

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



Robert Norris
Naval Training Station
Norfolk, VA 1939

Marblehead Biography Robert Houston Norris

Robert “Bobby” Houston Norris was born in Feb 1919 in District 16 of Sevier County, Tennessee, which borders North Carolina between Knoxville, TN and Charlotte, NC. Southern Sevier County includes the Great Smoky Mountains and Tennessee’s highest point, Clingmans Dome (6,643 ft). Robert was the third-born child of John Norris (1870–?), a sawmill worker, and homemaker Mary Elizabeth “Lizzie” Dunn (1894–1976). His siblings were Edith (1914 –?) and Albert (1917–1979).



Robert (L) with siblings Edith and Albert

The 1920 U.S. Census showed the family living with Lizzie’s mother, Nancy Dunn. John Norris was a laborer in a sawmill at the time. A decade later, the 1930 census indicates that the couple had divorced, and Lizzie apparently told the census enumerator that her kids were going by the last name Dunn. Subsequent records do not indicate that this was ever legalized. It is unclear which schools the kids attended, but the 1930 census indicated that Robert and Albert were in school while sixteen-year-old Edith was working as a folder in a laundry.



Robert with his mom,
Lizzie probably before
going to Asia

Robert enlisted in the Navy on 13 Dec 1938 at Nashville, TN. He received basic training at the Naval Training Station in Norfolk, VA, after which he was transferred to the [USS Henderson \(AP-1\)](#), one of two veteran Navy transport ships that kept the Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors ([USS Chaumont \(AP-5\)](#) was the other). Robert is listed in the *Marblehead* records as joining the ship from *Henderson* on 9 Jul 1939 in Shanghai, China.



Robert with Albert (L) and
Edith before going to Asia

Aboard *Marby*, Robert 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.



Robert in Tsingtao,
China, 1939

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.



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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* would temporarily become Radio Darwin to facilitate regrouping of the remaining Allied warships to slow the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia. She then 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, two more were badly damaged, and another two slightly damaged.

Marby spent the last week of January 1941 in Surabaya, and by 1 February, she was cruising off Madura Strait. On February 3rd, 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.”¹ 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, 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 *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-central 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.

The *Marblehead*'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. Indeed, Robert's grandnephew, James, reported during the writing of this biography that his mother “remembers being told that they thought Robert had been killed on the *Marblehead*.” 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 perhaps Robert had the opportunity to visit home.

As *Marby*'s six-month overhaul in Brooklyn Navy Yard neared completion, Robert was still part of her crew. On 1 Sep 1942, he was promoted to Coxswain (Cox), and he was present aboard at the quarter's end on 30 Sep 1942. With Robert still aboard, *Marby* departed Brooklyn Navy Yard on 15 Oct 1942 for duty

¹ From [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#), p 108-109

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in the Central Atlantic, operating out of Recife, Brazil in pursuit of enemy subs and blockade runners, and occasionally rescuing Allied flyers and enemy sailors in lifeboats.

Robert was still aboard *Marby* at the end of 1942 while the ship was at sea on patrol off Recife. He was aboard three months later, at the end of Mar 1943, when she was on patrol with Task Group 41.4 off Rio de Janeiro. However, on 11 Jun 1943, Robert was transferred to Navy 120 (code for Recife) for further forwarding to the Receiving Station at Newport News, VA for duty in the “*Intrepid* detail”.

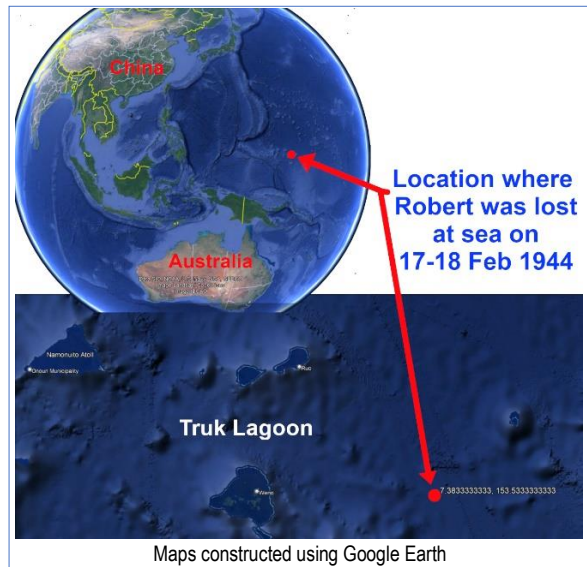


On 16 Jul 1943, Robert was standing on the deck of the brand-new aircraft carrier *USS Intrepid (CV-11)* on the day of her commissioning at Newport News, VA. He would remain aboard *Intrepid* for the rest of 1943 and into 1944 by which time the carrier had crossed into Pacific waters and soon joined Task Force 58 for the island-hopping campaigns across the Central Pacific, initially in the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. On 16 Jan 1944, *Intrepid*, her sister ship *Essex*, and the light carrier *Cabot* left Pearl Harbor to conduct a raid on islands in the Kwajalein Atoll from 29 Jan to 2 Feb. The carriers' air groups destroyed all 83 Japanese aircraft stationed on Roi-Namur in the first two days before Marines went ashore on neighboring islands on 31 Jan in the Battle of Kwajalein. That morning, aircraft from *Intrepid* attacked Japanese defenses on Ennuebing Island until just before the first Marines landed and quickly took the island.

After the fighting in the Kwajalein Atoll finished, on 3 February, *Intrepid* and the rest of TF 58 proceeded to launch Operation Hailstone, a major raid on the main Japanese naval base in the Central Pacific, Truk Lagoon. From 17 to 19 February, the carriers pounded Japanese forces in the lagoon, sinking two destroyers and some 200,000 gross tons of merchant shipping. The strikes demonstrated the vulnerability of Truk, which convinced the Japanese to avoid using again. *Intrepid* did not emerge from the operation unscathed, however. On the night of 17–18 February, a Japanese torpedo bomber scored a hit on her stern. The torpedo struck 15 ft (5 m) below the waterline, jamming the ship's rudder, and flooding several compartments.

According to the records of the East Tennessee Veteran's Memorial Association, Robert went missing that night while “on duty at a gun station in number 15 Gun Tub starboard side at 0011, 17 Feb 1944, when an explosion occurred from an enemy torpedo at about Frame 194. This sheared the bolts holding the gun tub to the hull allowing the tub and its occupants to drop into the sea at Latitude 07°23'00” North, Longitude 153°32'00” East (see location on the map at the right).

Robert Houston Norris was officially declared dead on 18 Feb 1945 and was later memorialized at Manila American Cemetery, Fort Bonifacio, Manila, Philippines.



Robert Houston Norris is listed on page 244 of the 1944 book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#). Please read it and [Marby's own biography](#).

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, USS Marblehead 1939-1945, with valuable contributions from Robert's grandnephew, James King, including the photos of Robert and family above. Other sources include Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, en.wikipedia.org, Google Earth, and other Internet sources.

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