

Oak Ridge's General, Part 2 - B.B. Bell: "Always do what is right"

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 11, 2019)

Benita concludes the story of General (Retired) B. B. Bell. She brings us up to date on his many accomplishments and recognition for a long and highly successful career in the United States Army. Enjoy learning more about an Oak Ridger who has gone on to have enormous impact on world situations in the military.

B. B. Bell graduated from the University of Chattanooga in 1969. He began a commissioned, four-year military obligation, in fulfillment of his ROTC collegiate scholarship, that turned into a lifetime military career extraordinaire. During his professional journey he received advanced military schooling in the Army's Ranger School, the Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Department of Defense National War College in Washington, D.C. Additionally, he received a master's degree in Systems Management from the University of Southern California.

His active duty assignments have included Germany, South Korea, Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Storm, and Hungary for Operation Joint Endeavor. His assignments in the U. S. included: command and staff positions at the Dept. of the Army, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Fort Knox, U.S. Central Command in Fort Steward, Georgia, and the Council on Foreign Relations, New York City. He has also commanded armor and cavalry units from platoon to brigade. Some of his awards include the Defense Superior Service Medal, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, Meritorious Service Medal, and the Army Commendation Medal. (*The Oak Ridger*, Sept. 25, 2005)

His last post, 2006-2008, was served as the Senior Military Commander for United Nations, combined U.S.-South Korea forces, and all U. S. military forces in South Korea. Previously, Bell served as Commander of U.S. ground forces in Europe since 2002. He served as the Executive Officer to General Norman Schwarzkopf during operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield. His numerous assignments have advanced him from a first assignment in Germany where he led units patrolling the Iron Curtain between East and West Germany to the rank of Four-Star General in his South Korean, last assignment.

I asked General Bell to recount one or two interesting and challenging assignments from his illustrious career. His written response included three examples which follow:

"My most challenging assignment was as the Executive Assistant to General H. Norman Schwarzkopf for nearly three years when he served as the Commander of U.S. Central Command which oversaw U.S. military operations in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. As a Colonel, I worked directly for him, kept his schedule, worked his correspondence, reviewed and assessed all official documents headed for his desk, kept his personal log of his actions and activities, and was his key liaison with senior military and political leaders in Washington as well as across his Central Command Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine subcomponents. I performed this job both in peace in the States and in war when we deployed for Desert Shield and Desert Storm (1990-1991) where he led the first Gulf War against Iraq and its invasion of Kuwait."

"My most interesting assignment was as the Four- Star Allied Commander of all military (South Korean and U.S.) in South Korea in the defense of South Korea. This included leading and commanding over a million men and women in uniform with the mission of deterring an attack from north Korea, and should deterrence fail, counterattacking into north Korea by land, sea, and air to defeat their armed forces and remove the government in Pyongyang."

"My most rewarding assignment was as the Commander of 2 Squadron, 9 Cavalry Regiment. This unit, which was the reconnaissance unit for the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division, had a history and lineage dating back to the Buffalo Soldiers. Buffalo Soldiers were the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments organized just after the Civil War with all black soldiers. Their service in the American West and in the Spanish American War was stunning, and thus, to be a part of one of these units was an incredible honor and privilege. I had this position as a Lieutenant Colonel from 1985-1987."

Asked what he considered as his most valuable lessons learned in military leadership, he replied, "Always do what is right. Look in some type of mirror once a day and ask the question, did I do what was right today? If the answer is yes, then continue along the course you have set. If you have any doubt, then make changes right now in your personal and professional life. Always do what is right. The harder right is always better than the easier wrong."

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B.B. mentioned that in retirement his first priority is spending time with his wife Katie, stating that they were often apart during his military service, and he now wishes to "date my wife and to love each other and enjoy each other's company." Very soon after his retirement, Katie was diagnosed with a genetic lung disease which was destroying her lungs. A double lung transplant at Vanderbilt Medical Center in 2009 restored her to health thanks to what B.B. calls "the gift of life" from an unidentified donor. Subsequently their son, Buck, also received a double lung transplant in 2011 to counter debilitating effects of Cystic Fibrosis. B.B. asserts that they may be the only living mother-son double lung transplants in America. They have one granddaughter whom Buck and his wife adopted as a baby from Korea in 2007.

I posed the following, family question of B.B.: "I honor your military time and the sacrifices this must have meant for you and your family. Do you care to comment on the military lifestyle and how it has shaped your life and that of your family?" B.B. answered, "The military is a very closed 'society' with its own norms, codes, rules, and requirements. That said, at its core, military life is much like civilian life. It consists of a group of professionals (we have a volunteer/professional military—no draft) who work hard to become competent at their jobs and tasks, and families trying to do what is right and raise their children like the rest of society. While the risks to death or injury in training or combat are high compared to civilian life, and the work is arduous and family separations are numerous, these risks and realities tend to build 'cultural character' and pioneering, 'can-do' spirit. Because of this, military communities are very, very tight knit and support one another in very special ways. The vast majority of military professionals and family members grow to love this closeness and find military life as extremely rewarding. And of course, military members and their families are very proud of their contributions to the defense of America's Constitution. Across the board, it is a very special and heartfelt lifestyle."

I also wanted to ask General Bell about the future of the military. My question is followed by his response. "The military, like the rest of society, is increasingly dependent on technology. The challenges of privacy, security, and credibility are rampant in tech applications. What do you see as the future of the military and technology?" Bell's answer: "The explosion of technology is having a major impact on our military and militaries across the globe. Three areas of technological capability are particularly noteworthy: robotics, electronic warfare, and space operations. These three areas are the new 'high ground' in strategic and operational thought, and the nation that commands one or more of these areas will have a distinct advantage in pursuing its military objectives. It is incumbent for the United States to 'seize' these high ground, technological areas and indeed dominate them. Today, China feels the same way, so we therefore have a very serious strategic competitor."

General Bell continues to speak, write, and consult on work in the defense industry and strategic security environment. Though he has been asked to pursue a political office, he has declined saying his first priority is his wife's continued wellness. From their home near Chattanooga, B.B. now enjoys hunting, shooting sports, and fishing; activities he first loved to share with his father during his Oak Ridge teen years. His retirement follows a distinguished military service record worthy of our utmost respect and gratitude.

Thank you again Benita! This time she has surely provided us insights into General B. B. Bell that makes us all proud of him and of what he has accomplished. I know we have all appreciated what he said about his challenging and rewarding military career. What I found most encouraging, being a veteran as well, was his excellent explanation of the uniqueness of the military culture. I agree, but he said it better than I ever could.

But the most valuable lesson he shared may well have been the instruction to "Always do what is right. Look in some type of mirror once a day and ask the question, did I do what was right today? If the answer is yes, then continue along the course you have set. If you have any doubt, then make changes right now in your personal and professional life. Always do what is right. The harder right is always better than the easier wrong." We can all benefit from that astute advice.

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B. B. Bell in his college days is second from left in this photograph provided by Keys Filhauer. Keys provided this insight with the photograph: "B. B. always put others first. He always wanted to know about your successes and this was true when he was a student or in command of the NATO forces. A roommate, a fraternity brother, wedding participants, graduates of the University of Chattanooga and friends for 53 years, we learned from each other the values we both have placed on commitment, leadership and community. When B. B. was going to speak to my Civics class, I asked one of his aides how I should introduce him to my class, he responded...Sir, I will call him General and you will have to decide. I said to my class...please welcome my friend B.B. Bell."

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In this file photo taken in September 2006, Oak Ridge native B. B. Bell, a four-star general who was then serving as the U. S. military leader in Korea presents a framed set of "overdue medals" to 88-year-old World War II veteran Raymond Smith, also of Oak Ridge by way of Decatur, AL. Bronze Star recipient Smith had recently moved to East Tennessee

Photo by: Scott Fraker