



Jim Downing

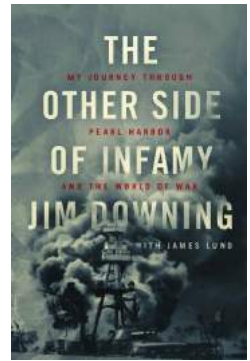
Pioneer of Discipling Movement Residencies

August 22, 1913 – February 13, 2018

by Robby Butler

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](#)¹ 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](#).²



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. And Jim's testimony for Christ in his book made him eager to get it out to everyone in the military, or with a military friend or family member.

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

¹ JimDowning.net/military-experience

² GuinnessWorldRecords.com/world-records/oldest-male-author-

Within three months however, four of the previous five Navigators were discharged, and the fifth deferred to Jim's leadership. Jim had no intention of a career in the navy, but when it came time for his enlistment to expire he thought, *The future of the Navigators depends on an inside man in the Navy. I am willing to be that man.* Jim re-enlisted to continue leading shipboard discipleship.³



By 1941, 125 sailors were reproducing disciples on 50 ships, and Dawson estimated that by the end of Jim's first decade the Navigator discipling movement had spread to 1,000 ships and 1,000 military bases.⁴ Today the Navigator ministry is in more than 100 countries.

Jim's involvement with the [Navigators](#)⁵ 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 104th birthday.

³ Read more in [The Other Side of Infamy: My Journey Through Pearl Harbor and the World of War](#), pp. 56,58.

⁴ Dawson Trotman in "Born to Reproduce" turret2.discipleshiplibrary.com/1A.mp3 starting at 18m45s.

⁵ Navigators.org/jim-downing-a-life-well-lived

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](#)⁶ trainer demonstrated the use of Bible storytelling in discipleship, I saw Jim use Bible storytelling with a gathering of veterans. And 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 this 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](#)⁷).

Jim contributed two articles for that issue—one emphasizing [insights from Ralph Winter](#)⁸ that impacted Jim during his 1990s visits to the USCWM, the other on [knowing God vs. knowing about Him](#).⁹ Jim also gave a [video interview](#) expanding on both articles¹⁰ and approved my distillation of Jim’s transcript of Dawson Trotman’s 1956 call for [reproducing disciples](#).¹¹

⁶ [SimplyTheStory.org](#)

⁷ [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/archive/discipleship-revolution](#)

⁸ [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/75-years-as-a-disciple-maker](#)

⁹ [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/you-can-know-god-personally](#)

¹⁰ [Vimeo.com/19016613](#)

¹¹ [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/a-passionate-call-for-maturity-that-reproduces](#)

This 2011 issue of *MF* led with a tribute to [Avery Willis](#) and the RLM breakthrough,¹² and introduced the [Training for Trainers Process](#)¹³ 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 recognize the significance of movements (unbroken chains) of multiplying disciples. Even researching this tribute has surfaced insights relevant for [discipling movement residencies](#)¹⁴ today.

¹² [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/avery-willis-last-dream](https://missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/avery-willis-last-dream) this

¹³ [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/training-for-trainers-process](https://missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/training-for-trainers-process)

¹⁴ [Movements.net/blog/blog/2018/2/25/156-growing-workers-for-noplacelleft](https://movements.net/blog/blog/2018/2/25/156-growing-workers-for-noplacelleft)