



Marblehead Biography of Nuel Armstrong Jones



Nuel Armstrong Jones
Sea2c, Killed in Action
Courtesy: Tablets of the Missing,
Manila American Cemetery and
Memorial & Find-a-grave.com.

Nuel Armstrong Jones was born on 3 Dec 1921 in Booneville, Logan County, Arkansas, located about 120 miles west-northwest of Little Rock and 37 miles east-southeast of Fort Smith, AR, on the Oklahoma border. Booneville was founded in 1828 when Walter Cauthron, an early explorer of the Arkansas Territory, built a log cabin and store along the Petit Jean River. At the time of Nuel's birth, roughly 2,200 people lived there.

Nuel was the second child of James Garland Jones (1896–1978), an Alabama-born blacksmith-cum-farmer, and Texas-born homemaker Lillian Ethel Wilkinson (1901–1939). This union gave Nuel the following siblings: James (1920–1983), Junior (1924–), Bobby (1926–2008), Louise (1929–), Dorris (1933–), Betty (1935–), and Anna V (1936–).

Lillian died in 1939 and was buried in Shamrock Cemetery, Shamrock, Wheeler County, TX next to her parents, Benjamin W. and Louisa Melinda Miller Wilkinson. James remarried thirteen months later to Delta Pearl Craig nee Satterfield (1912–1986). It was the second marriage for both. This union brought

Nuel two half-siblings, Edna Virginia (1942–2014) and Tommy Brazelton (1943–1987). Nuel and his siblings attended Booneville Elementary School and Booneville High School, both of which existed at the time of his birth.



Lillian Ethel Wilkinson
Mother of Nuel Jones
Courtesy: Find-a-grave.com

On 3 Apr 1940, four months after his 18th birthday, Nuel enlisted in the Navy at Little Rock, AR. He was assigned S#346-79-35, and he reported for basic training at the Naval Training School in San Diego, CA. Following basic training, as an Apprentice Seaman (AS), he was received at the USN Hospital Corps School in San Diego on 28 Jun. On 3 Aug Nuel was promoted to Sea2c and two weeks later, on 17 Aug, via the Naval Receiving Station in San Diego, he was received aboard light cruiser *USS Phoenix (CL-46)* for temporary duty following which he would be forwarded to the Asiatic Station (ASTA) headquarters in Manila, Philippines for further assignment.



James Garland Jones
Father of Nuel Jones
Courtesy: Find-a-grave.com

He transited the Pacific aboard *USS Chaumont (AP-5)*, one of two veteran transport ships [*USS Henderson (AP-1)* was the other] that kept the Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors. On 5 Aug 1940, at Manila, Philippines, Nuel was received for duty aboard the *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, or *Marby* as she was affectionately known to her crew. For most of her Asiatic Fleet career, *Marby* wintered in the Philippines and summered in China; however, he would not see Shanghai and other exotic ports in China because *Marby* and the rest of the Asiatic Fleet had quit China by then, as Japan controlled all significant Chinese ports except Hong Kong.



USS Phoenix (CL-46) passing USS West
Virginia and USS Arizona at Pearl Harbor 7 Dec 1941
Courtesy: U.S. Navy

Still, Nuel would serve slightly more than one and a half years aboard *Marby*. Except for a January cruise to Guam, *Marby* operated in Philippine waters for the rest of 1940 and nearly all of 1941, traversing the thousand-mile Philippine archipelago

twice. However, on 25 Nov 1941, in anticipation of hostilities with Japan, the Asiatic Fleet Commander,



The Marby

Admiral Thomas Hart, ordered nearly all his ships to slip away without fanfare and sail southward through the Philippine archipelago and into the Netherlands East Indies (NEI; today Indonesia).

By 27 Nov 1941, *Marby* anchored off Jolo Island, near the tip of the Philippines. The following day, she crossed into NEI waters, off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, navigating mine fields to reach the port. En route the men quickly noticed that the shore was lined with cables strung along the beaches, forming barriers to discourage landing parties, and there were pillboxes beyond the barriers. Once in port, the crew dropped anchor, doused unnecessary lighting, and awaited further orders.

Ten 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, where she refueled and then cut across the strait to Makassar City on South Celebes Island to reprovision. By Christmas, she was at the Dutch Naval Base at Surabaya, Java, where Capt. Robinson granted his men limited shore leave despite the risk of Japanese air attack.

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¶

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. That ship's capture in Manila Bay a few weeks earlier is a [tale of American naval daring](#) in the early dark days of WWII in the Pacific.

In Darwin, for a few days, *Marby* temporarily became Radio Darwin, a beacon to facilitate regrouping of the remaining Allied warships to slow the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia. She then headed north, and on 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 five enemy vessels were sunk, two more were badly damaged, and another two slightly damaged.

Marby spent the last week of Jan 1942 in Surabaya, and by 1 Feb, she was cruising off Madura Strait. On 3 Feb, a flight of about 40 Japanese planes passed overhead en route to bomb Surabaya. One plane lingered behind to study 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. ... 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, his lookouts had already 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 its 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 direct hit jammed *Marby's* rudder causing her to steam in a predictable circle, and along with the other direct strike, knocked out her gyroscope, all electricity and internal communication, and caused multiple fires that soon swept the ship.



The near miss ripped a large gash in *Marby's* bow, which flooded compartments and caused the ship to begin to sink. The enemy assumed the sea would finish *Marby* off, so they went after bigger prey, the *USS Houston*. The Japanese would claim several times that they had sunk *Marby*, but they knew nothing of the character of the men to whom she 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 would defy the odds, the Japanese, and the Java Sea.

Teams bailed by hand nearly non-stop for more than seventy hours, as others quenched fires and threw endangered unexploded munitions overboard, re-rigged electrical lines and internal communications, relocated pumps weighing tons, and treated the wounded. On the evening of 4 Feb, with the help of destroyer escorts on both sides of the ship, Capt. Robinson, and others on the bridge and in the engine room maneuvered a rudderless *Marby* in darkness and rain squalls through the treacherous Lombok Strait, steering by adjusting the speed and direction of her propellers. Early on 5 Feb, she entered the Indian Ocean and headed west for the tiny fishing port of Tjilatjap on Java's south coast, where she arrived the next day.

The Tjilatjap submersible drydock was too small to raise the whole ship, but it successfully raised the bow to enable basic repairs to a one-by-four-foot hole in the hull. Other repairs were undertaken, and the ship's dead were buried, and the seriously wounded transferred to Dutch hospitals.

On 10 Feb 1942, as *Marby* was still undergoing repairs in Tjilatjap, Nuel was transferred for undescribed duties aboard *USS Asheville (PG-21)*, an aging gunboat that had been commissioned in 1920. Three days later, *Marby*, still not fully repaired, departed on the first leg of her improbable 90-day, 20,859-mile escape to New York via Ceylon, South Africa, and Brazil. Nuel remained aboard *Asheville*.



USS Asheville (PG-21) Panama Canal Zone, 1920s

Asheville had begun her career in the 1920s on power-projection missions "showing the flag" and protecting American lives and property in Central America and later in the Philippines and China as

part of the Asiatic Fleet. In mid-1941, as tensions grew with Japan, *Asheville* withdrew to patrol duty in the Philippines. After Japan's attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, she and most Asiatic Fleet surface ships moved to Java to defend the Malay Barrier.

Following the 1 Mar 1942 sinking of *USS Houston (CA-30)* which marked the demise of the Asiatic Fleet, surviving American ships, including *Asheville*, began retreating towards Australia. *Asheville* was never heard from again. On 8 May 1942, presumed lost with details seemingly unknowable, *USS Asheville* was stricken from the Navy's list of active ships, and the families of *Asheville's* crew could only wonder about the fates of their sons.

After World War II, a more complete story of *Asheville's* final battle emerged through the words of a fellow prisoner of war who met *Asheville's* sole survivor, Fireman 1st Class Fred Louis Brown, in the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp at Makassar, Celebes Island, Netherlands East Indies. That POW's identity is yet to be confirmed, and even his ship is uncertain: some Navy sources attribute the account to a survivor of heavy cruiser *Houston*, while others attribute it to a survivor of destroyer *Pope*. The *Pope* attribution is the more plausible of the two, since Makassar's American POWs were drawn mainly from the crews of *Pope* and the submarine *Perch*, whereas most *Houston* survivors were instead sent to labor on the Burma-Thailand "Death Railway."

In any case, Brown reportedly related to a fellow prisoner(s) that *Asheville* had been slowed by engine trouble while sailing alone towards Australia and had been spotted at dawn on 3 Mar 1942 about 200 miles south of Java in the Indian Ocean by a shipborne Japanese scout plane. She was soon overtaken by enemy



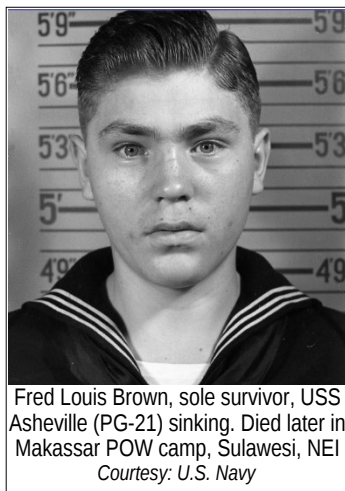


destroyers *Arashi* and *Nowaki* and heavy cruiser *Maya*. As the cruiser stood by, the destroyers engaged *Asheville* at close range in an intense 30-minute gun battle. Outgunned and outnumbered with only four 3-inch guns and a few machine guns, *Asheville* fought a "valiant but hopeless" running battle. *Asheville's* smoldering hulk, its forecastle and bridge almost completely shot away, sank in less than an hour. Of the 166 crew, all but Brown were killed in the action or died shortly thereafter.

Fred Brown, originally from Fort Wayne, IN, and an 18-year-old at the time of the battle, had been in *Asheville's* fire room when the fight began. Many of his shipmates topside were dead or already in the water by the time Brown came topside to abandon the ship. After asking if an officer was among the swimmers, a Japanese sailor on one of the destroyers threw out a line, which Brown grabbed and was hauled on board the enemy ship. He would be *Asheville's* only known survivor.

Brown was interrogated and eventually sent to the Japanese POW camp at Makassar, Celebes Island, NEI (part of today's sprawling Indonesia). As other prisoners did were periodically allowed to do, Brown sent letters home, and at one point, he even participated in a radio broadcast relayed via Tokyo. However, such communications were allowed only if they conveyed the falsehood that "all was well" with Japanese captivity. Brown, 21, died in the camp on 18 Mar 1945 after three years and fifteen days of captivity.

The Makassar POW camp was liberated six months later on 18 Sep 1945, sixteen days after the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay. Someone, perhaps several, among those liberated passed on Fred Brown's details of *Asheville's* last stand. It remains unclear whether Nuel Jones, the main subject of this biography, was killed in *Asheville's* defiant shootout or was among those who were left in the water to drown by the Japanese. Regardless, it was ultimately one or more of Fred Brown's fellow inmates at the Makassar POW camp who passed on the details of *Asheville's* demise, thus enabling the U.S. Navy, and ultimately the sailors' families, to learn of the heroism of *Asheville's* crew.



Nuel Armstrong Jones is listed on page 241 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, Claude AI, and other Internet records, and from John Walls, USN, Retired, whose contact led to the expediting of this biography.

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