



Marblehead Biography of James Riddle



James A. Riddle
Courtesy: James' Daughter

James August Riddle was born 3 Jan 1917 the small town of Wilkinson in rural Titus County, TX to farmers Alvin August Riddle (1 Oct 1891-22 Aug 1947) and Annie Adalene Gregory (16 Sep 1892 - 16 Aug 1987) in the tiny town of Wilkinson, a farming community in the cotton belt of northeastern Texas roughly one third of the way between Texarkana on the border with Louisiana and Dallas-Fort Worth to the West. For most of his life until he enlisted in the Navy, the family lived in the larger community of Mount Pleasant, 14 miles south of Wilkinson.

James' siblings were Opal Zae Riddle (1911-1983), Louis Carr Riddle (1919-1998), Alvanelle 'Nell' Riddle (1922-2018), and Albert 'Al' Hamilton Riddle (1923-2001).

James attended a two-room school until the seventh grade and then enrolled in a high school in the neighboring town of Mount Pleasant. He studied there until his senior year when he was asked to leave school following an incident at the football field. He rejected the school principal's attempt to subject him to corporal punishment. He spent the next couple of years working on the family farm and other farms but increasingly work was getting hard to find.

The world was still recovering from World War I which left many European nations in debt, struggling to rebuild and to retain their colossal land grabs of the previous centuries against indigenous freedom movement and wannabee colonialists like Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union. In the mind of a typical American like James, the U.S. was simply trying to hold its own and protect its commercial, missionary, and military interests. With the brief exception of the "Roaring Twenties", the interwar period (1918-1939) which had covered the entirety of James' life to that point was marked by significant global economic and political upheaval. Countries adopted protectionist policies, such as high tariffs, which further exacerbated the economic crisis and fed the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe and Asia. The League of Nations, established to maintain peace, proved ineffective.

The Great Depression then ensued with the Crash of 1929, leading to massive unemployment, deflation, a cratering of international trade, and a collapse of cotton prices which devastated Mount Pleasant, where James was growing up, and many other communities in the northeast Texas cotton belt which surrounded it - among them, Texarkana, Paris, Greenville, Bonham, Sulphur Springs, Clarksville, and Sherman which was known for its cotton mills. The Dust Bowl worsened the situation with drought and soil erosion. James alluded to the importance of cotton in his Oral History Interview.

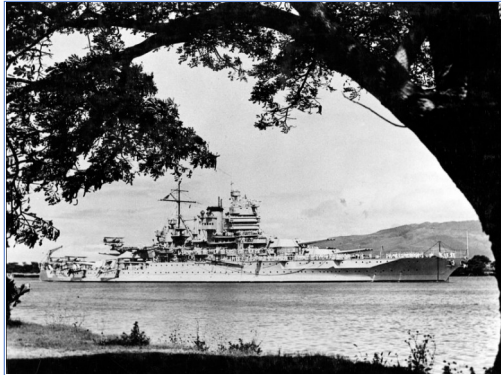
The economic stress and political uncertainty led to a dramatic rise in Navy recruitment. Perhaps this was one reason the recruiter in Marshall, Texas, who had exhausted his quota, referred James to the recruiting station in Dallas. Military service provided steady income, food, and shelter, largely freeing James and other like him from depending on agriculture, and it set the stage for the careers and seemingly endless stream of adventures that men like James would experience in the Navy.

When asked in his 2011 Oral History interview for the Veterans History Project how he came to join the Navy, James recalled a June day 74 years earlier when, for no particular reason, he and several friends hitchhiked to Marshall, a larger town about an hour and a half to the southeast. There, while taking in the sights, they happened by a Navy recruiting station. The recruiter was standing in the doorway, and he struck up a conversation and offered to let the boys take the Navy's entrance exam. They laughed at the idea until the recruiter responded with, "Well, you boys probably couldn't pass the test anyhow." Challenged, James and his friends took the bait and the exam. James, and perhaps others, scored high enough to qualify, but the recruiter said that his quota was currently full. However, he added that the Dallas recruiting station "had room!" He provided a letter for James and the others to take to Dallas if they were interested. The following morning, without telling his parents, James hitchhiked to Dallas, took the test again, and was sworn in. That afternoon he caught a train to San Diego, CA, and commenced basic training there. He was half a year short



The Marby

of his 22nd birthday, a high school dropout short on opportunity as the Great Depression dragged on. Plus, that recruiter's pitch about seeing the world had struck a chord. It took a week for his parents to get the news.



USS New Mexico (BB-40)

Courtesy: Tai Tsing Loo, U.S. Navy

James' first duty station after basic training was the battleship *USS New Mexico (BB-40)* which he joined in Long Beach, CA harbor, but the date he joined her is unclear and so it was not possible to determine how long he served aboard her, what his duties were, and which ports she put into during his time aboard.

Aboard *New Mexico*, James advanced from Apprentice Seaman to Fireman 2nd Class, and on 25 Oct 38, he transferred to the Asiatic Fleet's light cruiser *USS Marblehead* in Manila, Philippines. James would spend the next four years and three and a half months aboard *Marby*, as she was affectionately referred to by her crew. James visited large swaths of east, southeast, and south Asia, as well as southern Africa and South America and many islands in between. In one fell swoop, his

time aboard was the most exciting and the most dangerous period of his life. However, his intuition and the promises of that recruiter in Marshall did not let him down.

During his four years aboard *Marby*, the ship made 106 port calls, about one stop every 15 days. Naturally, some port cities saw multiple visits by *Marby*, particularly Manila, Cavite, and Olongapo in the Philippines, then an American colony where she spent her winters. She also made many visits to Shanghai and Tsingtao in China where she spent her summers. During James' time aboard, *Marby* visited five continents, crossed three oceans and at least 6 seas, and called on six sovereign nations and 11 colonial possessions. Smaller islands where she stopped along the way are too numerous to count. While there wasn't "a girl in every port," there were many, many stories to tell about each place along the numerous routes taken.

Decades later, James' daughter, Joan, herself a Navy veteran, would sum it all up nicely when she wrote in his obituary that, *"Every student who passed through his algebra or chemistry classes during his second career as a teacher and elementary principal in Stamps and Lewisville, knew the easiest way to avoid the Table of Elements or algebraic equations was to ask Mr. Riddle about some experience he had in a far-flung corner of the world and lesson plans were forgotten."*

Sadly, the global economic and political uncertainty spurred him to find his first career also led to war and James would soon be in thick of it. He joined *Marby* late in her history with Asia, which had begun when she joined the Asiatic Fleet in 1938. Her visits up and down the east China coast centered on Shanghai, which was then, as today, one of the globe's most cosmopolitan cities, a trading, financial and artistic powerhouse. Unlike today, Shanghai in the 1930s and 40's also featured a potent mix of opium smuggling, gambling, and prostitution. Unfortunately, China was also the central focus of Japan's desire to control all of Asia.

Japan's annexation of China's industrial heartland, Manchuria, in 1932, and its commencement of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, had escalated tension with the United States. By the time James arrived on the scene, Japan controlled all the ports of China except for Hong Kong, and while *Marby* did spend the summer of 1940 in China, when she sailed from Tsingtao in early September that year, it was a final farewell for her and soon, the rest of the Asiatic Fleet. Except for a cruise to Guam, *Marby* spent the rest of 1940 and most of 1941 in Philippine waters focusing on battle training as war grew increasingly likely in the minds of Fleet Commander Admiral Thomas Hart, *Marby*'s skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson, and the rest of the ship's crew.

On 23 Nov 41, sensing that hostilities were imminent, Admiral Hart ordered most of his ships to disperse without fanfare to the southwest and into the Netherlands East Indies (NEI; today's Indonesia). On the night of the 29th, *Marby* anchored off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI to await further orders. The ship was darkened for additional security.



The Marby

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 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.

In the days that followed, 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. Many of *Marby's* crew had friends on the ships at Pearl Harbor. Previously, battleships had been considered invincible but Japanese naval air superiority had just made quick victims of those British behemoths. These events sharpened *Marby's* crew's focus on the 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."*¹

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](#)). For a few days, *Marby* stayed behind to act as Radio Darwin, a beacon to facilitate the regrouping of Allied warships to slow the Japanese invasion 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 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 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

¹ [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#), p.42



would finish off what their bombs had begun, so they flew off after bigger prey, the heavy cruiser *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 men 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 coaxed the crippled cruiser 20,589 miles across the Indian and Atlantic oceans and entered 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](#).

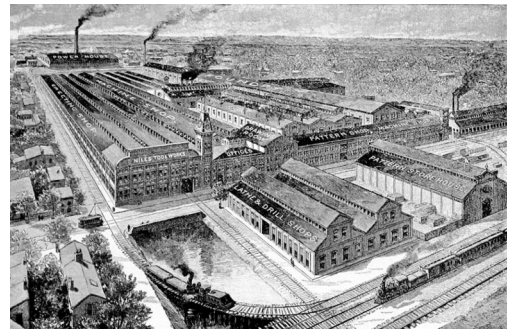
Japan claimed several times in the international press that it sank *Marby*, but the Navy never contradicted those claims. Instead, for security reasons, they kept her improbable voyage home a secret until she arrived in New York on 4 May 1942. The secrecy meant that families back home thought their loved one was either dead or in enemy captivity. On 5 May, phone calls began flooding across the nation, bringing the truth, and considerable joy, to hundreds of families who believed their loved ones lost. In one of his fireside chats, President Roosevelt singled out *Marby*'s crew as an inspiration to the nation. Now dubbed a hero, James soon took leave to go home, and *Marby* was moved to a drydock in Brooklyn Navy Yard for a comprehensive overhaul. Following leave, he returned to Brooklyn, assisted in the ship's overhaul, and occasionally teamed with other shipmates to sell bonds to fund the war effort.

James remained aboard *Marby* when she redeployed on 15 Oct 42 and sailed for her new home port, Recife, Brazil, arriving there on 18 Nov 42 after stops in St. Croix and Trinidad. From Recife, she would hunt Nazi submarines and blockade runners, and rescue downed Allied airman and enemy sailors off sunken vessels in the Atlantic. But James' focus would soon change due to a technological exigency of the Navy – diesel propulsion.

The Navy's first use of diesel power came with the 1916 commissioning of the oiler *USS Maumee (AO-2)* which employed two 2500-horsepower diesels. The transition to diesel gained momentum in the early 1940s, driven by the need for more efficient and reliable propulsion systems and enhanced naval operational capability to fight WWII.

On 7 Feb 43, while *Marby* was in Bahia, Brazil, James, by then a Machinist Mate 1st Class (MM1c), was transferred for training at the Diesel Engine School (Surface) at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, IL, with supplementary instruction at the Hamilton, OH plant of one of the Navy's diesel engine suppliers, Hooven-Owens-Rentschler. Its HOR² brand of large diesel engines (2,000+ horsepower) had been installed in many Navy vessels, including submarines, but the engine's design led to excessive vibrations and other problems. James' training included approaches to dealing with these challenges, and more generally, it was the key ingredient that enabled the next stage of his career.

"I left steam and never did go back to it. The Seabees were all about construction and just about all construction involved bulldozers, cranes, and all that stuff is diesel. So, it was just an automatic step, you



An 1896 rendering of H.O.R.'s Niles Tool Works in Hamilton, OH, 300 miles southeast of the Great Lakes Naval Training Center.

Source: en.wikipedia.org

² Plagued by vibration and other problems, by the end of 1943 most H.O.R. engines would be replaced in the Navy by competing products from the General Motors' Diesel Engine Division and the Fairbanks-Morse Model 38 engine. The wartime performances of the H.O.R. engines were so poor that submariner Captain Tommy Dykers of *USS Jack* said the following of them: "The H.O.R. engines saved the Japanese thirty or forty ships."



know. I'm already diesel-qualified and they needed diesel mechanics in Seabees, and I was a chief mechanic. So, for the last 10 years of my service I was in the Seabees.”³



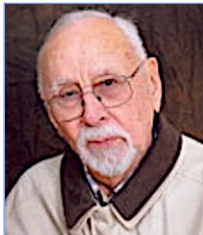
Wedding Photo 28 Mar 1945

Source: Daughter Joan Dempsey

His Seabee duties took James to a range of far-flung places such as Barrow, Alaska, to build airfields that enabled huge supply-laden aircraft fitted with skis to safely land on ice in extreme operational conditions. Other duties took James and his family to the Seabees base at Port Hueneme, California, and foreign shores such as Subic Bay, Philippines. Ruth and their children often accompanied him to these locations.

“Ruth and I often laugh when recalling these journeys. For example, in 1947 they went to Guantanamo (Gitmo), Cuba with a son and two suitcases. Four years later we left there with two children, an automobile, and five rooms of furniture. I was station fire chief there. After Gitmo, we went to Corpus Christi Naval Air Station in Texas, where I was also station fire chief. We were there when the Korean War ended. Then we went to the West Coast, back to Port Hueneme, and we lived in Oxnard, CA.” Thereafter, James went solo to the Philippine Islands to participate in the construction of the U.S. Naval Base at Subic Bay.

Ruth Pennington Riddle of Texarkana, TX, and, for many years, Lewisville, Arkansas, passed away on 13 Feb 2013 in Texarkana. She was survived by her husband of 67 years, James Riddle; son Joe Riddle (Misty) of Seattle, WA, daughter, Judy Riddle Malone (Jerry) of Spokane, WA, and daughter Joan Riddle Dempsey (Jack), of Alexandria, VA; six grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. Born



James A. Riddle

Source:

Findagrave.com

in Caddo Parish, Louisiana, 31 May 1928, she was the youngest of Addison and Effie Pennington's 11 children. Ruth met James, a career Navy man, in 1945 when he was on a short home stay near the end of World War II. Twelve days after they met on a Greyhound bus, they married and began a long life together filled with adventure and travel but grounded in a strong Christian faith and in family. Ruth was an accomplished gardener and cook, and she shared her talents through a love of entertaining, and her life-long compassion for those in need. Most days, when her work was done and the weather allowed, you could find her at a local fishing hole. James died on 11 Dec 2013 in Texarkana, Bowie, TX. James and Ruth are buried side by side in



Ruth Pennington Riddle

Source: Findagrave.com

Wilson Cemetery, Lewisville, Lafayette Co., Arkansas.

James A. Riddle is listed on page 245 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 helpful contributions from Joan A. Riddle, daughter of James and Ruth; the Veterans History Project; Ancestry.com; Newspapers.com, and other Internet records.

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

³ Paraphrased from his 2011 Oral History Interview.