

Oak Ridge's contribution to the Korean War

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

A few weeks ago I got a most unusual offer from Deborah (Deb) Schenk, who is the daughter of a long-time Y-12 co-worker now retired, Dave Medovich. She had recently moved to Oak Ridge and brought with her a bent toward historical research and writing.

She desired to take on some assignments for things I had in the works for *Historically Speaking*, but was not able to get done. And, boy, are there a lot of those as readers continually give me suggestion for stories. Finding time to do the necessary research is tough, so I gladly accepted her offer.

Deb has since taken on a full-time position with a local bank and has, of necessity, had to immediately slow down on the list of many potential stories I gave her. However, this story is one she completed and one that I am sure you will enjoy.

She interviewed Bill Sergeant to get the details of the deployment of the 194th Engineer Battalion led by Bill to the Korean War. Almost, if not all, of the members of the battalion were from Oak Ridge.

You will recall an earlier *Historically Speaking* column, *Happy Valley in Korea*, where Bill described the sign placed in a certain location in Korea by the predominantly Oak Ridge men who fondly recalled their own "Happy Valley" and saw the similarities to the one they named in Korea.

Now for Deb's story from Bill Sergeant:

In the beginning, Oak Ridge was a job site, not a home, to the many people who lived here. Everyone still associated themselves with wherever they had moved from to come here. In the fall of 1950, Bill Sergeant saw that sentiment begin to change.

In 1946, Bill Sergeant was a Captain in the United States Army stationed in Oak Ridge and working for the Clinton Engineer Works. When the Atomic Energy Commission took over the oversight of all of the nation's atomic energy activities, Oak Ridge came under that new organization as well.

As Bill's term of service came to a close, he was offered to stay in his position as a civilian with a generous salary. Bill had gone overseas during World War II and, seeing no advantage to staying in the service, was glad for the opportunity.

At this same time, the Federal Government was rebuilding the National Guard, which, of course, had been decimated by the war. The decision had been made to place a unit in Oak Ridge. Bill, being the most experienced and highest ranking officer left in Oak Ridge at the time, was asked to lead this unit in 1947. The way Bill figured the situation, he would get a promotion in rank and be able to make a few extra bucks with a minimal commitment.

So, a combat engineer unit comprising about 300 enlisted men and officers was formed. They met Tuesday nights and spent two weeks during summers at Fort McClellan in Alabama. Even as the situation in Korea heated up, Bill knew they were in no danger of being called up. After all, they had been to war. Men didn't go to war twice in a lifetime. Besides, the AEC had insisted that the unit not be available for state use, only federal. Clearly, they would fall at the bottom of the list when Tennessee was asked to give their share.

Despite the power of rationalization, the 194th Engineer Battalion led by now Lt. Col. Sergeant, was one of three Tennessee units called in July, 1950. They would be part of the first wave to head for Korea. The men were given only three weeks to settle their affairs.

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The most critical affair for most was housing. The vast majority of homes in Oak Ridge were still owned by the AEC and only for use by employees. With the men away for an unknown time, any wives who didn't work would lose the right to stay in their homes. Of course, not all of the men were government employees by the time and had a range of other issues as well.

Still, the inevitable approached. The unit was inducted on August 19th of 1950 and began preparations to leave for training at Fort Lewis, Washington, on August 30th.

As the date grew nearer and nearer, an impromptu send off grew to spectacular proportions. Every civic group in Oak Ridge found a way to contribute. The Oak Ridge High School band turned out to play. The Oak Ridger reporters were on hand and WATO planned a live broadcast, though technical difficulties prevailed. The paper described "scores of well known Ridge figures...mingled with the send off crowd." All told, an estimated 4,000 turned out to see off the unit.

As Bill looked back on this send off, he found himself homesick for Oak Ridge. With that came the revelation that he considered Oak Ridge "home." The gravity of the event had moved people who worked together and played together to truly pull together the way a city does in a time of change or crisis.

Overnight, Oak Ridge had grown from a job site into a real city and home.

There you have it. Deb, recently returned to Oak Ridge, interviewed Bill Sergeant, one of the true "old timers." She learned a lot quickly, don't you know. The only thing I could have done that would have gotten her immersed into our history even more quickly was to ask her to also interview Bill Wilcox. One "Bill" is likely enough to put her through at one time, huh.

The reason I know of this story is that Bill Sergeant had called me earlier and told me that he thought the story of Oak Ridge's contribution to the Korean War was not well known. He felt that Oak Ridge history was tied to the Manhattan Project and World War II, and rightly so, as the material for the first atomic bomb used in warfare came from Oak Ridge. Yet, the contribution of the 300 men from Oak Ridge was a huge one. They were among the first wave of troops sent to Korea!

Bill's desire was to be sure Oak Ridgers today understood the impact on the city when 300 of its men were called to war. That may well have been the single largest call up from a city in the nation during the Korean War. He wanted us to appreciate the sacrifice Oak Ridgers made so soon after the end of World War II brought on primarily by the contribution of Oak Ridgers to produce the material for the atomic bomb.

It is apparent the city understood at the time as the huge send off event seemed to materialize without any formal leadership. It seems to have "just come together" almost spontaneously. The community spirit that springs forth at such times is so very powerful and a wonder to see.

If we could capture that spirit in Oak Ridge today, we would not be bothered by the lack of retail sales, available housing in key locations and affordable price ranges, school demographics that have radically changed to where we have 35% free and reduced lunches, several empty retail locations, a number of partially filled industrial parks and stagnated growth overall.

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It is good to dream and to know that our city has pulled together on occasion (look at the recent Oak Ridge High School renovation) and to review the times of the past when the city acted with one accord to pull off significant events. We can do it again...it just takes the right catalyst.



Bill Sergeant leads his battalion in the March 19, 1949, Gate Opening Ceremony Parade – Bill's wife is in the crowd just to his left