

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



James DeForest Nelson
Source: Ancestry.com

Marblehead Biography James DeForest Nelson

James DeForest Nelson was born 4 Jul 1909 in Grand Junction, Mesa County, Colorado to Albert James Nelson (1882–1960), a gold miner, and homemaker Louise Rice (1891–1918). At the time of his birth, the family lived in Goldfield City, a bustling mining town near Pikes Peak at the base of Big Bull Mountain, just west of Colorado Springs. The town had 613 residents in 1910, but today it has less than fifty.

James, whose middle name came from that of his maternal grandfather, William DeForest Rice, late of Telluride, CO, was the first of three children. His siblings were Orman Leroy (1910-1917) and Mary Louise Nelson (1918-1918). However, the 1917-18, period would bring great tragedy to the family. First, Orman died in 1917, and the following year, when James was nine, Spanish flu struck the world. In September that year, when 450 soldiers arrived from Montana for training in Boulder and Colorado Springs (WWI had not yet ended), many were carrying the disease which subsequently swept through the state. Soon the whole Nelson family had the disease. Only James and his dad, Albert, survived.

Albert and James eventually moved in with James' maternal grandmother, Mary Emma Follett, and her husband, Deloss Webb, at their home in Grand Junction, CO. Mary and Deloss were retired, and Albert took a job as a farm laborer in the highly productive Grand Valley area, which has since become known as "Colorado Wine Country." James appears the Junior Class in of the Grand Junction High School 1927 yearbook, positioning him to graduate in 1928, but he does not appear in the graduating class of 1928. Other records indicate that he joined the Navy in 1927 instead, a surprising move in a pre-Depression year, particularly for someone who would later overachieve in the Navy.



Mary Ethel Dorsey 1931
Source: Ancestry.com

James happened to be home visiting his grandmother and Deloss at their Grand Junction home at 1111 Ute Avenue when the 1930 Census was taken. The enumerator recorded that James was a radio operator aboard a ship, but neither the ship's name nor its homeport was recorded. It is possible that it was at this time that he first met his future wife, Mary Ethel Dorsey (1913-2008). She and her parents, Otis Jefferson Dorsey (1879-1949), a building contractor, and homemaker Flora Jane Morrow (1879-1965), lived a ten-minute walk away. Like James, she attended Grand Junction High School, but was four years younger than James. She graduated in 1931. Mary Ethel



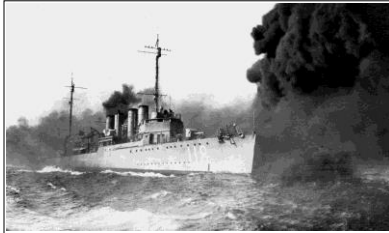
Flora & Otis Dorsey
Source: Ancestry.com

had three siblings: Otis Earl (1905–1973), Hiram Glenn (1907–1985) and Otis Jefferson Jr. (1921–1992).

Mary Ethel and James were married on 9 Feb 1934 in Grand Junction. They lived in various other location during James' career, notably San Diego, CA and later Norfolk, VA. They had two children, Bruce Orman (1934-1983) and Mary Louise (1936-2013).

Researching James' military record for this biography met constraints on several levels. First, James' full military record could not be obtained from the National Archives since this writer is not James' relative. Second, the muster rolls of Navy ships, which indicate changes in rate for enlisted men, are only available for 1938-1946 and officers are rarely mentioned in them. Muster roll information on James was available only from late 1939 to mid-1941. James achieved Warrant Officer and then Ensign in the 1940-42 period, and thereafter, as an officer, he only appears only in Cruise Books and Officer Registries which provide limited data. Despite these constraints, it is accurate to say that James' rise through the ranks from enlistee to senior officer was rapid, particularly since he did not graduate from high school. On average, he earned promotions every 2.6 years even though only six of his service years were during wartime.

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USS Lea laying a smoke screen in 1921
Source: Wikipedia

A Sep 1939 muster roll shows him arriving at the Naval Receiving Ship in San Diego, CA from the Naval Radio Station at Bremerton, WA. A Chief Radioman at the time, he is transferring to the destroyer *USS Lea (DD-118)*. His most recent reenlistment had occurred on 15 Jun 1938. He joined *Lea* on 30 Sep 1939, the date of the ship's 2nd recommissioning. James' was appointed Warrant Officer on 2 May 1940, and that was the date of his last appearance in muster rolls.

The *USS Marblehead (CL-12)*, or *Marby* as she was affectionately referred to by her crew, was probably James' next ship. He appears as that ship's Radio Officer on page 234 in the 1944 book, [Where Away – A Modern Odyssey](#). The book documents *Marby's* bombing on 4 May 1942 off the north coast of Java, Netherlands Antilles (today's Indonesia), and her subsequent improbable escape to New York.

It is highly likely that James joined *Marby* in the Philippines where, on 25 Nov 1941, sensing that hostilities were imminent, Admiral Thomas Hart, Commander of the Asiatic Fleet, ordered his ships to disperse without fanfare to the southwest and into the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). On the night of the 29th, the *Marby* dropped anchor off Tarakan Island, East Borneo, NEI to await further orders. Ten days later, at 0328 hours on 8 Dec 1941, *Marby's* radio crackled with news of the attack on Pearl Harbor and conveyed the order: "Hostilities have commenced. Govern yourselves 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., roused from deep sleep, the entire 700+ crew was standing at attention at their battle stations within eight minutes.

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*, her improbable 90-day, 20,589-mile voyage home was kept secret until 4 May when *Marby* arrived 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 on 5 May began flooding across the nation. Furloughs for the crew followed, and James may have visited family and friends in Colorado.

Probably following *Marby's* arrival in New York, James was commissioned Ensign and sent to the Naval Academy at Annapolis for further training. On 1 May 1943, James was promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade. James attained the rank of Lieutenant on 1 Jul 1944. It was around this time that he and the family moved to Norfolk, VA.

After WWII, James spent time aboard *USS Salt Lake City*. It is unclear when he joined her. Like other ships at the time, *Salt Lake City* was slated for deactivation and ordered to the West Coast, but on 29 Oct 1945, she was reassigned to Operation Magic Carpet duty carrying Pacific theater veterans back to the U.S.

On 14 Nov 45 *Salt Lake City* was added to the list of warships to be used as test vessels for Operation Crossroads, the Atomic Bomb Experiments and Evaluation Tests at Bikini Atoll. Partially stripped and her crew reduced, she sailed for Pearl Harbor in Mar 1946. At Bikini, she was used in evaluating the effects on surface ships of an aerial atomic bomb burst on 1 Jul 1946. In a second test on 25 Jul 1946, she was subjected to a subsurface burst. James' obituary mentions this Bikini bomb test duty. Having survived two atomic bomb blasts, *Salt Lake City* was decommissioned. On 18 Jun 1948, she was sunk as a target hull off the California coast and stricken from the vessel register.



USS Salt Lake City (CA-25)
23 Aug 1935
Source: Wikipedia

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James attained Lieutenant Commander Line on 1 Jan 1949. He served abroad during the Korean War, but his duty stations are not known. He attained the rank of Commander on 1 Jul 1955. At his retirement in 1958, he was serving as executive officer at the Naval Receiving Station in Norfolk.



Mary Ethel Dorsey
Source: Ancestry.com

The man who as a nine-year-old had survived the Spanish Flu and the loss of his mother and siblings, and who later survived the bombing of the *USS Marblehead*, excelled as an enlisted man and a commissioned officer, retiring from the Navy in 1958 at the age of 48½. Sadly, he got little time to enjoy retirement. He died of a heart attack three years later at Portsmouth Naval Hospital, just short of his 52nd birthday. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

James' dad died on 12 May 1960 in Plumas, CA. It is unclear whether he ever knew of his son's achievements.

James' wife, Mary Ethel, soldiered on into the 21st Century, spending time with her children, grandchildren, and friends. In her later years, she moved to Troy, Ohio, to be closer to her family. On 22 Dec 1973, she married Ohio-born widower Walter R. Hoyles (1921–1998), a resident of Hendersonville, NC, and former manager of four Ohio State Parks and former Chief Operator of the Troy, Ohio Water Treatment Plant. Walter died on 21 Mar 1998 in Hendersonville.

Mary Ethel passed on 2 Feb 2008 at the age of ninety-five. She was buried in nearby Vandalia, OH.

James DeForest Nelson is listed on page 234 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 members rosalia35 and Sharon, and from the records of Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, and other Internet sources.

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