



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



Martin John Moran
Source: [Navy Memorial Log](#)

Marblehead Biography Martin John Moran

Martin John Moran was born on 30 Jun 1916 in New Rochelle, Westchester County, New York, about 20 miles northeast of lower Manhattan. His paternal grandfather, Jeremiah Darby Moran, had arrived in New York from Ireland in 1867. Martin was the last of seven children of Anthony Michael Moran (1876-1934), a teamster and later a foreman in the wood industry, and homemaker Bridget Cecelia Morrissey (1873-1924). Martin's siblings were William Anthony (1900-1957), Hannah 'Anna' Cecelia (1902-1962), Anthony Michael (1904-1927), Thomas John (1906-1960), Patrick Bartholomew (1910-1973), and Joanna Elizabeth (1914-2001).

Martin's family life was disrupted in 1924 when his mother, Bridget, passed away. He was eight at the time. The Great Depression struck in 1929 and Martin's father, Anthony, soon lost his job. The 1930 U.S. Census suggests that he began having difficulty taking care of his family because it listed Anthony not as head of household, but rather an unemployed boarder staying with his oldest son, William, his daughter-in-law, and two grandsons in Mt. Vernon, New York, which neighbors New Rochelle, the family's hometown. His two youngest children, Joanna (16) and Martin (13), no longer lived with him, or even in the same city or state. The 1930 Census showed them as the stepchildren of Fred and Amiere Gregory, a cigarmaker and a department store clerk, respectively, who resided on Hamblett Street in Manchester, Hillsboro County, New Hampshire, 230 miles northeast of Mt. Vernon. Both kids were attending school at the time, but who were these Gregorys and what was their connection to the Morans of Mt. Vernon, NY. It appears that the wife's first name in the census, "Amiere", was the census enumerator's misspelling of 'Annie E', Joanna and Martin's aunt, Annie Elizabeth, their father's sister.

It is unclear which Manchester high school Martin attended or when he left school, however, a Manchester residential directory dated 1 Oct 1937 showed Martin as still resident at 81 Hamblet Street with the Gregorys, and it lists him as being in the Navy, so this is probably around the time of his enlistment. He was 21 years old, and he had been assigned Navy service number 2015104. His basic training likely occurred at Newport, Rhode Island, 123 miles to the south.



USS Colorado (BB-45) New York 1932
Source: [en.wikipedia.org](#)

While it is unclear the exact duty assignments Martin had prior to joining the *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, it is known that they included the battleship *USS Colorado (BB-45)* and his reenlistment on 13 May 1940 at Pearl Harbor, the *Colorado's* home port at the time. There, Martin transferred to the *USS Chaumont (AP-51)*, one of two veteran transports that kept the U.S. Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors - *USS Henderson (AP-1)* was the other. After stops in Guam and Manila, *Chaumont* visited Shanghai, China, where, on 5 Aug 1940, Martin transferred to *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* or *Marby* as she was affectionately referred to by her crew. He was a Metalsmith 2nd Class Petty Officer (M2c) and was

24 years old.

Aboard *Marby*, Martin would visit many of the exotic ports of China (e.g., Hong Kong, Tsingtao, Chinwangtao, etc.), the Philippines, French Indochina (today's Vietnam), and the Netherlands East Indies (NEI, today's Indonesia), and other areas. However, as tensions mounted between Japan and the U.S., when *Marby* left Tsingtao for Manila in early-September 1940, it was the last she would see of China. *Marby* spent the rest of 1940 and most of 1941 operating in Philippine waters with one trip to Guam. Intense battle training at sea was the focus of *Marby's* skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson, and the rest of the ship's leadership. On 1 Aug 1941, Martin was promoted to Metalsmith 1st Class Petty Officer (M1c).



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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. On the night of the 29th, the *Marby* dropped anchor off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI to await 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 south coast of Borneo, where she refueled. She then cut across the strait to Makassar, 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.

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. There, for a few days, *Marby* would temporarily become Radio Darwin to facilitate regrouping of the remaining Allied warships to slow the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia.

Marby soon headed north, and on 20 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 and four more were damaged, two badly so.

Marby spent the last week of January 1941 in Surabaya, and by 1 February, she was cruising off Madura Strait. On 3 February, a flight of about 40 Japanese planes passed overhead enroute to bomb Surabaya. One plane lingered 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. 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 its successful evasive action on the first three bomb 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, it 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 her 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, five of whom later died of their wounds, but the remaining able-bodied crew would defy 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. Following a six-month overhaul, *Marby* would fight again in the South Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea supporting the invasion of southern France. In one of his fireside chats, President Roosevelt later singled out the crew of the *Marblehead* as an inspiration to their compatriots.



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Marby's bombing in the Battle of Makassar Strait on 4 Feb 1942 and her subsequent escape to New York are described in [Marby's own biography](#) and in the 1944 book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#). Though Japan wasted little time in proclaiming to the international press that it had sunk the Marblehead, the ship's improbable voyage home was kept secret until 4 May when *Marby* arrived in New York. The secrecy had meant that loved ones back home thought their sailors were either dead or in enemy captivity. In any case, phone calls home began flooding across the nation on 5 May, the day after the ship made New York. Furloughs soon followed, and Martin soon visited family in both New Rochelle and Manchester.

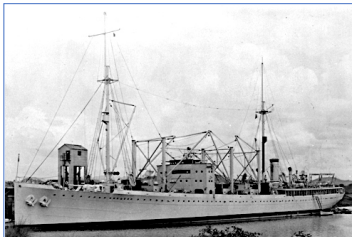


For actions during and after *Marby's* bombing, Martin was awarded the Navy Cross:

CITATION:

“The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Metalsmith First Class Martin Moran, United States Navy, for extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty in action during the attack on the Light Cruiser U.S.S. Marblehead (CL-12) by Japanese enemy bombers on 4 February 1942. When the steering engine room was wrecked, Metalsmith First Class Moran, despite being surrounded by electrical fires, worked to free the jammed rudder and to lock it amidships.”

As *Marby's* six-month overhaul in Brooklyn Navy Yard neared completion, Martin was still part of her crew and was aboard when *Marby* departed Brooklyn Navy Yard on 15 Oct 1942 for duty in the South Atlantic, operating out of Recife, Brazil in pursuit of enemy subs and blockade runners, and occasionally rescuing Allied flyers and enemy sailors in lifeboats.



USS Nitro (AE-2) Balboa, CZ 1938
Source: en.wikipedia.org

On 11 Jun 1943, at Recife, Brazil, Martin transferred to the ammunition ship *USS Nitro (AE-2)* for further forwarding to the Naval Training School at Norfolk, VA for instruction. His absence from *Marby* lasted six months, from June to Dec 1943, a relatively long training period for war time. His stay was probably lengthy for two reasons. In addition to the training itself, transportation between Norfolk and Recife may have been limited. *USS Nitro* was home-ported at Norfolk, but she made only two ammo runs to Recife, Brazil in her entire career.

Also, during his stay in Norfolk, Martin and Ms. Grace Coleman (1913–1984) got married. Grace was originally from Kansas City, Missouri, but the marriage certificate gave her address as 339 West 28th Street, New York, NY. This suggests that the couple had probably met while *Marby* was undergoing her post-bombing overhaul in Brooklyn. In any case, Martin took time out to wed and have a honeymoon and arrived back in Recife 19 Dec 1943.

On 30 Apr 1944, Martin advanced to Chief Metalsmith in an acting capacity, i.e., CM (AA), and on 20 Jun 1944 at Boston, MA, he reenlisted for another four years. On 5 Oct 1944, he transferred to the Navy barracks at Lido Beach, NY, and on 31 Oct 1945, again at Norfolk, Martin joined *USS Gordius (ARL-36)*, a landing craft repair ship. The last muster roll that we were able to locate for him shows him aboard *Gordius* on 1 Oct 1946, location unknown. He was a Chief Shipfitter (CSF) at the time.



USS Gordius (ARL-36) Hampton Roads VA., 1945
Source: National Archives (Rick Davis)

The [Navy Memorial Log](#) indicates that Martin also served aboard the light cruiser *USS Portsmouth (CL-102)*. This service is likely to have occurred after *Gordius* but before 15 June 1949 when *Portsmouth* was decommissioned and allocated to the Atlantic Reserve Fleet. She remained in the Navy's inventory through 1970. Martin also served in the Korean War, but it is not known on which ships or in what capacity. His final ranks were Metalsmith



(Shipboard) Chief Petty Officer (MEGC) during WWII and Naval Counselor Chief Petty Officer (NCC) during Korea.

Probably due to his extended absences at sea, Martin and Grace divorced in Jan 1950 in New Hampshire. They had no children. In March 1950, Martin married Helen Karwocki in Maine. Helen was born on 9 Jun 1918 in Hooksett, Merrimack County, New Hampshire, just ten miles north of where Martin grew up with the Gregory family in Manchester. Perhaps the couple had known each other even before Martin joined the Navy. Helen's dad, Peter Karwocki, was a farmer in Hooksett, and her mother, homemaker Mary Kupusta, were both of Polish heritage. Helen attended school in Hooksett.

After Martin left the Navy in 1956, the couple settled near their roots in Manchester, New Hampshire. Martin worked as a boiler maintenance man at "Grenier Field," an air base three miles south of the central business district of Manchester. After its closure in 1966, it was reopened as Manchester-Boston Regional Airport. By that time, Martin was fully retired.

Martin died at the age of 54 on 27 Nov 1970. Helen lived another thirty-eight years. She worked for a while in the Manchester mills and then as a clerk at the Grenier Base Exchange until her retirement. She had enjoyed traveling and living in all parts of the world as she followed Martin through his naval career. She fondly remembered her "solo" trip across the U.S. with her infant son, John, in 1950 to join Martin in San Diego. She was actively involved in the lives of her children (she and Martin had three: John, Michael, and Patricia) and her grandchildren as a den mother, school volunteer, and proud fan on the sidelines of her grandsons' soccer and baseball games. She was a talented seamstress who could do anything with a needle and thread, and she sewed for hundreds of people. She also worked as a supervisor of the checklist on election days. She developed a love for golf and was proud to be walking 18 holes at Derryfield Country Club at 80 years old. Helen Moran passed away at the age of 90 in Manchester on 21 Dec 2008.

Martin John Moran is listed on pages 18, 52, 140, 141, 151, 165, 166, 171, and 243 of the 1944 book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#). Don't forget to read it and [Marby's own biography](#).



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

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