



Marblehead Biography of John Edward 'Tex' Owen



John Edward 'Tex' Owen, 1931, age 17, San Diego H.S.
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

John Edward 'Tex' Owen was born on 5 Nov 1915 in Douglas, Cochise County, Arizona to homemaker and popular socialite, Texas-born Emily Eva Mulhern, and Kentucky-born William Thomas 'W.T.' Owen, the son of a judge in Owensboro, KY and the then editor of the *Douglas Daily Dispatch*. The family later moved to Dallas, TX, where 'W.T.' became engaged in advertising, but he died young at 51 and sometime thereafter, Emily moved the family to the San Diego, CA area. But it was probably in Dallas that John acquired the nickname 'Tex' which would follow him into his nine-year career in the Navy. We refer to him as Tex throughout this biography.

Tex's siblings from Emily's marriage to 'W.T.' Owen were William Thomas Owen, Jr. (1914-1982); Mary Mercedes Owen Wilkins (1918-2004); Emily Eva Owen, and Robert Volley "Bud" Owen (1921-1983). However, Emily remarried twice following W.T.'s death, first in 1937 to Noah Earl Hamman (1900-1968) and then in 1946 to Henry Appelin Bennett (1882-1955). These marriages may have brought 'Tex' additional half or step siblings.

In San Diego, Tex attended Roosevelt Junior High and then San Diego High School from which he graduated in the summer of 1931. He then attended Kelsey-Jenney Commercial College. Records of his original enlistment could not be located but his obituary suggests that it occurred in 1933. It is likely that he underwent basic training at the San Diego Naval Training Center. He was assigned Service # 3558754.

Navy Reports of Changes and Muster Roll are largely unavailable for the period between 1933 when Tex is likely to have enlisted and mid-July 1939 when he joined the *USS Marblehead*, so we asked AI to construct Tex's likely career trajectory between those two dates consistent with Navy promotion rules, shipboard manning realities, and the peace time U.S. Navy fleet tempos between the World Wars from Tex's likely enlistment in 1933 to his being received aboard the *USS Marblehead* in Shanghai on 9 Jul 1939. The following was the AI's realistic, historically accurate career-path for a sailor who enlisted in the peacetime U.S. Navy in 1933, served aboard the *USS Chandler*, and by July 1939 was an Electrician's Mate Third Class (EM3c) reporting to *USS Marblehead* on the Asiatic Station.

A sailor enlisting in 1933 could realistically reach EM3c by 1938–1939 if he showed technical aptitude, completed Electrician Mate "A" School, and served on a small ship like *USS Chandler*, where advancement was faster due to limited crew size and constant need for trained technicians.

Enlistment & Boot Camp (Summer 1933) at the Naval Training Station San Diego, CA, a major recruiting/training hub. Assigned the rate of *Apprentice Seaman (AS)*, the entry-level rating for all recruits. Underwent Boot Camp for 8–10 weeks. Shows strong mechanical and electrical ability; recommended for engineering division assignment.

Tex's first Fleet Assignment appears to have been aboard the *USS Chandler (DD-206)* from late 1933 to 1939. *Chandler*, an older four-stack destroyer, was later converted to a minesweeper (DMS-9). A small ship meant fewer petty officers, more firsthand responsibilities, and faster advancement for capable sailors.

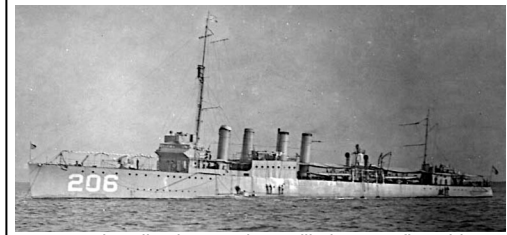
1933–1934: Apprentice Seaman Second Class (S2c). Promotion typically after 6–9 months of satisfactory service. Duties: deck work, basic engineering tasks, standing watches, learning ship electrical systems.

1934–1935: Seaman Second Class to Seaman First Class (S1c) usually after 12 months. The sailor begins working more closely with the ship's electricians and shows strong technical skill. The relevant division officer recommends him for Electrician's Mate (EM) rating training. Becoming an EM in the 1930s required sailors to demonstrate aptitude aboard ship, complete correspondence courses, attend Navy "A" Schools, and pass rating exams.



The Marby

1935–1936: S1c to Electrician's Mate Striker during which time Tex would have begun formal EM training aboard *Chandler*, completed Navy electrical correspondence courses, worked under an EM1c and EM2c maintaining ship's lighting circuits, generators, switchboards, gyro repeaters, sound-powered phones, and mine-sweeping electrical gear, however, Tex probably missed that final bit of training because he was reassigned to the Asiatic Station before *Chandler's* conversion to a minesweeper.)

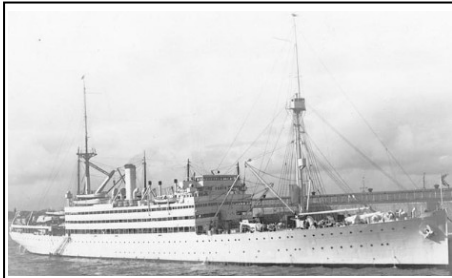


USS Chandler (DD-206) was likely Tex's first ship.
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

1936–1937: EM Striker to EM2c (Temporary). On small ships, sailors often held temporary acting ratings before formal promotion, and as such they served as acting EM2c during overhaul periods or when senior EMs rotate out. It is likely that Tex took the EM3c exam in late 1937.

Promotion to EM3c (Electrician's Mate Third Class) likely occurred in late 1938 or early 1939. This aligns with the typical 4 to 5-year progression from enlistment, the Navy's on-going need for trained technicians, and Tex's appearance as EM3c in July 1939 when first joins *USS Marblehead*. By 1938–39, he would have been a fully rated EM3c responsible for maintaining electrical systems, qualified for independent watch-standing, and eligible for transfer to larger or overseas commands.

On 29 May 1939 Tex was reassigned to the Asiatic Station and the *USS Marblehead* by way of the transport ship *USS Henderson (AP-1)*, one of two Navy personnel carriers that kept the Asiatic Fleet supplied with sailors (the *USS Chaumont (AP-5)* was the other transport providing this service). Thus, Tex began overseas service which indicated he had a strong service record aboard *Chandler*, that his rating (EM3c) was needed on a cruiser.



Tex's ticket to Asia - USS Henderson (AP-1)
Courtesy: Ancestry.com

Tex was one of several hundred of passengers aboard *Henderson* as she crossed the Pacific in June and July 1939 sailing from San Diego via San Francisco to Pearl Harbor and then on to Guam and finally Manila, Philippines, where Tex and his fellow "passengers" were processed through Cavite Navy Yard and Asiatic Fleet headquarters, both of which were in the greater Manila area. From there many, including Tex, would be further transported to U.S. vessels in Asian ports such as Tsingtao and Shanghai, China, the latter in Tex's case.

On 9 July 1939, Tex first boarded the light cruiser *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* as she lay anchored in the Whangpo River (anglicized today as the Huangpu River) directly across from the Bund, the bustling business district of Shanghai, then dubbed "Paris of the Orient". On a cruiser like *Marby*, as she was affectionately referred to by her crew, Tex would make many friends, encounter a larger electrical division, more complex systems (turrets, fire control, generators, communications), greater promotion potential, and an intense operational tempo due to rising tensions in Asia.

Marby's history with Asia began when she joined the Asiatic Fleet in 1938. 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 Tex arrived, 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 September that year, it was a final farewell that deprived Tex of many exotic adventures.



The Marby

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 *Marby*'s skipper, Captain A.G. Robinson, and the rest of the ship's leadership and crew. On 16 Nov 1940, while *Marby* was in Manila, Tex advanced to Electrician's Mate 1st Class. Nine 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).

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 function 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.

The authors of the book [Where Away](#) inadvertently added an 's' to the end of Tex's surname but in fact he was just an 'Owen.' Two other *Marby* sailors did have the last name of Owens (ending with 's') however -

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."



Sealcl Olon James Owens from Tennessee and RM1c Thomas Earl Owens Jr. from Texas. Probably both were his friends, but his closest friend and workmate was another Electrician's Mate, William Arthur Patterson Jr., W.A., for short. W.A. was from the San Antonio area of Texas.

Tex and W.A. frequently worked in the ship's ram room where they often argued about Mexican food. The ram room housed the big hydraulic rams which drove the rudder yoke which in turn controlled the rudder upon which the ship's maneuverability depended.

"You talk about elegant vittles," Patterson once said, "they don't come any better than the stuffed peppers at the Carta Blanca in San Antonio. They've got a nervous-nelly waiter that that I bet's toted more good chow than any man alive."

"Maybe so," Tex said dreamily. "Me, I'd settle right now for a quart of good chili like they've usually go warming on the back of the stove in a café in my hometown." Tex pointedly avoided thinking how far away all that was.

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 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."

Down in the ram room Tex was on watch in place of his friend W.A. Patterson who was on the sick list. He "saw the starboard ram drive the arm of the rudder yoke a full stroke backward and he felt the ship heel to starboard as she began her fast port turn. Topside the 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*.

Throughout the bombing Engineering Warrant and Deck Officer Electrician Jarvis was constantly assessing damage and ordering repairs and other responses. After the Japanese left the sky, a messenger informed him that Capt. Robinson wanted an assessment of the damage to the steering gear. After fighting his way past fire, smoke and wreckage, Jarvis had to pause while some other men were bringing a body out. Jarvis saw that it was the body of one of his electrician's mates, and soon he filled with indescribable horror as he realized it was Tex Owens, The bomb that had jammed the rudder had also killed one of his very best men!



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. In addition to Tex, ten other 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 a hero, many of the survivors took leave to visit their families. Some even got married.

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.

Marby's dead and those of the *Houston* were Initially buried in Tjilatjap, however, Tex Owen was eventually disinterred and reburied in the USAF Mausoleum in the Philippines. In 1950, he was disinterred again, and reburied in Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego, California.

'Tex' Owen is mentioned on the following pages of the 1944 book [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#):
101, 103, 113, 151, 185, 244, and 249.

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
CoPilot AI, Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, and other Internet records.
Corrections, additions, and photos are welcomed by email to spwade@gmail.com.*