



Marblehead Biography of Olon James Owens



Olon James Owens
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

Olon James Owens was born on 3 Mar 1921 in Lawrence County, Tennessee to Tennessee-born homemaker Lala Wenonia Morrison (1897-1963) and Alabama-born George Pierce Owens (1893-1956), a farmer. The couple had married on 8 Jan 1916. Olon was preceded by a brother, Malcom, three years his senior. Two sisters, Ella Louise and Martha Rebecca, would follow in 1931 and 1936, respectively. By 1950, George and Lala had given up farming and George was employed as a machine operator at a chemical company in Crestview, also in Lawrence County.

Olon attended nearby Summertown High School as Crestview did not have a high school at that time.

In December 1939 war was not imminent for the U.S. at the time, though the Nazis had already overrun Poland, the British had declared war in response, and the Japanese had been raping China for more than a decade. On 6 Dec 1939, an article appeared in the Nashville Tennessean newspaper stating that on the previous day, the city's recruiting station announced that it had set a new peacetime record for enlistments in a single day, and that applications were in hand from 42 Navy and Marine Corp recruits. They were to report for duty and transfer to Norfolk, VA on 12 December which had been designated as "Brother Day". Among the 42 men reporting on the 12th was Olon James Owens who was three months short of his 19th birthday.

Following basic training, Olon was transferred to the U.S. West Coast probably by train. He joined the battleship *USS Maryland* (BB-46) on 29 Mar 1940, probably in Pearl Harbor, TH, which was *USS Maryland's* operating base at the time. Which vessel transported him to Hawaii is unclear. Effective 4 April 1940, while still aboard *Maryland*, Olon was promoted to Seaman 2c, but his stay aboard *Maryland* was brief.



USS Maryland (BB-46) aka 'Fighting Mary'
Courtesy of Wikipedia.com.

On 14 Oct 1940, just prior to *USS Maryland's* departure from Honolulu for Long Beach, CA, Olon was transferred to Navy Receiving Station at Pearl Harbor for further forwarding to the U.S. Navy transport ship, *USS Chaumont* (AP-5), for further forwarding to the Asiatic Station in Manila, Philippines. On 5 Nov 1940, in Manila, Philippines, Olon was transferred from *USS Chaumont* to the light cruiser *USS Marblehead* (CL-12) for duty.

Marby's history with Asia began in 1938 when she joined the Asiatic Fleet. She usually wintered in the Philippines working from Manila and summered in China operating from Shanghai, then one of the globe's most cosmopolitan cities, a trading, financial and artistic powerhouse with a potent mix of opium smuggling, gambling, and prostitution. Sadly, China, and Shanghai in particular, were the focus of Japan's strategy to control all of Asia. Its 1932 annexation of China's industrial heartland, Manchuria, and its commencement of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, had escalated tension with the United States. By the time Olon joined *Marby*, Japan controlled all the ports of China except for Hong Kong, and *Marby* no longer visited China thus depriving Olon of the opportunity to visit the many exotic sites in China.

For the rest of 1940 and most of 1941, except for a cruise to Guam, *Marby* spent most of her time in Philippine waters focusing on battle training as war grew increasingly likely in the minds of *Marby's* skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson, and the rest of the ship's leadership and crew.

On 1 Sep 1941, while the ship was operating off TuTu Bay in the southern Philippines, Olon James Owens was promoted from Sea2c to Sea1c. Eighty-five days later, on 25 Nov 41, sensing that hostilities were imminent, Admiral Thomas Hart, Commander of the Asiatic Fleet, ordered *Marby* and most of his ships to disperse without fanfare to the southwest and into the Netherlands East Indies (NEI; today's Indonesia).



The Marby

On the night of the 29 Nov 41, *Marby* anchored off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI to await further orders. The ship was darkened for additional security.

Ten days later, at 0328 hours on 8 Dec 41, *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 sailed for Balikpapan, an oil port on the south coast of Borneo to refuel. She 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.

Days later details poured in on the Pearl Harbor disaster, particularly on the eight battleships sunk or damaged there. Then, on 10 Dec 41 came news of the loss of British battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* in the South China Sea east of peninsula Malaya. Previously, battleships had been considered invincible but Japanese naval air superiority had made quick victims of those British behemoths. These events sharpened *Marby's* crew's focus on their ship's vulnerabilities. *"For if those great British and American battlewagons, with their vast belts of bulges designed to serve as torpedo shock absorbers, couldn't take it from the Japanese fliers, what chance had an old bucket like the Marblehead whose A.A. battery was but a tiny fraction of any of those capital ships and whose slender sides had no such protection? Any torpedo that struck her would strike below her fragile armor belt which was only three inches thick at its heaviest. Her main battery could not be used against planes, and the seven 3-inch A.A.'s plus four .50 calibre machine guns atop the foremast and four more aft amounted to something considerably less than impressive."*

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. Formerly owned by the pro-Nazi Vichy French government, *Marechal Joffre* had been brazenly captured by American naval aviators and ground crews in Manila Bay and used to escape the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Once in Darwin, *Marechal Joffre* sailed on to San Francisco to be inducted into the U.S. Navy (see the [*Marechal Joffre Story*](#)). *Marby* temporarily stayed in Darwin to act as *Radio Darwin*, a beacon that facilitated the regrouping of remaining Allied warships to slow the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia.

In that effort, *Marby* soon headed north, and on 20 Jan 42, 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 ships were sunk and another four were 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." By the time the message reached *Marby's* Capt. Robinson, the

Lunch with Ray

On 11 Sep 2016, *USS Marblehead* biographer Steve Wade was having lunch in Virginia with World War II veteran Raymond 'Ray' Delos Kester was then 96 years old, but still ambulatory, cracking jokes, and relating history. Seventy-five years earlier, he had been a radioman second class (RM2c) aboard the light cruiser *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, then anchored off Tarakan Island, Borneo, west of the International Date Line. Kester had been off duty at the time and catching a few winks on the transmitter room floor when, at 0328 hours on 8 Dec 1941 (8:58 a.m. in Hawaii on 7 Dec 1941), an incoming message woke him. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was underway. Within minutes *USS Marblehead's* intercom began blaring calls to General Quarters across the ship. As Kester recalled, "the entire complement of the ship, 725 officers and enlisted men went from deep sleep to their duty stations in a mere eight minutes, a clear indication of the training, discipline and instinct for survival that would later save the ship."



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 would soon break loose.

On the bridge, Captain Robinson told Lt. (Jg.) Bishop, the ship's junior aviator, to "keep your eyes on those planes and give me the word about a minute and a half before bomb release so I can maneuver out of trouble.

Soon, Bishop replied "They are at the release point, Captain."

Robinson ordered "left full rudder". Marby's 3-inch anti-aircraft guns began kicking the deck and sending projectiles tearing through the air.

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 bomb jammed *Marby's* rudder causing her to steam in a predictable circle. Another strike knocked out her gyroscope, all electricity and internal communication. Multiple fires soon swept the ship. The near miss ripped a large gash in Marby's bow flooding compartments and causing the ship to begin to sink. Fortunately, the enemy assumed the sea would finish off what their bombs had begun, so they flew off after bigger prey, the heavy cruiser *USS Houston*.

At dawn on Friday 7 Feb 1942, a funeral service was held for *Marby's* dead and those of the *USS Houston*. The dead were laid out on the dock in homemade coffins all of which were flag-covered. Just as light was coming, the Chaplain from *USS Houston* started his service. It was deathly still and the Chaplain's quiet voice could be heard clearly. When he finished speaking, a firing squad delivered three volleys and the funeral party then carried off the dead on little narrow gage railroad hand cars.

Six days later, on Friday, 13 Feb 1942, as *Marby* slipped out of Tjilatjap for good, a moored Dutch freighter brought a victrola up to the microphone of her public address system, put on a record, and turned the speaker horn toward the *Marby*. As the Dutch seamen came to attention and saluted the passing cruiser, the record started turning. The music, powerfully amplified, went out across the water. It was the Star-Spangled Banner.

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 defied 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 42. *Marby's* bombing in the Battle of Makassar Strait and her escape to New York are described in detail in *Marby's* [own biography](#) and in the 1944 book *Where Away – a Modern Odyssey*.

For security reasons, the Navy never contradicted Japan's claims to have sunk *Marby*. Instead, they kept her improbable voyage home secret until she arrived safely in New York on 4 May. That secrecy also meant that loved ones back home believed that their sailors were either dead or in enemy captivity. On 5 May 1942, phone calls began flooding across the nation, bringing the truth, and considerable joy, to hundreds of families who had believed that their loved ones were lost.

In one of his fireside chats, President Roosevelt singled out *Marby's* crew as an inspiration to the nation. Now dubbed heroes, the survivors took leave to visit their families. Some, like Olon, even got married.

Following *Marby's* 4 May 1942 arrival in New York, Olon seized the opportunity to take leave to visit and marry his high school sweetheart, Geneva Eloise Foster. Like Olon, Geneva grew up in Laurence County, TN, but her parents had since moved to Florence, Lauderdale County, Alabama where Geneva and Olon married on 26 May 1942.

Olon rejoined *Marby* prior to her Oct 1942 redeployment to fight again in the Atlantic Ocean, primarily patrolling from Recife, Brazil to interdict German blockade runners and submarines and escorting Allied convoys and rescuing downed Allied flyers.

Effective 1 Sep 1943, in Img 245, Ln4, Olon was promoted from Sealc to Coxswain (Cox).



In 1944, following a preparatory stop in New York, *Marby* supported convoys to the British Isles, North Africa and Italian ports, and on 15 to 17 Aug 1944, she sat off the coast of Saint Raphael, France and pumped 157 rounds artillery rounds into German coastal positions in preparation for the Invasion of Southern France (Operation Dragoon), one of the most successful invasions of WWII.

On 8 Oct 1944 aboard *Marblehead* as the ship sailed from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil Olon was promoted from Cox to BM2c eff 5 Oct 1944, and on 6 Oct 1944 he was transferred to the Receiving Barracks at Lido Beach, NY, for assignment to a rotation program and further assignment by the Commander, Service Force. All told, Olon had served three years and eleven months aboard *Marby*.

In 1945, Olon was assigned to various units of the Service Force including the USN Cargo Handling Group #1 during the quarter ending 31 Mar 1945 which shows Olon as Part of a 33-man team. On 1 Oct 1945 at the receiving station of the Naval Operation Base at Norfolk, VA, Olon served with Cargo Group 1 Berkley through 26 Sep 1945.

On 1 Nov 1945 Olon was assigned to Norfolk Navy Yard, Portsmouth. He was honorably discharged on 4 Dec 1945, but he reenlisted the following day for four (4) more years and advanced to BM2c(T). He served in various roles there through the end of 1946.

Although legible Reports of Changes and Muster are not available for him after 1946, he continued to serve in the Navy, including during the Korean War, until 21 Nov 1961. His Naval service spanned 21 years, eleven months, and sixteen days. He retired with the final rank of Chief Boatswain's Mate. It is unclear whether he worked in some civilian capacity after retiring from the Navy.

Olon died on 12 Nov 1975. He is buried at Lay Memorial in Ethridge, Tennessee. His wife Geneva died on 14 Sep 2019 in Lawrenceburg, Lawrence County, Tennessee. She is buried alongside Olon in Ethridge. The couple raised five sons: Bobby Leon (1942–2025); Ronald Ernest (1946–?); [Denver Olon \(1947–2014\)](#); [Stephen James Owens \(1950–2017\)](#); and [Richard Anthony Owens \(1953–2011\)](#).



Geneva later in Life
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

Young American Patriots, 1941-1945 > Virginia

OWENS, OLON JAMES

BM 2/c, U. S. Navy. Born Mar. 3, 1921. Entered Service Dec. 5, 1939, N.O.B. Norfolk, Va.; Manila; Africa, Italy; France; South America. Attended Summerton, Tenn., High School. Holiness Church. Son of Mr. and Mrs. George P. Owens, Summerton, Tenn. Husband of Mrs. Geneva Eloise Foster Owens, 697 Belmont Ave., Portsmouth, Va.

Olon James Owen is listed on page 244 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, and other Internet records.

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