

Burl Brooks McVicker

U.S. Marine Corps, Master Sergeant

1916 - 1988

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Burl Brooks McVicker was born July 6, 1916 in Barbour County, West Virginia, to Melvin and Ida Margaret "Maggie" McVicker (née Reed). Burl was the third of six children. He attended high school for two years, but postponed his education after his sophomore year. This was probably due to the Great Depression—Burl was only 13 when the stock market crashed in 1929, and likely had to work to help support his large family.

The 1940 census lists the McVicker family living on Little Hackers Creek in "Taylor" County, West Virginia (the creek is actually located in Barbour County). At the age of 23, Burl was working as a shot fireman in a coal mine, placing explosive charges to shatter large faces of coal into smaller pieces for loading. His father and older brother Troy both worked for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which maintained a large operation in nearby Grafton.

McVicker enlisted in the Marines on July 19, 1940, and went through basic training in July and August on Parris Island, South Carolina. By November 1940 muster rolls show him with Marine aviation units in Quantico, Virginia, probably for more specialized training. He spent most of 1941 in Quantico and Jacksonville, Florida.

By July 1942, Burl had obtained the rank of Staff Sergeant. He was assigned to a Marine Scout Bombing Squadron (VMSB-141) attached to Marine Air Group 14 (MAG-14) at Camp Kearny, San Diego, California. The unit was very new, having only been commissioned four months earlier in March. McVicker was assigned the role of radio technician.

In MAG-14, being a radio technician was no desk job. The post placed McVicker in the rear seat of a Douglas SBD Dauntless Scout Bomber, where he operated the radio as well as the plane's rear-facing machine gun. At the end of August 1942, McVicker and his squadron departed San Diego for Henderson Airfield on the island of Guadalcanal. Soon, this obscure landmass in the South Pacific's Solomon Islands would be a household name in the United States.



Burl McVicker accepts an award from the Keep America Beautiful organization for his civilian cleanup work at Lake Youghiogheny in Pennsylvania. *Daily American newspaper* 14 December 1973

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Marine Corps Dauntless dive bombers taxi down the runway of Henderson Airfield in preparation for a raid in 1942. NARA

VMSB-141 arrived on September 23, 1942 and integrated into what became known as the Cactus Air Force, “Cactus” being the code word Allied command had designated for Guadalcanal. McVicker’s squadron was badly needed to lend air support to Allied forces fighting for control of the island against the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy.

The Battle of Guadalcanal (August 1942 – February 1943) was one of the earliest major land and sea engagements fought between the United States and Japan. On August 7, U.S. Marines and

Allied troops landed on the island and managed to capture its valuable airfield, which posed a threat to U.S. and Australian shipping. Unfortunately for the Americans, Japanese naval reinforcements arrived, drove off the Allied fleet, and landed more ground troops. Cut off from outside support, Allied troops dug in around Henderson Airfield, which by August 20 had begun receiving Marine Corps aircraft to help in the fight.

Over the next three months, the Cactus Air Force expanded to include additional air groups, including McVicker and his squadron. These crucial planes and men kept tabs on Japanese troop movements, protected against enemy bombers, and counterattacked enemy warships that frequently shelled the Americans from offshore. Losses among the Cactus Air Force were brutal. On the night of October 13-14 alone, McVicker’s squadron lost 26 of its 29 aircraft and 5 officers to one such shelling from Japanese battleships off the coast of Guadalcanal. 18 of the unit’s 41 officers were eventually killed on the island.

After months of fighting, American forces gained the upper hand. The Marines who had fought long and hard for Guadalcanal were able to stand down. On January 19, 1943, VMSB-141 was transferred to a U.S. military base on the island of Efate, in the New Hebrides archipelago, then a few weeks later to the island of Espiritu Santo as the battle for “Cactus” wound down. In September 1943, McVicker’s squadron returned to the United States at Marine Corps Air Station in El Toro, California, though it appears Burl may have returned



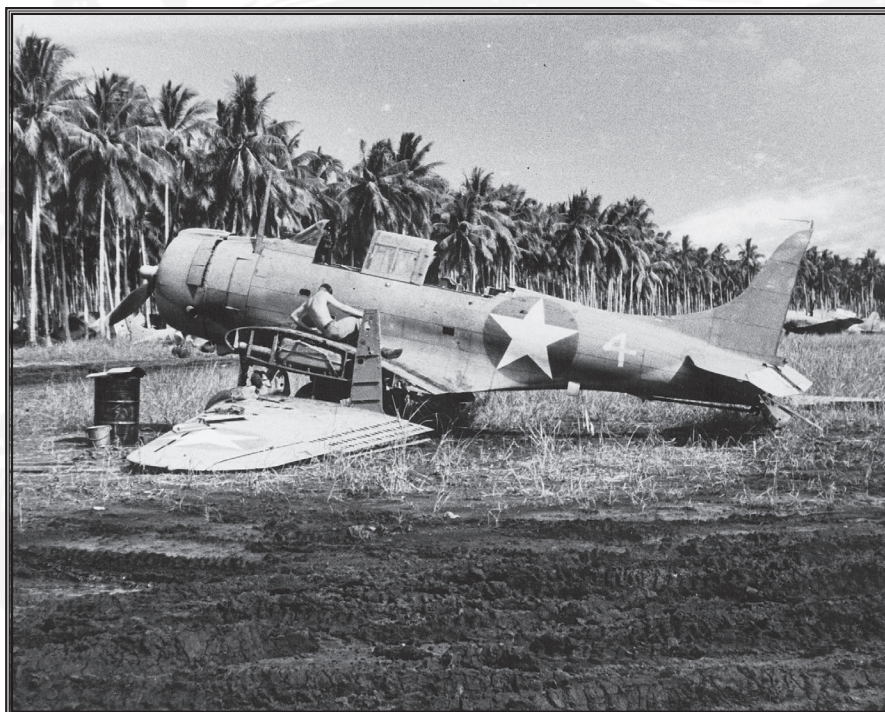
McVicker shows off a fishing award for catching trophy smallmouth bass at Lake Youghiogheny. *Pennsylvania Angler*, May 1968

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stateside earlier. He seems to have spent the remainder of the war there. Burl was discharged with the rank of master sergeant on March 27, 1947.

A few years later, McVicker began a 35-year career working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In 1967, he realized there was public interest in improving the environment around Lake Youghiogheny, a man-made reservoir in Pennsylvania near where the state meets West Virginia and Maryland. As the reservoir's manager, he instituted a cleanup program that grew in popularity over the next several years. On June 20, 1972, on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, Congressman Goodloe E. Byron of Maryland praised McVicker's work. The former Marine was again awarded special recognition in 1973 by the "Keep America Beautiful" organization. Burl was also quite the fisherman, winning awards for angling in 1966 and 1967. In the 1970s, he oversaw Special Recreation Days at Lake "Yough" for handicapped youth.

It is unclear exactly when McVicker and wife Sarah Marie McDaniel moved to Taylor County, West Virginia, near where he had spent his youth. By the early 1980s, they had settled in the county seat of Grafton. A few years later, on May 23, 1988, Burl McVicker passed away and was buried in West Virginia National Cemetery, only a year after it opened. Over half of his life, whether through the Marines or the Army Corps of Engineers, had been spent in service to his country.



A damaged Marine Dauntless bomber of the Cactus Air Force being worked on at Henderson Field during the difficult days of 1942. It is likely being stripped for parts to keep other planes in the air. *Naval History & Heritage Command*

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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section 2
Site 684

Date of interment: May 26, 1988

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

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