

Bill Sergeant, internationally renowned local hero, Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 17, 2009)

In each of our lifetimes, if we are lucky, we come in contact with someone who exemplifies greatness, who is humble yet powerful, who is heard yet quiet, who is dedicated to a cause and who gives unselfishly of their time, energy and resources for the betterment of mankind. Unfortunately, we often don't recognize them and sometimes fail to appreciate their achievements.

Almost without fail, they are more fully appreciated by others than by their hometown family. We who know them personally all too often take them for granted, use them up and unintentionally tend to downplay their accomplishments. This should not be.

I can name several such individuals in Oak Ridge and East Tennessee. As opportunity presents itself in *Historically Speaking* I plan to continue to feature these individuals as I have done in the past with articles about Ed Westcott, Bill Wilcox and others. Today we look at Bill Sergeant, Rotary International's highly decorated and longstanding polio eradication champion, a personal hero of mine and one of my most admired friends.

Bill was born in was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1919. His parents were not very well educated and never had much money. Bill remembers the depression, recalling that it seemed to have "lasted a lifetime." He observed that one does not seem deprived if everybody else is just like you are.

Another event that affected his early life was the Civil War. It wasn't over that long, particularly in the capital of the Confederacy.

The old Soldier's Home was a state home for veterans of the Civil War from Virginia. Fairly often the boys that Bill ran with would decide to "go to the old Soldier's Home." He recalls there were hundreds of the old soldiers left and they all wore their uniforms and they sat on park benches and they delighted telling the boys stories.

Bill could not understand how the South lost the war. Because in the stories these old soldiers told, they won every battle and the Yankees always ran away. Another incident that influenced Bill's early thoughts about the Civil War was a story in his family. His grandmother lived in Richmond when Richmond fell and when the Yankee troops came in, she remembered sitting on a porch singing a "ditty" that was derogatory about the Yankees. And some Yankee officer came up and told her father to make her stop singing that song.

Bill's parents did not finish high school and in those days during the depression, it was very unusual one to go to college. His parents could not have possibly afforded to send Bill to college. But his mother's brothers and sisters (who were prominent lawyers and business people) helped.

They decided that Bill should go to Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), since "Billy liked military" and VPI was a military school, a state school (less costly) and far away from home, yet still in Virginia. No one ever even asked Bill if he wanted to go or where he wanted to go...they just sent him. And off he went at age 16 to a far away college, like an obedient child should do!

While Bill finished college with a degree in general science because it was the only one they had that was general in nature, what he really got out of college was a military commission as a Second Lieutenant. However, he would have to wait on that to be official. He was too young. Everyone else in his class got the commission on graduation, but Bill was not 21. He had to wait until his birthday in October.

He also had to take a job teaching school as he needed some way to earn a living. As luck would have it, the school where he taught also had a young lady teacher living in the same farm house where he rented a room. She was a beautiful young lady and Bill determined right away that she was someone he wanted to know better. Eventually, Bill would become engaged to this young lady.

Bill's teaching career was interrupted when he was called for active duty in the Army. He recalls vividly when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and his one year enlistment changed to "for the duration" of

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the war. Bill spent some two years in Puerto Rico and then was sent to Provost Marshall General School on his rotation back to the states.

On his way there, he managed to go see that pretty school teacher and gave her an engagement ring. Then it was off to Battle Creek, Michigan. What he found there made him look for any way to get somewhere else. He found soldiers in charge of simple things and boring duty while the greatest war ever was going on. When he learned of someone interviewing for a special assignment, he signed up for an interview.

He was selected to go to Oak Ridge, TN. What was actually told him was that he was selected for the Manhattan Project. Immediately he was overjoyed as the only "Manhattan" he was aware of was in New York City, where that pretty school teacher was located to whom he had just recently become engaged. However, the next sentence sent him for a loop. It said he was to report to Oak Ridge, TN.

He could not find anyone who could tell him where Oak Ridge was located. Finally, someone said, just go to the train station and ask for a ticket to Oak Ridge, TN. This is exactly what Bill did. The person at the ticket counter looked through the large book of train stops and did not find Oak Ridge.

Just when Bill was about to give up and try something else, a lady sitting in a booth next to the ticket counter said, "I know where that is, my nephew works there. Sell him a ticket to Knoxville, TN. And when you get to the Knoxville stop, tell the conductor that you actually want to go to Oak Ridge."

That is exactly what Bill did. The conductor laughed at him when he told him he wanted to stay on the train until it got to Oak Ridge, "This train does not go to Oak Ridge, you will have to get off in Knoxville and take a bus." So, Bill got off in Knoxville and went to the bus station to get to Oak Ridge.

When he got there and asked for the bus that goes to Oak Ridge, he was told that a bus ran every 15 minutes 24 hours a day to Oak Ridge, just take the next one he saw. His ride to Oak Ridge was an eye opener. Here he was dressed in his Army dress uniform and the other folks had muddy boots. He began to wonder just what was going on at Oak Ridge.

What he found was even more intriguing. Bill had no idea what was really being done there, but he saw a huge amount of dormitories and it seemed most of them were young ladies. The first night he was in Oak Ridge, a group of ladies whistled at him. Now, that was something else. He immediately wrote his Army buddies who were still in Puerto Rico telling them of his good fortune.

Bill was planning to visit New York to see that school teacher again when he got a letter telling him she had found someone else and that she was breaking their engagement. Bill was surprised to find that he was not as heartbroken as he thought he might be. You see, there were dormitories full of pretty women in Oak Ridge and he had already seen several that had caught his eye.

It was not long until he made friends with another Army captain and his wife. The wife considered Bill's single status to be a challenge to her to find him a wife. She did just that when she told him that a young lady, Isabelle Emma Morrison, from Albany, NY, where she worked for a state senator, was coming to visit in Oak Ridge. She wanted to fix Bill up with a date with this young lady and Bill readily agreed.

She was beautiful and Bill would have fallen for her immediately, but he thought she was only visiting and would soon head back to New York. Yet, this was not to be. Because of a unique set of circumstances, Bill was able to impress her with his ability to make things happen.

It seems she was here for a friend's wedding. When the wedding was about to begin, the street in front of the wedding location was being paved. This was going to ruin the wedding, so she called Bill and asked if he could do anything to help. Bill called in a big favor to the man in charge of roads and grounds for the city. The paving equipment was moved to another street and the wedding went off without a hitch. Bill even got a phone call to ask him to attend the wedding reception as the young lady's guest.

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Bill's ability to make things happen impressed the young lady so much that she changed her plans entirely and stayed right here in Oak Ridge rather than returning to New York. She got a job as a secretary. Bill was pleased with himself and in about eight months they were married and later had four children.

Barbara Hood, Bill's youngest provides the following family details: "My mother was from Malone, New York where her dad was the local Sheriff. My dad and mom met in 1946 and married in February 1947. They had four children, David, Kathy, Patty and me (Barbara). Bill now has eight grandchildren and nine great grandchildren. All four of the Sergeant children graduated from Oak Ridge High School spanning the years of 1966-1975. Mom and dad bought their first house, a "D" house in 1955. It was located at 439 East Drive. They moved to 943 West Outer Drive in 1966."

The next *Historically Speaking* column will reveal Bill Sergeant's involvement with Rotary and will show his leadership role in the world-wide effort to eradicate polio. Let me go ahead and tell you about a special recognition event coming Saturday to recognize Bill Sergeant for his international leadership role in Rotary's effort to eradicate polio.

On February 21, 2009, there will be a special "End Polio Now" benefit recognition tribute to Bill Sergeant at the Pollard Technology Conference Center from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM. The cost is \$50 with \$40 going toward the "End Polio Now" effort. Tickets are available from members of the Oak Ridge Rotary Club or at the door.

Please plan to come and help recognize the accomplishments of our own internationally renowned hero, Bill Sergeant.



Bill Sergeant, a Servant Leader – speaking to a recent Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association meeting