

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

## Marblehead Biography Pao San Ho



Pao San Ho, 1945  
Source: US Navy Photo  
& Oakland Post Enquirer

Pao San HO was born on 25 Jun 1911 in Hankow, Hupei Province, China. It is unclear who his parents were, but he had at least one sibling, a brother.

Pao San Ho enlisted in the U.S. Navy at Shanghai, China on 5 May 36. Shortly thereafter he was assigned to the *USS Monocacy (PG-20)* as a Mess Attendant 3c. He would spend the next three and a half years aboard *Monocacy*, a patrol gunboat designed for operations in shallow riverine waters as part of the Yangtze River Patrol. During the Second Sino-Japanese war, which would soon merge into WWII, she was protecting U.S. commercial and missionary interests at the inland river port of Kiuklang (today's Quzhou)<sup>1</sup>, protecting American neutrality during the Japanese invasion of China. On 29 Aug 38, several mines exploded near the ship, showering it with fragments. She was then held at the port until the Japanese completed sweeping operations. Pao San was aboard at the

time. Following this incident, as tension continued to mount, and Japanese cemented control of all of China's ports except Hong Kong, the U.S. Asiatic Fleet decided to limit its exposure in China. It transferred *Monocacy's* crew in Shanghai. On 15 Jan 39, Pao San boarded the veteran Asiatic Fleet transport, *USS Henderson (AP-1)*, and after a stop in Hong Kong, she proceeded to Manila, Philippines where, on 22 Jan 39, Pao San was transferred to the *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, referred to affectionately as *Marby* by her men. *Monocacy* was decommissioned on 31 Jan 39 and struck from the rolls of the US Navy. She was towed to deep water in the East China Sea east of Shanghai and scuttled on 10 Feb 39 to prevent her seizure by the Japanese.<sup>2</sup> Pao San would spend the next three years aboard *Marby*.

*Marby*, the third ship named after Marblehead, MA, the birthplace of the American Navy. The ship usually wintered in the Philippines and summered in China after joining the [Asiatic Fleet](#) in late-1938. Other exotic locales such as British-controlled, [Rangoon](#), Burma (today's [Yangon](#), [Myanmar](#)) and [Hong Kong](#); [Saigon](#), [French Indo-China](#) (today's [Vietnam](#)), and other ports in East Asia and Southeast Asia were frequent stops. In late-Sep 1940, the ship left [Tsingtao](#)<sup>3</sup>, and her long association with China ended. By then, Japan had taken control of all major Chinese ports except Hong Kong.

Other than a cruise to [Guam](#) in January, *Marby* spent all of 1941 in Philippine waters. On 16 Feb 41, Pao San was promoted to Matt2c. On 31 Mar while the ship was in the Cavite Navy Yard, the crew had the opportunity to watch a [Pan Am China Clipper](#) land in Manila Bay on one of her several visits to the Philippines before the war.

By that time, like many of her sister ships in the Asiatic Fleet, *Marby* was obsolete by naval standards in the early 40s, particularly when compared to Japanese ships in her class. As Japan-US tensions mounted in late-Nov 41, [Admiral Thomas Hart](#), commander of the Asiatic Fleet, ordered its dispersal from [Manila](#), ahead of anticipated hostilities. By the evening of 27 Nov 41, *Marby* was anchored off [Jolo Island](#) at the southwestern end of the Philippine archipelago not far from Borneo. The ship was darkened for security.

The 1944 book, [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#), a detailed, compassionate description of the saga of the *USS Marblehead*, unfolds two days later, on 29 Nov 41, with the *Marby* anchored farther southwest, off [Tarakan Island](#), northeast [Borneo](#), [Netherlands East Indies](#) (today's [Indonesia](#)). Tarakan's beaches were lined with cables and pillboxes to discourage enemy landing parties though war had not yet been declared.

Unbeknownst to Admiral Hart and the crews of the ships that comprised it, the Asiatic Fleet's days were numbered. In the remaining four months of the fleet's existence, despite significant disadvantages in

<sup>1</sup> On 18 Apr 42, hours after they had bombed Tokyo, six US Army B-25 bombers crash landed near Kiuklang after running out of fuel. Of the 80 airmen involved, 69 survived the raid and the escape, including the raid's leader, Lt. Colonel Jimmy Doolittle. [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> After which the famous beer is named!



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numbers, technology, firepower and air cover, those ships and their crews would play a heroic yet tragic role in delaying the [Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia](#). Most of those ships would be lost, but *Marby* would defy the odds and the Japanese propaganda which reported her sunk on multiple occasions.

On 8 Dec 41<sup>4</sup>, at 03:28 hours, *Marby* received word of the [attack on Pearl Harbor](#). Her [General Quarters](#) alarm blared moments later and the [crew's response](#) foretold the spirit and training which would later save the ship. *Marby* sailed farther southwest ahead of the Japanese onslaught which hit the neighboring Philippines within hours. On 9 Dec 41, she was anchored in the oil port of [Balikpapan](#), Borneo.

On 25 Dec 41, in [Surabaya, Java](#), the *Marby's* Captain, Arthur Granville Robinson<sup>5</sup>, granted the crew Christmas leave despite the threat of Japanese air attack. It would be their last break for some time. By 31 Dec 41, *Marby* was in the [Flores Sea](#) between Surabaya and [Darwin, Australia](#), escorting the [SS Marechal Joffre](#), a [Vichy French](#) (Axis) ship brazenly captured by American naval aviators and crew in the Philippines and used to escape the Japanese invasion, a little known but inspiring episode in American Naval History which led to that ship's recommissioning as the [USS Rochambeau \(AP-63\)](#). By 2 Jan 42, *Marby* had become "Radio Darwin" in the northern Australian backwater that would serve as base for regrouping the Allied ships (together known as the American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) or Combined Force.

On 8 Jan, Pao San and his shipmates sailed north as part of an Allied effort to stall Japanese aggression in Java. On 24 Jan, she covered the retreat of four destroyers ([Paul Jones](#), [Parrott](#), [Pope](#) and [John D. Ford](#)) after their successful night attack on Japanese forces in the [Battle of Balikpapan](#).

On 4 Feb 42, while enroute to another attack on Japanese forces, *Marby* took two direct bomb hits and a very damaging near-miss from a squadron of Japanese bombers off the north coast of Java in what became known as the [Battle of Makassar Strait](#) (other names have also been applied). Thus began, for most of the *Marby's* crew, an "escape from the jaws of death." Ablaze, rapidly taking on water and steaming in an uncontrollable, very predictable circle because her rudder had been jammed by one of the direct hits, *Marby* seemed doomed. Instead of finishing her off, however, the Japanese assumed the ocean would complete what their bombs had begun, and they went after bigger prey such as the [USS Houston](#). However, Japan's Imperial high command wasted no time in reporting *Marby* sunk, and in the long tradition of fake news, they got everything wrong – the date, the location and nearest land mass, and even the waterbody (it was the Flores Sea). Most importantly, they got the "sunk" part wrong too!

In the ensuing 70 hours of non-stop toil, Pao San's shipmates quelled fires, manned bucket brigades, bailed around the clock, and engineered ingenious repairs which kept *Marby* afloat. But Pao San and his shipmate, Herman Lansing Carpenter of Pittsburg, Texas could not help for they had been badly burned when the searing flame of a 500-pound bomb swept through their battle station, a powder/ammunition handling room. Most of the other men on that station were killed, but Pao San and Herman survived. They were soon being treated as best the ship's doctors and pharmacists could do under the circumstances.

That night, *sans* rudder control, Captain Robinson and his men used *Marby's* "screws" to steer her through the treacherous [Lombok Strait](#) east of [Bali](#) in darkness and rainstorms. The crews of American and Dutch destroyers kept her from running aground in the reef-strewn strait. They emerged into the Indian ocean the following morning and headed west along Java's south coast bound for the small fishing port of Tjilatjap<sup>6</sup> which they reached early on the morning of 6 Feb 42. After arrival, *Marby* transferred her wounded, including Ho and Carpenter, to Dutch hospitals in Tjilatjap and Djoejakarta. Pao San and Herman went by hospital train to the latter, where on 7 Feb 42, they encountered [Dr. Corydon Wassell](#).

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<sup>4</sup> At Tarakan, *Marby* was west of the [international date line](#).

<sup>5</sup> It is unclear whether Pao San Ho was ever made aware that Captain Robinson, had commanded his first ship, *Monocacy*, for a year spanning 1924-25. Robinson had been a Lt. Commander at that time.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Francis Drake had stopped at this port on his sail through the Dutch East Indies 362 years earlier, in 1580. Today it is known as Cilacap, and it is a major oil facility for the Indonesia's national oil company.

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*Marby* then buried her dead but got only rudimentary repairs at the lightly equipped port before departing on 13 Feb 42 for the rest of her perilous, improbable 90-day journey to New York City.

Meanwhile, back on Java, Japanese air assaults were stepped up in preparation for an invasion at four points on the island's north coast, invasions that were designed to neutralize Batavia, the capital, and Surabaya, the naval base. The landings commenced on 28 Feb 42.

Dr. Wassell had gotten the bulk of his wounded sailors evacuated in late February, but no one controlling access to available shipping had allowed non-ambulatory cases aboard for fear they would drown if the ships were torpedoed, bombed, or sunk by Japanese surface vessels. So, Wassell took his remaining men, including Pao San, back to the hospital in Djoejakarta, and began looking for other alternatives. On 3 Mar 42, Wassell, Pao San, and the other remaining wounded sailors returned to the panic and chaos of Tjilatjap where multitudes were seeking any way out of Java as Japanese invaders rushed across the island. They boarded a slow, severely overcrowded Dutch Merchant Navy ship named *MV Janssens*. Many ships had been sunk in previous days, and *Janssens* was strafed by Japanese fighters on her second day at sea, but ten days after leaving Tjilatjap, she arrived at the Western Australia port of Fremantle. The wounded men were transferred to Hollywood Hospital in nearby Perth.



Dutch inter-island freighter *MV Janssens*

Source: Java Gold Blog



*USS Gold Star* 2 Sep 1937 with evacuees fr Shanghai to Kobe, Japan 1937 as Chinese Civil War Escalates

In Australia, Pao San recovered sufficiently from his wounds to be reassigned to duty, though he was periodically in and out of multiple hospitals in Australia and the U.S. for the rest of the war. Following discharge from Hollywood Hospital in Perth, he was sent to the US Naval Attache's office in Melbourne which forwarded him to ComBaseForce Asiatic Fleet in the same city. On 30 Mar 42, Pao San was received aboard the cargo ship *USS Gold Star (AK-12)* which ran routes between Brisbane, Melbourne, Fremantle, and Sydney. It is unclear whether Ho was part of the ship's crew or simply a passenger.<sup>7</sup> Ho appears to have spent most of the next three years attached to the U.S.

Naval Base Activities/Service Force, Subordinate Command, Western Australia.

A 20 Feb 1945 article in an Oakland, California newspaper tells of a mini reunion on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay between Pao San Ho, Herman Carpenter, his comrade in their battle station aboard *Marby* when the bomb struck, and their old friend, Chief Pharmacist Patrick J. Mallon. More on this reunion can be found in our more comprehensive write-up on *Marby's Wounded* at the following [link](#). That write-up also includes the touching story of the unusual bond that Ho had with Dr. Wassell, a connection that Wassell was unaware of until the night before they left Djoejakarta for Tjilatjap and the *MV Janssens*.

The Oakland newspaper article mentions that Pao San had just arrived in the U.S. for the first time on 1 Feb 45, three weeks before the reunion. He had been received by the U.S. Naval Training and Distribution Center and was then transferred to 13 Mar 45 to the U.S. Naval Hospital on the same island. On 30 Apr 45, he was sent to the Naval Convalescent Hospital in Santa Cruz, CA.

<sup>7</sup> Either way, it is unlikely that Ho would have known that before WWII, in addition to her cargo carrying duties, *USS Gold Star* served as a spy ship, her radio room manned by men of "[On-the-Roof Gang](#)", the Navy's cryptologic pioneers. From 1933, during the reconstruction of the Japanese fleet, to the summer of 1941, she monitored Japan's radio traffic as she moved from port to port in Asia, working closely with American ground stations in Guam, the Philippines, and China.



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Despite all the medical challenges he faced, and his extended separation from his family and his native culture, Pao San continued to advance in rate rising to Steward's Mate 1<sup>st</sup> Class by the time of the mini reunion in San Francisco.<sup>8</sup>

On 23 May 45, Pao San registered again for the draft. Apparently, his family was not yet with him as he gave the address of a friend, George Fat, in San Francisco. He indicated that he was unemployed. He was 33 years old, 5'6" tall and weighed 155 pounds. He had a scar and a tattoo on his left forearm. We have been unable to locate information as to what occupation(s) he pursued over the ensuing three decades.

Pao San passed away on 17 Nov 1976 at the age of 65. He was survived by his wife, Gen Shan, and six children: daughters Gladys, Grace, and Helen, sons, David, Danny, and Victor, and seven grandchildren. Pao San is buried in Woodlawn Memorial Park in Daly City, CA, on the San Francisco Peninsula, nestled between San Bruno Mountain State/County Park and the Pacific Ocean. It is unclear when his wife, Gen Shan, died, but presumably, she is buried alongside Pao San.

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, *USS Marblehead* 1939-1945, with help from Ancestry.com, Wikipedia.com, and Newspapers.com.

Corrections, and new stories and photos on the life of on the life of Pao San Ho, particularly those from family members, are always welcomed by email to [spwade@gmail.com](mailto:spwade@gmail.com). Thank you.

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<sup>8</sup> In 1943, in a significant step in addressing the racial segregation and inequality prevalent in the U.S. Navy, "Mess Attendant" was changed to "Steward's Mate", the name of the branch changed to Steward Branch, and the word 'officer's' was dropped from rate titles. Despite these changes, full petty officer status was not extended to stewards until 1950.