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Advanced Composition

Dr. Maxwell

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At Peace: An Interview with Major Howard Rivers Jacobs, Jr



Figure 55 - Happy to be Home!

“I got lost in the North Carolina mountains when I was 9 years old and found my way out.

I’ve always had a good sense of direction.”

My interview with Major Howard Rivers Jacobs Jr began with an attempt at understanding his name. “Do people call you Rivers, or Howard?” I asked. He smiled and said, “I’m mostly called Rivers, but my friends in the Army called me ‘Jake.’ And that’s okay, too.” Born in September of 1928 in Charleston, South Carolina, and raised a mile away from The Citadel, Rivers embodies Southern Romanticism. He is confident, kind, funny, traditional, family-oriented, and above all, a gentleman. His name sounds like a street south of Broad – the litmus test of Charlestonian Aristocracy. But Rivers never promotes that snobby stereotype. He carries himself with quiet humility and an alluring sense of peace. I wanted – and needed – to discover the source of that peace.

It appeared early in Rivers’ life. He spoke about visiting his grandfather’s farm, “a thousand acre spread that straddled highway 61 and ran all the way to the Edisto River.” His mentor, an Uncle named Clifford Richard Jacobs, “taught [him] everything there was to know about living on a farm or a ranch” and his “sole companion most of the time was a young Black kid named Joe Tink.” Between dawn and dusk, Rivers and Joe would cut down two pine trees, have “a jar of tea and our hand-biscuit at midday,” cut a third tree down, go hunting around four, then eat supper. His eyes twinkled as he recalled, “I helped birth a calf one morning.”

You could see why Rivers’ mother would send him to do manual labor in the summers; during the school year, he and future Citadel classmate Major General Carroll LeTellier would “have fun.” On one instance, at 13 years old, they were thrown out of a store after teasing the owner. Rivers laughed about it as he spoke. Major General LeTellier had passed away only a few days before the interview, and Rivers reminisced on their childhood before concluding with a mischievous smile, “I guess we were ‘bad’ kids. But it was a good childhood.”

After graduating from The Citadel, the Army commissioned Second Lieutenant H. R. Jacobs Jr into the Infantry. His first duty station as part of the occupational forces in Japan after the Second World War provided some keen insight into the post-draft Army. “It happened that in the Korean war...we were so outnumbered it was pathetic. We had 954 men in a so-called regiment on line...you’re supposed to have 2 forward battalions and one reserve. We had one and a half forward and no reserve when we had to defend the Kum river line where we met the North Koreans for the first time.”

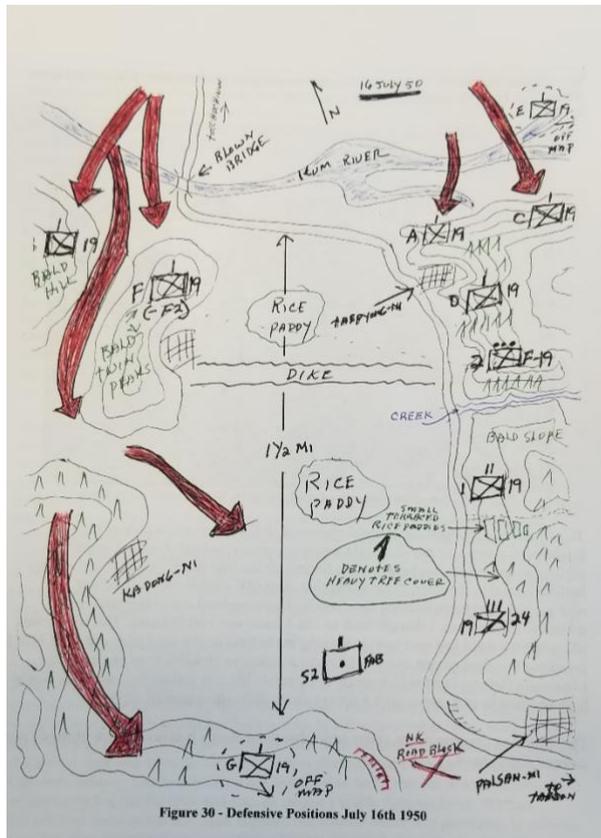


Figure 30 - Defensive Positions July 16th 1950

On July 16, 1950, Rivers had his first taste of combat. Although his unit fought honorably, they were quickly overwhelmed. “We had been fighting them since 3:30 in the morning,” Rivers remembered. “We had been exchanging artillery – I say exchanging, they were doing most of the firing. By the time I got up there, I was told there was no use in breaking a roadblock. They had already tried.” I asked him what he thought the problem was, and Rivers rolled his eyes and proceeded to rip apart the battleplans

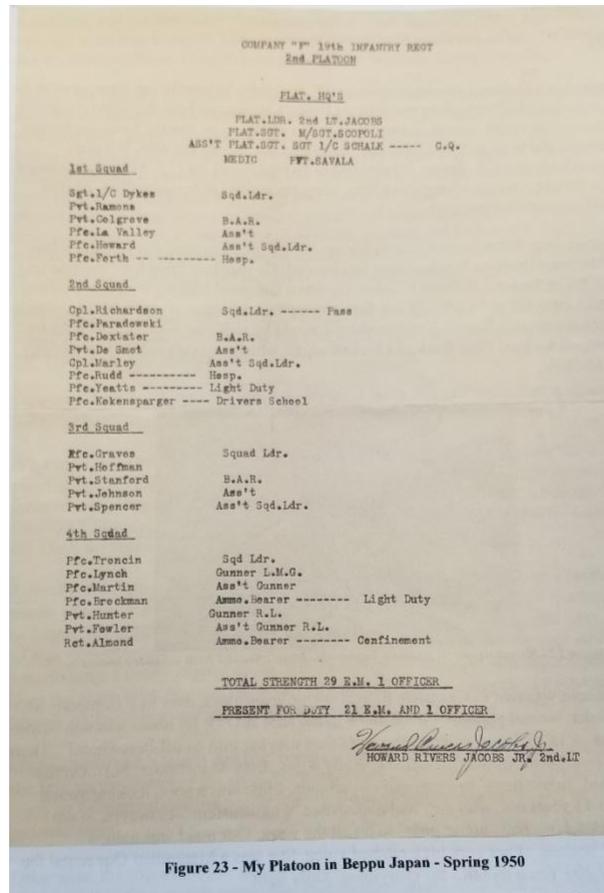


Figure 23 - My Platoon in Beppu Japan - Spring 1950

drawn up by his Regimental Staff. “If I had presented that as a solution to my professor COL Roundtree at The Citadel, he would’ve given me an F and told me to find another branch.”

At this point, Rivers grew a little quieter, a little more distant. “I remember being very frightened because a Captain on the Regimental Staff had walked the convoy and said, ‘Burn all the vehicles: it’s every man for himself.’” His eyes peered into my soul as he reminisced. “That is a very chilling command. It’s now 1830...we’ve been fighting for 13, 14 hours. I was frightened out of my skin, thinking this is my last day. Then after I heard that command, I thought about taking...well I had a carbine and a bayonet and I said, ‘I’m going to kill myself before I get captured.’” At this point, a Major fell beside Rivers and asked him, “Well, Jake, what are we gonna do?” Rivers laughed before reminding me, “I’m a 2nd Lieutenant, I’ve been in

the Army 6 months.” But he turned to that Major and said, “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting the hell out of here.”

Then something changed. Rivers smiled, and I sensed that this was the moment I had been waiting for: the story of where his peace stemmed from. “So I told this major and I suddenly realized I wasn’t afraid anymore. I found myself standing straight up with all kinds of fire going every direction. And I looked up and saw the artillerymen and my infantrymen standing up, we were the only ones standing. And they’re all looking at me.” Rivers paused for a moment and lifted a single finger up to the sky. “And I felt the presence of the Almighty. I didn’t see him, or hear him, but I got a message. It said, ‘Look son, you may or may not make it out of here today, but I will be with you, and there is still hope.’ That was it.” He looked around the room and laughed incredulously. “But I was still standing there, at attention, I was almost bracing. I felt myself look over there and say, ‘Follow me.’” He shook his head. “I didn’t say that. God said that.”



After I asked him what he thought about his experiences, he added, “I think as a Christian I was going through a lot of emotions as a young man, I think a lot of it was...a lot of people do this as a routine, without thinking about the impact our Creator...” he trailed off for a moment, then shrugged.

Rivers made it out of Korea with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart with an oak leaf cluster.

After being forced to resign his commission in the Army Reserve to continue his photo-development business, he focused on raising his three children and spending time with his wife, Joyce Karen Jacobs. “I’m grateful for all of that,” Rivers stated peacefully. “I was disappointed I could not finish my career as a Reserve officer. I missed it. It was tough for me to do that. The survival of my business and my family...my family came first.”

He reaffirmed this when, after our interview, Mr. Rivers gave me a call and hurriedly added some more information about his sister, Elizabeth Anne Jacobs. She graduated from Ashley Hall in Charleston and had three children. “I just wanted to add that,” he sighed. “I can’t believe I almost forgot. My sister passed away a year ago. I loved her—dearly.”

Major Rivers is a man at peace. His life, although full of hard decisions and horrific battles, was spent serving his principles: God, Family, and Country.

