

Bill Sergeant, internationally renowned local hero, Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 20, 2009)

In the last *Historically Speaking* column, Bill Sergeant's life history was featured. At the end of the article, Bill had just arrived in Oak Ridge and had met his future wife.

At about the same time Bill got married he also joined the local Rotary Club. It happened this way. The Atomic Energy Commission brought to town a new person who was placed in charge of the public safety, police and fire unit where Bill was to be his deputy. Bill took his new boss around town and introduced him to key individuals. One person he introduced the new boss to was the current president of the Oak Ridge Rotary Club. This person assured the new man that he should NOT join any service club until he heard from the Rotary Club.

Bill says that the man was obviously embarrassed by the fact that Bill was standing right there and heard all this, so the Rotary president felt obligated to also ask Bill if he were a member of a service club. Bill was not, but he still thinks the Oak Ridge Rotary Club had no intentions of inviting him to be a member except for this unusual circumstance. What a fortunate happenstance for Rotary International. Bill would eventually come to be venerated by the entire world of Rotary for his service above self!

But we get ahead of the story. Bill's next pivotal decision was to become the person in charge of the National Guard at Oak Ridge. *Historically Speaking* told the full story of his battalion leaving Oak Ridge for the Korean War just a few weeks ago on January 21, 2009, so I will just tell one additional story here.

Bill was having a good time in his position of Lieutenant Colonel with the weekly meetings on Tuesday's. His battalion was enjoying their summer camps. But then one day, he got a call from General Wallace, the Tennessee adjutant general, telling him that his battalion was being activated on August 19. Bill's immediate response without thinking it through was, "But General, we don't return from summer camp until August 20?"

Bill says the General called him "Boy!" even though he was nearly 30 years old at the time. The General continued, "This is war, boy, you are not going to any damn camp, you are going to WAR!" Bill did "go to war" even though he had already served in World War II, he was now off to the Korean War with a whole battalion of Oak Ridgers, where he recalls the horrors of combat from a personal perspective of being shot at, not just sitting in a behind the lines desk job. His Oak Ridge battalion saw war up close and personal.

Upon returning to Oak Ridge, Bill was placed in the security organization where he eventually became the head of that organization and spent the rest of his working career. He also picked up his service in Rotary.

The Oak Ridge Rotary Club had changed rather drastically during his absence and no one remembered him at all. Eventually Bill felt he needed to do something to again be accepted as a member of the club. When asked, he accepted the role of newsletter editor. What he did not know at the time was that he was not the first choice or even the second or third choice.

He learned that almost everyone in the club had been asked and refused to do it. Bill often did not attend meetings at the time, so he did not really know what was going on. However, writing the newsletter required him to attend meetings just to have something to write about. This proved to be a turning point for Bill.

In a matter of just a few years, not only did Bill regain his place in the Oak Ridge Rotary Club, he became its president and then even while president of the club he was selected as the district governor at approximately age 40...very young for the office.

That was not the end of his climb in Rotary's official leadership positions nor did he hesitate to take on informal leadership efforts within Rotary. He was becoming more and more dedicated to Rotary and the idea of service to others.

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Bill quickly gained a reputation for excellence in leadership not only within his district, but also across Tennessee and neighboring states. He continued to bring new and innovative projects and activities that involved clubs and members from across the nation and even outside the country.

In 1979, Bill was nominated for Rotary International Director and he retired from both his position as head of security at the Atomic Energy Commission and from his military service. He was a full Colonel in the National Guard at the time of his retirement. Bill was 60 years old at retirement and being nominated for director of Rotary International influenced his decision to retire as quickly as he was eligible.

One month after retirement, Bill was elected one of 15 directors of Rotary International. It was a two-year appointment. In his second year, he was selected Vice-President and given significant responsibilities that led him to become known as a person who gets things done.

For the next several years, Bill was constantly being called on by the presidents of Rotary International to take the lead on specific tasks, such as conventions and other committee leadership positions. He was the vice-president of a huge convention in Germany where 20,000 plus Rotarians attended. Bill's reputation among Rotary Clubs was growing internationally.

One significant opportunity came to him by a president appointing him to be a trustee of the Rotary International Foundation. This appointment was significant in that it expanded Bill's realm of influence sufficient for him to become associated with the effort to eradicate polio.

In 1975 a decision was made to attempt to eradicate polio by 2005. A fund raising effort began with an unheard of goal of \$120,000,000. The result was an amazing \$247,000,000, over twice the stated goal. This was without precedent and was the largest fundraising effort in the United States except for the one to recondition the Statue of Liberty. Bill was proud to be associated with that effort.

While off to a great start in the late 1970's and 1980's, the effort faltered and seemed to lose momentum in the early 1990's. That was when by a decision of the Rotary Foundation the International Polio Plus Committee was formed and delegated authority never before granted a committee. The goal was to rejuvenate the effort and to get the eradication of polio on a much higher profile within Rotary Clubs.

Bill was scheduled to complete his last term as trustee and was asked if he wanted to chair the new committee. Not believing he knew what to do to fix the problem with polio and not being a doctor, he declined the offer. However, Bill soon received a letter naming him chair of the committee anyway. This was in 1994.

When Bill looked into the issue more deeply, he soon realized it was a matter of leadership and what was needed was good managerial direction. That outgoing president had known what he was doing. He selected Bill for his natural leadership qualities. He knew Bill was the one for the job, even if Bill did not readily recognize it.

Bill Sergeant had led a battalion of engineers into combat in Korea, Bill was not an engineer - remember his college training was general in nature. Bill had led the police and fire department in Oak Ridge, Bill was neither a policeman nor a fireman. Bill had led the Security forces for the Atomic Energy Commission, Bill was not a security professional – well, he did become one by virtue of his long-standing position as head of security at Oak Ridge.

In all these positions, Bill had excelled at leadership. He had succeeded in gaining the respect of those assigned to his leadership. He succeeded in all that he undertook. This polio thing was no different. He served as chair of that International Polio Plus Committee for 12 years! Significant progress was made during his leadership.

Can you imagine that when Bill took over the International Polio Plus Committee some 1,000 people were contracting polio every single day in over 100 countries. Can you imagine the concern he felt, the

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overwhelming magnitude of the task he had undertaken. Yet, he readily saw the lack of interest in local Rotary Clubs as the primary problem to be overcome. Eradicating polio was the catalyst that could pull Rotary together. He just had to figure out how to do that and to get on with it.

And figure it out he did. The key element was getting the people to actually visit the countries where polio was still a problem and getting them to hold a child and actually administer the vaccine. Bill realized that without exception when he got someone to do that, he had them. They were forever his supporter and their enthusiasm for the task of eradicating polio from the world took on a personal edge. He was sure to send the directors of the Rotary International Foundation and when each returned, he had a supporter who would be sure his committee continued to be supported in all they did.

This was simple strategic leadership. It was something Bill did quite naturally. It succeeded beyond Rotary International's wildest dreams. President after president of the foundation continued to nominate Bill Sergeant to chair the committee. People like Ted Turner got involved and donated \$100,000,000 for ten years. That's a billion dollars. Imagine now, an Oak Ridger – Bill Sergeant, a member of the Oak Ridge Rotary Club was leading this world-wide effort. Funds were being raised in a substantial manner. Money was being spent to take the vaccine to the children in the countries where Polio still held sway.

Bill continued to make friends everywhere he went. Regardless of the country he visited, he came away with fast friends there. Many of them remembered Bill and what his committee was doing. He was even awarded an honorary Doctorate of Laws degree from a university in India, primarily because of the influence of a friend Bill made while there eradicating polio.

Bill has received numerous awards for his humanitarian service. All of them were surprises for Bill. He truly thinks he was "just supposed to lead that committee" for all those years and that he really does not think one should be given awards for "just doing what he was supposed to do." This gives you some keen insight into Bill's character. He does not seek awards. He does not desire recognition. Rather, he just wants to get on with the job he is "supposed to do" and enjoy the intrinsic rewards that come from helping someone who can't help themselves, especially children.

One award that Bill has received stands proudly in Krutch Park in the center of downtown Knoxville. It is a larger than life bronze statue of Bill holding a child in recognition of his unfailing efforts to rid the world of polio. The Knoxville Rotary Clubs determined to erect this statue in recognition of Rotary's 100th birthday in 2005. Again, Bill was surprised by the honor being placed on him.

But I must say I think he is pleased by this statue, primarily because of the focus on the child. It is set in a most pleasant location and is a fitting memorial to his untiring work all these years. Bill told of the Hungarian sculptor whose wife brought the baby for him to hold. Something about that baby really stuck with Bill. I think you can see it in his expression as you look at the statue...maybe that baby represented the world's babies to Bill...just maybe.

When asked what it was about Rotary that he felt was the most important element, Bill noted two aspects of Rotary. One was fellowship and the other was service to others. He noted that when his wife was dying so many Rotarians came to visit that his children remarked, "Dad, we never knew you had so many friends." Bill just reminded them that Rotarians were great friends.

Bill Sergeant, a great humanitarian, a family man, a local hero, my friend. Thanks for reading this tribute to Bill. Once in a while, 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. Bill Sergeant is such a man!

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

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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.



Statue of Bill Sergeant with child in his arms – representing all the babies of the world who will be polio free!

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Statue of Bill Sergeant with child – statue is located in Knoxville's Krutch Park