

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



Les Garlow circa 1940
Photo: Lansing State Journal

Marblehead Biography Lester 'Les' Commodore Garlow

Lester 'Les' Commodore Garlow was born on 23 JUL 1917 in Adrian, Lenawee County, MI. His father was William Perry Garlow (1883–1948), was a crane operator for the Water and Light Commission of Lansing, MI. Les' mother was homemaker Celia Blanch Humbarger (1889–1923). His parents, both of German heritage, married in their hometown of Bryan, Williams County, OH, on 12 MAR 1908. Les was the 5th born of eight children. His siblings were: Doris M. (1909–1985), Thelma (1910–1978), Russell Woodrow (1914–2006), Laverne 'Vern' (1915–1971), Viola Bell 'Dutch' (1919–1994), Mildred (1921–1921) and Martha (1921–1921). Martha and Mildred were born two-and-a-half months premature and neither survived.

Les was a graduate of Lansing Eastern High School, and prior to that, Walter French Junior High and the Maplewood School (elementary) in Lansing, where early on, he showed a proclivity for creating things with his hands. The census enumeration on 23 APR 1940, showed Les living with his widower dad and brother Laverne, a manservant. At that time, Les was working in a factory.

Les' enlisted in the Navy on 23 JUL 1940 at Detroit, MI. He likely did boot camp at Great Lakes training center near Chicago. His first ship was the [USS Idaho \(BB-42\)](#), a New Mexico-class battleship, the fourth ship of the U. S. Navy named for the 43rd state. *Idaho* was operating from Pearl Harbor, TH (Territory of Hawaii) on 12 OCT 1940 when Les, service #3114779, then an Apprentice Seaman (AS) came aboard fresh out of boot camp at the Naval Training School at Great Lakes, IL. On 23 NOV 1940, he was promoted to Seaman 2nd Class (Sea2c)

Two months later, on 17 JAN 41, he was transferred to the Naval Receiving Station at Pearl Harbor for further transfer to [USS Chaumont \(AP-5\)](#), one of two veteran transport ships ([USS Henderson AP-1](#) was the other) which kept the Asiatic Station (i.e. the Asiatic Fleet) supplied with personnel prior to WWII. Les completed this series of transfers in Manila, Philippines on 5 FEB 1941, when he joined the light cruiser [USS Marblehead \(CL-12\)](#), affectionately referred to by her crew as '*Marby*'. Aboard *Marby*, Les advanced in rating to Sea1c on 1 AUG 1941.

While Les was aboard *Marby* on 4 FEB 1942, the ship was bombed off the north coast of Java in the Netherlands East Indies (today's Indonesia), and it was reported sunk on multiple occasions in the international press. However, the leadership, discipline and determination of her crew enabled *Marby* to avoid destruction and sail into the history books. For the ninety days following her bombing, the parents and other loved ones of the sailors aboard the ship believed their men were dead or in captivity. On 4 MAY 1942, after three months of radio silence while improbably covering 20,589 miles across two oceans in crippled condition, *Marby* cruised into New York harbor. The following day the sailors called home with the good news and *Marby* slipped into [Brooklyn Navy Yard](#) for a massive overhaul. ([read Marby's biography](#)).



Alice Victoria Rosen
Photo: Lansing State Journal

Other than the trauma of seeing friends aboard the ship die or suffer badly from burns, Les came through the action off Java unscathed. He remained with the ship during its five-and-a-half-month overhaul, and it is highly probably that during this extended period in New York, Les first met his future wife, Alice Rosén. Alice, who was born on 25 AUG 1922 and raised in Brooklyn, was the daughter of Carl Albert Ragnar Rosén (1894–1964), a hotel waiter, and homemaker Hilda Viktoria Larsson (1897–1982). Her parents were from Sweden and she had a younger brother, Albert (1923-1947).

By 1 AUG 1942, Les had been promoted to Fire Controlman 3rd Class (Maintenance) or FC3c(M), and he remained aboard *Marby* when, on 15 OCT 1942, she sailed out of New York to rejoin the war effort. *Marby* redeployed to the mid- and south-Atlantic, operating mainly out of Recife, Brazil, hunting Nazi U-boats

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and blockade runners. During this time, she frequented such ports as [Georgetown, Ascension Island; Montevideo, Uruguay; St. Croix, St. Thomas, Trinidad, Cuba, Puerto Rico](#) and other Caribbean nations.

On 8 FEB 1943, as the *Marby* left on patrol, Les transferred to the Navy Operating Base at Bahia, Brazil for further transfer to Naval Training School, Norfolk, VA for six months of training in the fine art of fire control, i.e. inspection, maintenance and repair of gun fire control instruments (range finders, optical controls, and electrical firing circuits) in ship-board fire control stations.

It appears that at the end of this training but prior to his return to the ship, Les took leave to marry Alice on 4 MAY 1943 at the home of her parents in Brooklyn, NY. By 5 JUN 1943, Les was an FC2c and aboard the [USS Ariel \(AF-22\)](#), a former United Fruit Company cargo/passenger liner that the Navy had converted to a Mizar-class stores ship. In Trinidad, he transferred to [USS Tenacity \(PG-71\)](#), a former corvette built for the Royal Navy but transferred to the U. S. Navy as part of a reverse Lend Lease arrangement. To Les, *Ariel* and *Tenacity* were merely a ‘rides’ back to *Marby*, which he rejoined in Recife, Brazil on 3 JUL 1943.

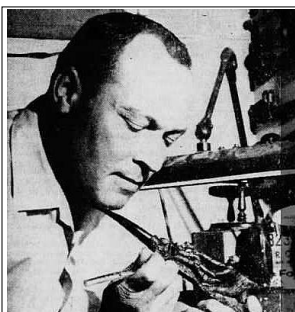
On 10 APR 1945 Les bid his buddies on *Marby* a final farewell and transferred to the Receiving Station at the Navy Yard in Washington, DC and then to the at the Navy Training School there to begin a course for Fire Controlmen on “new construction”.

The “new construction” was the [USS Fechteler \(DD-870\)](#), a Gearing-class destroyer then being built at Staten Island, NY. Les first came aboard *Fechteler* on 1 MAR 1946 for the ship’s commissioning the following day. Having missed WWII, the ship would eventually operate with the U.S. Seventh Fleet in support of United Nations Forces during the Korean War, and later carry out naval gunfire support missions during the Vietnam War. But Les would miss all that action. He was transferred on 20 JUL 1946 to the Navy Personnel Separation Center at Lido Beach, NY for honorable discharge. His first son, Gary was just ten days old.

With the Navy and WWII behind him, he returned home to Alice and Gary and eventually took a job in New York City’s water treatment department. Second son Bruce joined the family on 23 JAN 1949.

Apartment living in New York was a confining experience for Les. He missed Lancing, population just 79,000 when he’d left in 1940, and the tree-studded farmland that surrounded it. And since his boys were just two and one at the time, throwing a baseball around the front yard in Brooklyn, even if they had had one, was not an option.

Alice concluded that Les needed a hobby, preferably one that indulged his latent artistic tendencies – he’d been drawing pictures of the American frontier since he was six and she knew that he had a knack for carving. So at some point in late-1949, Alice accidentally launched Les on a sideline that kept him focused and relaxed, produced additional income, and even garnered him minor fame. She stumbled across a block of briar root in a store window, bought it for him, and encouraged him to carve, saying that she would sell whatever he produced. And she did. Soon Les had more orders for his unique hand-carved pipes that he could fill.



Les Garlow, carver first class
Photo: Lansing State Journal

In fact, Les was pretty talented all around. According to his son Bruce, he “was a pretty fair athlete and acrobat in his youth and, even as the 40-something father of two teenage sons, could still do handstands and flips in the front yard of our suburban home. He was a guitar and harmonica player, singer, book lover, romantic, trivia buff before there was such a thing and a fan of swashbuckling adventure stories. He also was a painter, sculptor and engraver.



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But my dad's true talent was carving pipes, and where he tinkered at most other pursuits, in this he was a master."¹ The photos of Garlow pipes on the following page confirm that assertion.



Garlow pipe with African scene, perhaps inspired by Les' visits to South Africa on *Marby's* long trip home
Photo: Pipes and Tobaccos Magazine

Below, a classic Garlow pipe followed by three close-ups of the intricate detail he embued it with.²



Lester 'Les' Commodore Garlow is listed on page 239 of the book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#).

Also, don't forget to read the biography of the ship at [Marby's Biography](#).

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, USS Marblehead 1939-1945, with important contributions from Ancestry.com, Wikipedia.com, Newspapers.com, and other Internet records.

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

¹ Sources for the preceding three paragraphs above and the first Garlow pipe pictured on the following page were articles from the Lansing State Journal ([16 Oct 1949](#) and [26 Oct 1959](#)), and a Mar 2014 article by his son Bruce in [Pipes and Tobaccos Magazine](#).

² Photos from [Tobacco Pipe Artistory blog](#)