

# Jim Downing

## A Pioneer of Discipling Movements

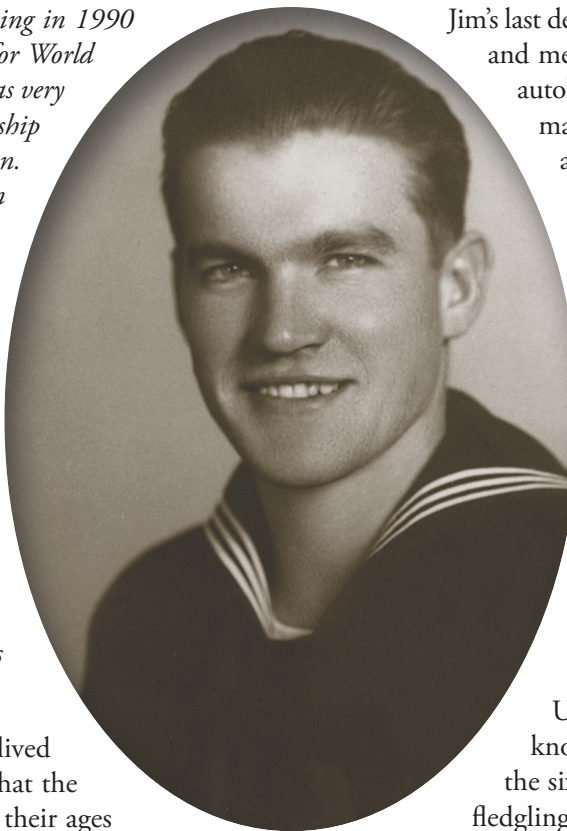
August 22, 1913–February 13, 2018

BY **ROBBY BUTLER**

*Editor's Note: I first met Jim Downing in 1990 just after joining the U.S. Center for World Mission, now Frontier Ventures. I was very impressed by Jim's passion for discipleship and completing world evangelization. That passion continued to burn brightly throughout his life. I was honored to work with Jim and Robby Butler on the Jan-Feb 2011 issue of MF. This collaborative effort was the beginning of my journey to discover the power of movements—unbroken chains of multiplying disciples—and changed my understanding of the missionary task. Jim's life as a disciple-maker and movement catalyst will be the most important and longest-lasting impact of Jim's very amazing life.*

Note the dates; that's no typo. Jim lived 104½ years! He liked to observe that the very young and the very old track their ages in fractions.

Jim's distinguished military career included the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, where Jim repeatedly told God, "I'll be with you in a minute." But God had other plans. A decade later Jim commanded a ship in the Korean War, and he lived to be among the oldest living survivors of Pearl Harbor. In



Jim's last decade he became a talk-show celebrity and met several U.S. presidents. Jim's 2016 autobiography, *The Other Side of Infamy*, made him the world's oldest male book author.

But the distinguished career, public spotlight, and world record were all secondary to Jim. His passion was making disciples who make disciples. Jim approached interviews as an opportunity to influence his interviewers and audience for Christ. Jim included his testimony in his autobiography and was determined for everyone in the military and their families to have the opportunity to read it.

Upon experiencing the joy of knowing Christ in 1935, Jim became the sixth sailor to join Dawson Trotman's fledgling Navigator ministry.

Just three months later, four of the first five Navigators had left military service, and the fifth deferred to Jim's leadership. "The future of the Navigators depends on an inside man in the Navy," Jim thought. "I am willing to be that man."

Jim re-enlisted to lead a residency program that won,

BY **ROBBY BUTLER**

[Robby.Butler@MultMove.net](mailto:Robby.Butler@MultMove.net)

[MultMove.net/resources](http://MultMove.net/resources)

**Robby Butler** graduated from Caltech in 1982, then served 24 years with the U.S. Center for World Mission (USCWM, now Frontier Ventures). There he worked closely with and was mentored by the founder—Dr. Ralph Winter. He also served and worked closely with Dr. Donald McGavran, Dr. Thomas Wang of the Lausanne Movement, and Dr. Luis Bush of AD2000. Robby helped Steve Smith publish the No Place Left saga (Hastening and Rebirth), edited James Nyman's *Stubborn Perseverance*, and has been a contributor and guest editor for Mission Frontiers. Robby's current focus is researching and promoting materials and methods to better equip Christ's body to pursue movements among every people group.





prepared and sent reproducing disciples throughout the Navy. Dawson later estimated that under this first decade of Jim's leadership and by the end of WWII, the Navigator discipling movement had spread to 1,000 ships and 1,000 military bases. Today the Navigator ministry is in more than 100 countries.

Jim's involvement with the Navigators spanned more than 80 years, including 20 years as board chairman and nearly 35 years *after* his 1983 retirement, at the age of 70.

In the early 1990s, when Jim was already nearly 80, Ralph Winter invited him to visit the USCWM to regularly disciple its young leaders. Jim seemed to take special notice of me as Ralph Winter's personal assistant, and we forged a lasting friendship.

Almost two decades later Jim traveled to invest in my life again. I was studying and praying about how to better mobilize the church and was drawn to focus on reproducing *discipleship*. In March 2010 I called Jim.

"I have some questions about Trotman's vision for discipleship," I said.

"Let me come visit you," Jim replied.

Just the previous month Jim had lost Morena, his wife of 68 years. He was 96½, and ready for whatever God had next. God gave Jim the word "availability" for this season, and he traveled, disciplined and spoke through December 2017, well past his 104<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Jim made everyone feel special. He was comfortable among those of high position, but never carried an air of self-importance and was concerned for the spiritual state of everyone he met. When Jim saw me in 2010, he resumed discipling me by discussing his next steps for discipling David, a young man who had helped care for Morena.

Jim was as eager to learn as to teach. Shortly after a Simply the Story trainer demonstrated the use of Bible storytelling in discipleship, I saw Jim use Bible storytelling with a gathering of veterans. When I talked with Jim about Avery Willis's "Discipleship Revolution"—based on Avery's collaboration with Real Life Ministries (RLM) in Idaho—Jim got interested as well.


In April 2010, just before Avery passed away, Jim and I traveled to New Orleans to experience the RLM model. Jim told me it was "the best church-based model of discipleship I have ever seen."

Jim was nearly 100 then and had then been actively discipling for 75 years. His endorsement of RLM emboldened me to draw a dozen others (including *MF* editor Rick Wood and his wife) to a second presentation of the RLM model at Navigator headquarters a few months later. There Rick asked me for an article on RLM. With Jim's support I countered by offering to prepare a whole issue on discipleship and discipling movements (Jan/Feb 2011).

Jim contributed two articles for that issue: one emphasizing insights from Ralph Winter that impacted Jim during his 1990s visits to the USCWM and the other on knowing God vs. knowing about Him. Jim also gave a video interview expanding on both articles and approved my distillation of Jim's transcript of Dawson Trotman's 1956 call for reproducing disciples.

This 2011 issue of *MF* led with a tribute to Avery Willis and the RLM breakthrough and introduced the Training for Trainers Process from Steve Smith's 2011 book *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution: The Story Behind the World's Fastest Growing Church Planting Movement and How it Can Happen in Your Community!*

Initial reports attributed Jim's death to complications from surgery (for life-threatening conditions). Jim recovered well from the surgery but had a mild heart attack almost a week later. He passed away two weeks after the heart attack.

*MF* owes an enduring debt to Jim for modeling and helping us to recognize the significance of movements (unbroken chains) of multiplying disciples. Even researching this tribute has surfaced insights relevant for discipling movement residencies today. 

This and other articles are available in PDF and booklet formats at





