



**Buel Caperton**  
Tech Sergeant, U.S. Marines  
World War II  
1943-1945

At the age of 18, I was drafted in 1943 and left Tyler to serve in the Marine Air Force. Since my birthday is in September, I had started school late; so I had to get a deferment to finish high school. Actually, I thought I had been turned down. My mother said, “Well, they won’t ever take you. You’re too skinny.” But they called me up again on May 21<sup>st</sup> along with several other boys I knew. School had closed early that year for that reason.

I was glad to serve my country and was super glad to be in the Marine Corps. They assigned three of us boys from the Tyler area to the Marines, and we picked up a fourth recruit in Dallas on our way to San Diego.

During basic training, I learned to work on Corsair airplanes. The Corsair, F4U, was a great plane and was the only Navy prop plane flown in World War II that was also used during the Korean War. We trained at night in the Mojave Desert. That was quite an experience when it was 100 to 110 degrees. Hot, but beautiful country.

Before long, we hitched a ride on a tanker to the New Hebron Islands in the South Pacific. We left San Diego at sunset on a Sunday. That was a lonesome, sad time for me. I went to the front of the ship and prayed that God would go with me and that I could walk in His footsteps and be protected by Him. I believe that’s why I’m sitting here today. I had a praying mother and grandmother and many others praying for me as well. As we sailed through what was known as Submarine Alley, we were told our ship could be sunk at any time. I could see nothing around us but water and constantly thought about the possibility of enemy submarine attacks. We managed to stay safe by zigzagging directions every two or three minutes. Of course, it took a long time to reach our destination.

A few weeks later, we sailed to Guadalcanal and on to Bougainville — the largest island in the Solomon Islands, where we remained about six months. The United States only had taken part of Bougainville, about seven square miles. Our planes bombed the Japanese across the

mountain. At night, the enemy would bring in submarines to try to feed their starving soldiers. But as night fighters, we were able to send those submarines back out to sea. We flew short missions until we arrived at Formosa in the Philippines in 1944. Our goal was to keep the Japanese on the island.

We never knew where our flight crews were going when they left each morning. Of course, they ran into a lot of fighter planes. Our pilots were some of the best. We even had two sergeants who flew before we got to the Philippines. Then all the pilots were young officers.

Most people don't realize how much fabric was on the Corsair and several other planes. The leading edge and the body were metal but the wings and back part of the aircraft contained a lot of fabric. Nobody wanted to work on that tough fabric after an airplane had been damaged, but that was my job. Sometimes I had to patch it, and sometimes I had to replace half a wing. It required a lot of careful sewing on my part. In the South Pacific, I was in charge of a shop where that work was done along with other aircraft repairs. There were 262 people there, including our pilots. It was a big responsibility. If we didn't repair an airplane properly, it could be disastrous.

The planes even had self-sealing gas tanks. That's how they developed the idea for self-sealing tires. The enemy could shoot a tracer bullet right through the gas tank, and it wouldn't explode. No air could get to it. At the time, that was a well-guarded secret. Following a mission, the gas tanks always had to be replaced, whether or not they had been damaged. Armored plating also provided extra protection for our pilots that the Japanese didn't have. In spite of all that, the Corsair actually was a hard plane to fly and required seasoned pilots.

I was a Christian when I went into the service. In war, however, one has a tendency to live a little closer to God. He is always there if you just reach out and open your heart to let Him come in. I believe the Lord even played a part in my selection for the Air Force. That was the best thing that ever happened to me. Sometimes I felt so close to the Lord that I could just feel Him walking with me.

The Lord's hand was on me all the way. I never got a scratch. It seemed like I always was in the right place at the right time. It wasn't smooth sailing, however. The South Pacific was extremely hot and humid, and we lost a lot of planes and a number of pilots. One Sunday morning, the Japanese managed to get through and drop a 250-pound bomb on our squadron. It fell near my tent, killing seven boys and wounding about 19 more. Luckily, I was in church at the time. I could return to the island today and show you where I was standing at the time. We were leaving the church when it hit and shook the ground. I thought, *The Lord's hand is on me. I could have been there.* One of my best friends was killed.

It was bad, but I couldn't let it bear on my mind too much. One of my biggest concerns was whether or not the men who died had been saved. A lot of boys claimed to have been saved, and it was not up to me to judge them. I just hoped and prayed they were true Christians.

No one in the United States knew what was going on in the South Pacific back then. It wasn't in the paper every day or on the news every night like things are now. Though I like to hear the news, I think it's easier for soldiers if they know reports about their activities are not being flashed across the world. Today's soldiers are certainly better equipped than we were. World War II took a lot of men, something like 11 or 12 million. Sadly, I believe that as many as 20% of our men who were lost in World War II were killed by friendly fire. The Marines practiced close air support and sometimes got in the wrong place. That happens in every war and always will.

I've never told some of these stories before. Of course, I've never been asked. Though I didn't fight in big battles and really had an easy time of it compared to others, it still was hard. I

found out that homesickness really can make one physically ill. I saw other men who came into our camp who had not been able to rest at all or even shave or bathe in weeks. We would stay out of their way so they could clean up and have a good time. But it was heartbreaking to see such young men in such bad condition.

We returned home on a troop ship in November 1945 after the war had begun to wind down. I figured I might have to go back overseas, but it turned out that I had earned enough points to stay home. If I had gone to Japan, I would have had to stay there two years. Once again, God's hand was on me. Back in the States, I left Cherry Point, North Carolina, and headed home. That was the best feeling. Though I wanted to go back into the Marines, something stopped me. I'm glad I didn't since the Korean War came along not too much later.

After I came home, it was hard to find a job. Six or seven million boys had been turned loose and they were looking for work, too. We took anything we could get. My first job paid 50 cents an hour. That was the shortest job I ever had — five days. Gradually, I was able to find better jobs. It was tough economically, but servicemen were respected then. I feel so sorry for the Viet Nam veterans because of the way they were treated. We really appreciated the good treatment we received.

During my time in the Marine Corps, I grew up quickly. Like other 18-year-old boys, I wanted to play. But there wasn't a lot of playing to be done. I had to do my job as best I could. Also, the further up the ladder I went, the more responsibility I carried on my shoulders. We didn't earn stripes for nothing. We earned them for working hard. I did my best and feel like I was rewarded for it. I can't say I enjoyed that time, but I am grateful I came out in one piece. A lot of men didn't.

There will never be another war fought like World War II was fought, and I hope there will never be another Viet Nam. But today's soldiers are well equipped and well trained. I think they will do their job well, too, as long as they know who the enemy is. I pray that they do. So far, they haven't let us down.

Today I see the American flag and am proud of it. But I'm afraid our freedom is deteriorating quickly, particularly freedom of religion. I don't want to see God left out of anything. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing wrong with Christianity being involved in anything. Christianity is a good thing to have in government. I don't believe Christians are standing up and doing what they should to ensure that.