

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



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## Marblehead Biography Bernard Joseph Wardzinski

Bernard Joseph 'Ski' Wardzinski was born 2 MAR 1919 in cold, wind-swept Buffalo, NY twenty miles south-southeast of the Canadian border at Niagara Falls. His parents were Teofil 'Teddy' William Wardzinski (1882–1940), a mold-maker in various foundries in the Buffalo area over the years, and homemaker Joanna Kazubowski (1887–1966), also referred to in the records variously as 'Jennie' or as 'Joan'. Teofil was born on the frontier where Germany and Poland melded in the 1880s. He immigrated to the U.S. with his parents in 1883 and was naturalized in 1890. Joan was born in Buffalo, New York. Both were of Polish heritage. They married around 1905.

Ski was the youngest of six children. His siblings were Edward John (1906–1984), Antonina Anna (1909–?), Charlotte Ladislawa 'Lottie' (1910–?), Leo (1913–?), and Theodore (1914–?). Nothing is known of the childhood experiences and schooling of Ski and his siblings, though Charlotte did appear as a seamstress living with her parents and Ski in a 1938 residential directory of Buffalo.

Ski joined the Navy in his hometown on 4 JAN 1939 and was issued service #2341925. He did his basic training at the Naval Training School at Newport, RI. On 9 MAY 1939 he joined light cruiser [USS Nashville CL-43](#) in New York, NY. The next day *Nashville* shoved off for Rio de Janeiro, Brazil carrying American representatives to the Pan American Defense Conference and then returned them to Annapolis, MD on 20 JUN. She then sailed to Norfolk, VA, and on 23 JUN, to the Panama Canal enroute to San Pedro, CA for two years of Pacific operations.



USS Nashville (CL-43)  
Source: NavSource



USS Boise (CL-47)  
Source: Wikipedia

On 9 MAR 1940, Ski transferred to light cruiser [USS Boise \(CL-47\)](#) for further transfer to [USS Henderson \(AP-1\)](#). *Henderson* was one of two veteran transport ships that kept the Asiatic Fleet stocked with personnel - [USS Chaumont \(AP-5\)](#) was the other. *Henderson* took Ski first to Manila, Philippines and then to Shanghai, China for duty aboard the [USS Marblehead \(CL-12\)](#), affectionately referred to by her crew as *Marby*.



USS Henderson (AP-1)  
Source: Wikipedia

Ski joined *Marby* on 24 APR 1940 as a Seaman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class (Sea2c). Ski would serve nearly two years on *Marby*. At sea between Tsingtao and Shanghai, China on 16 AUG 1940 Ski was promoted to Sea1c, and enroute to Jolo Island, southern Philippines, on 1 NOV 1941, he advanced to Carpenter's Mate 3rd Class (CM3c). When she sailed from Tu Tu Bay off Jolo Island on 29 NOV 1941, unbeknownst to the crew, they and the ship were saying goodbye forever to the Philippines where they had spent so many good times. In anticipation of Japanese hostilities, the Asiatic Fleet scattered, many ships heading into the neighboring Netherlands East Indies (NEI), then a Dutch colony and today known as Indonesia.

Their next stop would be Tarakan Island off northeast Borneo where early on the morning of 8 DEC 1941 they received word of Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor and thought of many former shipmates who must have been in harm's way there. Next was Balikpapan on the southern coast of Borneo. They departed Balikpapan on 11 DEC in the company of "old aircraft tender *Langley*, fleet oilers *Trinity* and *Pecos*, the supply vessel *Gold Star* and destroyers *Preston*, *Paul Jones*, *Stewart*, and *Barker*. *Gold Star* had been on her way to Guam when hostilities broke out. She had a cargo of food, beer, and whisky, and the Marblehead men were naturally more interested in her welfare than in that of the other ships. As Shipfitter Bernie Wardzinski said, 'They may have sneaked in and knocked off Pearl Harbor, but by God they'll never get that beer.'" The enormity of the task facing the largely obsolete Asiatic Fleet had not yet sunk in.

By Christmas, *Marby's* convoy "had reached the Dutch naval base of Surabaya, Java. Surabaya, which lay on the flat, humid Javanese coastal plain, had to be entered by a long and intricate approach through shallow

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and poorly marked sandbars. Dutch and native houses, on whose red roofs the sun beat down in eye-stinging brilliance, lay in clustered villages at intervals along the shore. The harbor was crowded with ships of all nations as well as picturesque native craft. ... Capt. Robinson had decided that “Japs or no Japs, a part of the crew should be allowed some Christmas liberty. Most of the officers went to the Simpang Club, a delightful place, spacious with verandas and snow-white tables and cool wicker chairs, where the maître d’hôtel spoke English and where, besides marvelous Heineken’s beer, there was rice taffel, a kind of wet curry to which was added, as the successive waiters arrived, an astonishingly manifold assortment of meats and tropical vegetables and spiced fruits, ...”

“Fire Controlman First Class Riches discovered a fortuneteller in a Marine canteen and, impressed by the things the fortuneteller told him of his past, he invited several of his comrades along to have their fortunes told too. Among these was Shipfitter Bernie Wardzinski, whom everybody called ‘Ski’ for short. Ski went along but refused to have his fortune told. He was an easy-going fellow, well-liked by his shipmates, and a particular friend of the Bull’s. Ski was as dark and the Bull was blond, ... Ordinarily Ski was agreeable to almost any kind of excursion ashore, but today he was stubborn about the fortuneteller.

## When the Ship’s Good Luck Deserted Her

Marby was not long out of Durban on 17 Mar 42, when the Bull awoke to go on night duty. He was coming topside when the man who had been standing watch with Ski Wardzinski came running across the deck.

“What’s up?” the Bull asked.

“Ski went below to sound the forward hold. Something’s got him. I yelled down but he don’t answer.”

The seaman ran on toward the bridge to report the news and the Bull ran toward the hatch. Perhaps Ski had only fallen and knocked himself out, he may of thought. But there was always the possibility of bilge gas. Something had to be done fast or Ski will die.

The Bull reached the hatch, and without hesitating, started down the ladder. When his feet hit the deck, his flashlight found Wardzinski. The Bull took two steps toward Ski and felt his eyes setting and something putting his legs out of commission. The air was peculiar and stinking. It required huge breaths yet breathing only made things worse. His head felt as if it were made of brass and somebody were beating it with a hammer. Neither of the shipfitter friends survived the night.

As the news spread through the ship, stories began to be swapped.

“Just a few days ago,” Red Percifield said, “the Bull and I were sitting on back aft. He said he wanted to finish his education and try to get somewhere. But most of all he wanted to get a little leave and go see his grandma. He wasn’t gonna tell her when he hit the States. But just go a-helling home, bust through the door and say, ‘Hello, Ma,’ and hug her.”

When the ship reached Port Elizabeth, the flag-draped coffins of the Bull and his friend were brought ashore and placed upon the waiting caissons. A company each of South African soldiers, bluejackets, and Royal Navy Marines marched up as a guard of honor and the funeral march began.

Later, the chaplain’s simple phrases and the bugler’s slow, eternally uncompromising notes made terrible anguish rise up in the men. It seemed as though the bugler would never be able to make the last note. And then the alien earth closed in over the coffins.

*Paraphrased from [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#).*

On being pushed to have his fortune told, the color left his face, as Ski said he already knew his future and it wasn’t good.

“‘I’m going to die, and I know it. ... I don’t need this guy to ... to rub it in.’”<sup>1</sup>

Ski survived the bombing of the ship on 4 FEB 1942 and the first half of her 90-day, 21,589-mile escape to New York (see [Marby’s own biography](#)), but on 18 MAR, as the ship steamed along the coast from Durban to Port Elizabeth, South Africa, Ski’s luck ran out (see textbox at the left).

Ski was predeceased by his dad, Teofil, in MAY 1940, but his mom, Joan, would have experience the grief of losing him so young. He’d just turned 23. Joan passed away in Buffalo, NY on 3 AUG 1966 and was buried at Saint Stanislaus Roman Catholic Cemetery in Cheektowaga, Erie County, New York. Ski was reinterred with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington VA on 2 JUN 1948.

Bernard Joseph Wardzinski is listed on pages p. 45, 51, 90, 118, 204, 210, 211, 212, and 247 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](#), [FindaGrave.com](#) and other Internet records.*

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

<sup>1</sup> The previous paragraphs were paraphrased from [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#).