

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

The *MS Marechal Joffre* Story *Flyboys in Search of a Boat*

One of the great tales of WWII chutzpah began in Manila Bay shortly after the Japanese invaded the Philippines on 8 Dec 42. Most U.S. planes had been quickly destroyed or disabled by the Japanese air assault leaving American airman with few options for escape. Most Allied warships and merchant vessels had departed the country in late November 1941, but a 14,000-ton French mail ship, *MS Maréchal Joffre*, still sat idle in Manila Bay. Fully crewed and fueled, she was paralyzed by political debate among her crew many of which supported the Nazi-installed Vichy French regime that had inherited the vessel after Germany seized control of France in 1940. However, the majority of the ship's crew favored the Free French regime in exile led by General Charles de Gaulle.



The standoff ended on 14 Dec 41 when, with Asiatic Fleet Commander Admiral Thomas Hart's approval, a band of U.S. Navy aviators and ground crew, largely from PatWing 10 and led by Lt. Edward Little brandishing a sword and revolver, commandeered a local yacht named *Gem*, boarded the French ship, and sent the Vichy loyalists ashore. Four days later, with more plane-less comrades on board, they sailed for America via Java, Australia, and New Zealand, with the *USS Marblehead (CL-12)* escorting the ship on the Surabaya, Java-to-Darwin, Australia leg.

The French ship reached San Francisco with a cargo of wool and zircon sand on 19 Apr 42. On 27 Apr 42 she was recommissioned *USS Rochambeau (AP-63)*, after French general Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, whose troops provided critical assistance to the American colonials fighting the British during the American Revolution.

USS Rochambeau went on to play important roles in WWII. Departing Oakland, CA on 20 Oct 42 on her first operation under the U.S. flag, she delivered additional manpower to the Guadalcanal campaign and evacuated casualties from Suva, and Bora Bora to San Francisco on 3 Dec 42. She delivered more troops and supplies later that December to New Zealand and Australia, and in March 1943, to New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. (On the latter voyage, a young Lieutenant (JG) John F. Kennedy rode her to Espiritu Santo before moving on to Tulagi, Solomon Islands to command PT-109). From June 1943 and into 1944, *Rochambeau* resumed passenger/casualty runs to the south Pacific adding ports in New Guinea and the central Solomons to her itineraries. Her final runs in late-1944 and early-1945 brought back casualties from Eniwetok, Guam, and Kwajalein.

Despite Lt. Little's role in seizing the French ship as escape options dwindled in Manila in late-1941, he did not sail with her to flee the Japanese but stayed behind to help slow their conquest of the Philippines. Captured after the fall of Corregidor, Lt. Little became senior Allied officer in Fukuoka #17 prison camp on Japan's southern island, Kyushu. After WWII, he was court marshalled for "conduct unbecoming an officer," allegedly for informing on prisoners to camp officials. However, those charges were never proven.

At the end of WWII, *USS Rochambeau* was decommissioned and returned to the French Government.

