

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

## Marblehead Biography John Dewitt Poe, Jr.



John Dewitt Poe Jr.  
pre-WWII, "For My Sis"

John Dewitt Poe, Jr. was born 3 FEB 1917 in Wilburton, Latimer County, OK, 160 miles east-southeast of Oklahoma City. His parents were Arkansas-born John Dewitt Poe, Sr. (1895–1966), first a coal miner, then a farmer, and eventually a banker, and homemaker Gertrude Mae Crabtree (1896-1974), who was from Oklahoma. John Jr. was the 1<sup>st</sup>-born of five children. John and his siblings, Gertrude "Sis" Elizabeth Poe (1918–1998); twins Richard P Poe (1921–1945) and Dorothy Fretwell Poe (1921–1995); and William Allen Poe (1922–1994), grew up in the Wilburton-Red Oak-Talihina triangle of Choctaw Nation territory east of McAlester, OK.



The Poe siblings, clockwise from left: "Sis", John, Richard, Bill, and Dorothy

They and many of their Poe relatives attended

Wilburton High School. John probably graduated from there in 1936.

He enlisted in the Navy on 17 Aug 1936 at Dallas, TX and was assigned Service #3559991. He underwent Basic Training at the Naval Training Station in San Diego, CA, and in the same city, on 20 Dec 1936, he boarded veteran light cruiser, *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* as an Apprentice Seaman (AS). Commissioned in Philadelphia in 1923, *Marby*, as she was affectionately referred to by her crew, had been operating off the U.S. West Coast as part of the Pacific Fleet since 1933.

In January 1938, *Marby* was assigned to the Asiatic Fleet. Home ported at [Cavite, Philippines](#), she cruised the Sea of Japan and the South and East China seas during the summer months, protecting American interests in the region. During this time, John would visit many exotic ports in the Orient - Yokohama, Japan; Woosung, Tsingtao, Chefoo, Chinwangtao, Shanghai, Amoy, Hankow, China (the latter, more than 600 miles up the Yangtse River, is now a sub-section of Wuhan, the city from which COVID-19 would emerge in 2020). *Marby* also visited the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong; Bangkok, Thailand; Hanoi, Vietnam; Rangoon, Burma; and many other ports in Southeast Asia. As John would note in his 1985 letters to his uncle and childhood buddy, Weyland Douglas Poe, Economics professor at the University of Texas, "*Two weeks later, we dropped the Chaumont [the veteran transport [USS Chaumont \(AP-5\)](#)] at Shanghai and took off for Tsingtao (north China). For the next two years we did a lot of moving with the Japanese invasion forces on the China coast.*" This, as political and military tensions escalated in the Far East.

*Marby's* 31 Mar 1939 muster roll, showed John as Seaman 1c, meaning that he would have risen AS to Seaman 3c and to Seaman 2c over the ensuing two years prior to becoming S1c. On 22 Aug 1939, he was promoted to Storekeeper 3<sup>rd</sup> Class (SK3c). On 15 Aug 19, he advanced to SK2c and two days later, he extended his enlistment for two years. On 1 Nov 1941, he advanced to SK1c and thus was on the verge of entering the non-commissioned officer ranks. This, an enviably rapid rise during a non-war period, was a clear demonstration of John's determination to make the most of his time in the Navy.

On 8 Sep 1940, *Marby* left Tsingtao and China for the last time. Except for a visit to Guam, she would operate primarily in Philippine waters for the next year. As tensions mounted in the wake of unsuccessful Japan-US negotiations, on 24 Nov 1941, Admiral Thomas Hart, commander of the Asiatic Fleet, ordered all significant U.S. men-of-war to disperse from Manila ahead of anticipated hostilities. By the evening of 27 Nov 1941, *Marby* was anchored off Jolo Island at the southwestern end of the Philippine archipelago, and on 29 Nov 1941, she dropped anchor off Tarakan Island, eastern Borneo in the Netherland's East Indies (NEI). The ship was darkened for increased security as the men viewed barbed wire, cables, pillboxes, and other anti-invasion emplacements on the beaches. This is the scene in the early pages of the opening chapter of the 1944 book, [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#).

It marks the beginning of *Marby's* WWII saga for it was at Tarakan, nine days later, at 0328 on 8 Dec 1941, that a message arrived carrying news of the disaster at Pearl Harbor. The General Quarters alarm was sounded immediately and eight minutes later, the entire crew were standing at attention at their duty

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

stations, an early but clear demonstration of the discipline that would later save the ship. *Marby* sailed the following day for Balikpapan, an oil port on Borneo's south coast, and by Christmas, she was at the Dutch Naval Base in Surabaya, Java, NEI, where Captain Robinson granted limited shore leave despite the threat of Japanese air attacks.

On the last day of 1941, *Marby* was in the Flores Sea escorting French mail ship MS Marechal Joffre, which had been captured by swashbuckling Naval Officer and several accomplices in Manila Bay in late Nov 1941. *Marby* arrived at Darwin, Australia, on 2 Jan 1942 and immediately became Radio Darwin, the beacon that would for a short time coordinate Allied shipping in the area. It was not *Marby's* first visit to Australia – that had occurred in 1925.

Back in Indonesian waters in late-Jan 1942, *Marby* covered the retirement of Destroyer Division 59 from its successful 24 Jan raid on Japanese troop convoys at Balikpapan. However, on 4 Feb 1942, as part of an attack force heading to strike another Japanese convoy, *Marby* was hit by two bombs and a damaging near miss which all but disabled the ship. With seawater rushing in via a 3-by-15-foot gash near her bow, all internal and external communications and lights disabled, fires raging everywhere, and a locked rudder steering her in a very predictable circle, the ship seemed doomed. However, luck would prevail as the Japanese bombers assumed the ocean would finish *Marby* off, and they left her for bigger prey like heavy cruiser *USS Houston*. But *Marby's* superb leadership and disciplined crew defied the odds, saving the ship and sailing her home - 20,589-miles in 90-days - to be repaired and to fight again! See [Marby's biography](#).

Unfortunately, many of her men who were either killed or badly wounded had to be left behind on the island of Java, and John Jr. was one of them. He was badly burned in the bombing. He was transferred on 6 Feb 1942 to the Dutch Military Hospital at the fishing port of Tjilatjap on Java's south coast, the ship's first port of call following the bombing. Left in the care of Dr. Corydon Wassell, at Petronella Hospital in nearby Jogjakarta, he was later evacuated, probably aboard Dutch submarine supply ship *MV Janssens* which departed Tjilatjap 4 Mar and arrived 13 Mar in Fremantle on Australia's west coast. John's own recollections of that time begin not in Fremantle, but in a hospital in Melbourne, on Australia's east coast. He recounts them and the rest of his naval career as follows:

*Late Feb (early Mar?), I got to Australia as part of the Dr. Wassell group. Got out of hospital on 10 June '42 and was transferred from Melbourne to Brisbane in August. Spent next two years in the islands – N.G. – Papua, Guadalcanal, Tulagi, Milne Bay, on various ships and barges. Got my warrant [promotion to Warrant Officer] in Jan '44 and married a Brisbane girl, Phyllis Payne [according to their daughter, Jan, they met at a party]. Rode the USS Ommaney Bay to San Diego in April '44 after having completed 6 years 10 mos. continuous overseas.*



John after commissioning



John with older daughter, Carole (1945-1998)

*Was at USNH San Diego for 16 mos. (patient and then duty) where I got my Chief Warranty [Chief Warrant Officer] and then went to Panama to help commission a sub-base at Balboa. Left there in July '46 and was released from active duty as NAS Alameda effective Oct '46." – from a letter to his uncle and childhood buddy, W. Douglas Poe, dated 7 May 1985.*

The Japanese reported *Marby* as sunk several times in the international press, and as with all the parents of the sailors aboard the ship, John's family probably thought he was dead or in enemy captivity. It is unclear when he informed them otherwise.

During John's hospital stay in San Diego mentioned in the letter above, his brother, Richard, died when his B-29 Flying Fortress crashed on a training run which John recounts in another letter to his uncle Douglas:

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



John's brother Richard

*"Anyway, I'm still holding on. My eldest and her husband, Carole and Jim, with whom I live, are in the process of finding a new home for us and it looks like we will be changing address before long.*

*Looking at your letter and noting your dental problem, Richard [John Jr.'s brother] had the same trouble when he enlisted before the war. The Navy and Marines rejected him, but the Army took him. He was a sergeant at Pearl [Pearl Harbor, HI]. I'm not sure where he was stationed. After Pearl, he transferred to the Air Force and was commissioned in late '44.*

*He was selected for training for the atom bomb drop on Japan and was killed when his B-29 flew up over [Alabama on a practice run from] New Mexico. They were training on runs from fields there to Alabama and Florida and back. He is buried in San Bernadino. I was stationed at the hospital in San Diego, and he was buried in Feb 1945. That was the only time I saw Dad after leaving in '36." – From a letter to W. Douglas Poe dated 25 July 1985.*

John's brother, William Allen, also served in the Navy (from Jul 1943 to Mar 1946).



John's wife Phyllis Alice

John's wife, Phyllis, was born in Brisbane on 19 Aug 1913 and died there on 18 Oct 1983. Her father, who hailed from Walworth, Surrey, England, was James Albert Payne (1858–1941), an entrepreneur who parlayed earnings from a second-hand goods shop into a small real estate empire of sixteen properties. Phyllis' mother was Brisbane-born, Alice Butter (1889-1983). Phyllis had four siblings - Douglas Wortley (1911–1951); Leonard Albert (1915–?); Vivien Joyce (1917–1992); and James Wortley (1922–2015).



John's brother William and wife, Mary Marshall Fouls

Fifteen of John's shipmates paid the ultimate price on or shortly after the 4 Feb 1942 bombing. However, John's pain from the bombing would continue for decades:

*"I first broke in 1969 – diagnosed as COAD – Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease – but mainly emphysema, bronchitis, and results of various kinds of damage – gasoline, cyanide gas, bomb blast heat, smoking. I can never again visit the U.S. – couldn't afford it – nor make any long trips. The government (Australian) pays my Social Security Pension and all my medicine costs including the oxygen. I get a small V.A. pension \$122.00 (U.S.) per month."*

*"In Feb '79, I was badly sick and as soon as I was able, I came to Carole and Jim's. By then (I don't remember much), I was bad and in June, they put me in the hospital to die. Somehow or another the medical staff decided to try the last resort and 3 months later I walked out. Since then, I have remained with Carole and Jim since I had to live with somebody. And I have had continual oxygen since then. Presently, I use a 3800-litre tank a day. The government pays for it as well as my social security pension of \$87.00 per week." - From letters to W. Douglas Poe dated May 1985.*

John died in Brisbane on 29 Aug 1985, 35 days after he sent his last letter to his uncle Douglas Poe.

John Dewitt Poe 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 significant contributions from Phyllis and John's daughter, Jan, including all photos and letter passages above, and from Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, and other Internet records.*

*Corrections, additions and photos are welcomed by email to [spwade@gmail.com](mailto:spwade@gmail.com).*