

Claude Howell earned his wings as a Marine and died serving his Country as a Naval aviator.

Like so many young men of his generation, Claude Caesar Howell, Jr.'s life was disrupted and ultimately ended by war. The only boy among seven children, Claude left Troy, North Carolina and enrolled in Clemson College in 1940. He likely completed his sophomore term before leaving Clemson in early 1943 to join the Marines. As the war raged around the world, Howell immersed himself in flight training, mastering the complex and unforgiving F4U-4 Corsair fighter. As a Marine pilot, Howell would not only brave enemy fire to provide close air support to Marine ground forces, he would also have to tackle one of aviation's greatest challenges—carrier operations.

When the war ended, Claude Howell picked up where he left off, returning to Clemson in July 1946. The Clemson of 1946 was far different than the one he'd left only three and a half years earlier. Many of Howell's classmates were like him, veterans, returning to school on the GI Bill. The average age of Clemson students was older and these men had seen violence and conflict unimagined just a few years before. Despite the trials of war, Claude was described as "full of happiness and joy." He graduated with a degree in general science in August 1949.

In less than a year, a new kind of war had broken out on the far side of the globe. Despite its euphemistic label, the Korean Conflict was a deadly struggle and Claude Howell soon found himself right in the middle of it. Now an ensign in the United States Naval Reserve, Howell was once again flying missions off the plunging deck of an aircraft carrier, this time the USS Boxer.

Landing on an aircraft carrier takes nerves of steel but landing the F4U Corsair took every ounce of airmanship. The challenge lay in the design of the aircraft. Most aircraft were able to line up with the landing deck approximately one-half mile out and the pilot could easily see the signals of the LSO (Landing Signal Officer). Unfortunately, the long nose and aft position of the cockpit of the Corsair made it impossible for the aviator to see the landing deck or the LSO on a half-mile final. The solution was to fly a really close final turn resulting in the aircraft lining up with the deck just as it was about to land. It took a steady hand to accomplish that feat.



1951
USS Boxer CV 21
Sea of Japan off the Coast of Korea

In mid-September, the Boxer and its complement of aircraft were part of the forces supporting the Inchon invasion, General Douglas MacArthur's bold initiative to trap North Korean invaders between United Nations forces at Pusan, in Southeastern Korea, and his amphibious forces landing to the northwest. Ensign Howell was assigned an air support mission to Uijongbu, just north of Seoul. US forces and their allies were protecting the direct route into Seoul from the retreating Chinese and North Koreans. On September 29, 1950, after completing his raid on Uijongbu, Howell's aircraft was struck by ground fire. He successfully parachuted to the ground and took cover in a shell crater.

The United States first large-scale use of helicopters in combat support roles was a feature of the Korean War. Helicopters were used to ferry supplies to isolated troops, to evacuate wounded from battle areas and to rescue downed pilots. One of the intrepid helicopter pilots was Navy Lieutenant (j.g.) Charles Jones of Kansas. Although the Navy considered nighttime flights by helicopters to be extremely hazardous, Jones nonetheless volunteered just before sunset to rescue Howell. In an account later published in *Time* magazine, Jones described the mission he and his crewman, Marine Corporal Larry Whittal, undertook.



By the time Jones reached Howell's position, the Corsair pilot had taken cover in an abandoned foxhole on top of a hill. US fighter aircraft were orbiting overhead, firing at the swarming enemy soldiers closing in on Howell. As Jones lowered his 'copter for landing, he came under intense enemy fire. "Guys were running out of a house taking pot shots at us," Jones recalled. Jones pulled back up, but decided to make a second attempt using a sling. "I was hovering over the pilot with the hoist sling down," Jones reported later, "but he gave me a frantic wave-off, as small arms fire opened up all around us . . . I heard bullets hitting the helicopter and gas fumes began to fill the cockpit . . . I think he knew that he was done for and didn't want us to get it too. He just wouldn't take the sling . . ."

With his own aircraft now mortally wounded, Jones gave up. Whittal, his crewman, had to lie on the floor of the cockpit, holding one of the controls in place with a knife. Unable to make it back to his ship, Jones brought his helicopter down on the Han River in enemy territory. Jones and Whittal took to their rubber life raft and reached an island in the river. As soon as the moon came up, they were rescued—by a helicopter.

In refusing to use the sling lowered to him, Howell, instead of being rescued, became the rescuer. He almost certainly saved the lives of the very men who had attempted to save him.

Howell's body was recovered three days later. Ensign Howell was an outstanding aviator who was brought down by enemy fire. His tremendous sacrifice as one of our Clemson heroes leaves us forever grateful for those who flew, fought, and died for our freedom.

Awards and Citations: Ensign Howell was awarded the Purple Heart, the Combat Action Ribbon, the Korean Service Medal, the United Nations Service Medal, the National Defense Service Medal, the Korean Presidential Unit Citation and the Republic of Korea War Service Medal.