

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

Marblehead Biography Albert Gene Mele



Albert Gene Mele
Source: Ginnie of Lake
County History Center Project

Albert Gene Mele was born on 8 Oct 1921 near the banks of Lake Erie in Willoughby, Lake County, Ohio, now a suburb northeast of Cleveland. Originally home to a local band of American Indians, the area was settled 1798 by a David Abbott who operated a gristmill there. The local Indians called the river that ran through the area "Sha-ga-rin" which meant "Clear Water". The name was later formalized as Chagrin River. In 1835, the town was named for Dr. Westel Willoughby, a public health official. During World War I, Willoughby became the site of a chemical weapons plant and other industrial activities. It had a population of roughly 2,700 around the time of Albert's birth.

Albert's dad, Guiseppe A. "Joseph" Mele (1887–1969), was born in Cardinale, Province of Catanzaro, near the end of the toe in the boot of Italy. Guiseppe arrived in New York on 14 Jun 1913 aboard the *S.S. Principe di Piedmonti* which had departed Naples on May 30th of that year. Albert's mother was Rosa "Rose" Sanzobrinio (1890–1960) of Spinoso, Potenza, Basilicata, which is in the arch of the boot of Italy. She arrived in America in 1897. The couple met in Ohio and married in Cleveland on 4 Apr 1907. Albert had seven siblings: Louis Dominic (1909–1998), Carl Charles (1910–1940), Mary Antoinette (1912–1974), Josephine Maria (1915–2004), Elizabeth Florence (1917–2000), Joseph James (1919–1981), and Thomas Anthony (1923–1991).



USS Mississippi (BB-41)
Source: Wikipedia.com

A month after his 18th birthday, on 8 Nov 1939, Albert enlisted in Cleveland, OH. He was assigned service #2833010. He probably did basic training at Great Lakes Naval Station, just north of Chicago. His first ship was the battleship *USS Mississippi (BB-41)* which he joined on 27 Jan 1940, probably in San Diego, CA. On 8 Mar 1940, while aboard *Mississippi*, Albert was promoted from Apprentice Seaman to Seaman 2nd class (S2c).

On 10 Oct 1940, at San Diego, Albert was transferred to *USS Chaumont (AP-5)*, one of two veteran transport ships then keeping the Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors (the other was the *USS Henderson (AP-1)*). Albert's orders read "FFT ASTA", meaning "for further forwarding to the Asiatic Fleet" which meant he was either headed to Manila, Philippines or Shanghai, China, depending on the season. Since winter was looming, it would probably mean the former, and sure enough, in Manila on 5 Nov 1940, Albert first stepped aboard the *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* or *Marby* as the aging light cruiser was affectionately referred to by her crew. However, as war clouds began to loom for the U.S. in Asia, Albert would not visit Shanghai, Tsingtao, or other exotic ports in China, for *Marby* had left China for good two months earlier. Except for one trip to Guam, *Marby* would spend the next thirteen months in Philippine waters where intense battle training at sea became the primary focus of the ship's leadership and crew.

Sensing that hostilities were imminent, on 25 Nov 1941, Admiral Thomas Hart, Commander of the Asiatic Fleet, secretly ordered his ships to disperse from Manila without fanfare and head southwest into the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). On the night of the 29th, *Marby* dropped anchor off Tarakan Island, East Borneo. The ship was darkened, and the crew settled in to await further orders.

Ten days later, at 0328 hours on 8 Dec 1941, as the crew slept east of the International Date Line, *Marby's* radio receiver crackled with news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The ship's General Quarters alarm blared moments later, and her crew's response foretold the training, discipline and spirit that would later save the ship – i.e., from deep slumber, within eight minutes the entire 700+ crew was standing at attention at their battle stations. Over the public address system, the men then heard the following: "The Japanese have commenced hostilities. Act accordingly."



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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.

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. There, 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.

Marby soon 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 final week of January 1941 in Surabaya, and by 1 February, she was cruising off Madura Strait. On the afternoon of 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 highly damaging third near-miss “close aboard her port bow.” The damage was severe – one of the direct hits jammed *Marby*’s rudder causing her to steam in a very 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 opened a large gash in *Marby*’s bow which flooded several 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 later claim on several occasions 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 morning, including Albert Gene Mele. Another eighty-four were injured, five of whom would later die 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, they would coax the crippled cruiser 20,589 miles over the next ninety days, crossing 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 in the Mediterranean Sea supporting the invasion of southern France. In one of his fireside chats, President Franklin D. Roosevelt would later single 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 after *Marby*’s arrival in New York. The secrecy had meant that loved ones back home thought their sailors were either dead or in enemy captivity until phone calls home began flooding across the nation on 5 May.

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

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But such was not the case for the eleven who died on the day of the bombing and the five who later succumbed to their wounds. In these cases, notice arrived more swiftly in the form of Western Union telegrams like the one Albert's family received.

Albert and his fallen shipmates were initially buried on 6 Feb 1942 at Tjilatjap (today's Cilacap on the south coast of Java, Indonesia). It was the first port that *Marby* made following the bombing. On 10 Mar 1942, *Marby's* skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson wrote a letter to Albert's family. In it, Robinson conveyed the following:

"He was buried, with other shipmates who were killed in action, in the European Cemetery at Tjilatjap, Java, Netherlands East Indies. Here in a quiet section of this beautiful island, the Netherlands Government has set aside an area for the internment of our heroic dead so that they may lie together in beautiful surroundings, in a sense under American soil and as a memorial to their high courage and ideals.

"A military funeral was held with escorts from both the American and Netherlands forces, and both Protestant and Catholic services were conducted by Chaplain Rentz of the U.S.S. Houston and Father Widennbusche of Tjilatjap. His grave is clearly and appropriately marked.

In 1949, Albert was reinterred in Willoughby Village Cemetery near his hometown. Nearly all his close relatives are also buried there.



Old Willoughby Union H.S.
Source: Ginnie of Lake County History Center Project

Albert attended Willoughby Union High School, and his name is included on a plaque that once hung there honoring him and other lost servicemen. Although the building still stands, it is no longer a school, and the plaque now hangs nearby in the new Eastlake North High School.



In this book of memorable events and feats of honor it seems peculiarly fitting to acknowledge that immortal event and the examples of supreme honor which "our boys" gave to us and the world in the crisis of forty-one and forty-two. To them we tenderly, reverently, dedicate whatever may be worthwhile in our Annual.

"Our Boys"

ALBERT MELE
TED BRUNSON

We'll always remember Pearl Harbor,
Brightest jewel of the blue southern sea.
Our lips will be saying "Pearl Harbor"
On each bead of our rosary.
The angels will smile on Pearl Harbor,
Till the last leaf will fall from the tree.
We'll always remember Pearl Harbor;
Our harbor of memory.

Tribute to Albert Mele in the 1942 yearbook of Willoughby Union High School
Source: Ancestry.com

Albert Gene Mele is listed on pages 243 and 249 of the 1944 book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#).

Don't forget to read it and [Marby's own biography](#).

Biography by Steve Wade, son of Frank V. Wade, BM2c, USS Marblehead 1939-1945, with contributions from Ginnie, of the Lake County History Center Project in Painesville, OH, and by Ancestry.com, FindaGrave.com, Newspapers.com, and other Internet records.

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