

Sergio Duncan

Advanced Composition

Feature Article

April 11, 2013

Max Hill, Jr.: A Behind-the-Scenes Hero

“Military Top-Secret Operations” is a term commonly heard through media headlines and social whispers. Although it usually hard to conceptualize what this actually means, I have acquired a newfound understanding of and respect for the phrase after meeting Max Hill, Jr.

Mr. Hill, an Illinois native, began our interview with a brief account of his own experience enlisting for World War II. After driving up to St. Louis, he fulfilled what he described as an important obligation; once “you turned 18,” he explained, “you got a notice to report to the post office and register for the draft.”

Hill had a strong desire to one day attend West Point and was even promised an appointment by his state’s Congressman. Unwilling to take the risk of being drafted into the Navy or any other service and hindering his path to West Point, he took the initiative and enlisted in the United States Army in July of 1945. Although technically a veteran of World War II because of his enlistment, Hill never saw combat due to the fact that days after he enlisted, the United States dropped the first and second bomb, ending the war the day before his 18th birthday.

From my outside perspective, I would have called that lucky. Mr. Hill, however, humbly claimed, “everybody wanted to participate.”

After a brief time of active duty, the Army sent Hill back to school; he attended Purdue University. Although he was passionate about civil engineering and construction, Hill decided to take on the challenging academic path of mechanical engineering.

After his short stint in the Army, Hill was granted an appointment to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland. Some would regard an appointment to the Naval Academy as a long-dreamed-of goal, but this opportunity very unexpectedly landed in Hill’s lap. Despite supposedly applying to West Point with his Congressman’s recommendation, Hill was given the surprising news that West Point did not know anything about him and that his Congressman never submitted the appointment. Distraught to say the least, Hill soon found out that the Congressman did, in fact, send the appointment; however, it wasn’t sent to West Point, but to the Naval Academy by accident.

As Hill became a 1951 graduate of the Naval Academy, the Korean War broke out. The Air Force was a newly established branch of the military at the time and had yet to establish an academy of its own. As a result, the Air Force recruited 25% of the graduates from the other

military academies and commissioned the cadets as 2nd lieutenants in the Air Force. Hill was part of his class's 25% and was sent to pilot training shortly after.



During the time that Hill served as a pilot, he traveled the world and was involved with some of the most important military developments in history. Upon asking him where all he was able to travel, he named such exotic places as: Guam, Great Britain, North Africa, and in his own opinion the most beautiful of all, Hawaii.

While in Guam, Hill recalls one of the most remarkable stories that I have had the honor to hear firsthand. Hill's unit was in charge of the possible deployment of the atomic bomb. Constant simulations and drills conditioned the men to prepare for the mission of one day dropping the devastating atomic bomb. On one specific drill, Hill's unit was ordered to carry out the full sequence of events to execute the drop. Assuming that this was just another drill, Hill did not think too much about it. It wasn't until the drill carried on longer than any other and even involved acquiring the deal-sealing trigger mechanism that alarms sounded, and speculation that this was no longer a drill but the real deal arose.

The operation order was carried out past the chaplain giving their Last Rights and even a weather report given by somebody other than the at-the-time-rattled Weather Officer. The base commander gave his final departing words and exited the room, leaving the men awaiting their final orders. As the men sat in suspense, the case commander poked his head back in and said, "Gentleman, that's the way it'll be if we ever really do go to war."

I can only assume the feeling of relief and I'm sure even a sense of annoyance experienced by these men upon hearing these words. It wasn't until about two years ago that Hill was given some very shocking news at a reunion: A classmate from the Naval Academy, who was appointed to the special weapons sector, revealed that his unit was in charge of delivering the trigger mechanism and that there was only one occasion where it was delivered and ready to be put into action. The occasion turned out to be the same drill that Hill's unit was ordered to carry out, and at the time he still believed that it had only been a drill. The sobering reality quickly set in as his classmate explained the situation that Communist China's aggression towards Taiwan had actually sparked the commencement of a possible atomic drop. Almost 60 years after the drill, the truth was finally revealed to Hill behind his close call in this chapter in history shrouded by mystery.

Upon leaving the military, the real estate market became the Hill's next target. During his time at the Naval Academy, one of Hill's American History professors introduced his

students to the historical and economic background of the South, which sparked Hill's interest and eventually led him to Charleston, South Carolina. Being from Illinois, Hill admits that one of the only things he knew about Charleston before this class was the Ft. Sumter experience.

When he first arrived in Charleston, he struggled to get into the real estate market since it was a monopoly-like sector run by family-only businesses. Hill recalled the astonishingly cheap prices of land and building costs of those days, but explains that due to the economic situation at the time, the prices, although low, seemed like fortunes in those days. After some time working, Hill became familiar with the area and began his road into the real estate business, a road which he continues to follow today.

Hill closed the interview by identifying the greatest take-away from his military experience: discipline. He states that the discipline learned while in the military carried on afterwards and has helped him set and achieve his goals even to this day. As one who has accomplished so much, Mr. Hill has clearly used the discipline he learned to great effect.