



William Copeland

Alton | Thursday, February 22 2024

Born on May 5, 1924, William (Bill) Joseph Copeland of Alton, Illinois, passed away peacefully in his home on the afternoon of February 22, 2024—just 73 days shy of his 100th birthday.

Bill was a member of America's Greatest Generation. He and his 8 siblings grew up on a farm near Alton, IL on Harris Lane, eating what was grown. The depression brought on hard times, but it was all they knew. As they worked long hours, the kids still had fun, playing tricks on each other, and exploring the outdoors. Bill attended the one-room Woods School and then onto Alton Senior High School, where he enjoyed the vocational classes and fell in love with woodworking. He then quit mid-way through his sophomore year to work fulltime on the farm.

In 1942 when Bill was 18, his mother passed away at the age of 41, after giving birth to 10 children, one who died very young. Bill's father, Joseph S., also known as "Juber Joe Lindsey Copeland", passed away 10 years later at the age of 61.

Bill's mother, Pauline (Hartman), was ill and often bedridden, but dedicated herself to the greatest gift she could give her family: that of a prayer warrior. She prayed for her troubled husband who wasn't following God, as well as for all her children. All these years later, "Momma's Prayers" are still cherished by the family as the stories of miracles have been handed down through the generations.

Those early years prepared Bill for what was to come. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Bill's older brother, Dean, immediately joined the Navy and served in the Pacific theater. Bill enlisted soon after when he turned 18, joining the Navy and going to bootcamp in early 1943. His younger brother, Carles, joined the Army and was assigned to serve under General George Patton, and fought at the Battle of the Bulge.

Bill was assigned to a destroyer, the USS Ericsson (DD-440). His keen marksmanship, honed from years of hunting on the farm, prepared him to serve as Gunner's Mate on the ship. He first found himself in the Mediterranean. At Anzio, there were over 40,000 casualties and Bill came close to death many times. Shells dropped all around, but never directly struck his destroyer. Mamma's prayers.

Bill loved to tell war stories. One recollection was when he found himself down on his belly as they were being attacked by German planes. He looked up and could literally see the tread of the tire of the enemy plane as it flew just over him. His pants legs were sucked to his skin from the concussion of a bomb, but he was okay. Mamma's prayers.

The USS Ericsson was credited for helping sink two German U-boats and escorting the captured U-505 back to the US. You can now see that uboat on display in the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry.

Bill often told how he was once assigned to guard German POW's who were brought on board. Holding a "tommy gun", Bill could see the fear of the captured sailors, who may have thought they would be gunned down gangster-style at any moment. He never forgot the face of one young boy, a Hitler Youth, no older than 13, and the terror in the young boy's eyes. Bill felt so sorry for him.

Bill's war experience was unique in two ways. First, his ship served in three campaigns: first in the Mediterranean, then to the Atlantic, and ended in the Pacific. Secondly, Bill spent his entire time on the same ship, never to be transferred. As such, his shipmates became his life-long buddies and Bill helped organize the first of many Navy reunions held for many years.

After the war, Bill came home for a short time but with his mother gone and his teenage sweetheart no longer waiting, his restless heart led him to wander. In January of 1947 he hit the road, Route 66, and hitchhiked back-and-forth to Arizona. When he asked to borrow some money from a girl in Phoenix, she refused but did tell him she'd buy him a bus ticket to leave town. She asked where to, and for no real reason, he blurted out "Peoria" (Illinois). Once there, he worked on farm in Elmwood, Illinois for a few months. But one day, his wandering ways kicked in again and he spontaneously drove his 1934 Ford past his employer's farm and he wound up back home. In Alton, he worked at the Leadworks and later on a delivery truck for Coca-Cola.

While Bill was away to war and wandering around, a major change had taken place in his father. His dad had given his heart to the Lord. Once home, Bill found himself in

church sitting next to his dad at the Alton Gospel Tabernacle located on Spring Street. The preacher asked if anyone wanted to accept Christ into their hearts and be forgiven of their sins. Bill's dad nudged him and asked, "Isn't it about time, Son?"

Bill went forward, accepted Christ, and his life was changed. Mamma's prayers.

Not long after, Bill was back at the church where he noticed this girl bouncing around in the front, visiting with everyone. He leaned over to his friend and said, "You see that girl? I am going to marry her!" And his words were prophetic. On May 28, 1950, Bill and Edna "Pug" Lou Miller became man and wife in that same venue. In a love letter to his future wife Bill said, "I'm thankful to the Lord that he brought me back to church, saved me and gave me you to keep me in line, and keep my thinking of good things instead of bad." Mamma's Prayers.

Bill and Pug would have two sons, Randy, born in 1952, and Barry in 1956.

Bill and Pug started "Copeland Cabinets" in 1952, and Bill's passion for woodworking fed their family and allowed for long family camping vacations, mostly out west where Bill enjoyed the mountains and exploring abandoned mines. Even after retirement in the 90's, Bill spent most of his time in his shop building furniture for his home or friends. He had built two of their homes on the farm property where he grew up. Pug passed away in their home in 2017, the same room that Bill died in seven years later.

Bill served as a deacon at Northside Assembly of God in Godfrey for many years, and later attended Abundant Church in Alton where he loved the traditional service for seniors on Wednesday mornings, especially when his son Randy would preach. Mamma's Prayers.

Bill shared his faith with anyone who would listen, just ask any of his family, friends and hospice caregivers! There was no doubt where he stood with his Lord prior to his passing. And that stance brought great peace to Bill and the entire family. The man loved God. Mamma's Prayers.

Bill is preceded in death by his parents and siblings Ruby, Anna Lee, Lois, Dean, Carles, Marilyn, Roberta, Duane, and Paul. He leaves behind sons Randy (Barbara) Copeland of Ferguson, MO, and Barry (Gina) Copeland of Kimberling City, MO; grandchildren Christopher (Tammie) Copeland, Sarah Copeland, Drew Copeland, and Kiel Copeland; great-grandchildren Branden Copeland, Reagan Copeland, Cameron Copeland and Jaden Copeland; and many beloved relatives and friends.

Visitation will begin at 9:30am on Saturday, April 13 at Abundant Church at 3986 Humbert Rd, Alton, IL 62002, with the Celebration of Life service immediately following at 11am.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be sent to the Abundant Church “100 Days of Faith” fund. Mail to 3986 Humbert Rd, Alton, IL 62002 or click here for online or text donations: <https://abundant.church/give>.