

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

The Nimitz Education and Research Center  
Fredericksburg, Texas

An interview with Irving Butler  
Michigan  
December 6, 2012

CHARLIE SIMMONS: This is Charlie Simmons. Today is the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, 2012. I'm interviewing Les Butler with Les in his hometown in Michigan and I am in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information that's related to this site. Les, if you would please, state your name and your place of birth and your date of birth and we'll take it from there.

LES BUTLER: My name is Irving L. Butler. I go by the name of Les.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay.

LES BUTLER: And my date of birth is 9-29-25. And Lynn, Massachusetts.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay. And what sort of family did you have? Brothers and sisters?

LES BUTLER: Had one brother and four sisters.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: And older or you're younger?

LES BUTLER: I'm the second oldest.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay. And what did your parents do?

LES BUTLER: Well it was in the Depression. So they didn't do very much. My father got a job late in the Depression in a print shop. So he became a printer. And my mother never worked.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: So did you grow up in the same town? Same vicinity through your younger years?

LES BUTLER: No, we moved from Massachusetts when I was about five I guess to Brooklyn, New York. It was a traumatic move. My father got a job driving a trolley car in Brooklyn.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Do you remember much about the move?

LES BUTLER: Yeah, well I lived there till, I lived in New York till I was oh, well till I joined the Navy.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Uh-huh. Okay so you went to school in, local school in your neighborhood in Brooklyn? And grew up, and did you finish high school?

LES BUTLER: No, I joined the Navy at 16 'cause the war had started. And I quit school, joined the Navy, and they took me when I was 17.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: What made you decide that you wanted to go into the Navy?

LES BUTLER: [Laughs] That's a good question. I decided I wanted to be a Marine. And I was short, very short, I was 5'6". I weighed about 108 pounds. And I went down to the recruiting and the Navy and Marines were on the same floor in an office building in downtown Brooklyn. Anyway, I got off the elevator and the Navy was right there. And I looked down the hall and there was this giant of a Marine in his dress blues. And I said, that's for me, boy. I strutted down the aisle and I got to him and I took a left turn and ran right into his arm. My nose right into his arm. [Laughter] And he said to me, "Where you going, sonny?" I said, "I'm going to join the Marines!" He said, "Get the hell out of here. Go down the hall and join the Navy." I was so embarrassed. I couldn't believe it. But I timidly turned around and walked out and joined the Navy.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Well I'll ask you the question then, what made you decide you wanted to join the Marines? To start with?

LES BUTLER: I just wanted to go kill Japs.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah. How long after -

LES BUTLER: I was incensed over Pearl Harbor.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm. And how long after Pearl Harbor was this that you enlisted?

LES BUTLER: Well, it was October, well I went in October 3 of 1942.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: So once you got signed up in the Navy, and you were 17 at the time, is that correct?

LES BUTLER: Right, I was 17. They took me on my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Where did you go to boot camp?

LES BUTLER: Rhode Island. I don't remember the base. Just it was in Rhode Island.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: You remember much about the training you got there? Did you feel like it was -

LES BUTLER: No, just that it was cold. Had to get up at five in the morning and do some exercises and run. And I don't know what else we did do. I remember the cold.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: And did you apply for any schools after that? Or were you accepted into any schools?

LES BUTLER: Oh, I went to school. The top part of the class was able to pick their school and I wanted to go to Aviation Mechanic School. 'Cause I wanted to become a Gunner. Flying. And I went. Down in Memphis, Tennessee.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Memphis Naval Air Station.

LES BUTLER: Right. Well, no, not the air station. Well, I don't know. The school was across the street from the air station.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Oh, okay. Okay.

LES BUTLER: We used to go over to the air station to fly with the Cadets. I guess they liked to have somebody in that front seat 'cause they're flying from the back seat. And it was great. We were all young and stupid and it was great flying with them. They learned to fly formation. God their wings, I swear they must have come within an inch of each other about half the time. But it was fun.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: [*laughs*] Yeah. Had you ever flown before that time?

LES BUTLER: No. No.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay so you finished Aviation Mechanic School and, did that then qualify you in any way to be an Air Crewman?

LES BUTLER: Well no. It gave me a rating. I was Third Class. And then I put in for Gunnery School. And I went to Gunnery School in Jacksonville, Florida. And, you know, we learned how to handle a machine gun from a turret. They had turrets set up on trucks. We used to shoot at the targets that were towed by the planes off the beach. And we learned early that if we shot the line, broke the line that was towing the sleeve, we could get the afternoon off. We could leave then for liberty because there was nothing else for us to do that day. [Laughter] But I was there for, I don't know how long, maybe a couple of months.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: When you finished up in Jacksonville what was the next step?

LES BUTLER: Like the Army does, here I was, everything I was doing aimed at becoming a Air Crewman. They sent me to a CASU outfit in, let's see, it's in Florida I mean in California. I forget the name of it. It's, I think it's an island, but anyway, we get there and what they did there was train pilots. At the base, they used to ship the everything, anything and everything, off to the war. We used to have to go over and take planes to the Compass Rose and tow 'em over there. And then we'd start 'em up and take 'em about a mile down to the Compass Rose. And set the compass for the planes and we'd drive 'em back. It was always so tempting. I never saw anyone do it; I heard people did it. But so tempting, you're taxiing pretty fast. And you feel like you should take it off but you don't.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: What sort of planes? What models were you working with there?

LES BUTLER: Mostly torpedo planes, the TBFs.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Uh-huh.

LES BUTLER: TBMs. Whatever.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: So your job, you were just sort of on the ground crew situation there for a period of time?

LES BUTLER: Yeah. Then, you know, when there wasn't anything for that to do, I was a Plane Captain on the fighter planes on the tarmac. My friend and I, he had been to the Gunnery School with me, and he and I were in the same group. As a matter of fact we were Plane Captains on the same plane, right next to each other. One day the Chief came out and he looked and he looked right, came down looking right at us and stopped and he said, "I need two volunteers to go on the *USS Enterprise*. Now." [Laughs] So. That's like an order.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.



LES BUTLER: But that, we wanted to get out of there. We wanted to get to sea, we wanted to get into the war. So we both jumped at it. And I figured if I got on the carrier then I could get in a squadron but I didn't know much about how those things worked, so. But we went. We went up to Bremerton. The ship was in there being fixed up after being bombed down in the South Pacific. And about, I guess, end of September or so we sailed down. Stopped at Hawaii and then went to our first engagement. Right in the war right away.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: And this was, this would have been September '43 then?

LES BUTLER: Went to Tarawa. Yeah.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay. So Tarawa was your first engagement?

LES BUTLER: Right. And from there, you know, we hit about every island. Going to Tarawa, Makin, Guam. God, I can't even remember all the names. But while I was on the *Enterprise* I got, I have 14 major battle stars on my ribbons.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay, now what was your job? Had you been assigned to a squadron yet or were you just –

LES BUTLER: No, I was just pushing planes around on the flight deck and that what killed me. I hated it. But, and I guess I showed that in my letters home. My mother and father were at the

movies one time. And the Fox Movietone news was on. On Navy training Pilots and Air Crewmen. And they said it cost \$50,000 to train a Pilot and \$25,000 to train an Air Crewmen. That's what my father told me. Anyway, he, my father was incensed that here I am pushing planes around the flight deck. He knew I wanted to fly so bad. So he wrote a letter to the President and told him the story. And said he was going to cancel his war bonds. He was going to move out of his job in the war factory. I don't know where he was working. I think it was Grumman.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: But anyway, he said he was going to quit both. Because they, you know, they spent all that money training me and then got me doing up there, pushing a plane around like anybody could do. So he sent it, sent it to the President. The President sent it to the Bureau Naval Personnel. Bureau Naval Personnel sent it back to him and wanted more information on all the schools I'd been to.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Really?

LES BUTLER: So he sent that to me. I got it aboard ship. He said on his note that I could probably do it faster than he could sending it. So I said, "Okay." We thought about it first. We were a little nervous about even writing to the Bureau Naval Personnel. But I did write it. And

had to take it down to the exec's office to get it out off the ship. I thought the exec was going to throw us bodily off the ship.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Oh gosh.

LES BUTLER: But he threw us out of his office and said we'd hear from him. Well the next day there was an item in the plan of the day that said, "All qualified combat Air Crewmen report to the exec's office at 15:30 the following day." So we went down there and there was about 12 or 13 guys there. One of 'em had shot down two planes down at Rabaul. One, another one had shot down a plane someplace else down the South Pacific. The rest of 'em had been flying somewhat. You know, in different planes. Bombers and torpedo planes.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: And so we all had to give the exec our training and such. Then he threw us all out. [Laughs] And then we were on our way back to Guam and we were at anchor in Guam. I was down in the berthing area and this Ensign came up and said, "Is Butler here?" And I said, "That's me." He said, "You got 20 minutes to get off this ship. Your orders are at the Quarterdeck." I couldn't believe him. I said, "Where am I going?" He said, "You got 20 minutes to get off the ship." I said, "Okay." He says, "Is Bernard here?" I said, "That's him over there." He went over and he told Bernard the same thing. So all we knew was we were getting off the

ship. So we packed everything in a bag. We had parachute bags that we got some place along the line.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: And went up the Quarterdeck. They threw us off the ship, took us over to a baby carrier, which was going back to Pearl Harbor. Up [*indiscernible, 15:39*] a couple of days later and went to Pearl Harbor and got into a retraining squadron. We were there about a month, flying in torpedo planes, gunners. And then we got sent to, down to the Admiralty Islands. It was 31 crews went and a crew consisted of a Turret Gunner and a Radio Man. And there was 31 crews and by then I was a Second Class so I was in charge of the 62 men going down the Admiralty Islands. To pick up the fleet, anyway. Go out –

CHARLIE SIMMONS: What was your transportation going down there? What were you on?

LES BUTLER: It was another Jeep Carrier. Took us down there. So we get down to the Admiralty Islands. And this was, this is straight skinny, we get down there and, well, they set us up on the Hangar Deck with cots. And we all had our flight jackets and we had 38s that were issued to us when we were leaving. So the first night, knowing that these Navy flight jackets were, anybody wanted to steal them, and they were hard to come by. And we had the 38s. With our holsters and they were, you know, that go under your armpit.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: Anyway, so I put, I didn't do anything the first night but the first night, one gun and two flight jackets were stolen. So I said, that's enough of that. I mounted an armed guard that night. Oh God, the next day the Master of Arms came and got me and took me down the exec's office and the exec balled me out and he took me into the Captain and the Captain ranted and raved and wanted to know who the hell I thought I was to mount an armed guard on his ship. So I told him the story.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: Huh?

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Well of course you would! I mean, what, how could they argue about it? I mean -

LES BUTLER: Well, he did. He didn't, he just felt that I didn't have the authority to do that and it was his responsibility. Then he told me, he said, "You get every one of those guns, take 'em down to the armory, and put 'em in the vault in the armory. When you get off the ship, we'll give 'em back to you." I said, "Okay." [*Laughs*] I couldn't say anything else.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Sure. [*Laughs*]

LES BUTLER: So we did. And when we got down to the Admiralty Islands, we went up to the, we were called up to the Quarterdeck, my group. And I took my orders up there and was going to give 'em to the Officer of the Deck but he didn't want 'em. He just said, "Where you going, Red Beach or Blue Beach?" And real smart, snotty-like. And I told him, I said, "I don't know." I said, "I'm going to go to COMSOPAC." Which is Command of South Pacific. And he asked me again, did I want Red Beach or Blue Beach. The third time he asked me that I said, "I guess I got the message." So I took Red Beach. And he brought in, 'cause we were at anchor. He brought in a, you know, landing craft. We took our gear and went down there and got in it. And took off. And we went for, oh God, a couple of hours on that thing. Instead of going to the main island where the COMSOPAC was, they took us and dropped us off at an island up the way. And all I could see was jungle. And it was getting late in the day. Anyway, I finally found the Officer of the Day there. They put us up in bunks in Quonset huts. And said, "You can work your way out of here tomorrow." 'Cause he didn't know where COMSOPAC was. So we did. We went in there, it happened to be a Sunday I think. And anyway, we went to bed that night. Next morning, got up. I went looking for where the office was. And I couldn't find it and I asked where the ships were 'cause I had, oh, I'm getting ahead of myself. I was trying to find the office and I couldn't get it but we had the cots and nobody was talking to us. Nobody come looking for us. So we figured, well, we'll rest a couple of days. Well, *[laughs]* the guys started to go to, they had an air field there because they used to fly planes in and fly 'em out. And they went down to the, the guys were going down to the beach. And they took some of the rafts out of the torpedo planes that were down that way. Went out and there was fishing rod stuff in

the rafts. You know, emergency gear, if you get shot down and you got in your raft. And you had a little something to sustain yourself until somebody picked you up. And they were going to row over to the island of Ponam. Which is the big island there, I guess. And there was still Japs on Ponam. Matter of fact, when you're flying in, Japs would take pot-shots at the planes.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Jesus.

LES BUTLER: But there wasn't enough that they wanted to go in and force 'em out. 'Cause it's a big island and they didn't figure there was too many of 'em there. Anyway, I finally figured something's up. We've gotta stop this. You know, these guys are stealing the life rafts and everything and we should be in the war! I said, "I'm going to go to jail if I don't get out of here." So I finally went up and demanded to see the OD. I found the OD and he said he would find out. Oh, I know. Went into the office to find out where the OD was. I noticed in the out box on the counter, the O-man there would throw the stuff in the out box, and I saw the names of some of the guys in my group. And it said, you know, they were assigned to different ships. I looked, I picked up one, looked at the other. Like four guys going to one ship, two guys to another ship and, I said, "Oh my God." I said to the mailman there, the O-man, I said, "Where are these ships?" And he pointed out, he said, "There they go. They're going back to the war." They were sailing out. I don't know how many there was. A small task group. So I said I have to see the OD. Anyway I finally got ahold of him, told him the story, the whole story and he says, "Oh, I'll do something." So he got us another LCI landing craft and we got on board it and they took us down to the –

CHARLIE SIMMONS: I'm sorry to interrupt you but, have you got all 62 guys, all 31 crews are still together with you?

LES BUTLER: Yes. Had two Quonset huts they made available to us. Anyway, we all went back and I went in to the main office down where the offices were. I don't remember which island was which. And I went in, turned my orders over to a Marine who was at the desk, whoever was in charge. I say, "Oh God, here it comes." And he come out and he said, "Okay, I'll have a truck here in a little bit. You'll load your gear in the truck and tomorrow we'll get with you and make your assignments." And about that time, the ships were coming back in for some reason or another. They must have gone out just to work out some kinks with the crew or something. But, anyway, they came back. And a couple of days later we all got assigned to our ships. And I went on the *USS Saginaw Bay*. As a Gunner in a torpedo plane with a squadron. As a replacement. Then we went, from there, we went up, we're going up to the Philippines. And MacArthur was going back. And we were in the task force so we were doing anti-sub work in the task force to keep MacArthur safe. And make sure he didn't get shot out. And we had a pretty good task force. And, so we were doing our flying, every day, anti-submarine work. And one day we came across a Jap sub. And the pilot was going in, we were dropping depth charges and I said, "Make sure you bank hard. I want to shoot the, what the hell do they call it, the periscope, if I can, off that sub." And the sub is crash diving then. So he dropped the depth charge, he banked hard and I fired at, I don't know what I hit if I hit, I was shooting at the island hoping I could get the periscope so he'd have to stay under or surface.



CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: So they could get him. If our depth charge didn't kill 'em. And then we went on up to the Philippines and stayed up there for a while.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Now when you were on submarine patrol, Les, those depth charges had, you could alter, you could set the depth that you wanted the depth charge to explode. Was that a responsibility you had when –

LES BUTLER: No, the pilot did that.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Oh, okay.

LES BUTLER: Yeah, we had no control over any of that. All I had was my 50-caliber gun.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay.

LES BUTLER: The radiomen had a gun in the belly, as you know, 'cause you've got one of those TBFs on you.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Right.

LES BUTLER: Or TBMs.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: But I figured well, the radioman being down in the bomb bay area would be able to set the depth on the depth charge.

LES BUTLER: No, he can't get in the bomb bay. All he had was his radio. He had radar. And a 30-caliber gun sticking out the bottom.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay.

LES BUTLER: So anyway, the ship called us off because they had a destroyer coming in and was going to take on the sub. Well I think we sank the sub, though I never was given anything. But when we got out of the Navy I went up to Massachusetts. My Pilot was getting married. One of the women at the wedding said to me, "Did you get a Navy Cross like Mike did?" I said, "Well, no, the Pilot got that." "Oh, oh, okay." Then I realized we must have gotten credit for sinking that thing because that's the only way he would ever get a Navy Cross.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Well.

LES BUTLER: It's a Capital ship and, you know, he would get a Navy Cross if he sank the damn thing.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: So I just assumed that we did. I eventually got an air medal but that was it.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: And I wasn't out there too long before, they rotate the squadrons about every six months or so. They did during the war. And we went back to Pearl Harbor and eventually I got back to the States. And after that I was flying as a Plane Captain in B-24s in Kansas [*laughs*]. And I said, "This is hardly Navy" but they were training crews for the B-24s in Olathe at Kansas. I think it's Olathe at Kansas. And we did a lot of skip bombing and that kinda thing, training.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Uh-huh.

LES BUTLER: And, but then the, I think the war ended or was, I guess the war was over then. And I got sent to Pensacola, Florida, again flying in torpedo planes but that didn't last too long 'cause I was due to get out. I had a four year enlistment and my time was almost up.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: And that was my career. Then when the Korean War started I was in the reserve squadron at Floyd Bennett Field in New York. Flying again in torpedo planes. TBFs. Then when the war was started in Korea, they, man, they called us back, I don't think the war was a day and a half over before they called us back.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

LES BUTLER: The whole squadron. And the squadron that was at Floyd Bennett Field went to the West Coast to get into the war. We stayed on the East Coast doing anti-submarine work, looking for Russian subs. We were on the *USS Saginaw Bay*. I never heard of Saginaw Bay but now I live in Michigan and it's about 20 miles from me.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Well, yeah, well have they got your name on the plaque up there?

LES BUTLER: [*laughter*] I don't think so. Squadron doesn't belong to the ship as you probably know.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Well that's true, that's true. Yeah. What was the squadron designation that you had?

LES BUTLER: VC-78.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Okay. And the *Saginaw Bay* was a CVE-82 so, sometimes the squadrons have the same designation as the ship. I'm not quite sure why.

LES BUTLER: No, I remember when I was on the *Enterprise* they used to alternate the squadrons and it was the Air Group Six and then Air Group Ten. And then Air Group Six and then Ten. I was on there long enough that they had to change it a few times.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: I see. Yeah.

LES BUTLER: We sailed down the Caribbean and we went to Guantanamo, we operated out of Guantanamo Bay for a while and out of Norfolk for most of the time.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Pretty good wartime duty, then, it sounds like.

LES BUTLER: Well it wasn't bad. But by that time I had a wife and two children. Well, I didn't mind going. You know, I was in the reserves. I got called up and I knew that could happen so I didn't mind. But I was anxious to get home at that point.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Yeah. So how long did that go on then?

LES BUTLER: Two years.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Two years.

LES BUTLER: 22-months.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: And was that the end of your active Navy career? Or did you stay in the reserves?

LES BUTLER: No, I got out. [*Laughs*] I had enough.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Well you did your share.

LES BUTLER: Well, I had a family. You know. At that point.

CHARLIE SIMMONS: Well that sort of wraps it up then, for your career. Have you got any other outstanding episodes that you'd like to talk about or –

LES BUTLER: [*Laughs*] Nothing you could put in print!

CHARLIE SIMMONS: [*Laughs*] Okay, okay. Well, I guess, on that note then, I will go ahead and close this down.