson (1906-1982), Henry Rufus (1908-1997), Rubie Pearl (1910-1985), Daisy Alice (1912-1990), Mattie Vermell (1915-1996), and Jewel Gladys (1916-1977). Wheeler was the first child of Effie Arizona Mount, his dad's second wife, who he married in 1919. Three full siblings would follow Wheeler: Noel Eddie (1922–2017), Mary Mae (1925–1984), and Tennie Alice (1925–1985). Wheeler's dad, Henry Arthur Gibson (1881-1947), supported the family as a farmer, and later as a sawmill laborer and as a spinner at the Opp Cotton Mill.

Little is known about Wheeler's early education except that he attended first grade and made the honor roll at the Opp Mill School in 1930. It is unclear whether he completed high school though that seems unlikely given the fact that the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs show him enlisting at the Birmingham, AL Naval Recruiting Station on 29 Jan 1936. At the time, Wheeler would have just turned 15 years old, suggesting that he or his dad might have falsified his birth records to meet Navy recruitment age requirements. Such tactics were not unusual during the Depression when jobs were hard to come by. Earlier, in 1927, the family had lost considerable assets in a fire that destroyed the family barn and all its contents, including farming equipment and a Ford touring car. Those assets were not insured. The Depression ensued two years later, and Alabama was one of the worst hit states due to its dependence on agriculture, particularly cotton farming and processing, as well as mining and steel manufacturing. By 1930, cotton prices had dropped to their lowest levels since the 1880s and non-farm employment in Alabama fell by 15% between 1930 and 1940, the highest rate for any Southern state. The Opp Cotton Mill where Wheeler's dad worked was badly affected but it did not close. Still, unemployment remained high through the 1930s, and the Gibsons likely needed new income streams.

No records were found of Wheeler's service between 1936 and 1940. He may have returned to civilian life after his initial enlistment because a 31 Mar 40 Navy Report of Changes at the Naval Receiving Station, San Diego, CA, indicates a second enlistment in Birmingham, AL on 7 Dec 39. Of course, reenlistment was not unusual, however in this case Wheeler appears to have had to repeat basic training since he is received in San Diego as an Apprentice Seaman (AS) from the Naval Training School in Norfolk, VA.

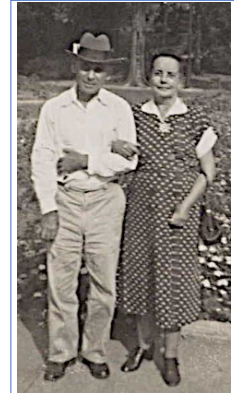


[USS Saratoga \(CV-3\)](#) underway 1942  
Courtesy: Wikipedia

In any case, on 8 Mar 40 he was transferred to [USS Saratoga \(CV-3\)](#), a Lexington-class aircraft carrier built during the 1920s and commissioned on 16 Nov 27. Originally designed as a battle cruiser, she was converted into one of America's first aircraft carriers. Aboard *Saratoga*, on 7 Apr 40, Wheeler was promoted to S2c. On 6 Sep 40, he was transferred to Saratoga's Fighter Squadron 3 at Manila, Philippines, and on 5 Nov 40, in Manila, he was received aboard the *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, affectionately referred to by her crew simply as *Marby*.

Wheeler would spend two years and ten months aboard *Marby*.

His time aboard included some of the most notable events in the ship's history. Except for a voyage to Guam, *Marby* would remain in Philippine waters for most of the next twelve months. On 25 Nov 1941, in



Wheeler's parents,  
Effie Arizona Mount and  
Henry Arthur Gibson

Photo courtesy of: Ancestry  
member [aprilakajoy](#)



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

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

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. While in Darwin, Wheeler was promoted to F1c effective 1 Jan 42.

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.

By comparison to ships in their class in the Japanese Navy, *Marby* and her sister ships in the Asiatic Fleet were largely obsolete. 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. Overall, the Japanese Navy had a technological and numerical advantage in Southeast Asia. Still, the Allies had to do their utmost with what they had.

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, *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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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, that the enemy left her for sunk and went after *USS Houston*. *Houston* lost more men in the exchange but

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<sup>1</sup> 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)

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

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 enough as 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, fighting fires, 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 two propellers to navigate *Marby* safely through 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.<sup>2</sup>

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. Wheeler was aboard throughout the trip.

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 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 Wheeler went home to Alabama 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. He stayed with her when she redeployed to rejoin the war, this time in the Atlantic Ocean operating out of Recife, Brazil. On 7 Dec 42, while the ship was departing on patrol, Wheeler received a promotion to Water Tender 2<sup>nd</sup> Class (WT2c) effective 1 Dec 42.

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<sup>2</sup> *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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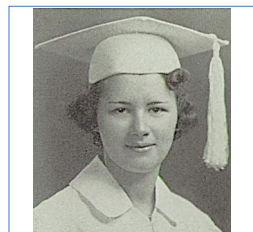
On 14 Aug 43, *Marby* sailed from Recife on patrol and Wheeler was promoted to WT1c, effective 1 Aug 43. In the ensuing months, *Marby* was frequently on patrol in search of Nazi submarines and blockade runners. Refueling and reprovisioning stops often took her back to Recife but also to other Brazilian ports such as Bahia, Pernambuco, and Rio de Janeiro, to Montevideo, Uruguay and to Asension Island in the mid-Atlantic before heading to Miami, Florida, where on 6 Sep 43, Wheeler transferred from *Marby* to the receiving barracks in Miami for further forwarding to the receiving station at Philadelphia, PA for duty in connection with the fitting out of the new *USS Astoria (CL-90)* which had been launched on 6 Mar 43.



*Astoria* on her [shakedown cruise](#) on 22 Jul 44  
Courtesy: Wikipedia

Wheeler spent 8 months and 21 days in the Philadelphia Navy Yard as part of the team involved with the fitting out of *Astoria*. No records were found indicating that he had spent any time in Philadelphia previously. It therefore seems likely that it was during this lengthy stay in Philadelphia that he met Marian Louise Cohen. Marian was then roughly 22 years old. She was living with her mother, and she was working as a secretary. How Wheeler and Marion met is unclear, but they were married in early 1944.

*USS Astoria* was commissioned in Philadelphia on 17 May 44. Following her shake-down cruise, Wheeler remained aboard the new ship. He would see little of his new family over the next few years as *Astoria* soon departed to join the Pacific Fleet. Passing through the Panama Canal on 19 Sep 44, she arrived in San Diego on 3 Oct 44. She then sailed to the Mare Island Navy Yard in San Francisco before moving on to Pearl Harbor.



Marian Louise Cohen,  
1938 graduate of Hallahan  
Catholic Girls High School,  
Philadelphia, PA  
Courtesy: Ancestry.com;  
Classmates.com

On 16 Nov 44, *Astoria* left Pearl Harbor to join the fast carrier Task Force 38 which was then based in Ulithi in the western Caroline Islands. She had been assigned to Task Group 38.2. Task group was comprised of the aircraft carriers *Lexington*, *Hancock*, *Hornet*, *Independence*, and *Cabot*; the fast battleships *New Jersey*, *Iowa*, and *Wisconsin*; and the light cruisers *Pasadena*, *Vincennes*, *Miami*, and *San Juan*; and twenty destroyers.

*Astoria* was assigned the role of anti-aircraft escort for the fleet's aircraft carriers. The American fleet sortied on 11 Dec to support the invasion of Mindoro. The carriers conducted a series of raids from 14 to 16 Dec before poor weather grounded the aircraft. That night, Typhoon Cobra struck the area inflicting considerable damage on several ships and sinking three destroyers. *Astoria* was not seriously damaged.

As part of Task Force 38, *Astoria* sortied from Ulithi again on 30 Dec 44 to cover the invasion of Luzon. It struck Japanese positions on the island from 6 to 9 Jan 45 before sailing northward with carriers *Hornet*, and *Hancock*, cruisers *New Jersey*, *Wisconsin*, *Pasadena*, *San Juan*, and *Wilkes-Barre*, and fifteen destroyers. On 9 Jan, the fleet began South China Sea raids on Japanese holdings in China and Southeast Asia. *Astoria* escorted the carriers over the next two weeks as they struck targets in Japanese occupied China and French Indochina. The fleet returned to Ulithi on 25 Jan.

By early Feb 45, command of the fast carrier task force had passed to the 5th Fleet, and the unit was renumbered TF 58. At that time, *Astoria*, *Wilkes-Barre*, and *Pasadena* were transferred to TG 58.3, which included *Cabot*, the carriers *Bunker Hill* and *Essex*, the battleships *South Dakota* and *New Jersey*, the large cruiser *Alaska*, and fourteen destroyers. The fleet, including *Astoria*, sortied early that month to conduct a series of air attacks on the Japanese home islands, which began on 18 Feb. Later that day, the fleet sailed south to support the invasion of Iwo Jima, and *Astoria* was detached to conduct shore bombardment on 21 Feb. Thereafter she rejoined the carriers for another round of strikes on the Japanese capital, Tokyo, and thereafter returned to Ulithi on 3 Mar. On 6 Mar, Wheeler was



U.S. Lexington (CV-16)  
Courtesy: Wikipedia.org

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

transferred to *USS Lexington (CV-16)* and for her wartime service, *Astoria* received five battle stars. Wheeler saw much of that action.

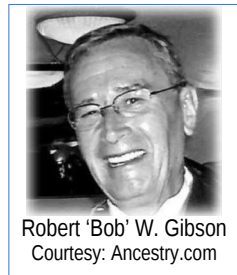
Wheeler, still a WT1c, finished WWII aboard *Lexington*, and he remained in the Navy. On 9 Dec 45 he transferred, via the receiving station in Philadelphia, to *USS Fargo (CL-106)*. He was honorably discharged on 18 Dec 45, but he re-enlisted for four more years on 19 Dec 45. On 1 Mar 46, he was promoted to Chief Water Tender (AA), and on 17 Nov 46, he joined *USS Randolph (CV-15)*. On 16 Apr 46 he achieved permanent CWT status. On 26 Aug 46 he went on leave, returning on 4 Sep. In Feb 48, he began a rotation between *USS Randolph* and the newer *USS Philippine Sea (CV-47)* which was operating out of Quonset, Rhode Island.

Wheeler returned to duty aboard the *Philippine Sea* which had been conducting trials and training between Quonset and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba through Feb 48. That month, the *Philippine Sea* became the flagship of Carrier Division Four. On 20 Feb she departed for her first deployment on the Mediterranean Sea as part of the 6th Fleet. In July 48, Wheeler was promoted to Boiler Technician Chief, the senior non-commissioned officer responsible for operating and maintaining the boilers and other machinery in a ship's engine room.

By 1 Sep 48, back on *USS Leyte (CV-32)*, Wheeler achieved the rank of BTCS (Boiler Technician Senior Chief Petty Officer). On 18 Oct 48, Wheeler was assigned temporary duty at the Fleet Training Center, Newport, RI, for a one-week course on damage control.

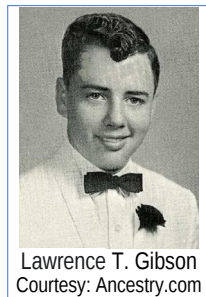
In 1953, Wheeler appeared in a 1953 US Navy Cruise Book as part of the crew of the *USS Benner (DDK-807)* operating out of Philadelphia, PA, USA. It is unclear when he joined the ship, but over the period between Oct 51 and Sep 54, that destroyer made three Mediterranean cruises visiting ports in Spain, France, Italy, Greece, and Turkey, and Algiers and Tangier in North Africa. She also participated in NATO training exercises during this period.

Wheeler Thero Gibson was honorably discharged from the U.S. Navy on 8 Aug 1955 after 20 years of service.



Robert 'Bob' W. Gibson  
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

Marian and Wheeler had five children: Mary Louise Gibson Capelle (1944–2020), Lawrence Thomas Gibson Sr. (1945–2010), Nancy Gibson Schwencer (1947–?), Robert 'Bob' W. Gibson (1949–2020), and Gregory Joseph Gibson (1955–2018). Their son Robert served in the Marines and their son Lawrence served in the Navy completing his service, which also included the Vietnam War, as a Gunner's Mate Chief Petty Officer.



Lawrence T. Gibson  
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

In April 1980, Wheeler and Marian bought a house on North Wells Avenue in the Philadelphia suburb of Glenolden near the Delaware River. Wheeler passed away the following year at the age of 61. Marian died on 13 Jun 1990 in Glenolden. She was almost 70 years old.

Wheeler Thero Gibson is listed on page 239 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, and other Internet records.*

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