



The Marby

Marblehead Biography of Robert Joseph Groesbeck



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Robert Joseph Groesbeck was born on 11 Sep 1919 in Norfolk, Madison County, Nebraska to Canada-born homemaker Adelle Emma Groesbeck (1875–1962) of Schenectady, New York-born contractor Charles Henry Groesbeck Sr. (1869–1951). Robert was the youngest of four children. His siblings were Charles Henry Jr. (1901–1954), Adele S. (1909–1983), and Juanita Marie (1912–1996).

By the 1930 U.S. Census, Robert's parents had moved the family to the Minneapolis/St. Paul area of Minnesota where his father was working as an advertising representative in a publishing company. Robert's brother had moved elsewhere, but his sisters were still in the household. Robert likely started school there.

By the 1940 census, Robert's parents were residing in Chicago with his still single younger sister, Adele. We could not determine which high school Robert might have attended or whether he graduated and when. Nevertheless, Robert enlisted in the Navy at the U.S. Naval Reserve Station in Chicago on 26 Mar 1940, the month prior to the completion of the census. He was assigned service number 300-04-93, and he reported the same day to the Naval Training Station, Great Lakes, Illinois, as an Apprentice Seaman. He remained in the Great Lakes station's muster rolls through at least 30 Jun 1940.



USS Indianapolis (CA-35)

On 5 Feb 1941, in Guam, Robert reported aboard *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*. He had been transported there first by the *USS Indianapolis (CA-35)*, probably from the U.S. West Coast as far as Hawaii, and from there via the veteran Navy transport vessel, *USS Chaumont (AP-5)* to Guam. Robert would serve two years and four months aboard *Marby*, as the light cruiser was affectionately referred to by her crew. It would be the most dangerous and exciting period of his life.

Robert joined *Marby* late in the ship's history with Asia, which began when she joined the Asiatic Fleet in 1938.

Normally, she wintered in the Philippines working from Manila and she summered in China operating from Shanghai. Shanghai was then one of the globe's most cosmopolitan cities, a trading, financial and artistic powerhouse with a potent mix of opium smuggling, gambling, and prostitution. Unfortunately, China, and Shanghai in particular, were the focus of Japan's strategy to control Asia. Its annexation of China's industrial heartland, Manchuria, in 1932, and its commencement of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, had escalated tension with the United States.

By the time Robert arrived aboard *Marby*, Japan controlled all the ports of China except for Hong Kong, and while *Marby* did spend the summer of 1940 in China, when she sailed from Tsingtao in early September that year, it was a final farewell. Except for a cruise to Guam, she spent the remainder of 1940 and most of 1941 in Philippine waters focusing on battle training as war grew increasingly likely in the minds of *Marby's* skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson, and the rest of the ship's leadership and crew.

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; today's Indonesia). On the night of the 29th, *Marby* anchored off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI to await further orders. The ship was darkened for additional security.



Nine days later, at 0328 hours on 8 Dec 1941, *Marby's* radio receiver crackled with news of the attack on Pearl Harbor and conveyed the order: "The Japanese have commenced hostilities. Act 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, i.e., from their deep sleep, the entire 700+ crew was standing at attention at their battle stations within eight minutes.

At dawn, *Marby* weighed anchor and headed for Balikpapan, an oil port on the east coast of Borneo. Arriving on 11 Dec 41, the crew began stripping the ship of unnecessary items and otherwise prepared to execute war plans. During this stop more details poured in on the disaster at Pearl Harbor, where most of the crew had friends to worry about.

Word soon reached the crew that British battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* had been sunk on 10 Dec 41 in the South China Sea east of the Malay Peninsula. Previously, battleships had been considered invincible, but Japanese naval air superiority had just made quick victims of those British behemoths. These events sharpened *Marby's* crew's focus on the ship's vulnerabilities.

*"For if those great British and American battlewagons, with their vast belts of bulges designed to serve as torpedo shock absorbers, couldn't take it from the Japanese fliers, what chance had an old bucket like the Marblehead whose A.A. battery was but a tiny fraction of any of those capital ships and whose slender sides had no such protection? Any torpedo that struck her would strike below her fragile armor belt which was only three inches thick at its heaviest. Her main battery could not be used against planes, and the seven 3-inch A.A.'s plus four .50 calibre machine guns atop the foremast and four more aft amounted to something considerably less than impressive."*¹

Once fully fueled, *Marby* departed Balikpapan's fuel dock on 16 Dec and crossed Makassar Strait to Makassar City on Celebes Island, arriving on 18 Dec 41 to reprovision from cargo ship *USS Gold Star* (AG-12) and other sources. She departed Makassar on 22 Dec 41 for the Dutch Naval Base at Surabaya, Java, arriving on Christmas Eve. There, Capt. Robinson granted his men limited shore leave despite the risk of Japanese air attack.

On the last days of 1941, *Marby* was cutting across the Flores Sea escorting the French mail ship *MS Marechal Joffre* from Surabaya to Darwin, Australia. Formerly owned by the pro-Nazi Vichy French government, *Marechal Joffre* had been brazenly captured by American naval aviators and ground crews in Manila Bay and used to escape the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Once in Darwin, *Marechal Joffre* sailed on to San Francisco to be inducted into the U.S. Navy (see the [Marechal Joffre Story](#)), and for a few days, *Marby* temporarily became Radio Darwin, a beacon that facilitated the regrouping of remaining Allied warships to slow the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia. In that effort, *Marby* soon headed north, and on the night of 23-24 Jan 1942, she covered Destroyer Division 59 (*USS John D. Ford*, *USS Parrott*, *USS Paul Jones*, and *USS Pope*) in its retirement from a raid on a Japanese convoy at Balikpapan in which, according to the destroyer division commander's own after-action message, seven enemy ships were sunk and an undetermined number damaged.

Marby spent the last week of Jan 1942 in Surabaya, and by 1 Feb, she was cruising off Madura Strait. On Feb 3, a flight of about 40 Japanese planes passed overhead en route to bomb Surabaya. One plane lingered

Lunch-with-Ray¶

When word reached the *Marby* at 03:28 on 8 Dec 41 of the disaster at Pearl Harbor, Raymond (Ray) Delos Kester, RM2c, then a 21-year-old off-watch radioman, was catching a few winks on the floor of the *Marby's* transmitter room. Over lunch¹ in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC on 11 Sep 2016, still ambulatory and cracking jokes at 96, Ray recalled the call to general quarters that followed receipt of the historic message 75 years earlier. He said that the entire complement of the *Marblehead*, 725 officers and enlisted men, went from deep sleep to general quarters in a mere eight minutes, an early indication of the discipline and instinct for survival that would soon save the ship.¶

¹Lunch with this biography's author¶

¹ *Where Away: A Modern Odyssey*, p.42



behind to get reconnaissance on the ships below which also included heavy cruiser *USS Houston*, the smaller Dutch cruisers, *De Ruyter* and *Tromp*, and seven Dutch and American destroyers.

The following morning “broke red, burnishing the bottoms of clouds that floated across the sky before a mild westerly breeze. The lookouts could see the high mountains of Bali looming in the distance.”² A little after 0900, Admiral Doorman on *De Ruyter* received a dispatch which he then flashed to all ships: “37 bombers to Surabaya, course SSW”. By the time the message reached *Marby*’s Capt. Robinson, the ship’s lookouts had spotted the planes approaching from the east at 17,000 feet. Each had the red sun of Japan painted on its tail and wings. All hell soon broke loose.

Despite successful evasive action on the first three bombing runs, *Marby* eventually suffered two direct hits and a third near-miss close to her port bow. The damage was severe - one bomb jammed *Marby*’s rudder causing her to steam in a predictable circle. Another strike knocked out her gyroscope, all electricity and internal communication. Multiple fires soon swept the ship. The near miss ripped a large gash in *Marby*’s bow, flooding compartments and causing the ship to begin to sink. Fortunately, the enemy assumed the sea would finish off what their bombs had begun, so they left *Marby* for bigger prey - *USS Houston*.

The Japanese knew nothing of the character of the men to whom *Marby* was home. Eleven sailors were killed that day and another eighty-four were injured, four of whom later died of their wounds, but the remaining able-bodied crew defied the odds, the Japanese, and the Java Sea. After bailing by hand non-stop for more than seventy hours, over the next ninety days, they would coax the crippled cruiser 20,589 miles across the Indian and Atlantic oceans to enter New York harbor on 4 May 1942. *Marby*’s bombing in the Battle of Makassar Strait and her escape to New York are described in detail in *Marby*’s [own biography](#) and in the 1944 book *Where Away: A Modern Odyssey*.

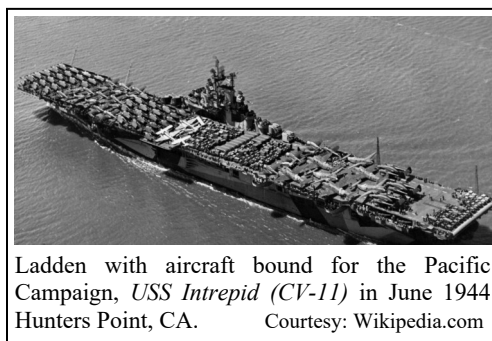
Japan claimed several times in the international press that it had sunk *Marby*. The Navy never contradicted those claims but kept the improbable voyage home secret for security reasons until the ship arrived in New York on 4 May. The secrecy meant that loved ones back home thought their sailors were either dead or in enemy captivity. On 5 May, phone calls began flooding across the nation, bringing the truth, and considerable joy, to hundreds of families who believed their loved ones lost. In one of his fireside chats, President Roosevelt singled out *Marby*’s crew as an inspiration to the nation.

Robert was advanced to Seaman First Class effective 1 Sep 1941 and was carried on the ship’s muster rolls without interruption through five calendar quarters ending with 30 Sep 1942.

While *Marby* was operating from Recife, Brazil, hunting Nazi subs and blockade runners with occasional convoy duty in the north Atlantic and other European waters, Robert was advanced to Coxswain effective 1 Dec 1942. He continued serving aboard *Marby* until 11 Jun 1943 when he transferred to the U.S. Navy facility at Recife, Brazil (“Navy 120”), and then forwarded to the Receiving Station, Newport News, Virginia. There he joined the freshly commissioned aircraft carrier, *USS Intrepid* (CV-11) on 16 Aug 1943. The war was far from over and soon it would get ‘very hot’ for Robert and his mates on *Intrepid*.

Still a Coxswain, Robert appeared in *Intrepid*’s muster rolls through the quarters ending 30 Sep 1943 and 31 Dec 1943.

On 15 Jan 1944, Robert transferred from *Intrepid* to the Naval Hospital at Aiea Heights, Pearl Harbor for brief and unknown treatment. He returned to *Intrepid* on 25 Feb 1944. He



Laden with aircraft bound for the Pacific Campaign, *USS Intrepid* (CV-11) in June 1944 Hunters Point, CA. Courtesy: Wikipedia.com

² *Where Away: A Modern Odyssey*, pp. 108–109.



advanced to Boatswain's Mate Second Class effective 1 Apr 1944, while the ship was en route to San Francisco, CA. On 9 Jun 1944, Robert transferred from *Intrepid* to RS Treasure Island, CA.

On 11 Jul 1944, he was received at Receiving Station "Navy 128", WWII Navy code for Pearl Harbor, but on 21 Jul 1944, he was transferred to Naval Hospital No. 8 for treatment, his second hospitalization of the war. He transferred back to *Intrepid* by 10 Nov 1944, having missed the ship's summer and early autumn combat operations described below, and remained aboard her through the end of Dec 1944, including the intense air raid of 25 Nov 1944.

In Jan 1944, *Intrepid* had joined the Fast Carrier Task Force (Task Force 58) for the Central Pacific island-hopping campaign targeting the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. On 16 Jan 1944, *Intrepid*, her sister ship *Essex* (CV-9), and the light carrier *Cabot* (CVL-28) left Pearl Harbor to raid the Kwajalein Atoll from 29 Jan 1944 to 2 Feb 1944. Their air groups destroyed all 83 Japanese aircraft on Roi-Namur in two days of strikes, clearing the way for 31 Jan 1944 Marine landings in the Battle of Kwajalein. That morning, *Intrepid's* aircraft hit Japanese defenses on Ennuebing Island until ten minutes before the first Marines came ashore.

On 3 Feb 1944, *Intrepid* and the rest of Task Force 58 launched Operation Hailstone, a major raid on the Japanese naval base at Truk Lagoon. From 17 to 19 Feb 1944, the carriers sank two destroyers and roughly 200,000 gross tons of merchant shipping. However, *Intrepid* did not escape unscathed: on the night of 17-18 Feb 1944, a Japanese torpedo bomber struck the carrier astern, jamming her rudder to port, flooding several compartments, and killing 11 sailors. The crew held course by running the port engine at high speed, then jury-rigged a sail from scrap canvas and hatch covers to limp back to Pearl Harbor, arriving 24 Feb 1944. After temporary repairs, *Intrepid* sailed on 16 Mar 1944 for permanent repairs at Hunters Point Naval Shipyard in San Francisco, arriving 22 Mar 1944.

Repairs were completed by 9 Jun 1944, followed by two months of training near Pearl Harbor. In early Sep 1944, *Intrepid* rejoined the fleet, by then re-designated Task Force 38 under the Third Fleet and Admiral William Halsey Jr., for operations in the western Caroline Islands. On 6-7 Sep 1944 she struck Japanese artillery and airfields on Peleliu ahead of the coming invasion, then joined strikes on Mindanao (9-10 Sep 1944) and the Visayan Sea (12-14 Sep 1944). On 17 Sep 1944, *Intrepid* returned to Peleliu to support the Marines who had landed there two days earlier.

Intrepid then returned to the Philippines, assigned to Task Group 38.2, to help prepare for the Philippines campaign, striking Japanese airfields there as well as on Formosa and Okinawa. On 20 Oct 1944, at the opening of the Battle of Leyte, *Intrepid* launched strikes supporting the Allied landings on Leyte. By this point Task Group 38.2, commanded by Rear

Admiral Gerald F. Bogan aboard *Intrepid*, had been

reduced to just *Intrepid*, *Cabot*, and the light carrier *Independence*.

From 23 Oct 1944 to 26 Oct 1944, the Japanese Navy launched a major operation against the Leyte landings, producing the Battle of Leyte Gulf. On the morning of 24 Oct 1944, an *Intrepid* reconnaissance aircraft spotted Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's flagship *Yamato*.



Curtiss SB2C-3 Helldiver caught in *Intrepid's* aft radio mast after a night landing accident, 30-Oct-1944.
Courtesy: Wikipedia.com



Intrepid launching aircraft 'in lovely weather'.
Battle of Leyte Gulf.
Courtesy: Wikipedia.com



Intrepid and *Cabot* (CVL-28) struck Kurita's Center Force that afternoon in the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea, hitting the battleship *Musashi* repeatedly through the day; further strikes from *Essex* and *Lexington* added more damage. By day's end, *Musashi* had taken 13 bombs and 11 torpedoes and sank, while *Yamato*, *Nagato*, *Haruna*, and the cruiser *Myoko* were also damaged, forcing Kurita to break off temporarily.

Admiral Halsey then took Task Force 38 north to intercept Vice Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa's decoy carrier force. Early on 25 Oct 1944, *Intrepid's* aircraft helped sink four Japanese carriers and a destroyer in the Battle off Cape Engano. The move north let Kurita's force turn back east through the San Bernardino Strait, where it engaged the escort carriers and destroyers covering the landing force in the Battle off Samar before ultimately withdrawing.

On 27 Oct 1944, Task Group 38.2 resumed operations over Luzon, including a raid on Manila on 29 Oct 1944, during which a kamikaze struck a port-side gun position, killing ten men. With Robert back aboard, a larger Japanese air raid on 25 Nov 1944 sent two kamikazes into *Intrepid*, killing sixty-nine men and starting a serious fire that was brought under control within two hours; the ship remained on station before being detached for repairs the following day and reaching San Francisco on 20 Dec 1944.

Robert's service aboard *Intrepid* concluded on 15 Jun 1945, when he transferred to the Receiving Station, San Francisco, CA. He was received at the Naval Receiving Station, Chicago, Illinois, on 6 Aug 1945, and four days later, on 10 Aug 1945, was transferred to the Receiving Station, Boston, Massachusetts, for further transfer to the Commander, Service Force, Atlantic Fleet (Com One), the last action recorded in his available Records of Change and Muster Rolls. His discharge date remains elusive!

In the 1950 U.S. Census, Robert J Groesbeck, age 30, was residing at 43 14th Avenue, Queens, New York, as head of household, still married to Teresa, employed, and working 40 hours per week as a fireman in the general plumbing sector.

Teresa predeceased Robert in 1996 at age 79. Robert died in 2012 in Conroe, Montgomery, Texas, USA (aged 90–91). They are buried together in Sunland Memorial Park, Sun City, Maricopa County, Arizona. No obituaries could be located, but it is likely that they were survived by their two daughters, and perhaps several grandchildren.

Robert Joseph Groesbeck is mentioned on page 240 of the 1944 book *Where Away: A Modern Odyssey*.

Don't forget to read Marby's [biography](#).



Clearing wreckage on the hangar deck after *Intrepid* was hit by kamikazes, 25-Nov-1944.

Courtesy: Wikipedia.com

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, USS Marblehead 1939-1945, with contributions from Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, Wikipedia.com, Anthropic's Claude AI, and other Internet resources.

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