

WHY STOOP TO BE A KING WHEN YOU CAN BE A MISSIONARY!

By Pam Rasmussen, International Ministries Office

Survival was utmost in Jack Pierce's mind as he fought desperately near the 38th Parallel that divided North and South Korea.

United Nations' forces had gone from mountain to mountain to reclaim territory taken by the North Koreans and the Chinese. Jack – a 19-year-old radioman – and his fellow infantrymen were engaged in battle for Hill 119 in Boulder City. Chinese soldiers had succeeded in breaking through and occupying a large part of the trench line on the forward slopes. The battle was so vicious that Jack saw older, seasoned comrades cry for their mothers, while others stood frozen in fear. At one point, Jack wanted to give up. He was lying on top of dead, mutilated bodies surrounded by heavy shelling, small arms fire and hand-to-hand combat. As he tried to muster courage, his mom's voice suddenly replayed in his head, "I've never raised any cowards!" So, he got up and pressed hard into battle, determined to live. The Marines launched a rapid counter-attack and re-established the perimeter.



Overshadowed by WW 2, the Korean War would later be called "The Forgotten War," even though 54,246 Americans lost their lives, 103,284 were wounded and another 8,177 went missing in action. From a human perspective, it was a miracle that Jack survived, but he was meant to become a different kind of soldier.

Jack was born in 1934 in Oceanville, New Jersey, to John and Mary Pierce. His sisters – 15 and 9 – babysat him while their mother worked at a leather shop, and they doted on him. "I got away with murder!" Jack chuckles.



Jack's mom

His mom, a native of the harsh Pine Barrens of NJ, had a no-nonsense personality. She'd learned early on to be tough and independent, which was an asset when her husband passed away from tuberculosis, probably contracted at the iron forge where he'd worked.

Jack was barely three when his father died. His only solid memory is of his dad lying in a darkened room, beckoning to him. "Go into the front [storage] room and look behind the mattress. There's something there for you."

It was a toy boat. Jack was thrilled yet felt guilty uncovering something meant for Christmas. The little boy had no idea that his dad would not live to see December 25th.

When Jack's oldest sister married, her husband became a father figure for the child. The man tinkered with electronics and built a radio for Jack, who was spellbound by what he could tune in. The substitute dad also taught Jack ocean fishing. Other kind men invested in his young life as well; a farmer bought him things, and a neighbor taught him to weld.

As a teen, Jack grew to love hunting and longed for a shot gun of his own. His resourceful mother made fake roses which he sold door-to-door after dark. He remembers feeling very embarrassed selling flowers but, also, very excited when purchasing the gun.



Jack loved hunting and fishing so much that he skipped the fifth grade to indulge in those interests. So, he was a junior in high school when he should have been a senior, and that was when his interests grew to include a beautiful young woman.

“There was a fire drill and the upper classmen came out the same door as the lower grades. I looked over and saw this cute little thing with a pony tail and bobby socks, and I took note,” Jack laughs.

That “cutie” was Barbara Hamilton from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Born in 1938, she was the first child of Thomas and Anna Hamilton, who provided her a little brother 16 months later. The family eventually moved to New Jersey.

Barbara, affectionately called “Babs,” grew up in a troubled home. Her father was an alcoholic, which caused much marital tension. Some arguments would end with her dad stomping off to the local bar. But despite his addiction, Thomas succeeded in entrepreneurship as a groceryman, roofer, and carpenter. “He built a beautiful 3-bedroom home with the knowledge he had,” Babs says. Yet, he knew his life was wretched and he longed to be well. Babs was 15 when that miracle happened.

Terribly ill from drinking, Thomas called a pastor with whom he’d been working as a fellow carpenter. Pastor Sink came, knelt beside the bed and prayed for healing. That night Thomas got up, showered, and walked two miles to church. Afterward, he and Anna began reading the Bible. Thomas was the first one to ask Christ to forgive his sins, followed shortly thereafter by his wife.

As for Babs, she was joyful that her father no longer drank and that peace had enveloped their home, but she was not about to leave her religion and its rituals she loved. Her parents fervently prayed that God would open her spiritual eyes.



One Friday night in January 1952, Babs – a freshman – was at her friend’s house preparing to attend a school dance. She was mortified when that friend’s steady boyfriend showed up with a blind date for Babs. “I was so worried!” she says. “Here was this junior four years older than me, and I had never even dated!” Jack recognized her immediately as the cute bobby-sox girl, and he sought to put her at ease. Babs’ worries quickly dissipated. She was smitten!

Jack enlisted in the Marines at the end of his junior year and finished high school through the GED program. He deployed in July 1952, so the sweethearts’ relationship grew through letters over the next few years. When he was assigned to guard duty at Lake Hurst Naval Station, their love deepened through frequent visits, which culminated in Jack giving Babs an engagement ring on her birthday in January 1955.

In May, right before Babs was to graduate from high school, and before Jack was officially out of the service, the two secretly eloped to Elkton, Maryland – the Reno of the East. “We left a letter with my brother and took off,” Babs laughs. “I was 17 and Jack was 21.”

When they returned, Babs graduated, Jack finished his military service, and then he found work as a pipefitter, which proved to be a miserable job in the very cold winters. Tiring of it, he opted to go to school on the GI Bill and became a skilled barber.

Finding a steady routine included their desire to attend church regularly, but they couldn’t agree on what church. “So, we just started going to Dad and Mom’s church – the Gospel Center,” Babs says. The people there had been praying for the couple to understand salvation. Two years later, Jack trusted Christ first, then Babs.



In the meantime, the Pierce’s first child, John, was born, followed a few years later by a daughter, Dawn. During a missions-emphasis week at their church, Jack was drawn to the idea of becoming a missionary, but Babs was not so keen. “I was kind of fearful to take our little kids to the mission field. I battled it!” Babs says.

And then Oliver B. Greene came to town. He had lived a wicked life until he got saved in a revival meeting when he was 20. At 24, he bought a tent, and for the next 35 years he traveled across America as an evangelist. Babs’ mom invited Jack and her to one of Oliver’s meetings.

“My mom was sitting between us,” Babs remembers. “At the end of the service, Oliver said, ‘For those who know they’re saved, but would like to commit their life to go ‘all out’ for the Lord, stand up!’

“I felt compelled to get out of my seat,” Babs says, “and when I opened my eyes, I saw that Jack was standing, too. Mom couldn’t figure out what was going on! Then we went forward. A pastor counseled us, and asked, ‘What do you feel God wants you to do?’ We both said at the same time – ‘Be a missionary!’ He replied, ‘Sell your house and what you have and go to Bible school.’”

The Pierces did not sell everything they owned, but they did rent their house and moved into a few unfinished rooms in Jack’s sister’s house. Jack barbered part time and commuted to Philadelphia Bible College (PBC), frequently burning the midnight oil as he studied.

It was during this time that a couple from New Tribes Mission (NTM) came to speak at the Pierces’ church and told them about NTM’s training center in Pennsylvania. Jack and Babs made it a point to visit there over Christmas vacation and were enthused. “We were thrilled that everyone there had the goal of taking the gospel to those who had never heard of Christ,” Babs says. “When we left, they promised to pray for us and hoped we would soon return.”

Before resuming his next semester at PBC, Jack shared with the dean of men about his desire to be a missionary and about NTM. “The dean was acquainted with the mission,” Jack says. “He told me, ‘Look, you’ve got two kids, and by the time you finish Bible college and seminary you might not even qualify for

some mission boards. If you really feel led, why don't you just go ahead and do what the Lord wants you to do?"

"We sold everything, even our insurance policy, and paid off all our bills," Babs says. "Then we packed our kids and belongings into the car and off we went to Jersey Shore. We said, 'Our church is going to think, *These kids are crazy! They just started Bible college and here they are going off!*' But they were behind us and gave us a farewell check of \$50. That was a lot of money in those days! With all the gifts people gave us, we were able to put down three months' rent at one whack."

While in missionary training, Jack became good friends with John Snyder, who had grown up in Brazil and was going back. Through chats with him, the Pierces, too, felt led to serve in that country, so they chose to study Introductory Portuguese during their time at language school. That same year, baby Rebecca rounded out their family.

With their schooling completed, the Pierces prepared to move to South America. In May 1962, Jack left by freighter, taking their barrels and crates with him. The voyage lasted a month due to many island-stops. Babs and the children were to follow by plane two months later. She did not travel with Jack due to her history of severe motion sickness; also, more passage money was needed. When she finally did fly, it was Babs' first time ever, and no one around her spoke English.

After their reunion in Brazil, the Pierces settled in the eastern interior on the outskirts of the cattle town, Vianópolis. Their small adobe house had no running water or electricity, and Babs cooked on a cement woodstove. Water was drawn from a large, open well in the yard. Those rustic conditions did not discourage Babs; she was there for a purpose, just like the other missionary ladies new to the country. Together, they and their husbands delved into formal language study.

When Thanksgiving rolled around, the Pierces longed for a traditional meal. "I went in search of a turkey," Jack says. "I got out in the street and was walking beside my bicycle, because it was muddy. While there, I listened and listened. Pretty soon, far off in the distance, I heard a gobble. I made my way towards the sound and was able to buy a fellow's turkey," he laughs. "But then we didn't have a roasting pan," Babs adds. "Jack made me one out of an empty kerosene can that I scrubbed and scrubbed."

They invited fellow missionaries Daris and Mary Brown to their feast. Mary brought Jell-O made from a much-prized package she'd brought from the USA. "She somehow made it in her clay water pot," Babs still marvels. "It was such a treat!"

After completing an in-depth study of Portuguese, in which they both became fluent, the Pierces felt led to work with the Krinkati people in the northeastern state of Maranhão. Once again, Jack preceded his family, transporting their belongings to the port town, Imperatriz. Two weeks later, Babs traveled with the children on an all-day trip in a DC3. Vomiting punctuated her every take-off and landing.

From Imperatriz, the family squeezed into the homemade body of an old truck that had been converted into a type of minibus. The weather was hot and so were the sides of the tin enclosure, making the journey more difficult with young kids.



Babs and her run-away mule

Three hours later, they arrived in the one-horse town, Montes Altos, where they stayed for a while at a missionary base. Leaving the children there, Jack and Babs then traveled for three hours by mule to the Krinkati village where they planned to locate as a family.



Pierce children with the Krinkati

Two anthropologists had previously lived among the Krinkatis, so the people, although quite primitive, had adjusted to outsiders. The Pierces were given permission to move into the anthropologists' former living quarters. "We shared a grass hut with a tribal family," Jack states. "We had half of the house and there was a little stile we had to step over that separated us." Although two different worlds came together under that one roof, the people and the Pierces embraced one another. It was a good time of establishing relationships before the missionaries built a place of their own.

While serving there, Jack and Babs prayed diligently for a Utility Jeep. Aware of the need and wishing to aid the project, women in their sending church had been buying dented canned goods. The money they saved by doing so went into a special envelope. It was slow-going until the men learned about the goal, and they immediately pitched in the rest of the money. Upon opening the letter that contained this news, Babs began to dance and sing, "We have a jeep! We have a jeep!" A thrilled Jack immediately tackled the red tape of financial transfer and soon made the jeep purchase at the Willy dealership. This wonderful provision from the Lord made the Pierces' lives much easier.



With their own children and the boys' dorm

About six years into the Pierces' time among the Krinkati people, NTM field leadership asked Jack and Babs to temporarily fill a strategic need as dorm parents at the mission's boarding school in Vianópolis. The couple accepted, and co-laborers – Roger and Ellen Bailey – moved into the Pierces' jungle home. "So, we went to **temporarily** fill in as dorm parents," Babs laughs, "and we did that for 15 years – in three different dorms!"

After being a dorm dad to boys, Jack had mixed feelings about being a dorm dad to girls. “I kind of braced myself for it,” he admits, “and the girls found out about it. They teased, ‘Uncle Jack, don’t you like us?’ I said, ‘You are sweet girls, but I had so much fun with the boys going camping and fishing.’ They said, ‘We’ll go hunting and fishing with you!’” he laughs.

On their first fishing trip, the girls complained of not catching anything. “Well, of course you’re not!” Jack playfully said. “Are you calling the fish?” He told the kids they needed to make whistling and smacking sounds, which they promptly did. “Guess what?” Babs tittered. “They started catching fish! It was so funny because he’d just been joking.”

During those years, Jack and Babs filled various roles: school cooks, supply buyer, barber, school chairman, and teacher of Arts & Crafts and Bible.

The Pierces poured their lives into those young people and were much loved in return – “Uncle Jack” for his great humor and kindness, reassuring love and patience, and skill at teaching art; “Aunt Babs” for her consistent hospitality and parties, delicious cooking (especially her meatballs & spaghetti and stuffed cabbage rolls), contagious giggle, and genuine interest in the children.

Not only did the Pierces have a profound effect on the dorm kids and their parents, they also touched the lives of the local Brazilians. One day, a national man on horseback, while talking to a group of countrymen, stated, “*Você sabe que o Senhor Joaquim é gringo, mas tem alma brasileiro!*” (“You know, even though Mr. Jack is an American, he has the soul of a Brazilian!”)



One of Jack's exquisite paintings

Between school terms, Jack surveyed areas where missionaries were needed. On an arduous trip to the Gurupi municipality in the state of Pará, his goal was to visit a Japanese/American Wycliffe missionary deep interior, who would be able to give him information about the surrounding tribes, especially the fierce Parakanas. Thankfully, God provided Jack a Christian Brazilian man from Imperatriz, experienced in contact work, who was willing to accompany him.

Jack bought two guns for shooting game, and a canoe for the journey.

“We put in at this narrow stream and paddled until we came to a tremendously large river with falls. We shot the rapids in that dug-out canoe!” Jack exclaims. The 200-mile river trip would take the men within eight miles of the hostile natives, reported to have attacked both settlers and other tribesmen in the area.

During the 21-day journey, the men had to string their hammocks high in the trees at night to avoid being attacked by an *onça* (jaguar). To get up there, they’d secure a long, forked pole to the tree, shimmy up to the notch, then secure more poles in like manner, until they reached a height of about 18 feet from the ground. It was precarious to be sure. Sometimes it would rain, chilling them to the bone in the breeze. “It’s terrible but one night I got dysentery up there,” Jack says. “I had to hang off the side of the tree as sick as a dog. We could hear the jaguar across the stream and I said, ‘Man, I’m glad he’s over there and not on this side!’ Then I heard the cough [close by].”

In the mornings, Jack would roll up his hammock and throw it down. The test was to see if a jaguar was lurking; if so, it would pounce. “That way we knew if we shouldn’t come down!” he laughs.

Eventually, they arrived safely at the Wycliffe missionary’s outpost and acquired the information Jack sought. What a blessing when a plane arrived with supplies for the man, and Jack and his friend could fly out to Wycliffe’s field base in Belén! From there they separated, and Jack caught a bus for home. “I was a mess,” he admits. “I had smelly old clothes and a beard, and I can’t remember when I was so tired!”

The man who’d once penetrated enemy territory in Korea had just penetrated the darkness of Satan’s territory. Now a middle-aged soldier-of-the-cross, Jack was committed to seeing people find freedom in Christ. Because of his brave survey work, several missionaries were placed in those outlying areas.

Not every adventure was daunting. The Pierces’ endless tales include an enduring sense of humor. One of the most comical stories highlights the time the couple had their two female dogs “fixed.”

Jack and Babs brought the still-sleeping pets back to a guest apartment at Ebenezer – the mission’s Brazilian dorm. After laying the dogs down, the couple went to bed. At some point during the night, the pets awoke and went berserk, throwing up around the dish cabinet. Jumping out of bed, Jack tried to pull the cabinet away from the wall, so that he and Babs could wipe up the unpleasant mess, but the top part toppled over, smashing glass everywhere. The partially-drugged animals kept running through the splintered shards, while the Pierces kept yelling at them to stop.

“We finally put one dog in the car and the other in the bathroom, so we could clean,” Babs recounts. “Next door was a Brazilian couple, and Leonor awoke and told her husband, ‘Joaquim and Babs are having a terrible fight! They are breaking dishes and everything! You need to go over there and stop them!’ Her husband refused to get involved, but the next morning he came and asked, ‘What happened last night?’” Babs chuckles. He enjoyed the crazy story. Leonor later confided with laughter that, due to his small stature, her husband hadn’t dared to tackle Jack!

After 46 years in Brazil, Jack had serious heart trouble, so Babs’ vision of living out the rest of their lives there did not materialize. She grieved in leaving. “We’d learned the culture and the language, and once you do that you are part of the people,” she says. “You just feel at home!” And they were leaving a much-loved house they’d had built after 25 years on the field. Jack had designed it, and it was beautiful.

“She was the one who was crying and left claw marks in the ground because she didn’t want to come back [to the States],” Jack jokes.

“And here we are!” Babs giggles, having long since grown thankful for the move. “Without the Lord what would life have been?” she adds thoughtfully. “I love the promise where God says there is no man who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for His sake, and the gospel’s, but that he will receive a hundredfold [Mathew 19:29-30a]. He gave us many houses and lands and brothers and sisters of all colors, sizes and shapes. What a blessing! Somebody said, ‘Why stoop to be a king when you can be a missionary?’ And that’s very true!”

“Being a missionary was major, major important to us,” Jack reminisces. “It was a blessing! We have friends, even in the jungle. They knew and understood us, made their homes and their village life open to us, and revealed a lot of cultural secrets to us. They are all very precious to us! Likewise, we met so many young people in all three dorms who were precious to us.”



With grown children: John, Rebecca and Dawn



Photo courtesy of John Pierce

For the past 10 years, Jack and Babs have resided at the NTM Retirement Homes in Sanford, Florida. Recently, they moved into the assisted living section, because Babs had heart surgery. But this much-loved couple is often visited by former dorm kids, co-workers, and even Brazilian friends passing through Florida. The couple’s three children, eight grandchildren and 19 great-grandkids also cherish them deeply.